



# Blood Prince

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**Description:** He's searched for her across centuries. But he's not the only one . . .

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# Page 1

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## Chapter One

Helen

Troy

1251 BC

The walls of the room shook with the tremors of battle. A flight of doves soared from the balcony of my chambers and into the cloudless skies. The carnage on the street below and the screams of terror and pain had not disturbed the birds at these heights. Only the rumble of danger from within spurred them out and over the golden rooftops of Troy. They dodged the plumes of black smoke that rose from the burning temple far below and flew toward the blinding sun.

I wished Paris and I could make a similar escape. Too late. There was no safe haven for us anywhere. I cradled his head in my lap, the blood trail from the corner of his mouth now dry. He had no breath, no life. Taken from me and flung to Hades or Elysium, I knew not which. My heart bled out slowly, my end mixing with his in a never-ending river of sorrow.

The sound of a thousand feet drummed up the stairs and onto the landing outside our room. The warriors began battering the door. They must have searched the entire palace before reaching these lofty corridors. They would raid every room and kill all within.

Now they were on my doorstep, their voices harsh and full of blood.

Barring the door and piling furniture against it in a heap would keep them at bay for only a moment. They would get in. There were too many of them bent on destruction. The soldiers had washed over the city like a bloody tide that was now lapping at my feet. The wave would soon engulf me right along with the skeletal remains of Troy.

The cacophony of violence faded to the background as I looked upon Paris, the fine curves and lines of his face still beautiful in the morning light. I stroked his golden hair, glad he would not be subjected to any more of this world, this life, or the tortures inflicted by the demons outside the splintering door.

The warriors continued their onslaught, eager to claim their prize. Before the door was ripped from the hinges, the assault ceased and the soldiers quieted.

“Helen,” a voice called. His voice. “If you come out to me, we will stop and no harm will come to you. If you do not, you know the price that must be paid for disobedience.”

A shiver coursed through me, and the air shimmered. I was all too aware of what he would do to me if I fell into his clutches again. The memories of his torments were still fresh. I cringed at the thought of his favorite punishment, the kind that happened in my bedchambers, only spoken of in undertones by my handmaidens.

“Helen!” His voice rose with anger. I did not answer and, instead, whispered words of love to Paris, even though he could no longer hear them. The voice outside the door grew ever louder and ordered the door shattered. The soldiers roared back to life, violating my chambers with each vicious plunge.

I gave one last look at my lover and settled my gaze on the besieged entry. The soldiers turned the furniture barricade into rubble before pouring inside and amassing around me. They watched me, cruel eyes hard as flint, and stood waiting for their leader.

He strode through the opening, dressed in purple befitting his station and armored in glittering silver. His gaze settled on me and then Paris. He smirked to see the son of Troy bloodied and dead.

“Come, Helen,” he ordered.

I did not move, only stared back into his harsh visage.

“Is it more punishment you desire? I’ve already laid waste to the city, all for you. And now you would deny me what is mine?”

“I am not yours.”

“You are mine and will always be mine. Now leave that disgusting piece of rotting meat and come to me.”

I felt his gaze, and the gazes of the savage demons, on me, waiting for me to obey. I tenderly adjusted Paris’s head so he lay on the floor, and rose to my feet. My gown flowed out behind me in the wind of the balcony, as if seeking to escape right along with the doves.

He smiled, watching my every move, no doubt making sure I was still as perfect as the day he bought me. He held his hand out. Maybe he hoped I would beg for forgiveness right then and there, prostrate myself and let him take me in front of his warriors. Never. Never again would I be his slave.

The billowing fabric hid the dagger in my hand. Before any of the men had a chance to move, I plunged the blade deep into my neck. His smile faltered as I fell. My heart’s blood rushed out in a torrent, assuring me a quick death.

I hit the floor hard next to Paris. His angelic visage was the last thing I saw as the

darkness beckoned, taking me down into its cold embrace.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:06 am*

### Chapter Two

Elena

I crashed into the man on the sidewalk. I'd been walking in the Paris gloom for the past hour, trying to get used to the sights and sounds of the mortal world. I was far from the slopes of my home on Mount Olympus. Everything here was brighter, somehow harsher. I realized things were utterly different as I passed a fully nude, silver-painted street performer juggling three-headed baby dolls.

No, this definitely doesn't happen on Mount Olympus.

Out of my depth. That's what I was. Put me on an immortal battlefield—I was home. Here? I was lost.

And it didn't help that I couldn't shake the feeling I was being followed. From the second I left the courtyard of Roth and Lilah's French chateau, I could feel a presence. Something that flitted around on the periphery, staying just out of sight. At first I guessed it might be one of my warrior sisters, perhaps Iphi playing a trick. But it didn't feel right. Apprehension tickled down my spine as I walked along the sparkling river.

It was precisely this feeling of unease that caused me to stumble into the stranger on the sidewalk. I had turned my head, searching for whatever or whoever was giving me the odd sensation, when I collided with what felt like a brick wall.

But it wasn't a wall; it was a man. I sized him up quickly while righting myself. He

towered over even my tall frame, but I wasn't worried. After all, I was Elena de Artemis, the pride of the goddess Artemis's warrior maidens. Skilled in witchcraft and battle, I had no cause to fear any mortal, no matter his size.

"Pardon me," I said and ignored his outstretched hand.

"No, it was my mistake. I didn't see you there." His voice was a smooth baritone, and his dark eyes watched me intently. The gaze was so direct that I felt a twinge of...something. I couldn't quite put my finger on what it was. Something in the back of my mind. I didn't like it.

I moved to step to his side and continue walking along the path next to the Seine. The waters flowed smoothly and reflected the moonlight that flooded the city. The scent of the flower market was heavy on the air, lilies and lavender demanding notice almost as much as the stranger before me.

"If you don't mind." He held out a well-manicured hand to pause my departure. "You see, I'm new to Paris"—he said the word as if it were distasteful—"and wondered if you could help me find my way to the Champs-Élysées? My hotel is there, and I can't seem to remember which side of the river I should be on."

I did not want to stay and chat, especially since something about the stranger was giving me a faint sense of alarm. Having been in battle for most of my life with Artemis, I always trusted my instincts. And my instincts were telling me things were not what they seemed.

"I'm afraid I can't help. I'm new here too."

He didn't move, didn't give even a hairsbreadth of space for me to pass. I could either step into traffic, dive into the river, retreat, or get him out of my way. Never one to turn tail, I chose the last option. Stepping toward him, I expected him to turn for me

to pass. But he was unmoving. He was large and well-muscled, such that my first thought of him as a brick wall was proving to be more accurate by the second.

“Let me pass.” The hairs on the nape of my neck rose as he stared down at me.

“Perhaps we could catch a late dinner?”

Was I speaking in a completely different language or did the man have a hearing problem? “I said let me pass. I need to get home.”

A hail of honking horns drew my attention to the busy road. A sleek black limo cut through traffic and pulled up to the curb, blocking me in even more. My adrenaline ratcheted up. No, something was definitely not right.

He smiled and waved to the car. “In that case, may I give you a ride back to your home?”

Alarm bells were ringing loud enough to awaken all my fighting senses. I backed up from him a pace, my green eyes no doubt flashing with annoyance and power. I was ready to cast at him if for no other reason than to get him out of my way. But then I looked around. There were dozens of people taking an evening stroll, enjoying the crisp Paris night. The nearest bridge was covered with lovers and locks, the former hoping for a bit of magic from the latter. A smattering of tourists were beneath us, walking along the quay next to the glittering river.

I could not cast here. Not in the open. As Artemis’s master tactician, I was in charge of every battle, mindful of every move. If I used my powers, there would be a panic, which could put the mortals in danger. Though not particularly fond of mortals, I never took the life of an innocent. Not even in war.



## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:06 am*

The stranger did not back away, despite the fact that he must have noticed the shimmer of otherworldly power rolling off me. He held out his hand toward the waiting car. He was no mortal—something darker lived beneath his handsome surface. He continued to assess me, but not as a stranger would. He seemed more like a merchant, checking his newly arrived merchandise to assure himself no damage had befallen it on its journey to him.

Never one to look away first or ignore a challenge, I studied him right back. He wore a black suit, formal, with a deep sapphire shirt that was unbuttoned at the top. Far more formal than the jeans and sweater I had borrowed from Lilah, my closest sister, for my stroll. I would have worn my customary forest-green tunic and pants, but Lilah's commentary—"You can't go out looking like a wood elf, Elena; people will notice"—prevented that. The sweater proved itchy—even now, my back was irritated, almost burning, from the rough fibers.

The stranger's face was a classical daydream of masculine splendor. Black hair cut to fall pleasingly across his olive forehead, with dark brows to match. Beauty had marked him, truly, but there was something else. His eyes. Instead of a window to his soul, they were a bottomless abyss. They did not speak of passion, love, or emotion. Instead, they were cold and dark, as if whatever light that had once lain within them had been snuffed out long ago.

I bristled at the thought of what a creature with eyes like those wanted with me. I'd seen enough. I whirled on my heel, staring contest be damned. The sooner I got back to Roth, Lilah, and my sister maidens, the safer the city would be. The stranger could go straight to Hades, for all I cared.

But what I saw behind me stopped me dead. It was Paris, the famed vampire, charging right at me. His fangs were bared, a look of raw fury on his face. The last I'd seen of him, he'd been fawning all over my mistress, Artemis.

I marveled at the rage in every one of his movements. It was as if he were giving off sparks of hate and anger. Then he disappeared and reappeared much closer, teleporting through the crowds.

If the stranger was a wall, Paris was an avalanche, his malice bearing down on me with a violent certainty. Why was he picking a fight with me? And in the mortal world of all places? He was a block away, no more, and closing fast. My palms began to tingle, the beginnings of a vicious hex taking shape. But I still had the onlooker and collateral-damage problems.

"Please, allow me." The stranger held the car door open. His gaze was still glued to me, as if he were totally unaware of the homicidal vampire charging right at us. With only seconds to make my decision, I glanced from the stranger to Paris, and chose.

"Where can I have my driver drop you?"

I certainly wasn't about to tell him the location of my sisters at Roth's chateau. "Just drop me in front of Notre Dame." Though unfamiliar with the Paris streets, I knew how to make it back to the chateau from there, at least.

"Surely not. Allow me to take you to your home."

"I, ah, I am staying at a hotel near there. So that's as good a place as any." I shifted in my seat, leaning away from the stranger, who now seemed uncomfortably close in the confines of the car.

The second I'd stepped in, the stranger had followed me and the car tore from the

curb. But Paris had teleported again at the last second, covering the remaining distance in a heartbeat and fixing me in his dark glare as I sped away from him. Something told me it would not be the last I saw of the vampire prince, though I had no idea what quarrel he had with me. Not that it mattered, I'd gut him if I had to, though my mistress wouldn't be too pleased about it. I kept checking behind the vehicle for any sign of him.

"Don't worry about him," the stranger snapped. He scowled, contorting his otherwise handsome face. "He is and always has been beneath you. Nothing more than a peasant."

I glanced at my door, my hand itching to pull the handle so I could escape into the darkening streets.

"Locked." The stranger smiled. "For safety, of course."

I narrowed my eyes at him, sizing up what it would take to turn him to dust. Getting into this car was a mistake. I'd foolishly been caught in a snare. But something about the stranger was familiar. All these events were more than simple happenstance. The run-in on the sidewalk was no accident, but I couldn't tell how Paris fit into the picture.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:06 am*

I focused once again on the playing field, trying to determine how to gain the upper hand. But my heart sank when I realized how thoroughly trapped I was. Though not familiar with the City of Light, I knew the car was speeding away from the river, the center of town. Away from my sisters and safety. And the stranger seemed fully aware of what had gone on at the riverbank. He must have known Paris was following me. He also knew where I would be and how to get me where he wanted me—here, in his car, hurtling through the night, with no clear avenue of escape.

“This isn’t the way to Notre Dame.” I turned to face him directly. The darkness in his eyes made me wince inwardly. But I wasn’t afraid. This was a situation I could handle easily, though the stranger would be much the worse for wear. I wasn’t about to be the punchline of some kidnap plot retold by my enemies on Olympus at my expense. I kept calm and summoned my power. My palms tingled again, the harbinger of the stranger’s death. He may have sprung the trap, but I was no ordinary quarry.

He raised a hand and rubbed a lock of my hair between his thumb and forefinger. He moved so fast I barely caught the flicker of his arm. Now I knew he was no ordinary hunter. He sifted the golden strands and looked at them with something edging on wonder. My palms were no longer simply tingling, they were burning with the desire to strike the presumptuous stranger down. Never had a male dared to take such liberties with me. But I sat still, playing along until I saw the perfect opening to strike. Moves had to be made in their turn.

“I thought you were lost to me. Do you have any idea how long I have been searching for you?” He spoke softly now, but he stared past me, through me, as if lost in memory.

His voice. Now so close in the car, it was like a cold caress, and it was familiar. Without understanding how or where or why, I realized I knew this man. My heart sped to a rapid pace, a mix of terror and déjà vu washing over me. Goosebumps broke out along my skin, and a sense of dark foreboding cut deep. I was in danger, as sure as if I were in the midst of a battle of the gods.

“Stop the car. Let me out.” The coldness in my voice rivaled the chill of apprehension in my heart.

“I can’t do that, Helen. Not now that I have you again.”

“My name is Elena, not Helen. And if you don’t let me out, you are going to regret it in a multitude of painful ways.” I no longer bothered hiding my power. The palms of my hands glowed a deep orange as orbs of flame lit there, fire ready to rip from them and tear the stranger to pieces.

But something was different. My magic was still powerful, could easily torch the stranger and the car—but the orbs were perhaps a little smaller, the fire a tinge darker. What was happening? It wasn’t just my magic—I felt different, the low hum of the goddess’s influence no longer imbuing my body. Only one thing could cause such a shift—Artemis had abandoned me. Why? I was struck dumb, unable to believe it. My moon mother had turned her back right when I needed her the most. What in Hades is going on?

The stranger, unaware of the change, glanced down at my hands for a moment before returning those dark eyes to mine. “I’m not afraid of you, Helen.”

I pushed past my rising panic about Artemis and focused my ire on the stranger. “That is a tactical mistake you won’t recover from.” The flaming orbs grew larger. One touch and he would burn. Both touches and he would be ashes. Then I could return to Olympus to beg forgiveness for whatever I’d done to displease my mistress.

“Tell your driver to stop. Now.”

“I’m sorry to do this. I truly am, my love, but you leave me no choice,” he said with a note of false resignation tinged with exhilaration. He was enjoying this. As if he were toying with me all along.

“That’s it. I gave you a chance.” I raised my hands and pressed them to the creature’s chest. The fire should have sent him up in a blaze of screaming agony.

The stranger suffered no injury. My fire pierced him, yet did no damage. In fact, he smiled.

I took my hands away and stared at them, wondering if I should shake them into working properly. “Moon mother, please,” I whispered.

“You can’t hurt me, my love. But unfortunately,” he continued, and whisked out a pair of engraved silver bangles, “you could harm others in my employ.” He spared a glance toward the driver.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:06 am*

I drew back my palm to strike him, but he caught my wrist with ease and clapped a bangle around it. Then he captured my other hand and did the same as easily as the first. My flames vanished. Impossibly powerful dispelling shackles, they bound my magic.

I flung myself against the door of the car, trying to wrench it open and fall out into the street. The door did not give. With a cry of rage, I pounded on the glass, but it did not shatter. Artemis's strength was truly gone from my veins. I kept struggling, fighting to escape him. I will not be taken like this. But as I told myself these things, the truth hit me hard. I had fallen. Artemis had abandoned me. I was in enemy hands.

"I planned for this, you see." He watched me, a caged bird helplessly beating my wings against the bars.

"Stop struggling." His voice grated on my ears as I focused my energy on breaking the rear window. His arms closed around me like a vise. Pulling me to him, subduing me with an ease that caused rage to roar through my heart and mind.

"Shhh, shhhhhh, don't fight them. You couldn't get them off if you tried." He kept me stilled against him with one strong arm and ran his long fingers down the side of my neck, tracing the silver runes that had marked me as Artemis's servant. "Your beautiful skin. How could she mar it like this? It was so perfect." He spoke as if I were a work of art on a wall in Artemis's chambers, now defaced. "And this," he said with deep contempt while perusing the birthmark along my jugular, no doubt pulsing a bright red in my distress.

"Get off me." But I was outmaneuvered and under his control ... for the time being.

He squeezed me closer, his breath in my ear. “For now.” The stranger relaxed his grip. He set me beside him once again and regarded me with his strangely familiar gaze.

He was powerful, far stronger than any ordinary immortal. Strong enough to subdue a warrior of the gods. I was not going to escape with brute force. So I switched tactics—reconnaissance. Calming myself and slowing my heartbeat through sheer will, I began, “Who are you?”

“Don’t you know, Helen?” His eyes twinkled with some dark secret.

“Why are you calling me Helen?”

“Because that’s your name.”

“My name is Elena. You have the wrong person.”

He waved my comment away with a dismissive flick of his wrist. “She changed your name to suit her own vanity. You are Helen. And, I assure you, I would know you anywhere. You, your body, your scent, your”—he glanced down at the apex of my thighs—“everything.”

I took a deep, shuddering breath, if only to calm the bloodlust careening through my veins. I had been kidnapped and muzzled by an insane creature of unimaginable power. I didn’t have a strategy for this situation tucked away in my mind—because this turn of events should have been gods-damned impossible. But I wouldn’t give up my chosen tactic, not until I got all the information I could.

“Who is it you think changed my name?”

“That bitch Artemis. She thought it would be fun to wipe your memory and make you



more of her disciple. As if that would change you, make you somehow unrecognizable. For an all-powerful goddess, she truly is a simpleton.” He shook his head.

My anger bubbled over at the slight. “When my mistress finds out what you’ve done, she will flay the skin from your bones, wait for it to grow back, and then do it again and again until you beg for death. If I’m lucky, she’ll allow me to be the one to do the flaying.”

He laughed, a rich sound that still managed to lack any true depth of feeling. “I sincerely doubt that.”

Irritation rankled under my skin. “How do you know me?”

“I already told you,” he said and sank back into the seat, confident I was no longer a danger or a flight risk. “I know everything there is to know about you.”

“Why didn’t my magic harm you?”

He smiled faintly, as if remembering something that amused him. “We made a deal, you and me, a long, long time ago.”

“A deal about my magic?” Goddess give me strength to withstand this delusional fool. I had no memory of him, just the faintest sizzle of recognition on a visceral level.

“Not exactly.” His gaze still raked over me, all of me, possessive.

I stiffened my back. “I demand to know why you think you know me.”

He leveled me with his dead stare, a hint of amusement in the curve of his lip.

“Because I’m your husband.”

## Chapter Three

### Paris

I continued teleporting, skipping from one street corner to the next, keeping the car that held Helen captive in my sights. I could not let her go again, could not give her up as I had before when there was no other choice.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:06 am*

I cursed as I flew through space, seeing the surprised faces of mortals and immortals alike as I disappeared and reappeared at intervals. Desmerada—self-appointed vampire queen—had spies looking for me everywhere. I had no doubt one of her dark watchers had seen my display of teleportation power and already faded into the Underworld to report to its master. I never would have used my ability in such an obvious manner, but there was no time. The thought of Helen in the hands of the demon made me skip even faster, materializing for only a split second before vanishing back into the ether.

Only the day before, I had trailed Elena from Olympus to earth, unwilling to let her out of my presence once I'd located her among Artemis's warrior maidens. She'd been in the city for only a few hours, and I could not take my eyes off her, watching her through the windows of Roth's chateau and following her as she took a stroll through the city streets.

Just knowing she was alive gave me a sense of euphoria, but being so close to her without taking her in my arms was acute torture. Gods, I wanted to go to her and explain our past, hoping it would give us a future. But I knew now wasn't the time.

I had to pacify Artemis before I could even dream of speaking to Helen again. I had wormed my way into the goddess's good graces with flattery and lies, but I had only one true goal. Helen. And she was alive, vibrant, and just as I remembered her. Now that I'd left Artemis to remain with Helen, the goddess would likely smite me on sight.

I would risk it just to be near Helen again. I ached to claim her, to go to her and promise her I would never fail her again, that I would love her for as long as I lived.

But what would I say to her? Hi, I'm Paris. You used to love me. I've loved you for thousands of years, thought you were dead, found you alive, so let's get back together? I could see her turning me into a steaming pile of vampire bits. She had no memory of her previous life. She didn't even give me a second glance when I first saw her in Artemis's ranks. Now she was known as Elena de Artemis, the tactician of the moon goddess's huntress army.

Even though she had a new name and station, I could feel her in my bones. It was her, through and through. She was still Helen, strong and proud, the most beautiful creature I had ever seen in my mortal or immortal life.

I'd continued tailing her earlier in the evening, following her through the streets of the city that shared my name. Though dressed in ill-fitting jeans and a sweater, she was just as tantalizing as I remembered. Tall, yet more graceful than the most delicate fairy. I couldn't see her eyes but knew they shone a deep, turbulent green. The same green that haunted my dreams and even some of my waking moments.

The men who passed her on the street turned their heads, following her lithe movements. I wanted to destroy them because I knew the secret thoughts that played out in their heads, because they played in mine too.

But more than anything, I wanted to hold her again, to feel her against me. I could still remember her sultry taste on my tongue, the feel of her hands and her mouth. I'd wanted a lifetime of those moments, but they'd been stolen from me, from us both.

I'd dreamed about her, only her, for so long, that when she was actually before me, it was almost too much to bear. I thought I might perish simply from the wanting of her, so close but untouchable.

On Olympus, I had fooled Artemis into thinking I was enamored with the goddess. It had been the only way to stay close to Helen. But now, after I dumped Artemis in a

rush to follow my true heart's desire, the game was up. I could never step foot in Artemis's realm again.

Helen had been so beautiful, taking her evening stroll. Her honey scent in the air had drawn me closer as she wandered next to the shimmering river. The moon was half-full and dressed in a swath of gauzy clouds. Silvery light had played along the crown of Helen's head, the glow angelic. Her fingers trailed along the stone railing as her gaze rested on the waters below. What was she thinking about?

Her reverie had taken me to the past. I remembered how we used to tell each other our secrets, quietly pouring our memories into each other in the dark. We would talk and laugh and share our dreams while lying in bed, our love a bond that would never break. Her gentle smile as she stroked my chest was forever etched into my memory.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:06 am*

But now, along the riverbank, we were each solitary strangers wandering the world, bereft of the one whom their soul loved. And only I knew it. She did not remember the sting of losing such a love. Perhaps it was a blessing for her to forget, but it was a loss that had tormented me every day since I'd awoken in a pool of her blood.

Every so often she would peer into the area where I hid, as if she sensed my presence. But then she'd continued on, her golden waves of hair flowing out behind her in the cool breeze.

She'd turned to pass over the river. I'd been two blocks back, hiding in the crowd. I'd glanced up, gauging where I should position myself along the rue to continue my vigil.

And then the demon Menelaus had materialized directly into her path. In disbelief, I had watched as the bastard set a simple trap.

My rage had exploded, and I'd taken off at a dead run before teleporting to eat up the distance. She slipped through my fingers at the last moment, taken by the demon king. But I would not let her go. Not this time.

Now I'd done away with all pretense of hiding my powers—I skipped through space to keep up with the car. I couldn't see what was going on inside the quick-moving vehicle, but I swore I would make Menelaus pay for his treachery.

## Chapter Four

Elena

The car turned down a wooded lane, passed through a set of wrought iron gates, and sped to an enormous chateau. It was set in an isolated clearing, the road no longer visible. The building rose from the landscape like a miniature mountain range, its dark roofs and turrets slashing through the night sky.

I remained silent after the creature's bizarre claim that we were married. He continued to study me, watching my every move as if he were measuring my breaths. When the car came to a stop, he rose and held out a hand to help me from the car. I ignored him and exited, searching my surroundings for any avenues of escape. The yard was large and open, but I doubted I had a chance of outrunning my captor, and my magic was of no use. The bangles on my wrists had tightened such that they felt welded to my skin.

I would have to wait until I saw an opening, sometime when he wasn't watching me. And once I got the metal off my wrists? I'd return to this place and destroy it down to the foundation.

"Please, step inside." He gestured to the large front doors that swung inward as a butler appeared.

I climbed the steps into the foyer. A glittering row of chandeliers lit my way along the bloodred marble floor. I continued on through the wide hallway, opulence in every detail of the paneled walls and the pieces of art expertly placed at intervals. The home was palatial. So much so that I almost felt small, as if crushed under the weight of its finery and sheer size. Each fine work of art and furnishing was just more kindling for the fire I would bring down later.

I scanned the rooms as I passed, looking for potential weapons and examining the windows for escape. Each one was accented with crossed iron pieces in a scarab motif, serving as a decoration and an effective jail. The stranger trailed a few steps behind me. I could sense his gaze roving over my backside, still taking in every

move.

“In here.” The stranger waved me into a room with a roaring fire. It was a drawing room, tufted leather couches and a delicate writing desk gracing the polished wood floors. The door closed behind us, a solid thunk followed by the click of the lock. I was once again trapped with him.

My throat closed up, but I kept myself on an even keel. This wasn’t the first time an enemy had underestimated me.

“Please, sit.”

I perched on the nearest couch and awaited my chance to strike. It would come. The stranger would eventually make the wrong move and give me the opportunity to sweep the game board and take him down with it.

The stranger took the seat opposite me, leaned back, and steepled his fingers. “I know you don’t believe me when I say I’m your husband. But, I assure you, Helen—and that is your true name—you are my wife.”

I said nothing and took stock of the room. Only two doors—the one we’d entered through and another, behind the stranger. The first was locked and the other a mystery. The windows bore the same scarab bars, no help there. I pinned my hopes on the mystery door.

“Would you like to know how I found you?”

He tapped his fingers together as he watched me, a smug smile taking over his features.



## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:06 am*

“Yes.” Any information about how he’d tracked me down could help me find him, when I was out of here and had the full contingent of Artemis’s warrior maidens at my back. This was not the sort of slight I would let go unpunished. I only wondered how much I could make him scream before I took his head. I smiled a little at the thought.

He frowned, as if he knew I was fantasizing about his death. Then he regained his mask of smug pleasure. “I knew where you were the moment you left the confines of Olympus. All this time, I’d thought you dead. But, as a demon’s mate, you are marked. It’s like a beacon of sorts, alerting me to what’s mine. Fate was such that I was in the city the moment you arrived. You were so close, I could feel my mark. I could feel you, Helen.”

My unease grew. I was surprised to hear he was a demon, but more than that, angered by his words of ownership. It was true that demons did mark their mates, but I bore no such mark. I kept my demeanor even. “The only mark I bear is that of Artemis.” I turned my head to the side and ran my fingertips down the runes. “And this birthmark.” I turned my head to the other side, showing him the red mark at my jugular. Pointing out just how wrong he was.

He growled as I touched the pink skin.

“Not there.” He rose and sat next to me, too close for my comfort, but I did not move. A cold sweat broke out along my brow, and my stomach churned. Something stirred beneath my breast, a self-preservation instinct that demanded I get away from this creature. His nearness dredged up some horrible darkness inside me that I hadn’t even known was there.

“Here.” He ripped through the back of my sweater in a smooth movement, leaving me bare. I raised a hand to strike him, but he caught it and twisted it behind me. Forcing me forward, he ran his free hand down my exposed flesh. Then without warning, he slicked his tongue along the top of my shoulder blade. I cried out and felt a searing pain where his mouth had been.

Craning my head around, I saw a symbol burned into my shoulder blade. It was a scarlet mark, twisted and slashing—the demon language. No.

“Let me go!” I tried to wrench my hand away from him. But he was strong, stronger than any immortal I had ever fought.

The air around me flickered, my magic seeking to break through, but the dispelling bangles kept my powers in check.

He leaned me back and pushed me down onto the couch. Settling on top of me, he smiled as if he’d won a victory. His body was hard against mine. His bottomless gaze had not warmed, but the rest of him was on fire. His shaft pulsed against my thigh, and my gorge rose.

“You see, it is you, Helen. You are mine.”

His words were like a jolt to my system, a strong wave of déjà vu rushing over me. I sensed memories, but more palpably, a deep warning. The panic rose within me, threatening to engulf me and my plans of escape. My heart beat rapidly, as caged in my chest as I was in this mansion. I tried to calm myself, to strategize, but I was helpless, trapped by a demon who I feared had some dark claim on me.

“You know it’s me, Helen.” His voice had dropped to a whisper as he greedily eyed my mouth.

He ran a hand through my hair and then pulled viciously, exposing my neck. He fastened his lips to my skin, grazing my birthmark with the sharp tips of his canines. I cried out, revulsion overcoming my resolve, and readied my plea to Artemis to save me from this fate. But it wasn't necessary.

The door I'd been eyeing burst inward, showering the room in dust and splinters. The stranger jumped from the couch and rushed to it, giving me the opening I had been waiting for. I darted to the door we'd first entered, but it was locked.

The stranger stalked through the blasted opening without giving me so much as a glance. Was he so confident in his trap? I furiously twisted the door handle, but the lock was solid. Before I could search the room for something to use as a lockpick, I heard the mechanism click over. There was no time to question it. I swung the door wide and dashed into the hall. I took off at a run back toward the front door, but only managed a handful of steps before an arm as strong as iron encircled me. A hand clamped over my mouth, cutting off my scream before it even lofted from my lungs.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:06 am*

### Chapter Five

Helen

Troy

1252 BC

I ran my hand along Paris's jaw, feeling the tickle of stubble beneath my fingers. The light was fading, signaling the coming gloom and my deepening disquiet.

"I'm coming back, you know," he said.

I sighed and snuggled closer to him, relishing his warmth. "I know." But dread had gripped my heart ever since I learned of Menelaus's challenge. At sunset, my beloved would meet my husband on the field of battle outside the walls of Troy. Menelaus had never been defeated, a demon of martial prowess that rivaled that of the gods. He had an army of mortals at his back, fooled into believing their leader was Greek. Instead, they followed the darkest demon, bent on destruction.

A tear slid down my cheek, landing on the golden hair at Paris's chest.

"Shh," he said and stroked my back. "I will always come for you." He pulled me to him and possessed my lips, our breaths and tendrils of our souls mingling. I wished it would always be like this, the two of us together.

I broke the kiss as tears rose in my eyes. "I can't lose you."

“You won’t.” His cerulean gaze made a promise I knew couldn’t be guaranteed. Death prowled the edges of the room, sneaking through the shadows of the coming night.

He commanded my mouth again and pulled me astride him, pressing me into him as he palmed my backside. Even in my fear, he kindled a fire within me. I entwined my arms around his neck and rocked against him. His shaft had already thickened against my core.

With a fluid movement, he rolled me onto my back and spread my legs wide. He claimed me, a sharp sigh escaping my lips as he thrust fully into me.

Paris watched me, holding my gaze as he withdrew and sank back into me, the pleasure strengthening our already-powerful bond. I wouldn’t let fear take this moment from me. I’d lose myself in him.

He bent his head to lick my nipple before encircling it with his lips, sucking it, and sending chills down my body. His steady rhythm never stopped as I clutched the sheets, feeling the bliss building up within me.

He reached down and stroked me with his thumb, causing a moan to rise from my lips. His rhythm quickened. He pulled back and watched as I arched for him, as if wanting to sear this moment into his memory forever. I pushed the thoughts of forever out of my mind and focused on the here and now. I returned his gaze and trailed lower, watching the clenching muscles of his torso as he continued rocking into me, filling me. I raised my hips, wanting every inch of contact with him, needing to feel the delicious friction. I wrapped my fingers in his hair and pulled his head to mine, again partaking in the sweet communion of our kiss.

His tongue was adept at teasing me into wanting more. Knowing what I craved, he sped his pace and lifted me from the bed, sitting me atop him and leaning me back so

he had free access to my breasts. With one arm behind me, he used the other hand to continue stroking me into a frenzy as his mouth played at one nipple and the next.

“Gods,” I breathed.

“Helen,” he growled, no doubt feeling me tightening around him, the peak of my ecstasy approaching.

Spreading my legs even more to increase the contact, I knew I couldn’t hold out much longer. He pulled me back up to him and locked his lips on my tender neck as my nipples grazed his hard chest. The feeling was too much. I cried his name as I came, helpless to stop myself. The pleasure surged through every inch of me, and the air around us hissed with my magic. With a final powerful thrust, I felt him erupt, his seed filling me. His strokes were sure and strong, pumping the fullness of his life into me. When we were both spent, he fell back toward the foot of the bed and clutched me to his chest.

I clung to him, feeling his strong heartbeat thumping a steady rhythm against me. I closed my eyes. Ignoring the deepening shadows—the harbinger of darker deeds to come—I focused on the warmth and life of my beloved Paris.

## Chapter Six

### Paris

I gunned through the iron gate, destroying it along with the front end of the car I’d stolen from Menelaus. My diversion of blowing the antechamber door worked perfectly, sending the demon searching through the house while I was able to rescue Helen. She sat next to me, glowering from the passenger seat. No doubt she was torn about fleeing with me or staying and trying to find an escape of her own. But the dispelling bracelets—though the thought of anyone daring to bind her raised my

rage—made her choice for her. She could not cast her way out of this situation. She needed me. Thank the gods.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:06 am*

The nearness of her was overwhelming my senses. Her smell, her very aura speaking to my long-dormant heart. I needed to keep my eyes on the road as we tore through the night, but I kept glancing at her, even though she glared at me. I noted only two changes in her; the runes on one side of her neck and a pink welt on the other, something akin to a birthmark. But I remembered her body as if it were my own, and no such mark had ever lain upon her skin before. Curious.

“Take me back to Roth’s chateau.” Her voice was cold, insistent on her command.

“I’m afraid that’s not possible.”

“It is possible, and you are going to do it right now, or I will call Artemis and all her warriors down on your head.”

“Do you want your sisters dead?” My words were harsh, but she didn’t understand the danger that had landed at her doorstep.

“You would dare threaten my sisters?” she hissed.

“I’m not the threat.” I shifted into higher gear as I whipped along the curving road back to the city. The engine roared, mimicking the tumult in my mind.

“Listen, Helen—”

“Elena.”

I curbed my comeback. “Fine, listen, Elena. That demon back there will stop at



nothing to possess you. He will burn your sisters, this city, and the world to the ground before he will willingly let you go. Do you understand?"

"No, I don't understand! Take me to my sisters, now, or so help me, I will call down the wrath of Artemis."

She eyed the door handle, and I quickly flicked the locks into place. Neither of us had time for any escape except for the one we would make together, gods willing.

"You can't call on Artemis."

"Do you want to wager on that?" The fire in her voice made the air sizzle around her. Her power was bound, not broken.

"If you do, she will strike both of us dead."

"Nonsense—well, only half is nonsense." She smirked. "You will most certainly be dead. Artemis will see to it."

I couldn't allow her to even attempt summoning the goddess, so I dropped the bomb in the calmest voice I could. "She thinks we are in love and have run away together."

Helen stilled her desperate search for an escape before turning to me, her jaw set in lines of fury. "What?"

"When you left Olympus, I was desperate to follow, so I told her about us." I shrugged.

Her eyes flashed, and she fisted her hands. "I see now. I see why Artemis has abandoned me. This is all your fault. She did this because of your lies. Making up some nonsense about us being together. And there is no us," she said between

clenched teeth.

“It’s not a lie. We have been lovers for thousands of years. I simply reminded Artemis of that fact. She will offer you no aid, I promise you. You have been cast out, and I have a price on my head, courtesy of your mistress, among others.” Had I fucked the situation? Yes. But I didn’t have many options, not with Menelaus so close.

She ran her fingers down the mark of Artemis along the side of her neck. “No.” Her voice quavered the slightest bit.

“She may not have done it formally, but you are no longer in her good graces. Besides, you are powerful enough in your own right that any boost you get from Artemis is likely minimal at best. She won’t help you. Trust me on this.” I remembered the goddess’s vicious forehand along my jaw when I’d told her I was only there for Helen. The sting from her sharp slap had resonated for a full day afterward.

Helen pounded her fists on the dashboard, the heat I knew so well lighting her gaze and making me desperate to touch her, claim her again as mine. Gods, I had thought her dead for so long that just being near her, hearing her voice, catching her scent on the air—it was as if I had been reborn.

“Why do you think you know me? Why does that demon think I’m his wife? Why is there a mark on my back?” Her voice shook, anger in every note. She leaned forward for emphasis, showing me her bare flesh and the now-fading mark of Menelaus, the symbol of demon royalty.

I bristled at the sight of what the demon had done—in the past and now. I’d sworn long ago to end the vile creature but had no success. Menelaus was too well protected, always surrounded by a legion of warriors at his beck and call. He was a

demon king, bred for battle and conquest, and he was obsessed with Helen. All the more reason I needed to get her to safety. “He won’t stop, Elena. Not until he has you again. Now that you’ve left Olympus, he can hunt you wherever you go. Our only chance is in the Underworld. We can hide there.”

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:06 am*

Her eyes widened, the sincerity in my voice maybe reaching some part of her that remembered me. At least I hoped it was true, hoped there was something of me left in her heart.

Now that I had her attention, I stumbled on, trying to convince her of the truth. “Menelaus is, well, was, your husband. He is a demon king, and you are the fabled Helen of Troy. Troy was a powerful city, but only half filled with mortals. The other half, the ruling half, was the proud line of Priam—the reigning vampire clan of the Underworld. They sought to make a new life, away from the strife of the Bloodkeep, and free of the war that constantly raged between demon kind and vampires in the Underworld. The vampires founded Troy and built it into the jewel of earth, a shining beacon of trade and enlightenment.”

The lights that marked the outskirts of the city, now within reach, sparkled ahead. I knew where we needed to go to cross into the Underworld but had no time to prepare. We would have to go with what we had and hope it was enough.

She was silent, considering me. She didn’t actually say the word “bullshit,” but the set of her brow told me enough.

I wanted—no, I needed—her to believe me. But even I knew my words were a poor substitute for the knowledge of the life she’d lost.

I sped through the urban areas, racing toward the ramshackle row of Underworld shops in the heart of the city. They looked like run-down, crime-ridden areas to any mortal eye, and even to the immortal eye they could use some fresh paint. They were the only places in the city to get magical goods and one of the few places on the

continent to cross over to the Underworld. The price was steep, as the magic necessary to maintain such a portal was intense. But I would pay any amount to keep Helen safe, to keep her out of Menelaus's clutches.

"And I'm supposed to believe you are Paris, the Paris from the Trojan War, the one Helen was so in love with?" The incredulity in her tone rankled, but I would not let it put me off.

"Yes. The one you were so in love with. I was a mortal prince of Troy, adopted by the vampire king Priam."

"You were mortal?"

"Yes."

"Was I mortal?" she asked, the hint of ridicule still lacing her voice.

"You were, but you were no ordinary mortal. Your father was a god, Zeus by all accounts, though we never knew for sure. You had abilities that no mere mortal possessed. You could see a battle in your mind and plot each move ahead of time. You would always gain victory through your web of stratagems. And you had a magic so powerful that you became..." I trailed off, unsure of how to explain her past.

"I became what?" Her tone demanded an answer, and she had crossed her arms in disbelief.

"You became a commodity." The term rolled off my tongue with an acidic inflection. I remembered every detail of how she described being ripped from her family, put on display, and sold to the highest bidder, Menelaus.

“I became a what?” She shrank back against the door of the car.

I didn’t want to continue telling her, but the words poured out of me. If I could only make her remember her past, then she would know the danger Menelaus presented, know that I was her only safe haven in this storm.

“Menelaus is your husband because he bought you at auction. He desired your powers and, above all, wanted your beauty for himself. So much so that he took you as his wife.”

The color was draining from her face at an alarming pace, as if my words struck home.

I continued punishing the engine, hurtling us toward salvation via a portal to the Underworld. “But then we met. He was away, and I was visiting the demon nobility of Greece in an effort to stem the violence that continued to rage in the Underworld. And then I saw you. You were so powerful, so beautiful, but there was something else, something that tore at my very heart.”

“What?” She still watched me intently, her green eyes stormy with thoughts. She was hanging on my every word.

“You were heartbroken. Something inside you had been torn asunder, but no one else seemed to care. They were all too caught up in your beauty and power to see the emptiness that haunted you. But I saw it, saw the pain you hid so bravely. And I didn’t want you to have to be brave anymore. I wanted you to live without fear, without remorse.” I meant every word. The memory of her strolling through a rose garden in the palace, her eyes watchful but not truly seeing, played through my mind. The moment I saw her, I knew I would sacrifice anything to love her, to see her eyes smile, to bring her whatever joy I could.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:06 am*

We pushed through the darkening evening, the skies becoming clouded and erasing the earlier silver light. I brought the car to a screeching halt in front of a dilapidated shop with the words CRANFEL'S WEAPONRY across the top in the goblin language.

“So we ran away together, back to Troy. But he wouldn't let you go. He will never let you go. Even now he is behind us, seeking you. We don't have long.”

I jumped from the vehicle as she did the same. Edging around toward her, I readied to catch her should she dart away. I would take her through the portal by force if I had to. I would hate myself for it, but I would do it to keep her safe. I would never let her come to harm again, never let death claim her. She made no move, just stood beneath the flickering streetlight and watched me.

“If I return to my sisters, he will come for me?” Her tone was measured, her arms still crossed against her chest.

“Yes, and bring a legion of his fiercest demons. None would survive such an onslaught. Not even the gods' own cohort.” I motioned to the door. We had precious little time to slip through the portal before Menelaus was upon us.

I heard her heartbeat speed up, thudding against her ribs as if the thought of harm befalling her sisters taxed her system. “How do you know he won't follow us to the Underworld?”

“He will. But the mark will not call him unless he comes near you. Proximity activates it. If you stay here with your sisters, he will find you, and his demons will

kill them all. I've seen your sisters, watched them band together. They would do anything to save you. Believe me when I tell you that no matter their skill, no matter their passion, every last one of them will die so he can have you."

She eyed Cranfel's, her heart still hammering out the violent rhythm. Even if she didn't completely believe me, I knew Helen would never endanger the ones she loved. Her own past, the one she didn't remember, told me as much.

Screeching tires cut through the night, the sound of Menelaus and his minions in pursuit. Helen didn't realize she was a lure, one that would draw the demon king every time.

"We must go, Elena. He is close, and I'm certain he's not alone." My fangs lengthened. I would fight to the death.

She took a step toward the shops, seemingly having made up her mind. "I have only two demands, and if you agree to them, I will go with you. First, I want these removed." She shook her slender wrists, the dispelling bracelets hugging her skin.

"Done. And the second?"

"Only I am allowed to kill Menelaus." She stood there and decreed death with the air of a warrior goddess primed for battle. Her golden hair flowed down her back in a cascade of softness, and her fair skin shimmered with that otherworldly effervescence. There was nothing I could deny her. Nothing.

The deal was struck.

## Chapter Seven

Elena



The portal closed behind me with a definitive swoosh, leaving Paris and I alone in the back of another shop. Though no longer on earth, I sensed no real change in the atmosphere or my surroundings. I wasn't truly sure we'd actually entered another realm. Perusing the room, I searched for exits, weapons, anything to give me an edge.

Then I glanced at where the portal had vanished.

"Don't worry. I paid Cranfel's cousin in Paris an obscene amount of euros to make sure the portal closed behind us for good," Paris said.

A goblin shuffled in through a shadowy door and gave them a bored look before shuffling back out again. I took a step to follow it, but Paris raised a hand so he could go first. I smirked. Once these cuffs were removed, I would show him just how much I didn't need his help or his protection.

My mind raced back through the tale he'd told. I wasn't sold on Paris's story, though he had told it with surprising genuineness.

The vampire was well-known on Olympus. Tales of his womanizing and blood sport were often fireside fodder among my sisters. And he had always been known as a heartbreaker, his tan skin and fair hair a perfect complement to his formidable height and toned body. A golden five o'clock shadow graced the masculine angle of his jaw, and his eyes—I had never seen any more beautiful. It was as if a painter had taken a stroke of color from the firmament and given it to Paris, a gift of creation.

The more he'd told me, the more I had to admit something in his words rang true, and I couldn't imagine why he would weave such a convoluted web of lies. I could not deny my instincts, and, to my own amazement, they told me to trust him. Besides, it was either risk the destruction of my sisters at the hands of the demon or put my own life on the line by following the playboy vampire. I would never set my sisters up for harm, even if it meant my own life would be forfeit. So be it.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:06 am*

We emerged in the front of another weapons shop, almost a mirror image of the one we'd left behind. Various blades and fighting accoutrements lined the walls, each glinting deadly. I calmed, knowing I could heft any of the weapons around me and strike down a foe in moments. I eyed a particular short sword, its length etched in Olympian runes and its haft wrapped in supple ram leather.

“Cranfel!” Paris barked, the harshness in his tone new to me. His face was stern, the angles even more stark. Only then did I realize how gentle he was with me, far more so than he appeared now. This version was the one whispered of and feared throughout the worlds, not the one who'd begged me to accompany him to the Underworld. Which was real?

A crusty goblin emerged from a side room and eyed both Paris and me with apprehension. “Master Paris, what can I do ye for?”

“Can you remove these?” Paris asked and placed his hand on my back, guiding me forward so the goblin could examine the binds on my wrists. His touch was somehow warm, the tips of his fingers resting lightly along my spine. Just the sensation made a pleasant rush of heat flow through me.

Ignoring the feeling, I proffered my hands, unafraid of any goblin who was half my height and pea green. A slow runnel of snot hung from his nose as he moved closer to examine the bracelets.

“Mmmm, these are something special.” His eyes lit as if seeing a precious jewel. Cranfel reached for my wrists, but Paris had a blade at the creature's throat before the goblin had a chance to touch me.

“Harm her, and you’re dead.”

The goblin swallowed audibly and delicately ran his crooked fingers around first one band and then the other. They sizzled at his touch, though I felt no pain. He muttered in a strange language, puzzling over the bangles. His musings continued for moments before it seemed he’d made up his mind. “If I take them off her, can I have them?”

“Why? What are they worth?” I asked.

The goblin gave me a quick glance, sizing me up. “They aren’t worth much, just plain old silver.” He shrugged, but his covetous glance returned to my wrists.

“In that case, we’ll be on our way. I’m sure there are plenty of other shops around here that could remove these for me.” In fact, I didn’t know any such thing. This was my first visit to the Underworld. But I figured it was worth the chance, especially when I spied a case full of magic bomb ingredients more potent than any I’d ever been able to concoct on Olympus. Black market stuff. If these bangles could buy me some magic stores, all the better for my next meeting with Menelaus. I strode past Paris, who had a wicked look on his face as he watched me. I had never been looked at with such open desire, and the feeling of his gaze was somehow heady, powerful.

“Wait, wait.” The goblin hotfooted it past the vampire and planted himself in front of the door. “I’ll give you fifty for them.”

Paris’s eyes were laughing, a sparkle that made him more than a little endearing. His features were angular yet, when he looked at me, he softened, as if the very sight of me relaxed him. That familiar tingle shot through me, but I pushed it down.

I had no idea what the goblin meant by fifty. Fifty what? I glanced to Paris, who shook his head almost imperceptibly.

“I’m afraid not.” I crossed my arms. “Now we’ll be going.” Aggressive negotiating was one of my favorite games.

“One hundred.”

Another shake from Paris.

“Not a chance.” I took one more step toward the door for emphasis.

“Two hundred, and that’s my final offer.”

Another faint head shake, the sparkle growing into a smile that had my heart speeding its pace. Surely it was the negotiation making my blood pump, not the vampire.

I kicked my chin up and reached for the door handle. “Out of my way.”

“Okay, three hundred and not an ingot more.” The goblin’s color was getting up, his pointed ears turning neon.

Paris inclined his head ever so slightly. I eyed the short sword and the other magic elements scattered throughout the store. “I’ll take four hundred store credit and a twenty percent discount, or we walk.”

The goblin blinked, first the left eye, then the right. “Deal.” Its oozing nose quivered at the finality of his decree. I hoped all Underworld creatures were not so loathsome.

I looked back at Paris, his face glowing with a warm smile, his even white teeth showing only a hint of the canines that were there earlier. More than anything, I saw adoration in his eyes and felt an echo of the unknown past he’d told me about. My heart pounded even harder, and now I admitted it was he who spurred its beat. He held my gaze until I looked away, my cheeks heating.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:06 am*

“Are you okay?” Paris’s tone was cheeky, as if he knew he was affecting me and enjoying it.

“Just get these things off me,” I griped.

“Right this way,” the goblin said and hustled through another side door.

Once again, Paris stepped first. I followed, my gaze lingering on his broad back. He was strong; I already knew that from our run-in at Menelaus’s mansion. If his stories were to be believed, he was thousands of years old, making him one of the most powerful immortals I had ever come across.

I couldn’t stop my mind from humming with secret thoughts of what he could do to me—an utterly inappropriate topic. I tried to snap myself out of it by looking anywhere else, but my gaze returned, drawn back to the fall of golden hair that just brushed his stiff collar. I felt the urge to touch him—to reach out and run a hand along the powerful muscles of his back, as if it was second nature to me. All these thoughts were so out of place that I stopped walking, needing breathing room. I had never desired a male before, especially not one who was a known scoundrel. I even began to wonder if he’d enthralled me somehow, but I knew that couldn’t be the case. I was too powerful for vampire parlor tricks.

Paris continued ahead, surveying the room as he went. They entered an adjacent smithy shop with an enormous forge, its immense fire crackling and screeching up into a cylindrical chimney. Strange shapes twisted in the flames, dark faces and hands reaching out. They screamed in fear or pain, I couldn’t tell which, and goosebumps broke out along my arms. The walls were lined with newly forged weaponry, a

couple still glowing with heat around the edges.

“Come, come. It’s all right.” The goblin fanned the flames with a whirring mechanism attached to the forge’s base, an orange glow lighting the room and the shrieks growing louder. “We need the fire of Hades to get those things off you.”

“Those are souls from Hades?” A chill rushed through me despite the overwhelming blast of heat. Hades maintained his dark kingdom in the depths of the Underworld where only the damned tarried. Even Olympians feared the dark reaches of such a cursed realm.

“Just their echoes. They’re still toasting in the fire down there, but their essence is in the flames here too.” The goblin continued, unaffected by the mournful sounds rising from the forge. “Those bracelets were created particularly for you, bound with a powerful magic. This is the only way to remove them.”

“How do you know they’re for me?”

“Whoever made them knew your magics, knew them intimately enough to create the perfect binding spell. Destructive magic is your forte, right? Got a thing for fire, though you can pull any element in one form or another. Extremely powerful?”

I nodded. But who could know my magics well enough to bind me so completely? I could think of no one. Not even my closest sister, Lilah, knew the full extent of the damage I could cause, the sheer power that made its home within my body.

The goblin put a finger into his ear and pulled out a giant ball of wax before flicking it into the fire. “Besides, they have your name on them. Helen, right?”

Chills ran through me at the goblin’s words, icing me inside and out. “I—”

“Her name is none of your concern. If you tell anyone you saw us, so help me, Cranfel, I will slice you up and feed you piece by piece to the screamers in the fire.” Paris’s voice boomed, cowing even the sounds of the flames. His fangs had lengthened again, lethal. He was a killer. One look at the death in his eyes proved it. The fireside tales about him were based in truth. I couldn’t tell if it frightened me or excited me.

Cranfel blanched. “I would never talk about my clients.”

The vampire loomed over the goblin, menace seeping from every pore.

Cranfel stopped digging in his ear. “Never, never,” he squeaked.

The goblin’s terror almost made me feel sorry for him. But not quite. Any creature who had no problem profiting from the fires of the damned would never be on the receiving end of my pity.

“Get on with it.” Paris rose to his full height again, crossing his arms over his chest.

The goblin, with a relieved sigh, reached for and found a set of tongs. They were spitting sparks into the air.

“If you hurt her—”

“I won’t, I won’t,” the goblin assured Paris with a wave of his twisted fingers. “This isn’t my first go-round with enchanted bracelets, you know.” Cranfel motioned me to come closer, waving his hairy green hands in the firelight.

Paris stood between them, eyeing the fire before turning to me.

“Trust me?” He held his hand out to me.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:06 am*

I ripped my gaze from the goblin's fiery pincers and looked into Paris's eyes. He watched me with such tenderness. It was disconcerting. My head screamed that I did not know him, but there was another part of me, buried deep, that spoke of a love so strong, it shook the very pillars of Olympus.

As he watched me struggle to make a choice, another emotion crossed his visage, something far more telling—passion. It was there, written in his confidence, his bearing. He was passionate for me.

I realized he'd been holding back in the short time we'd been together. At this moment, he was baring himself and asking for a boon from me. I could feel his desire, as if scorched into my soul. He wanted me with an intensity that I could not fathom. Those light touches of his fingers, the way he watched me. It was as if he'd caged himself, too afraid he might scare me away with the sweltering emotion that roiled within him.

I wondered at the feeling that raced through my veins. Not fear, but exhilaration. The same instinct that warned me of Menelaus now told me that Paris would be true to his word.

Trust.

Never breaking eye contact, I took his proffered hand.

The city of Pyli, where we had entered the Underworld, lay far below us. Smoke rose from the haphazard buildings that lined the main street, each one like an ice-cream cone piled high with too many scoops. Three separate suns were in the sky overhead,



the firmament an unfamiliar shade of amethyst. When we'd stepped out of Cranfel's shop, I had looked at Paris with alarm, expecting him to go up in flames. But he was unharmed.

He smiled when he noticed me staring. "The Underworld is the birthplace of vampires. This is our homeland. Only the earthly sun harms us."

It occurred to me the ancient war between demons and vampires Paris had spoken of must have been extremely bloody for the vampires to leave a place where they could live in the light.

"I have a home up on the ridge." He pointed to the craggy slopes in the distance. "We'll head there. It's safe."

He'd led me down the busy street to a livery shop. He kept his head down and maintained a steel grip on my arm the whole way. I'd followed his lead, keeping my eyes down. At the livery, he'd arranged for transportation up the mountain ridge next to town. Questions upon questions had risen in my mind as we rode up the steep slope. But the clatter of the buggy made conversation impossible. Paris had barely paid me any attention, anyway. His gaze roamed the woods and the dark cliffs around them. We were then dropped at the edge of a dense wood by the horselike creature that pulled our small carriage. It had fur of the softest rabbit and was extremely sure-footed on the mountainous path that led to these heights.

I stretched after the bumpy, noisy ride and enjoyed the crisp air that stirred around us. Paris tucked some strange currency into the beast's pack, and it turned, heading back down the craggy slope to the city.

Holding out a hand, I summoned a ball of flame. I'd been doing it every so often on the journey, reassuring myself that my magic hadn't been tainted by the bangles. He eyed the orb of golden heat, a look verging on satisfaction crossing his face, before

scanning the tree line. No fear. He wasn't put off by my magic in the least, even though I could destroy him with a thought.

We walked a short way through the wood, the sunlight never touching the mossy floor in the thick tangle of trees, until a slight clearing revealed a shadowy structure. It seemed to grow from the rocky granite of the mountainside, perched there as if a dark piece of the mountain had bubbled up and been frozen to the spot.

Paris's Underworld home was, in a word, hideous. The color of dark coal, it seemed to swallow any light that came near. It was built into a cliff of dark rock that ran along a sharp, wooded ridge high above the valley below. It would have been architecturally lovely, with high roofs and amazing vistas, if only there were windows. Instead, the outside was soot black. It was well-camouflaged, so high and well-blended that even an eagle would have trouble spotting it.

But I wasn't in this for an architectural survey. I'd trusted Paris at Cranfel's, even let him lead me up to his mysterious home. Though my instinct told me to trust him, I couldn't give it full sway over my mind. I was able to think more calmly on our ride up the ridge and come up with a plan. Now that my binds were gone, I could make a break for it. Run and try to sort this whole mess out. Staying with Paris couldn't be the right move, no matter how much my instinct told me it was.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:06 am*

He walked in front of me, carrying the packages from the shop. I knelt, pretending to examine the flora along the forest floor. He continued ahead a few more paces.

“I know it’s not much,” he called as he walked, “compared to where you lived on Olympus—”

I missed the rest of his words as I rose and darted away, dashing through the trees. I dodged low branches, keeping a swift pace, fleeing into the darkness of the woods. My footfalls were nearly silent on the mossy forest floor. I didn’t falter, even though I wasn’t sure what lay ahead.

Faster and faster I ran, my thighs burning, the forest closing in around me, hiding me from any possible pursuer. I couldn’t slow. Paris would no doubt have given chase, but my head-start should guarantee that he couldn’t catch up.

I chanced a glance behind me, and my heart dropped. Paris was only a few paces back, his steps even more silent than mine. Gods. His face was alight with something verging on rage, but not quite. There was something else there too, something that made my stomach clench and warm.

I burst into a blistering speed, pushing my body as fast as it would go. Ahead I saw the amethyst sky peeking through the leaves—a clearing in the forest. I reached the edge and lengthened my stride, now more sure of my footing and not having to dodge trees.

I knew I would escape. Knew it until I felt arms encircle my waist and drag me down into the grass. I hit the ground so hard the air whooshed out of me.

Paris grabbed my arm and roughly turned me onto my back. His fangs jutted from his mouth, sharp and hungry, and he looked almost dazed. He straddled me, pinning my arms at my sides with his powerful thighs. His hands were at my shoulders, pushing me into the cool ground.

He stared at me as I took in deep gulps of air, my heart beating at a furious pace. Power floated in the air, my emotions making electricity crackle around them. Once again, my fear mixed with something more, something different. Arousal. The killer looming above me made me want something I'd never wanted before. I balled my hands into fists at my sides, at once angry that he'd overtaken me and also... relieved.

He leaned down to my neck. I stiffened.

"You shouldn't run from me, Helen." His voice was low, a dangerous caress on my ears. "I can't teleport here in the Underworld, but I can always catch you. I'm too fast. And you're too delicious to let go."

I shivered, but not from cold. I was trapped beneath a predator, but instead of fear, I felt desire. Heat spread from my center outward, warming me.

He breathed in and let the air out on a growl. His fingertips dug into my shoulders. "I can smell your need."

The electricity snapped, silver light arcing around them.

"Paris—"

He sat up, the trance somehow broken at the sound of my voice. His fangs retracted, and he looked at me as if only now seeing me. He released his grip on my shoulders and rose to his feet before pulling me up next to him.

My power dissipated, gone on the chill breeze that soughed through the trees.

“Elena.” He let out a heavy breath. “You can’t just take off. It’s not safe.” He ran a hand through his hair, now lit brilliantly from behind in the light of the suns. More golden here than he could ever be in the single light on earth. “And I... I can’t be sure I can control myself when you do things like that. I just...” He trailed off, seemingly at a loss for words.

“I can take care of myself.” I focused on his first words, not trusting myself to even think about what Paris would be like if he truly lost control. “I’ve done it for thousands of years. Led armies. Destroyed my enemies. I’ll do the same to Menelaus.”

He gripped my arms and locked his gaze on mine. His brows were drawn down in consternation. “I thought you understood. I would never hurt you. I need you to believe me. I want to protect you, always. You are safe with me.”

I felt my resolve failing. The thoughts of running I’d had earlier now seemed foolhardy. I didn’t know anything about the Underworld. I could have run right into an even worse situation.

I needed more time to plan, to think. Running headlong into the woods was not the action of a strategist. Paris was right. I needed to stick with him until a better opportunity presented itself. Instinct had gotten me this far. Time to trust it some more.

I squared my shoulders. “I won’t run again.”

“Do I have your word?”

My spine straightened. “Yes, you have my word.”

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:06 am*

“Thank you.” He dropped his hands to his sides, seemingly appeased. “Good. Now, if you’d like, I’d be happy to show you back to my home.”

He backed up a step, letting me go first. Was he being a gentleman or keeping an eye on me? Likely both.

After a much more leisurely walk through the woods in almost comfortable silence, I approached the doors to the dark, foreboding house.

“Welcome.” He swung the opaque doors open wide. I entered slowly, unsure of what lay within. What I saw astonished me. The inside was filled with light and not a hint of the darkness that appeared from outside. Seeing the soaring views of the sky and the valley, I realized that the house was more glass than stone, more sky than ground.

The golden light filtered through the many windows, revealing rich wood floors and comfy seating areas. Paris had no doubt paid a high price for the intensity of the magic required for such a glamor. But it likely kept him alive. It was well known he was ceaselessly hunted by the bloodthirsty vampire queen Desmerada, usurper to his throne and kingdom.

I stepped farther inside. Given his party-boy reputation, I was pleasantly surprised to find Paris lived in this tranquil retreat. Its woodsy splendor reminded me of my home in the Forgotten Forest of Olympus. It was so well hidden that it made an excellent base of operations. High ground, good view, and difficult terrain. Perfect.

Paris retrieved my packages, setting them in a neat pile near the door. The air outside had a chill that grew colder the higher they climbed in the quaint buggy, but the

house was warm and inviting. I smelled something wonderful wafting through the air, lemon and saffron drawing me into the home.

But I hadn't come here to settle in. I needed to find a way to destroy Menelaus and have done with the entire affair. I told myself that my plans included being finished with Paris as well, that I was a warrior maiden in the service of Artemis. But the way he looked at me, that possessive yet reverent gaze, made my thoughts jumble. The way he'd pinned me in the forest, the feeling of being the prey. Goosebumps broke out along my skin at the memory.

Nothing had ever distracted me this way before, and I couldn't let it happen now, especially when there was a demon out there who posed a threat to my sisters. No, the creature who thought he owned Elena was what remained foremost in my thoughts. Menelaus's destruction was the endgame.

I halted, not allowing myself to sink into one of the welcoming couches or chairs. I needed Paris to know I wasn't going to be his Helen no matter what happened from this point forward. We were strangers with a common goal, as far as I was concerned. Nothing more.

"We need to discuss our next moves so that we can put a plan in action." My tone was clipped.

"You only just arrived. The trip through the portal and the journey afterward were likely more taxing than you realize." He lowered his brows, a spark of the predator still lingering in his eyes. "We are safe for now. Menelaus won't be able to follow. At least not right away." He guided me into the living area, his light touch once again sending shivers along my bare back. His faint smile told me he was pleased that I allowed him to touch me.

"I think we should just focus on a plan." I crossed my arms, unwilling to take another

step until he acquiesced.

“And we will, but first, wouldn’t you agree that we could use a meal and you could use some fresh clothes?” His gaze roved over me, lingering on the edges of my torn sweater. It was starting to fray and reveal the sides of my breasts. When he licked his lips, my cheeks heated. I shifted my arms down to cover myself, eliciting a sigh from Paris.

He turned, walked deeper into the house, and called out, “Daphne!” Glancing back at me, he said, “I will return. Please make yourself at home.” He passed through a door at the rear of the living area, near the wide windows that overlooked the valley. His voice called back to me, a hint of a smile in the words. “And I’ll know if you take off again. Part of me is almost hoping you do.”

The strange tightening in my core returned, the warmth spreading at the thought of how he’d looked at me, how his hard body felt on top of mine. I slapped my palm to my cheek and shook my head. Get it together.

And did he say Daphne? Who was that? A lover? I pushed away the sting at the thought. I had no claim on him, and his philandering was well-known. Clearly, my feelings were just the result of the sudden stresses pressing on me from all directions.



*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:06 am*

Instead of contemplating further, I took in the room—ways of ingress, places to take cover, where to stash some of Cranfel’s weapons. I imagined enemies swarming through the front door and made a mental map of how many steps it would take for them to overtake the room. I could hold them off at the foyer for a time, then fall back to the hallway to the right—a handy bottleneck. The fluffy couches could be flipped to use defensively. A large white rug, no doubt the pelt of some mythical beast, would serve to trip attackers if bunched up just right. And the light alone, streaming in from the walls of glass, would dazzle anyone upon first sight.

Satisfied with the space for now, though I wanted to know where the three interior doors led, I perused the home through a different lens. The fur rug looked so soft, I wanted to run my fingers through it. Before I could even kick my boot off to glide a toe through the silky fur, something at the side of the room caught my eye.

A small half-moon-shaped indentation in the glass wall held an ornate golden table with a piece of exquisite statuary on top. The space and the table seemed made solely to display the item, whose marble gleamed as if only recently polished. The light hit it at all angles such that the nook was aglow. I approached, drawn to it.

The statue appeared to be a game piece, akin to the white queen of a chess board. The figure stood with a sparkling crystal sword raised over her head, ready to strike, while a shield bearing a crest of laurel adorned her other arm. The workmanship was exquisite down to the very expression on her face, determination set in stone.

I raised my hand to it but didn’t touch. “Hmm, what are you?”

“A piece made long ago for a game called latrones.” Paris stood behind me, though I

had not heard him reenter the room. I intentionally kept my eyes on the game piece, not wanting to reveal how startled I was that he could creep up on me so easily.

But his words piqued my interest; I had long been a lover of games. “What sort of game?”

“Strategy. A game of warfare.”

My favorite. “Where are the rest of the pieces and the board?”

“Why? Do you want to play?” Mischief was in his voice, and his question meant a bit more than what it seemed.

“Maybe.” He wasn’t the only one who could be mischievous.

“Then I’m sorry to say that this is the only piece I have left.”

“What happened to the rest?”

“They were destroyed.” The ache in his voice was like a wound, one that should have healed long ago but instead still pained him anew each day.

That whisper within me, the one telling me of a life already lived, grew louder. I turned to him, sensing that I needed to know the rest of the story, needed to put the puzzle pieces together. I found myself looking up into those sky-blue eyes, his lips only a breath away from mine. The passion in his gaze burned into me, searing a path down my body and into my most secret places. I had never wanted the touch of a male. But I knew then that I didn’t want the touch of just any male. Only the one whose reverent gaze rested on me, searching my eyes, my heart. Logic told me to back away, to take a defensive tack given the unfamiliar terrain. But I didn’t move, couldn’t breathe, couldn’t find a muscle willing to obey the command of my mind.

Instinct ruled me.

“Gods,” I breathed as my heart kicked into a staccato beat.

The sound of my exhale set him into motion, as if he’d been waiting for a sign from me. His hands pressed against my back, no longer the hesitant fingertips. His wide palms pulled me to him. Without warning, he claimed my mouth with a passion the likes of which I’d never felt. My mind screamed for me to torch him, a shimmer filling the air around us. But my body responded to him as if under his command instead of mine. His mouth, so insistent, so full of that fervor he had been trying to hide, made me giddy. This felt right, as if it was where I was meant to be. Here, in his arms. My lips parted, and his wicked tongue darted in, tasting me. My knees went weak, and I allowed him to pull me even closer.

His kiss was the most erotic thing I had ever experienced. My budded nipples grazed against him through the sweater with each of my quick breaths, making them ache. He ran a hand up my side and under the material, cupping my breast as he deepened our kiss. A moan rose from my throat at the sensation of him kneading the soft mound. He backed me into the window wall, covering me with his body. It was as if I were a magic bomb that had ignited, suddenly ablaze at his touch, his kiss. He ripped the remaining fabric from my top. His hands strayed to my breasts, the feeling of his thumbs teasing the hardened tips making me lose all sense of time and place.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:06 am*

He yanked his shirt open, buttons flying, and pulled me to him, groaning as my skin met his. I wrapped my hands around his neck, my instinct demanding more of him, all of him. I snaked my tongue against his and reveled in the pleasure of his penetrating strokes. Had I been here before? Felt this electric touch? Something sparked in my memory, a loose thread that fluttered away before I could grab it.

He lifted me, and I wrapped my legs around him.

Home. This felt like home.

His shaft was against me, thick and taut with desire. And, gods help me, I wanted it. Wanted him inside me. It was as if I was suddenly possessed by some wanton spirit, but I didn't care. All I knew was his passion for me, and all I wanted was to feel it come into full bloom within me.

He carried me to one of the couches and laid me down. Settling on top, he fell between my thighs as his kiss continued to make me melt. With one hand still at my breast, teasing me into a pleased moan, his other reached down and got a handful of my backside. I arched against him, relishing the feel of him all over me.

Right. This felt so right.

He broke our kiss but only to move his mouth down my chest and capture a nipple, grazing it with his teeth. I ran my hands through his tousled hair. He released one breast to encircle the other, flicking his nimble tongue across the peak, sending a shock of arousal through me.

Tension built at my center, a sensation unlike any other I could recall. A sweet pressure that promised bliss. I moaned again as he sucked the bud completely into his mouth, the sensation within me growing ever stronger. Like I was a bowstring being drawn back slowly, surely.

But when he relinquished his hold on my aching breast and nibbled at my neck, I froze. Memories of Menelaus binding me and placing his mouth on my neck surfaced like a monster in my dreams.

“Helen?”

The name was wrong on my ears, jarring me back to my senses. I put a hand to his tan chest, pushing him away as I scooted from him until my back hit the arm of the couch.

His brows furrowed, worry dimming the fire in his eyes. “I mean, Elena—”

Before he could continue, a half-naked nymph traipsed into the living room, bowed, and said in a high trill, “Dinner is served.”

## Chapter Eight

### Paris

I had dreamed of this moment so many times, cried out for her in my sleep on more occasions than I could count. And she was finally in my arms, the living, breathing goddess who had consumed my thoughts ever since our first meeting in that rose garden so long ago. Just the taste of her, that honeyed softness that I would never forget, made me desperate for more. Even though she did not remember our past, didn’t remember the love we shared, she was giving herself to me now, in the present. And gods, did I want to take her, to give her the release I had wrung from her so

many times before, to hear her crying out my name.

But she'd turned cold. Daphne had stumbled upon us before I'd even had a chance to ask what I'd done wrong. Elena covered her fair breasts, the pink nipples still plump and wanting. I couldn't stifle a growl at the loss of that glorious sight.

"Oh, I didn't know I was interrupting something." Daphne watched me and Elena with interest, her barely covered breasts bouncing jauntily as she straightened from her low bow. Being a nymph, Daphne was an open creature, enjoying seeing and being seen, especially when there was nudity involved. Despite her youthful appearance, she was hundreds of years old, if not thousands. An excellent housekeeper and general companion. I had grown quite fond of her over the years.

"You weren't, um, interrupting," Elena said. She was looking at the tattered remains of her sweater with chagrin.

Before I could make my apologies for the destroyed clothing, Daphne picked right up, never missing a beat. "I have plenty of clothes, and, though I may be older, I still got it"—she shook her behind with a sly wink at Elena—"so I think some of them will fit you."

To my surprise, Elena smiled at the nymph. "You remind me of a certain sister of mine."

"I do?" Daphne asked with delight. "Then she must be gorgeous!"

Elena laughed, the sound a salve to my heart. I feared I'd frightened her, overwhelmed her with too much too soon. But when she'd stood in front of her game piece, I could not hold back any longer.

The white queen was the only relic I'd managed to save from our life together, the

only thing Menelaus hadn't shattered. When I awoke in our bedchambers in Troy, the figure lay beside me in a pool of Helen's blood, more blood than a mortal could ever lose and yet still draw breath. My new vampire senses told me as much, but even without them, I knew she was gone somewhere far beyond my reach, to the fields of Elysium or the Island of the Blessed. There was no body; likely taken by Menelaus to be defiled. I cursed the demon for ever touching her and vowed to end his life. My despair was bottomless, a deep abyss that drowned me in pain and rage.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:06 am*

Lying there, reeling from the loss, I could feel the blood of the vampire king Priam flowing through my veins and giving me power beyond measure. Through the crucible of Menelaus and Death itself, I had been reborn an immortal and saved, redeemed by my beloved Helen.

She had given me life and sacrificed her own. On the night of my death, I had gone to battle Menelaus, forsaking the safety of the Trojan wall and staking my life on battle. If I had prevailed, then I would have won peace in the war and the chance at a real life with Helen—two things I valued above all else.

The demon king and I had dueled at nightfall, our battle cries and ringing swords the only sounds in the dusty twilight. A host of vampire nobility watched at my back while the demon horde lined up behind Menelaus, a wall of reckoning. On and on we'd fought, striking and drawing blood, circling, weaving. It was a delicate dance of vicious war. Though I was only a mortal, I fought with all the heart I had. But the demon Menelaus won the battle, a sharp stroke through my chest sealing my doom.

Priam, his tears flowing freely, carried me inside the walls and laid me gently at Helen's feet. Her face was drawn and pale, yet still beautiful, as she knelt beside me. Her dress was pure white, of the airiest silk that floated on the air and glowed in the silver rays of the moon. I thanked the gods that I was allowed to see her once more before I was taken by the ferryman.

As my vision dimmed and my soul untethered, she fed a liquid down my throat. My senses were failing, but the iron taste was strong on my tongue. Her gentle hands stroked me, soothed me even as I felt her tears and heard her sobs. I never wanted to cause her pain, but before I could even try to ease her suffering, all went dark.



I now knew it had been Priam's blood she'd poured down my throat. Helen, it seemed, had a plan in place should I fall to Menelaus. She had sought to turn me into an immortal, crown prince of the vampire kingdom.

She had saved me.

I had failed her.

I never saw the Trojan Horse, the fall of my family, the death of my soulmate. I was still in my death sleep, Priam's blood changing and remaking me into something new. When I awoke, I discovered Priam and all the others of my royal lineage had been snuffed out by the demon hordes at Menelaus's command. I was the last survivor of the noble vampire house. The deaths of my loved ones haunted me, but it was the loss of her, the one for whom I lived and died, that had made it almost impossible to gather myself from the pool of her heart's blood and strike out into the cold night. But I had done it. For her and for revenge on the one who took her from me.

And now she had returned to me. Safe in my arms as she was ever meant to be.

Daphne had been chatting excitedly about having a guest in the house, though I hadn't heard a word as I relived my darkest day in my mind.

Unperturbed, Daphne continued, "We need some more girl time around here. Whenever he sees fit to visit, he's always brooding around, flat-out moping, or staring at that thing." She motioned to the white queen. "Come with me. I'll get you all set up in the prettiest guest room with the prettiest view, unless you're staying in with Paris?"

I watched Elena, her cheeks pinking at the suggestion. "I'm, um, I need my own room."

I couldn't help the smile that took hold of me. We'll see about that.

Daphne and Elena ate together. The mischievous nymph prepared enough food to feed a small army. When I saw the feast, I raised a brow at the housekeeper.

She shrugged. "I had some ingredients lying around."

After Elena had loaded her plate with Daphne's bounty, I sat with them and drank blood from a glass. Elena had watched me with interest at first, but then quickly became bored. Perhaps she was expecting some grand show of "vampire of the night"?

Truth be told, I was far more interested in her, now wearing one of Daphne's lacy dresses. It skirted the tops of her pale breasts, giving me a tantalizing look at what lay beneath. I'd tasted it and wanted more. Would never stop wanting more.

Not getting a blood-crazed show from me, Elena turned to Daphne, who was all too happy to have an audience. Elena quickly became enthralled with Daphne's tales of the Underworld. Like her past self, Elena loved to learn. She ate up Daphne's explanations about how the "Underworld" was actually a misnomer created by the mortals, for this realm was actually a world separate and apart from earth.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:06 am*

“They say a powerful mage of the olden times, or maybe even Hades himself, created the Underworld with the help of the Titans—somewhere immortals could be free from the gods and the mortals alike,” Daphne said conspiratorially, as if revealing some great Underworlder secret.

I wasn’t sure how it was created, but I called it home now, though I spent quite a bit of time on earth. It was safer there for me, easier for me to hide from Desmerada’s cavalcade of spies. I hid in plain sight, melding into the dark culture of clubs and alleys, preying on human women and surviving on their blood and comfort. I cursed myself for touching even a single one of them. Had I known my beloved still drew breath, I would never have done such things. But, as it was, I used the females for blood and allowed them to use me for pleasure. I swallowed, the shame mixing with the iron taste of blood.

Daphne continued and gave a laundry list of all the different types of creatures that called the Underworld home: nymphs, fairies, demons, vampires, spirits, cyclopes, furies, and any number of other beings. The Underworld was far vaster than earth, with several tribes occupying massive strongholds.

The vampire fortress, Bloodkeep, was atop a stone crag in the midst of an immense, misty wood. Their neighbors, the demons, occupied the arid lands just beyond the reach of the forest and plains. The demon stronghold, Decanum, was situated at a fabled oasis amid the shifting dunes and punishing suns of the Desert of Thorns.

I had never seen the walls of my ancestral home, the Bloodkeep, but they were fabled to rival the gates of Troy, shot through with gold and carved with scenes of Underworld lore. I had no desire to claim the throne, no need to live a life at court

among the backstabbing nobility that thrived under Desmerada's rule.

Daphne persisted with her Underworld 101. "Some demons have horns, and some are odd colors, but some look human. I've been with a few, though, that look human up top but have a little extra demon down below, and I'm here to tell you that if you find one like that, you give old Daphne a call, because I'd like to get acquainted."

Elena smiled, warmth lighting her cheeks at Daphne's straightforward talk. I remembered that smile well, having taken joy in eliciting it from her so many times in the past.

Daphne's tales continued until Elena's eyelids began to droop, fatigue weighing on her. "—and that's why vampires can only teleport on earth, not in the Underworld," Daphne finished with gusto.

"I think our guest could use some rest," I said.

"No, I'm fine, I just need to—" Elena's words were interrupted by a yawn.

"Please, just one night of rest, and then we will make our plans." I fully intended to set the destruction of Menelaus in motion, and now that she was with me, I knew it was as good as done. But my deep need to keep her safe, to keep her well, overruled even my desire to slay the demon.

She looked to argue again, but exhaustion seemed to overcome her resolve. "Fine. But just one night, or day, or whatever time it is..." She looked to the firmament in puzzlement. It remained that deep amethyst, the three suns making their way across at a leisurely pace.

"Night is almost here." Daphne started collecting plates from the rough-hewn kitchen table.

“Let me help you.” Elena picked up her plate.

“Don’t you dare. I have to pretend like I work around here, at least a little.” Daphne winked. “Job security.”

Elena’s tinkling laugh warmed my heart. She thanked Daphne for the meal and rose to leave.

“Remember, first right, then third door on your left,” Daphne called.

The moment Elena was gone, Daphne stopped clearing and watched me with a knowing look. “Well?”

“Well, what?”

“It’s her, isn’t it?” Daphne smiled.

“It’s who?” I played coy, but Daphne knew my story, knew that I burned brightly for only one soul.

“By the gods, you found her!” Daphne clapped her hands, joy shining in her eyes.

“But she doesn’t know she’s her.” I drained my glass, itching to follow Elena, to make sure she was safe.

“Doesn’t matter. It was clear as day the second I saw you together. She’s your white queen, through and through.”

I rose, gave the beaming Daphne a kiss on the forehead, and strode to my room. Next door to Elena’s. I sat on the bed and couldn’t help but smile. Looking like a fool, sitting there and grinning at a wall, but it didn’t bother me. If my heart could beat, it

might have burst from the sheer joy of knowing that she lived and that she was here. I could hear her even now, pulling back the covers and settling into the sheets. What I wouldn't give to be in there with her. She belonged with me. But I needed to wait until she realized that for herself.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:06 am*

Did she wear anything to bed? The thought caused my cock to spring to life. The way she'd been with me earlier, allowing me to touch her, needing me to pleasure her. I ran a hand over my mouth, recalling the sweet taste of her on my lips.

I reined myself in. She needed to rest, and I needed to give her space. I rose resolutely from the bed and stripped down, ignoring my demanding shaft as I tucked it into my boxers. Slipping between my sheets, I listened to her, imagining how she looked in the large bed, the shape her lithe body would make under the covers. She seemed to toss and turn for an inordinate amount of time. Restless, perhaps uneasy? I needed her to know she was safe here. Safe with me, always.

But she'd run from me. The memory was unsettling. I shifted against the pillow. I hadn't meant to take her down so hard, to prowl on top of her like an animal. But my nature was not the same as it was when we were both mortal. Now a predator lived inside me, one that she'd put there. I would control it, though the memory of her arousal, the smell of desire wafting off her in waves, did nothing to ease the ache between my legs. I let the image of her running, her hair streaming out behind her, leave and refocused on the sounds from the neighboring room.

After a while her breathing became even and deep, sleep taking her.

I thrummed my fingers on my chest and stared at the beams of the ceiling, above which the sky had changed to the nighttime dark. A slow eruption of stars dotted the inky blackness. I closed my eyes and tried to will myself to sleep, but even with my eyes shut, she was there, her hair, her eyes, her essence, haunting me as she had these many years.

I saw her running through a field of the deep lavender that covered the hills just outside of Troy. She was laughing as I chased her then, daring me to catch her and make love to her among the fragrant blooms. She was reclining on our shared bed in the palace of Troy, her skin dewy and glowing after we'd made love.

My memory moved on to how her emerald gaze would follow me as I sparred with my brothers. Her lilting voice would give me strategy tips after every match. My smile returned as I remembered what an avid student of hers I had been, listening to her lesson and then thanking her with myriad pleasures. These were the memories that eased me, allowing me to drift into dreams of her.

I was nearly out when a shrill scream of pure terror shattered the stillness.

## Chapter Nine

Elena

I was covered in a cold sweat and awoke when I heard someone screaming. As I sat up in the bed, I realized the sound was coming from me. My dream was a terror—Menelaus stood amid the corpses of my sisters, their heads severed, and their souls sent to Hades. He'd made me watch, trapped and bound for him to torture as he pleased. Those eyes, unfathomable and dark, had promised retribution for me daring to run from him again.

Before I had a chance to rise from the bed, Paris burst through the door. He glared around, looking for intruders. When he found no one, he sat next to me. "Are you all right? Are you hurt?" He felt along my body, gauging for any harm.

"N-no." I drew the sheet up. I wore a lace teddy, something Daphne had picked out as pajamas, though I felt it was missing a good bit of fabric. "It was just a dream."



Paris relaxed only slightly, still searching my face.

“It was Menelaus. He had me again. Had m-my sisters.” My voice trembled, the terror of the dream still lingering in my mind. Menelaus’s soulless eyes still seemed to glow at me in the dark. This sort of fear was new. Nothing had ever shaken me like this, and it was the odd *déjà vu* that made it all the more terrifying.

Paris reached up and stroked my hair. “Never again.”

“And my sisters? Are they safe?” The image of my strong warriors lying in a pile of death cut me so deeply that tears sprang to my eyes.

“He has no reason to invite Artemis’s wrath now that you are out of his reach. He does not hunt them, does not want them. Just you.”

His words, though they should have chilled me, put me at ease. I could not bear it if my actions resulted in my sisters’ destruction.

“And are you certain he can’t find me here, even with the mark?”

“The portal in Pyli is closed. The next nearest portal is in the Bloodkeep, over five-hundred miles away, and he would never dare try to cross there. The vampires and the demons are still at war.” His hand was in my hair, soothing me. He raised the other to catch a tear that rolled down my cheek.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:06 am*

I shook myself inwardly. I was a warrior maiden, chief of Artemis's soldiers, not some sniveling girl in thrall to a vampire. Besides, it was only a dream. Still, I couldn't escape the feeling of dread. The image of my sisters murdered and lying in a heap was seared into my thoughts. It stoked my hatred of the demon who thought he could possess me. I would end him. My mind began whirring, trying to think of ways to get to him without him knowing I was near. How many troops did he command? Where were they stationed? What sort of weaponry would they use? What was the quickest way through the Desert of Thorns and into the demon palace Daphne had spoken of?

"Hey, hey, Elena, look at me." Paris lightly tipped my chin up. "Rest now. Your sisters are safe. You are safe."

Slowly, the concern in Paris's eyes made me relax, let go of the fear and the need to strike back at the demon who haunted my dreams. My thoughts eased, no longer coming in a torrent. I took a deep breath and let it out, calming my heartbeat.

I couldn't simply fall back asleep, not now. I wasn't used to sleeping alone, having always bedded down with my sisters. This room, with the huge bed and glass walls, was overwhelming after the terror of the dream. I felt weak and foolish to ask but knew I would not get a moment's rest unless... "Would you, um, would you stay with me?"

Paris stilled. He looked at me with that same heat that made me melt for him earlier. This was a mistake.

"No, that's a bad idea. I'm—"

“Of course.” He hesitated only for a second before pulling back the covers, getting in, and propping himself on his elbow next to me. His bare chest was like a golden wall, blocking my view of the door behind him. I caught his scent, masculine and woodsy. Calming. Familiar.

“Sleep now. Nothing will harm you, in dreams or otherwise, while I’m here.”

He sounded so certain, so intent on protecting me. Just the resolve in his manner was a balm on my troubled spirit. I relaxed back into the bed, staring at the flickering, swirling trail of stars overhead. Paris sank down next to me and rested his palms on his chest. A faint heat radiated from him as if he’d soaked up warmth from his bed and brought it to mine as a gift.

Instinct urged me to curl up against him, to seek his shelter, but I remained still. I couldn’t start down that path, because with the way he looked at me, I wasn’t sure I would be able to stop. He was only a whisper away, but as far as I was concerned, it was a vast distance, one I would not cross. At least, not again.

I steadied my breaths, longing for a sleep of oblivion. My eyelids became heavy. Paris’s presence seemed to wick away the horror of the dream. After settling my mind, my heart, I let myself go into the warm dark.

I awoke in a comfortable fog. My lashes fluttered open to find a dusting of golden curls and the hard chest of Paris beneath me. I was snugged into the crook of his arm. My hand lay on his muscled stomach and my knee was slung over him, resting atop his rock-hard shaft. My breasts were pressed to his side, and my hair fanned out around me. I was mortified and aroused all at once.

I didn’t move, wondering if I could somehow extricate myself without him noticing. I was afraid to look up at his face, lest the movement wake him. Biting my lip with indecision, I decided to first slowly remove my traitorous leg. Gently, I began lifting

my knee, but a deep rumble from Paris's chest stopped me.

"Don't." He pulled me even closer so that I was almost completely on top of him.

Heat shot through me, hardening my nipples and wetting my core. My body acted of its own accord, as if it had been longing for this, needing Paris's touch so desperately. I remembered all Paris told me of our supposed previous life together. I wanted to doubt it, to deny it ever existed. But the way my instincts sought him, the way the very heart of me wanted to feel him inside me...the doubt was shredding away. Could what my instincts had been telling me all along be true? Were we fated?

I hitched in a breath as he pulled me directly on top of him, my legs straddling him. He let out a hiss as my sex rested on his shaft, only the thin fabric of my lace and his boxers separating them.

He drew my face up to his. Those eyes watched me so intently. "I've dreamed of this, of you, for so many years." His voice broke with emotion and longing, pain flashing across his eyes like a cloud across the sun.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:06 am*

Before I even knew what I'd done, I brushed his lips with mine. A gentle nudge to bring him back to the present. To take away the pain. But it was so much more than that. It was a bridge, one linking us across an ocean of time, though I couldn't even begin to tell the depths of that vast sea. When he took my mouth with more passion than I had ever experienced, I knew I was in trouble.

### Chapter Ten

#### Paris

I couldn't believe the sweetness of her. Waking to her pressed against me was an acute torture. She slumbered, no doubt unaware of how she had molded herself to my side, just as she had in times past. I couldn't control my need for her, my cock hardening as she placed her calf against it.

I'd forced my hands to stay put. One rested on her hip and the other at my side, restless to touch her. Her breathing changed, and her eyelashes tickled my chest. Her eyelashes flickered faster, and I couldn't help my smile, knowing she was surprised at finding herself glued to me. But when she went to move away, I couldn't let her go.

Her lips brushed against mine, and I took more, melding our mouths and partaking in the sweet ecstasy of her kiss. She warmed even more under my caresses, and the scent of her desire lengthened my fangs, though I was careful not to harm her.

I slid my hands down, grabbing her ass and raising her to get a better angle on her mouth. The heat of her against my aching shaft made me hurt, and imagining how much hotter she would be once I was inside her to the hilt sent me precariously close

to the edge. She ran her hands in my hair. Her breasts crushed against me, the tight buds of her nipples making my cock pulse with need. She felt me and moved her hips, thin fabric the only thing between me and the sweet bliss I knew lay between her thighs. I pulled her up my body and reached a hand around her, stroking her sex from behind.

She moaned as I moved the fabric aside and delved a finger inside her. Gods, she was tight. Her sheath could milk my cock until I cried out for mercy. And she would laugh wantonly as she used to, taking her pleasures and giving me even more. Gods, she drove me wild. Even now, after being separated by an eternity, she was everything I wanted.

I drew my fingers out and reached even farther, massaging her clit with her own wetness. It was already swollen and in need of my attentions. She undulated on top of me as I stroked her mouth with my tongue and her clit with my fingers. Her magic swirled in the air around us, and my skin tingled with electricity. She neared the edge, about to cascade into a release. But I would not let her come so easily.

I removed my fingers, causing her to dig her fingernails into me in frustration. I savored her raw emotion and flipped her on her back. Ripping the teddy from her, I shredded the thin fabric easily. She was bare to me. The peaks of her nipples pointed to the heavens as she spread her legs. I slid down her body, the scent of her arousal drawing me toward the fair hair at the junction of her thighs. When I saw the pink of her lips, I held back a groan. My cock strained against the fabric of my shorts, but I denied it, would not sate it until I had my fill of her tender flesh.

I nuzzled her thigh, enjoying the shimmer of her magic that lit the air around us. Her powers were barely leashed. I wanted to send her out of control, not giving a damn what the consequences were. I feasted on her, letting my tongue stroke her with abandon.

Elena

I had given myself over to instinct—a slave to its needs. The weak protests in my mind had long since dissolved under the insistence of his kiss. And now my thoughts were filled with only one thing—Paris. He nestled between my thighs, his gaze on my innermost flesh and a ravenous glint in his eyes. I had never allowed a male to get this close to me, this intimate. And I should have bolted from the room, but I didn't.

His fangs had grown into lethally sharp tips. But, gods, the sight made me hot, made me want him more than I'd ever wanted anything. When he licked me, I couldn't hold back the moan that reverberated through the room. When he didn't stop, I cried out his name.

His tongue sped its pace, licking me as if he wanted to taste every last bit of me. And I wanted him to. I kept my hands in his hair as my body arched, spread wide before him. He sank a finger deeply into me and reached the other hand up to caress my breast. He sucked at my tender flesh, and the sensation made me writhe. Increasing his speed, he made my mind go blank, focused solely on him pushing me to the brink. The tension grew until my need blotted out everything else. When I felt the tip of his fang graze the nub at my center, the tension broke and I went over the edge, falling and cascading into the deep waters beneath. I cried out as I came, the release invading my every thought, every breath.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:06 am*

He gave me a few more appreciative licks and kissed up my stomach, sampling each nipple before returning to my mouth. I tasted myself on his tongue, the heady flavor of our entwined bodies. As he positioned his shaft at my entrance, I dug my nails into his back.

Gods, was this happening?

He released my mouth and rose on his elbows. His fangs were in full view. Their razor edges made my breath hitch before I looked into his eyes, alight with the passion that burned inside him, burned for me. Trust. He let out a deep growl, and he ground his hardness against me. I thrust in answer, high on the sensation of his body.

He scraped the tips of his fangs over the pink mark on my neck, making my nerve endings tingle all over my body. I should be afraid. Instead, I felt powerful. Dominant. I needed him inside me, his fangs and his length imbedded deeply. Reaching down, I freed his shaft from his boxers. The tip was wet, and I swiped my thumb around its head, feeling its smooth, hard length. He groaned at my touch, a deep sound of wanting. His mouth joined with the smooth skin of my throat, teasing me, promising to take my vein but not telling when. Gods, the pleasure.

But then I felt something burning at my back. Something wasn't right. I stilled. Then I realized it. Menelaus's mark. It was on fire.

Paris

I sensed the change in her and felt the threat. I rose from the bed and scoured the crag beneath us, looking for any sign of danger. There, in the early morning light, shadows



moved, climbing upward. More demons than I had ever seen were now amassing on my doorstep. It was the horde come for Menelaus's prize.

Below, flames roared through the streets of Pyli. The town would soon be destroyed, nothing more than a pile of ash and embers. I cursed, bitterness rising in me and replacing the honeyed taste of Elena on my tongue. She had already jumped from the bed, dressed quickly, and was throwing clothes and items into a pack she'd found in the closet.

"They don't know our exact location, or they would have been on us already."

"Agreed." Her voice no longer had even a hint of its earlier heat.

"Meet me when you're ready." I dashed to my room and began packing a similar bag.

"Daphne!" I called out as I collected gear.

I yanked a weapons stash from under my bed.

Pulling on a gray T-shirt and some jeans, I cursed Menelaus in three different languages.

Daphne rushed through the door, her pointed ears at sharp attention. "Demons! They're coming!"

"I know. We have to run. You ready?"

"Yes. We can go to my people."

I shook my head. "You know I would never risk you or them."

Daphne and the nymphs of the Woodlands were brave, but they were not hardened

warriors. Menelaus would overrun them and bathe in their blood.

Her eyes welled with tears, distorting the friendly golden flecks dotting the chocolate irises. “Pyli’s on fire. Where can we go?”

“Fuck!” I kicked the foot of the bed, the wood exploding and sending splinters flying. There was nowhere else. I had no home, and now, thanks to my duplicity with Artemis, neither did Elena. We had no protection, no benefactor to see us through the coming storm.

Elena appeared in the doorway, dressed in some of Daphne’s tight-fitting leathers that hugged her hips and a black T-shirt. Her hair was whipped back into a high ponytail, and the air near her shimmered with that otherworldly glow.

“Got a plan?” Elena was calm as she bent down to raid my trove of weapons and magic ingredients, loading up her pack.

“The portal in Pyli is probably destroyed. We have to run.” Letting Menelaus take her again was not an option.

Daphne dug a sparkling ocarina from her bag and played a loud, intricate tune. I knew the sound. The glittering magic shot from the small instrument and out through the windowed ceiling. Daphne was summoning Zirga, her winged horse and the last of its kind. It answered only to the nymphs, having freed itself from the chains of Olympus long ago. I had a weakness for anything that was the last in its line, even though Zirga had already made her contempt for me known. I rubbed my chest, remembering a vicious hoofprint and broken ribs. Even so. “Daphne, you can’t get her mixed up in this. She could be killed.”

“Zirga decides what she will and won’t do, who can ride her and who can’t. Besides, you have any other ideas?” Daphne put her hands on her hips, still fighting back her

tears.

I glanced back down at the demons quickly scaling the sheer cliff wall. It was only a matter of time before we were overrun.

“The nearest portal is in the Bloodkeep?” Elena asked.

## Page 26

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:06 am*

I nodded. “But we’ll never reach it. Desmerada will make sure of that.”

“She’s the demons’ number one enemy. Menelaus would never go there, right?”

I narrowed my eyes. “Not unless he wanted his head on a pike right next to mine. It doesn’t matter, Elena; we can’t make it to that portal. It’s impossible.”

Elena straightened and shouldered her pack before unsheathing the Olympian short sword at her waist. “We’re going to the Bloodkeep.”

A chill ran through me at the ice in her tone. She was a warrior, ready to deal death to her enemies, no matter who or where they were. The shimmer around her intensified, electricity crackling in the air.

She kicked her chin up. “And we aren’t going there to run. We go to take it.”

The three of us hurried through the home. I paused only to snag the white queen from its stand. Outside the front doors, a magnificent pegasus, inky black with wings of the purest silver, stood waiting.

I scanned the perimeter but heard only the breeze soughing through the trees. The demons had not made it this far yet.

The beast nuzzled Daphne as Elena approached. “Zirga, I’d like you to meet Elena.”

Zirga’s wings shook slightly as if waving a greeting, and she nickered lightly. Elena reached out her hand slowly. I tensed, readying for Zirga’s temper. But the creature

placed her midnight nose against Elena's palm and looked at her with a steady silver gaze. Elena calmed the unpredictable beast—a feat I'd never been able to master.

“She likes you.” Daphne jerked a thumb at me. “Him—not so much.”

“Can he ride her?” The trepidation in Elena's words struck at my heart. Yesterday, she ran from me. Now, she didn't want to leave me.

Daphne stroked near Zirga's ears and whispered to her. The creature shook her head, her dark mane waving as if in deep disagreement with whatever Daphne said. I doubted even Daphne could persuade Zirga to fly me to safety.

“We don't have time; they're almost here.” I brandished a set of daggers and bared my fangs. “You two go. I can hold them off.”

“No. We aren't leaving you.” Elena summoned fire into each palm and readied herself.

“You have no choice.” Parting from her tore me to pieces, but I couldn't let her fall into enemy hands. She would fight, no doubt, and be punished even more for it. And she could never harm Menelaus, never fight back against the demon. That bargain had been struck long ago.

Before we could argue further, Daphne clapped her hands in triumph. “She'll do it!”

Zirga turned away, snorting her disapproval.

“Thank the gods.” Elena doused her hexes and beamed at the reluctant pegasus.

Not wasting another second, I easily lifted Elena to the beast's back and held out my hand for Daphne.

A tear slid down the nymph's olive cheek as she took a step back. "She can't carry all three of us."

I stepped to her, ready to throw her across Zirga's back if necessary. "Then the two of you must go." I would not leave her.

Daphne smiled through her tears. "I'm a nymph, remember? No male, mortal or immortal, will ever be fast enough to catch me."

Before I could seize her, she threw me her hefty pack and tore through the trees toward the distant lowlands. Her fey-like feet barely touched the ground as she blurred out of sight.

Chasing after her was pointless. Daphne was right—a sure-footed nymph was notoriously difficult to capture, especially if a male was on her trail. And I couldn't leave Elena's side, not with danger so close.

As I turned back to Zirga, a thundering sound shook the mountain beneath me. Elena was aglow with power and had reduced one corner of my home to a smoking void. A hapless demon's arm fell on the ground in front of me, and several pained shrieks cut through the air.

My eyebrows shot to my hairline.

She glanced at me, a tempest in her eyes, and shrugged. "What?"

I couldn't stow my smile. "Gods, I've missed you."

The woods were now whispering with footsteps, enemies seeping through the shadows, just beyond view. Even her magic could not destroy them all.

I ran to Zirga, slung the packs across her back, and jumped on.

“Go!” I yelled.

She took a few steps and stretched her silver wings. Elena tightened her grip around my waist, pressing into my back and digging her nails into my stomach. Zirga broke into a gallop and, with a few more flaps of her wings, sent us shooting out over the house. Hundreds of spiderlike demons crawled along the eaves, invading the cloaking magic and causing the spell to flicker. Glass shattered as they burst through ceilings and windows.

Elena held out her hand and summoned a ball of black flame. Intense magic, nothing on earth or in the Underworld could compare to her raw power. She hurled the vicious hex at the structure beneath, shattering my home in an explosion of fire, sending it and the demons plummeting to the valley floor. The cacophony of screams and splintering wood seemed to rattle the air as we soared away, Zirga’s wings pushing us farther into the lightening sky.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:06 am*

Far below us on the mountainside, a voice cried out with pure rage. Only one word lofted to my ears—Helen—until it was cut off by the boom of my home crashing into the stone below.

I urged Zirga on toward the misty forests surrounding the Bloodkeep. The Darkwood was a black mark on the horizon, the light swallowed by the dense trees. The creatures that lived within were equally dark, having grown in abundance after the line of Priam no longer kept the sinister nature of the wood in check. No one dared enter the forest anymore, but I steered Zirga straight toward it. The spires of the Bloodkeep were barely visible in the distance, threatening from afar. Going there meant my certain death at Desmerada's hands. But the closer we were to Bloodkeep, the safer Elena was from Menelaus. It was a risk I was willing to take.

"It's better now," Elena cried in my ear over the roar of the wind. "The mark. It no longer burns."

Distance—it was the only way to keep her safe. Safe from Menelaus—but we were flying straight into something that could turn out to be far more deadly.

Chapter Eleven

Helen

Sparta

1255 BC



Leda knelt, her silvery ringlets sticking together in a blood-soaked mat on her head. A demon on each side kept her arms outstretched as Menelaus ran a blade over her skin, as if he were playing a violin of blood and bone. Her screams echoed through the royal chamber. The nobles in attendance stood silent. Their eyes burned with pleasure, thrilled at their king's strength. To have kidnapped Zeus's former lover? A triumph. To have her cowering before the great demon horde? A treasure.

The demon nobles' thirst for blood was well-known throughout the Underworld. Regents were chosen based solely on their ability to maintain their position at the top of the heap through violence, bloodshed, and fear.

"Don't, Helen. Just let him end me," Leda pleaded.

My tears scorched my face, the pain my mother was enduring far too much. "I have to, Mother. Please."

My brothers, Castor and Pollux, lay to Leda's side, their eyes open and unseeing. Blood marred their once-handsome faces, and their lips had already taken on the dusky blue of death. Menelaus had slaughtered them the moment they'd tried to rescue me from the auction block. My tears for them mingled with the ones for my mother. I had none left to cry for myself.

Menelaus made another deep cut at Leda's elbow. Blood pooled beneath her and colored her fine gown a deep crimson. She had been dressed in the purest white with a regal purple robe for my wedding earlier in the morning. I had never seen her look so beautiful. The sight should have made me happy. But there was no sliver of joy to be found in my situation. Leda was a prisoner just as much as I was. Both bought, paid for, and enslaved by Menelaus. The gowns and glitz were only for show. Menelaus wanted to impress his horde, show his strength and wealth.

And all had gone according to plan until Menelaus tried to touch me, to claim me

after he'd forced me to wed him. I had incinerated him, melting his skin like candle wax, and almost set the palace afire with my magic. The only thing that stopped me were his skeletal hands at my throat, choking me into darkness. I awoke here, with my mother bleeding at my feet and an ultimatum in my lap.

Menelaus turned to me. "I could do this for days, months, even years." He licked Leda's blood from his knife. "Only you can save her, Helen. Just say the word."

Menelaus approached me as I sat upon the dais. He'd forced me to watch my mother's suffering for hours. My resolve weakened with every cut, every blow, but Leda would not relent, would not allow me to give Menelaus what he so desperately desired.

"My queen, do you not want to ease your mother's suffering?" The demon king loomed close to me, his hot breath like the vapors of hell. "I appreciate your cruelty, I truly do. It warms my heart to see you enjoy the tortures of our enemies, those who would take you from me. But, if you consent, I will spare her. You have my word as your king and husband."

I wanted to give in, but Leda's gaze was hard, telling me that it was better for Leda to die than for me to accept Menelaus's terms. The blood from her arms still flowed in spurts, and a fine sheen of sweat shone on her face. Still, she would not allow me to raise a hand to save her. Despite my mother's pleas, I could feel myself bending, almost breaking. The tears continued down my face as they had for the past several hours. I made no sound, only wept as my mother endured Menelaus's torments.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:06 am*

“Zeus will come for me and wipe you all into the mouth of Hades.” Leda tried to call down death as she fought against her captors. They did not move, just stood as if made of stone. Leda was so weak now.

Mother, please.

Menelaus backed away from me and put his blade to Leda’s throat. He looked to the ceiling and through the atrium that gave way to the sky above. “I see no Zeus coming for you. No assemblage of gods on your side.”

He slipped the blade slowly along her skin, carving a trail of blood in its wake. Leda made no sound and held my gaze. My magic was screaming, demanding to be released, to destroy Menelaus and all in the room. But I couldn’t risk my mother.

He nicked Leda’s jugular and sent blood pouring down the front of her dress. “The bloom is gone from you, whore. Zeus will not come for a haggard cow when he already had the milk when it was fresh.”

The demon nobles laughed, their evil erupting throughout the airy chamber and echoing away until it resembled a dirge.

I closed my eyes. I couldn’t bear to see Leda’s face, to watch my mother’s resolve crumple with my own.

The word slipped from me like water from a tilted cup. “Stop.”

“I’m sorry, my wife, I didn’t quite hear you.” I could hear the smile in his voice.

“I said that I will consent.” My voice was shaking, the knowledge of what I’d just given up too much to bear. Opening my eyes, I met the stark gaze of my mother.

“No!” Leda cried and fell to her hands, finally released by her demon captors.

I rushed to her. “I’m sorry, Mother. I can’t let you hurt anymore for me. I can’t bear it. Please forgive me for my weakness.”

Leda wailed and took me in her bloodied arms. Acid shredded my heart, my throat. Like Leda, I knew the deal would seal my fate. Fate. The pain of what I’d lost and what I would soon suffer overcame my voice, my soul. I was eclipsed by my doom.

“He will never stop hurting you,” Leda whispered through her tears. “He will never stop. Never.”

“I can’t let anyone else suffer because of me.” I glanced at my brothers, their deaths for nothing, no one. The weight of their sacrifice broke me. They thought they could save me, but I wasn’t going to be me anymore. Not after this.

“Now, my queen, prepare yourself.” Menelaus tore me from Leda’s arms and dragged me behind the dais. Leda screamed my name, and I knew that sound would never leave my mind. Just like the dead faces of my brothers, it would be there, lingering, forever.

Menelaus threw me down before his witch, an immortal who had no equal in the realm of binding and dispelling magics. She wore a robe of the deepest crimson, her dark hair coiled like snakes around her head. Already a fire burned next to the beady-eyed witch, the souls of the damned present in the flames.

“My queen is ready and has agreed to allow you to bind her. But only such that she cannot harm me. Do you understand?” Menelaus gripped the witch’s robes, drawing

her face to his. She did not flinch before his menace, but her fangs extended, sharp and lethal. “You will not disturb her powers any further than that. If you do, your life is mine.”

He dropped the witch and glared at me. “Don’t think you can get away with harming those around me. I’ll keep your mother here for my amusement. If you try your magic on any of my servants or warriors—or even yourself—she will pay the price a hundredfold.”

He knelt beside me, coming as close as he dared while my magic still shimmered around us. “And after this, there will be nothing to stop me from claiming you.” He ran a finger along my cheek, smiling as he felt my tears.

I would never escape from the despair that took hold in my breast. Never again have a joyful or pleasant thought or feeling. I was trapped, undone by the curse of my abilities.

“And my payment?” the witch hissed.

“Do this, and I guarantee you will reign among your people as the most powerful, most feared leader they have ever seen.” Menelaus tipped his head slightly. “Queen Desmerada.”

## Chapter Twelve

Elena

Zirga landed at the edge of the Darkwood in the late afternoon. I slid down from the pegasus and almost crumpled before Paris caught my arm. The flight had left my legs wobbly. He steadied me before leading Zirga to the stream we had landed next to, allowing the pegasus to drink only after he tasted the water for enchantments or

poison.

I stretched, unknotting the muscles that had tightened during our hours-long ride, and eyed the edges of the Darkwood. It lived up to its name, the branches gnarled and twisting, absorbing and distorting the light of the three suns. Black roots reached out through and over the ground as if seeking to overtake more of the sunny plain. The vast grassland we'd flown over seemed devoid of settlement. To our left were the remains of a rutted road that led into the wood. It was covered with leaves and vegetation, clearly having long been in a state of disuse.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:06 am*

After Zirga drank her fill, Paris spoke to her, his voice low. Before long, Zirga approached and nuzzled me. I stroked her soft mane, marveling at the midnight strands of fine hair.

“Thank you,” I said, and meant it. Without Zirga, I would have already been back in Menelaus’s grasp. I shuddered at the thought.

Zirga watched me with an intelligent gaze before slightly bowing in response. Then she turned, took off at a gallop, and launched into the violet sky, heading back the way they’d come. Her wings glinted in the suns, sending prisms of light down along the ground.

“Doesn’t she need a rest?”

“Zirga owns these skies and could sail through them all day.” Paris watched the creature meld into the firmament, gone beyond their sight. Wrinkles of worry marred his brow. “I sent her back for Daphne.”

I touched his arm. “She’ll be okay. I only knew her for a short time, but I could already tell she could take care of herself. She reminded me of my sister Iphi, quick-witted and always up for some mischief.”

“She’s tough. And smart.” Paris still stared back toward Pyli. “Even so, no one could stand against the demon horde.”

“She won’t have to. She’s long gone from the horde, safe and warm somewhere.” I didn’t know if I was trying to convince Paris or myself. Either way, I had to believe

Daphne got away. Leaving a friend behind chafed, even if that friend ran faster than any demon ever could.

Paris gazed into the looming trees and along the unused road. A chill wind blew at our backs as if pushing us into the milky fog that swirled in the woods. I knelt and started combining various ingredients from my pack, making quick and dirty magic bombs.

Pausing, I followed his gaze along the road. “Does it lead to the Bloodkeep?”

“It must.” His brow was furrowed, worry etched on his handsome face. “The Bloodkeep used to be a center for trade and arts, the beating heart of the Underworld. Now, the vampires are subjugated to Desmerada’s will. They don’t like visitors. Neither does the Darkwood.”

I peered into the opaque wood. “We should stick close to the road but not stay on it. We set out now, break when we tire, and keep going until we get within striking distance. We have to make it to the keep as soon as possible. Then, we’ll figure out how to take it.”

Paris looked at me like I’d just told him we intended to storm the Citadel of Olympus and spit in Zeus’s eye. “The Bloodkeep is fifty miles away in the middle of the wood, surrounded by an immense wall constantly manned by hundreds of vampire guards loyal to Desmerada. Not to mention what lurks in the woods themselves. We may not even make it a mile in.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “Okay, so what’s your plan?”

His face turned to stone, but turmoil was in his eyes. “Your plan is suicide. I will not let Desmerada kill you, and I will not hand you over to Menelaus. Never.”



“I agree. But if we stay here, we die. If we go back, we die. If we go in”—she gestured to the foreboding trees—“at least we have the semblance of a chance.”

“And then what?”

“And then we reclaim what’s yours—the Bloodkeep.”

He barked out a harsh laugh and spun away from me, setting his shoulders into a wall of refusal. I would never have allowed my warriors to turn their backs on me like this, never have suffered them to question my command. This was different. He’d been bent on protecting me from the moment we met. But that wasn’t who I was. My world was built on fighting and more than that, winning.

Was my plan rash? Sure. Did I have the details hammered out? Not remotely. But was it the best option? Definitely.

I had to convince him that this way—the way fraught with blood and battle—was the only way to save us both.

I took a deep breath. “Remember when you told me of your Helen, of how she could make a battle plan in her mind and see the steps to win before ever even setting foot on the field?”

He cocked his head slightly toward me, though his stance remained hard.

“Well, if I’m this same Helen, the one you knew and worshipped, why would you think I can’t do the same? I am a warrior of the gods now, Paris. If anything, I’d wager my skills have grown, not withered. And with a vampire army at my back, nothing could stop us from taking out Menelaus and ending the war between vampires and demons for good.”

His shoulders softened, but he did not turn, still regarding the stream that escaped the heart of the Darkwood and meandered into the grasslands.

I needed him to know, needed him to believe in me, though I'd never been one for grand speeches before battle. Instead of trying to rally him, I spoke to our bond. The one I knew bridged the distance between us, though I had no memory of how or when it was forged. But it was certain, as sure as the love I had for my sisters. I could feel it living inside me.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:06 am*

I moved closer, then reached out with tentative fingers and rested my palm on his shoulder. “Remember what you said back in Pyli? ‘Trust me,’ you said. Now I’m asking you to do the same.”

He turned to me and drew me into his arms, kissing me with that passion, that desire that burned me.

Gods, how could he melt me like this?

After he’d staked his claim on my lips, my soul, he separated from me, but only by a breath. “I can’t lose you again.”

“You won’t.” I kissed him, matching fire with fire, after making a promise only the Fates knew if I could keep.

The forest was a misty maze. Branches brushed at my hair like skeletal hands, and the ground was a tangled mass of roots and debris. Staying off the road was the safest course, but it made our trek even more slow going.

The Darkwood was eerily silent. It should have been alive with birdsong and animals, but only the clack and creak of branches in the wind broke the stillness. The fog was so dense that we stayed within arm’s length. If we were to get separated, there was no way we’d find each other again. Keeping to the edges of the ancient road, we forged farther and farther into the darkness that permeated the wood. The fading suns only increased the gloom.

I was becoming accustomed to the muffled silence, seeking through it for any sounds

that could signal danger. There were none I could detect, just the occasional whistle of wind, the groan of branches, and the thud and crunch of our footsteps.

Glancing at Paris from the corner of my eye, I saw he was on edge, rigid as he walked. His eyes constantly scanned the mist before us as it eddied around the wizened branches. He'd drawn a dagger when we'd first stepped under the canopy of trees and carried it now. I ghosted my fingers over the hilt of the Olympian blade at my side. I had magic and metal, two powerful allies.

Night was falling, the darkness slowly becoming all-encompassing as the mist formed a wall around us. We continued on, hoping to find more hospitable terrain to make camp for the evening. The roots were so thick here that every step was treacherous.

"There's something in the mist." His voice was low, carrying only to my ears and no farther. We both stopped, straining our senses into the space around us.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. He was right. Something was there, hidden in the milky-white hedge. It watched us and slowly circled. We turned along with the creature, sensing it trying to move to our flank. I summoned blue orbs into my palms, the electricity darting and dancing. I couldn't risk fire. The trees would go up in an inferno if I let those magics out to play. Paris drew his short sword as a counterpart to his dagger.

The creature stopped and let out a hiss, no doubt unhappy that its prey intended to fight back. Tense seconds passed, neither side making a move. The hissing resumed, but now there was more than one, a virtual host of high-pitched hisses cutting through the silence. We were surrounded. Standing back to back, we waited for the onslaught that was sure to come.

Eerily calm, I kept my breathing steady. Battle was what I was meant for. There was no better feeling than destroying something that was bent on ending your life. The

anticipation of an imminent clash had me spoiling for the fight.

The hisses grew louder, and I could make out the skittering sound of legs, too many legs, on trees, on the ground, even shaking the leaves above us. They were trying to intimidate us, scare us into bolting and separating. I could respect it. Divide and conquer had always been one of my favorite strategies. But it wouldn't work this time, at least not for the hissing masses in the woods.

I allowed the balls of electricity to grow larger, my power surging through me, ready to end the threat. I looked into the mist, unafraid, and let out a long hiss of my own. A challenge.

The noises stopped. The silence returned, as if the forest held its breath. The creatures were still there. Waiting, watching. I would wait no longer. I let the power surge through me, sending the orbs flying into the mist ahead of me. The electricity cracked, sending small bolts of lightning through the foggy cloud, illuminating what lay beyond.

I gasped as a horror of legend appeared in the silver light.

## Chapter Thirteen

### Paris

I began swinging at the mist the minute Elena let her magic loose. Great spurts of black blood erupted from my strikes, and the hidden creatures shrieked at each hit.

“We have to run.” Elena's voice was steady as she shot bolt after bolt of lightning and magical energy into the woods. So many wails ricocheted along the trees—too many. Our attackers had to number in the hundreds. But what were they?

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:06 am*

I spit the black blood that spurted against my mouth. “Do you know what they are?”

“Yes.”

A hairy black leg dropped into my vision. It was impossibly large, as long as a human leg. I looked up to see the maw of a giant spider bearing down on us. Its teeth were sharp needles that lined the entirety of its mouth, and its many eyes were black and unblinking. I drove my sword up into the beast. Black blood cascaded down, and it shrieked before shriveling onto the ground next to me.

“Now!” Elena cried, and we took off at a run. Elena blasted the mist ahead of us, destroying the misty water droplets and revealing a mass of black hairy bodies and a multitude of hungry eyes.

“Spiders. Fuck.” I attacked the mist at our backs.

“Not just any spiders. Here.” Still casting with one hand, Elena grabbed a magic bomb from her pack and handed it to me. I threw it behind us. The deafening blast sent bits of spider flying past us. They thunked into the trees and leaves above, the pitter-patter like a hard rain on the murky ground.

Elena stumbled, her foot caught in the shriveled legs of a felled spider. Another dropped down onto her back, its legs scrabbling at her. I smelled her blood on the air, the barbs on the creature’s legs ripping gashes in her skin as she screamed and fought. I pulled her from its grasp and swung out with my sword just in time. I caught it in mid-pounce and sent its head rolling away into the gloom.

“Another!” Elena handed me a magic bomb.

Despite her injuries, she hurled spell after spell into the mist as we kept moving. The chatter in the woods didn’t stop. Hundreds of legs still followed us, their owners readying to attack. They seemed endless, an infestation of horrors. I hurled the second bomb behind us, the explosion once again echoing through the dark trees before it was swallowed up by the all-encroaching mist.

A spiny severed leg shot through the mist, its barbs embedding into me. I ripped it out, ignoring the blood running from the burning wound. Poison? Elena’s back must have been on fire.

So many spiders had already fallen, littering the ground as we ran farther into Darkwood. I didn’t know if we were running straight to the spiders’ lair or to salvation. I very much doubted the latter.

As Elena hurled an even larger burst of magical energy ahead of us, her powers never flagging, an ear-splitting screech cut through the sounds of battle. The pursuit stopped, the spiders retreating and chattering quietly. Elena inhaled deep gulps of air as we stood back to back once again. Her blood was warm, wetting my shirt as we pressed against each other. Though her powers never waned, her use of them took a toll on her.

I’d seen it before, long ago, her face pale and her body trembling after helping the Trojan army hold off Menelaus’s horde in the first battle.

“Why have you come to this wood?” The strange voice could have been called lovely, the higher tones melodic. But it was mixed with a hissing noise, as if there were two speakers in unison.

“We seek passage to the Bloodkeep.” Elena’s voice rang true and strong, despite her

fatigue and pain.

“Why seek death there when you can have it here instead, warrior?” A cacophony of hisses rose around them, seemingly in agreement with the speaker.

“Because I seek more than death. I seek blood. I seek vengeance. And I shall have it all if you will only let us pass.” Elena’s palms lit with fire, a threat of greater magnitude. If they were to die here, better to set the forest ablaze and take these dark creatures with them. She combined her palms into one large orb of flame.

“I once sought more than I should have.” The voice clucked. “I paid for it. You looked upon me, fair maiden. Just for a moment. Did you not know me?”

I was unsure of the creature’s game, but Elena was likely already two steps ahead of me. Just like old times.

“I do know you. What befell you is wrong and always will be so.” Elena’s words were genuine, but she continued to bobble the fire orb between her hands.

Movement caught the corner of my eye. Huge spider legs, far larger than any of the ones I’d seen during the battle, slid out of the mist toward Elena. She tensed but did not stop toying with the fire, a show of strength. I wanted to turn, to strike the creature down, but I couldn’t leave Elena’s back unprotected. Instead of attacking, I turned my head to watch, keeping one eye on the dense fog.

I cursed under my breath as the creature appeared fully, an immense black spider body with the nude torso of a maiden where the head would have been. Long, stringy hair hung to the ground, and her eyes were a glassy black, unblinking. Her mouth was full of the same needle fangs as the smaller spiders, causing the hiss with each word. It was a terrible visage that would have struck a mortal dead from pure fear.



*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:06 am*

“You did not deserve this fate, Arachne.” Elena’s tone was consoling?

I kept my thoughts to myself.

“This fate,” the creature spat, “was due me for my arrogance. For my folly in thinking I was greater than the gods. The gods showed me, didn’t they? Now I’m left to rot in this decaying, blighted wood.” The bitter laugh that left Arachne’s body made my hackles rise.

Arachne’s story was legend. She had once been a fair maiden who excelled at weaving. She was so skilled at the art, she challenged Athena to a contest. Athena accepted the challenge, sure she would best the maiden at the loom. Instead, Arachne wove the most beautiful tapestry earth or Olympus had ever seen, stinging Athena’s pride. In retaliation, the goddess doomed Arachne to a life of weaving by turning her into a monstrous spider. Now she was here in the Darkwood, a nightmare come to life.

More legs poked through the mist, a host of spiders massing around Arachne.

Her dark gaze swept over the remaining spiders. She pouted, if such a creature was capable of doing so. “Look how you’ve thinned my babies. My adopted darlings and I have made this our home, dark and diseased as it is, our one refuge from the gods and the immortals.” Her voice rose, the hissing growing louder. “You’ve killed them.”

Elena nodded. “We did. Now that I know for certain it is you, I am sorry for it.”

Was she apologizing for defending our very lives?

Arachne ran a hand through a lock of her dirty hair. “You speak well, warrior, I’ll give you that. But I see Artemis has marked you. You’re in service to the gods I hate with every wisp of soul left in this cursed body. What stops me from ripping you to pieces and sending the runes on your skin back to your mistress?”

“Well, for one thing, there’s this.” Elena threw the ball of fire into the air, the flames reflecting in Arachne’s black eyes before Elena caught it smoothly in her hands again. “For another, if you grant us safe passage, I swear to you that when I take the Bloodkeep, I will make you mistress of the Darkwood. You will have charge of it and will answer only to Paris, the true king of the Bloodkeep. But with one caveat. You and your spiders must not attack or kill those who venture herein. The new king will need a protector, someone to oversee the wood’s rebirth.”

I tensed for the hissing laughter and the spider attack. Reaching into my pack, I palmed a magic bomb. When there was only silence, I stilled. Was the nightmare actually considering Elena’s offer?

I knew Elena was skilled in battle, in strategy. But the way she calculated and came upon a way to move ahead without losing our lives to the spider queen was something altogether greater. Even if it didn’t work, I was still in awe.

Arachne clicked her many teeth. “What’s your name, warrior?”

“Elena de Artemis.”

“Well, Elena de Artemis, I do not believe for a moment you will ever make it to the Bloodkeep. My darlings and I aren’t the only evil things in these woods, and what lurks within the keep puts us all to shame. Still.” She clicked her needle teeth together again, considering. “I don’t want to lose any more of them.”

She watched the fire as Elena allowed it to play back and forth in her palms, a mesmerizing show of ability. But her wounds and the many spells had taken their toll. She was trembling, only enough that I could feel it against me. She gave no other sign, nothing that would hint of weakness to the spiders or their mistress.

Arachne looked around at her spiders, which waited patiently for her command. “I will agree to your proposal if you will also agree that, should you fall in the woods by some other creature’s hand, my babies will get the pleasure of feasting on you and your companion.”

Elena tilted her head. “What do you mean by fall?”

Arachne tsked. “Smart little warrior, aren’t we. I mean if you die. Though I don’t see why you wouldn’t let them have a little nibble if you were mortally wounded. And, of course, my wager is only on your life, but if you die and he lives, then I still get both of you. Live meat is so much more fun for my babies to eat.” The spiders tittered, their maws wet and dripping with anticipation.

“I think I can handle that.” Elena tossed the fireball up into the air one final time and let it dissipate in front of Arachne’s face. “You have my word.”

At the wave of Arachne’s hand, the spiders skittered back into the mist. Arachne backed away too and tipped her head slightly, a bow to the bargain struck with Elena. As she disappeared from view, her voice, still that mix of beauty and horror, floated on the damp air. “Sleep here tonight, little warrior. None dare venture into Arachne’s realm in the Darkwood. You will be safe...for now.”

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:06 am*

Once the sounds of the spiders had vanished, Elena sank to her knees, weariness and pain destroying her facade of control. I scooped her into my arms and walked a bit deeper into the wood, away from the carnage of battle.

“I’m okay.” Her voice was weak, and her eyes were unfocused. She had been so strong, dueling with Arachne and bringing us through the ordeal alive. I leaned her forward to check the wounds on her back.

“I need to rinse these. The poison is keeping you from healing.” I reached into my pack for a skin of water. Pulling her face against my chest to stifle her cry, I poured it down her back. I hated her agony, but this was the only way. Once satisfied I’d removed as much poison as possible, I then laid her into the nook of the tree. She was so pale—ghostly white like the mist.

I quickly set up the little tent I’d found in Daphne’s pack. It was just large enough for two. Though a dusky gray color, compared to the Darkwood, it may as well have been glowing white. I grabbed some dirt and muck from the ground and smeared it along the outside, camouflaging it. Once I set it all up, I lifted Elena and placed her inside. I gently removed her torn shirt as she laid her head on my shoulder. The wounds on her back were still red and raw, but she was healing. Good. The water had done the trick, and her skin was sewing itself back together. She sighed as I held her away from me and slipped a clean T-shirt over her head.

After laying her on her side, I moved to leave and stand guard, but her hands fastened around my neck.

“Stay,” she breathed. Her eyes were closed, color gradually returning to her face.

“I need to watch for trouble.” I ran my thumb over her soft cheek.

She pulled me to her, and I let her. Her eyes fluttered open for only seconds. “We made a deal. We’re safe for tonight. Stay.”

I had never been able to deny those sparkling green eyes, and I wasn’t going to start now.

When I bedded down next to her, and she snuggled up against me. Only then could I let myself relax a little. She was alive, healing. I wrapped my arms around her, careful not to touch the wounds on her back, and nestled into her hair. She was already asleep, her soft breaths against my chest comforting me.

I lay awake for a while, listening for any spider legs clattering or the sound of other intruders, but heard nothing. Her slumber made my eyes heavy, and her warmth soothed me. I fell asleep with her safe against me.

## Chapter Fourteen

Elena

I woke encircled by Paris’s arms. The suns had risen, though very little of their light made it into the forest. Still, it was enough to burn off some of the mist. Arachne had been true to her word, allowing us to sleep through the night in safety.

I gazed up past Paris’s jawline to his eyes. His golden lashes rested against his cheeks as he slept. He was beautiful at peace, the dangers of the night no longer troubling him. He had faint laugh lines around his eyes, and I found myself hoping that I could exercise them a bit more. Happiness was so fleeting, so precious.

He began to stir, perhaps sensing my gaze on him. His eyes opened. I was still

amazed by the blue of his irises.

Clutching me to him, he sat up and peered around at the trees and still-swirling mist.

“It’s clear. I already checked.” I rested my head in the hollow of his neck. Even if I hadn’t believed his tale about our past, I was too drawn to him in the present to bother hiding it. He rested his chin on my head and just held me, letting me breathe and clear the shadows of the previous evening from my mind. My back was healed, no doubt thanks to his efforts to clean my wounds.

“You better take good care of me,” I murmured.

“And why is that?”

“If you don’t, you’ll be spider food.” I tried to keep my face serious but couldn’t stop the grin that overtook me.

He threw his head back and laughed. I wanted to nibble up his neck and taste his mouth. Instead, I sighed and rose from his grasp. His gaze was glued to my breasts as they jutted against my T-shirt.

“Gods, you will drive me mad, woman.” He pushed his erection down in his pants before he stood and stretched. I watched, unable to take my eyes from the hard length straining against his zipper.

“Changing your mind?” he asked.

For a second, I wanted to, wanted to enjoy him this once before we continued our dangerous trek into enemy territory. But I forced myself to look away, to focus on the mission at hand. Besides, I’d never been with a male—at least not that I remembered. My head was clear now, not in the haze of passion I’d been caught in at his house.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:06 am*

He grumbled his disappointment and began packing the tent. I stuck to my resolve, even though I kept stealing glances at him as he worked.

I dug through Daphne's bag and found some snacks and skins of water. I sat and ate as Paris worked. We had wandered from the road, but it wasn't far. The mist was thinner now in the morning light, and the road shone in the suns, the only place where the rays could fully break through the canopy. Our way was lit in tones of silver and white.

I leaned back against the tree as Paris finished clearing the campsite. A gasp ripped from me when I saw the mass of webs in the canopy above us. The spiders were there, black eyes peering out from spherical nests hung far above the forest floor.

A few smaller spiders—babies, no doubt—were scrambling around on the webs, as if they were playing. They were actually almost cute, in a way. But when a larger spider darted out, scooped them onto its back, and hissed at me, I gulped. Needle teeth? Not cute.

“They slept above us all night, you know. I could hear them.” Paris admired the mass of twisting webs and hanging spheres. “It's kind of beautiful.”

“Sure, but the sooner we're out of here the better.” Needle. Teeth.

“If Arachne was telling the truth”—he spared another glance to the network of white above their heads—“then we're leaving our only sanctuary in the Darkwood.”

Of course, he was right. We needed to stay cautious. Far better the spider creature

you knew than the one you didn't.

When I finished my brief meal, I realized Paris had to be hungry, but he couldn't eat what Daphne packed. A pleasant tingle went up my spine at the idea of him drinking from me. I batted the inappropriate thought away. I was a warrior, not a snack. "Paris, do you, um, do you need to eat something?"

He knelt down next to me, his eyes twinkling. "Are you offering?"

A rush of heat blasted through me at the too-real thought of his fangs at my neck. "We both need to stay strong." My voice was breathy, though I tried to control it.

He smiled, his fangs lengthening slightly. "As much as I would love to take you up on the offer"—he leaned in, so close to my neck that I held my breath—"I can go several days without blood. Besides, I can smell blood in one of Daphne's skins. She packed for me. Like you said, she's smart."

He reached around me, his arm grazing my breast, and grabbed one of the skins. When he sat back on his haunches, I tried not to sigh. The corners of his lips twitched up before he took a big swig, drinking his fill. He watched me as he drank, as if imagining he was tasting me, and I felt a tingle at my neck where he had been. Gods.

I stood and lifted my pack. He followed my movements, his eyes focused on my body. Ignoring the warmth that coursed through my blood, I started toward the road.

Paris stowed his breakfast and followed me, matching my pace. The visibility was increasing as the suns rose higher and fought back the mists that otherwise ruled these woods.

We picked our way over the roots and around bubbling pits of black muck to follow the road deeper and deeper into the wood. Soon, there were no more webs above us,



only the dark tree limbs and rare patches of sunlight. We stopped to rest at midday, sitting with our backs to a great tree. The trunk was so wide I doubted if five of my sisters could join hands around it.

“How much farther do you think it is until the keep?” I munched on some delicious fruit I’d found packed away. It had a bitter green rind, but the inside was sweet and velvety. I’d need to plant a tree that bore this fruit near the maidens’ village in the Forgotten Forest.

“We have another day of travel at least. Maybe two.” He tilted his head back against the bark. “And I still haven’t heard your grand plan to get inside the gates of the Bloodkeep.”

I didn’t want to inform him that I hadn’t thought of one yet. I needed to get the lay of the land first. Surely, there was an entrance, some way to get into the keep other than parading through the front gate. And then I’d figure out a way to exploit its weaknesses and bring it to heel.

“We have to go through the front gates,” Paris said. “There’s no other way in.”

I coughed, almost spewing fruit. “How do you know? I thought you’d never been there.”

“I haven’t, but there’s a reason Desmerada has lasted this long when there are plenty of other pretenders to the throne out there. Security. No one gets near her unless she can use them and abuse them at her pleasure. They have to be weak or useful, preferably both.”

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:06 am*

A shadowy plan began to form in my mind, but I needed more information before making any decisions. “We’ll get in.”

“How?”

There was always a way to get to an enemy, even if it meant playing by their rules for a short while. “Let’s just keep walking for now. I need to concentrate on the game.”

He bounced his head against the tree. “That’s the thing, Elena, it isn’t a game. If she finds me, I’m done. I won’t be able to protect you.”

I rose and dusted off my leathers. “Yeah, but look at the bright side. If that happens, at least Arachne won’t eat you, right?”

He shook his head and stood before pulling me into his chest. I was beginning to get used to his affection. Leaning against him, I enjoyed the feel of his arms around me. He nuzzled my hair, his mouth so close to my ear it sent shivers down my back. “Can you at least tell me what you’re cooking up in that brilliant mind of yours? I know you have something.”

“Nothing solid.”

He kissed my hair and released me. “Well, I guess the game is afoot.”

“What do you mean?” I brushed my hair from my face and continued along our path.

“You’ve never heard ‘the game is afoot’?” He steadied me as my ankle turned on a

protruding root.

“Why would the game be a foot? A game you play with your feet?” Puzzling.

He laughed. The sound bounced off the trees and echoed back to them. “Never mind. It’s an earth thing.”

That explained it. Artemis’s maidens never took much interest in earth. I certainly never did. Only my sister Iphi would sit and stare at the viewing pools in the Forgotten Forest, watching for hours. They were a window to earth, showing Olympus who kept to the old ways and still worshipped the gods. But Iphi was interested in far more. She was always curious about what the humans were up to, what they were destroying, and what they were watching on their mind-numbing televisions.

A wave of homesickness washed over me. I could have used my sisters’ help in this fight. As it was, Paris and I were on our own.

“—ahead.”

“Huh?” I’d been lost in thoughts of my sisters.

Paris shushed me. His fangs had lengthened, and his gaze was pinned to the mist ahead of us. Before I had a chance to stop and listen, I threw myself against Paris, and we collapsed to the ground as a bolt of dark magic shot over our heads. We scrambled to our feet and chose two separate trees for cover.

The air around me was abuzz with power, and my palms lit in response. Shouts cut through the air, and hexes whizzed past. It took a moment, but it soon became clear we weren’t the targets. We had walked into someone else’s fight. We were spectators. Paris nodded toward some trees closer to the sounds. We approached, sneaking from

tree to tree until the mist dissipated enough to show a battlefield in a clearing. An enormous, ruined watchtower spiraled into the air above us, the top blasted open long ago. Large lichen-covered stones littered the ground.

I peeked from my hiding place, trying to discern the warring factions. Mages had taken the high ground inside the watchtower and threw dark magics at approaching vampires. The vampires, armed with swords and shields bearing a circular, swirling symbol, stormed the tower. Mage bodies littered the ground, their twisted and ruined visages revealing they were dark magic users. They weren't born with magic, like me. They'd sacrificed innocents and performed dark rites to gain a taste of power. Their ways were evil, and they were a scourge in all the worlds.

The battle raged on. I tore my eyes away from the bloodshed and stole a glance at Paris. He was mesmerized, watching the vampires intently. I tried to get his attention so that we could skirt the battle, but it was no use. He moved ahead to a tree at the very edge of the clearing. I cursed under my breath. We didn't need another dangerous interlude to keep us from our goal. I crept along with him, easing against a tree a bit farther back.

The sounds of battle died slowly, along with the remaining mages. The vampires had taken the tower. Bodies hit the grass as the vampires threw them from the heights and into a pile, likely for burning.

"Paris," I hissed.

I motioned him to back away, quietly trying to get his attention without alerting the vampires to my presence.

I failed.

An arm like a vise wrapped around my waist. A vampire hurled me out into the

clearing, directly at the feet of the bloody soldiers.

Paris

I was stunned, not believing the vision before me. These were vampire soldiers bearing the crest of Priam—the mark of my father. The swirl pattern of life everlasting glinted from their shields. The same crest I and thousands of soldiers had worn during the Battle of Troy.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:06 am*

Could there still be vampires who were loyal to my line? It was hard to believe. Desmerada ruled with death and terror, never suffering anyone to question or seek a return to the old ways. But here they were, powerful warriors dispatching the blight of dark mages.

They had worked together as one unit, storming the tower and killing the evil that had taken hold, just as Priam had taught the Trojans those many years ago. Always a team, always together, fighting as one. I could hear the shouts going up from the troops in my mind in response to my father's creed.

I snapped out of my reverie when I saw a blazing orb of fire growing into a maelstrom of destruction. Elena. I dashed toward her, covering the space between us in a moment. She stood before more than a dozen vampires who had formed a semicircle.

"One more step and you all get dusted." The cruel edge to her voice was new—likely a part of her career as Artemis's war chieftain.

They did not back away but stood unafraid, prepared to meet their fiery fate.

"Elena." I eased up behind her, laying a hand on her upper arm.

A murmur went through the soldiers at my appearance. Some of their eyes lit with recognition, though I'd never seen any of them before. They spoke to each other in the ancient vampire language.

"Elena, drop the orb."

She was ready to destroy them all, to burn them into floating ashes. “Why? Do you know them?”

“No.”

“Then we need to leave. Now.” The heat from her spell was singeing my eyebrows, but I could not turn my back on my people. That symbol was one of hope, and it seemed to glow even brighter with the reflected flames.

“Paris—”

At my name, the vampires dropped to their knees and laid their swords at their feet. Elena turned and looked up at me, a question in her eyes.

I held her gaze. “Drop the orb.”

With a whoosh, the flaming sphere of death disappeared, but the vampires remained on their knees before us.

“Askenith,” the one who seemed to be their leader said. “My king” in the old language.

“Askenith,” the men echoed, their gazes still trained on the ground.

“Shakorah.” I repeated the word I’d heard my father say on so many occasions. The king’s greeting to all loyal subjects. It meant “peace.” And it came off my tongue far too easily. I was no one’s king.

The vampires rose from the ground and sheathed their swords. Elena was still tense, her rigid back pressed against me. “Did I just miss something?”

The leader who had spoken first stepped forward, causing a shimmer of magic to erupt around Elena.

“I mean no harm, and I apologize for my rough actions.” He bowed low, leaving the back of his neck bare. There was no greater compliment or show of trust among the vampires than such an act.

I was at a loss, utterly unsure of what to say to these hardened warriors. They’d likely been fighting for the millennia I’d been avoiding the throne and living it up on earth. The shame at the realization burned me as sure as Elena’s fire. I’d had no idea any vampires loyal to Priam were still alive, but that was no excuse.

Gods, I’m a coward.

Maybe the mortals’ stories about me were true. So many times I’d read about myself, how I was a deserter, no mettle in my bones. How I ran from the battle with Menelaus when I felt I was losing. How I was inconstant and rash. None of it was true. Well, perhaps rash—yes, that was true.

But I’d fought for Troy, fought for Helen. I simply hadn’t won. History was hard on the losers. That’s what I’d always told myself. But now, knowing I’d left my brethren behind to suffer under Desmerada’s reign gnawed at me. The selfishness in such an act overwhelmed me as I looked at their battle-weary faces.

I had to make this right. With Elena at my side, maybe I could.

I squeezed Elena’s upper arm before stepping next to her.

“I am Paris, and this is Elena.”

Rising from his deep bow, the leader replied, “I am Captain Faren Lewin, leader—”



A screeching roar resonated through the wood, and the soldiers hurried into action, as if driven by the sound. One whistled, and a bevy of amaranths, the vampires' mounts, hurried from the trees on the far side of the clearing. They whinnied, fear in their gentle eyes.

"We must go, my lord, and quickly," Captain Lewin said.

"What made that sound?" Elena asked, her eyes wide.

"The same thing that destroyed this tower."

The roar sounded again, louder now.

"We've not much time." The captain jumped astride his mount, patting its neck in calming strokes. The beasts were akin to horses, but furry and with shorter snouts. Another soldier brought an amaranth, this one tall and with curly fur, to me. I hesitated only for a second, but the image of the Trojan symbol emblazoned on the soldiers' armor and the show of trust from the captain made my decision for me. I lifted Elena astride the beast and jumped up behind her.

## Page 37

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:06 am*

As we fell in line with the soldiers leaving the tower, she leaned back and whispered in my ear, “So, this is a good idea? Going with them?”

“They are loyal to my father.”

“That doesn’t mean they are loyal to you,” she hissed.

I tightened my arms around her. “Let’s see where this leads. I know I can always count on you for firepower if anything goes wrong.”

She shook her head, the flowery scent of her hair catching on the breeze. I breathed in deeply, though I didn’t need the air.

“At this rate, you are going to be spider food before sundown,” she bit out.

As we left the clearing and began weaving through the trees, a great blast of wind hit us. Then a few thuds, as if more of the large stones were falling from the tower, sounded behind them. Huge, veiny wings hung down and obscured the entire structure from sight. A dragon. Its talons, the tips stained red with some unfortunate creature’s blood, gripped the old stones of the tower as it claimed its perch. It either didn’t sense them or didn’t care, for it made no attempt to give chase.

“Was that a dragon? Are there dragons here?” Elena’s voice was tipped with wonder.

“It would seem so.”

“Only one remains,” the captain said. “That is Farnkelan, the Slayer. He rules the

skies over Darkwood. They say he once belonged to your father, Priam, but was corrupted by Desmerada and loosed upon the wood to slay trespassers and enemies alike. Who knows who he serves now? Perhaps only himself. We stay out of his way.” Captain Lewin turned and shouted orders to his men. They increased their pace, following a path I could not see.

Elena reached down and petted the soft fur of the amaranth. It chuffed in response and almost pranced along.

She glanced back toward the tower. “I feel kind of sorry for the dragon.”

“First the queen of spiders and now the dragon?” I shook my head. This woman was mad. Some beasts were never meant to be tamed. “These are dark creatures, Elena, that would kill you as soon as look at you.”

“My lord speaks true,” Captain Lewin said. “No one can gentle any of the beasts of these woods.”

“I don’t believe that for a second.” The fire in Elena’s words silenced any dissent from Captain Lewin. He turned forward and continued on, leading them over a swift stream and up a slope.

Helen lowered her voice so that only I could hear. “Well, the dragon can’t help that he’s powerful. He didn’t ask to be a dragon. And then to be taken against his will, mistreated, and made to do terrible things. Of course he’s destructive...”

I stroked her hair, my thoughts following hers. “You are fierce but not quite a dragon. And the things Menelaus forced you to do—they weren’t your fault. None of it was.”

She leaned back into me, resting her head on my shoulder as she perused the thick branches above. “Things can change. I made a deal with Arachne, the spider queen,

for gods' sakes. She kept us safe all night. Who would have thought that possible?"

It was true that she handled the monster with a mastery I never would have been able to manage. Could she tame a vicious dragon? Perhaps, but I didn't intend to find out.

The tension left her as she relaxed against me, at least somewhat. She was likely ready to strike should the vampires make any move. Still, she was trusting my judgment, letting me lead for now. Her faith was gratifying, but I was unworthy of it. The warriors ahead of us proved the fact. They had stayed. They had fought. I couldn't begin to imagine how much they'd lost at the hands of Desmerada. And now they bowed before me? I shook my head.

"What?" Elena asked.

"Nothing."

She shifted forward on the amaranth as the slope steepened even more. "Worrying about all those little spider mouths on you?"

I couldn't help my smile. "Well, I have been thinking about one mouth on me, but it doesn't belong to a spider."

She laughed under her breath, a sultry sound that drew me from my bad humor.

"We're here, my lord." Captain Lewin signaled to a vampire atop a wooden wall ahead of them. It was well disguised—still under the canopy of trees. A gate, marked with the same symbol of Troy, opened, and the soldiers rode inside in single file. Elena and I were last in line. She stiffened as we entered, on guard for any attack. The amaranth whinnied beneath us, the beast sensing Elena's powers simmering just under the surface.

We arrived in a courtyard surrounded by squat buildings, camouflaged in the dark colors of the forest. A handful of children ran past the well in the center of the cobblestones. Their laughter, though welcome, was incongruous with the darkness of the wood. Several men and women darted from the buildings or dropped their work at the edge of the square to rush to the soldiers. The vampires jumped down from their mounts and embraced them. Returning heroes.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:06 am*

I dismounted and helped Elena down. Her magics quieted as she watched the children run and play.

She put a hand over her heart. “I thought vampires couldn’t have children.”

“They can. When vampires are young, their hearts still beat, and they are alive. Only when natural-born vampires freeze into immortality do their hearts stop. After that, the only way to make another is, well, the way I was made. But vampires can only be born here, in the Underworld. They wouldn’t last long on earth or Olympus. The sun would see to it.”

A child approached slowly, the curiosity in her innocent gaze clearly warring with her fear of strangers. Elena knelt down and accepted a tiny doll from her. The girl’s brown hair fell in braids around her face, cherubic in youth. She could be no more than four years old.

“Are you a fairy?” she asked, staring at Elena’s golden hair in open wonder.

Elena laughed, a sweet sound that had the other vampires stopping to watch her. “No, but I’ve seen fairies. They are beautiful and have wings that move faster than you can see. And they flitter about, putting fairy dust everywhere and making everything sparkle. But fairy dust makes me sneeze.”

“Really?” The child’s brown eyes were as big as saucers.

“Really.” Elena smiled.

“You’re so pretty,” the girl said.

“You are too.”

The girl blushed.

“I like the braids in your hair,” Elena said. “Maybe you could teach me how to do mine?”

“What’s your name?”

“Elena. What’s yours?”

“Keilana.”

“What a beautiful name.”

“Thank you.” The child smiled shyly.

Elena looked up at me, the pure joy on her face giving me heart to continue on this journey. If I could get a woman as precious as her to look at me like that, maybe I wasn’t the coward I feared myself to be.

## Chapter Fifteen

Elena

The vampire encampment consisted of a main road with several communal buildings. Great trees shielded them all from prying eyes, with dozens of small houses nestled among the roots. The branches above dispersed the small wisps of smoke rising from the cottages.

Captain Lewin showed Paris and me to one of the squat buildings situated on what seemed to be the central town square. The doors bore the same swirling pattern as the vampires' armor and the mark on the gates. I trailed my fingers across it as we entered.

"What is it?" I asked Paris.

"The symbol of the line of Priam."

I glanced at him. "I thought there were no more vampires who were loyal to the line?"

"That makes two of us."

I couldn't see the entirety of the encampment but wagered there were likely no more than a few hundred vampires, with only a fraction of those as warriors. If the group from the watchtower were any indicator, the soldiers were fierce and battle-hardened. We could use their aid to take the Bloodkeep.

Captain Lewin led us through the rough-hewn building. His face was handsome, but deep scars marked his cheeks and forehead. He looked like a man of thirty or so, with thick brown hair and deep brown eyes. He had battled long enough and hard enough to make a dent in his immortal good looks. This was no easy life for any of the vampires in the village, least of all the soldiers.

The captain showed us to a modest room. A large chair made from twisting branches sat at the back, something akin to a rough throne. Several other, smaller chairs were scattered about in front of it. He motioned for us to take the two chairs nearest the throne before he exited to an antechamber at the back. Candles lit the room with warmth, and the roof was left open in places, showing the canopy far above them. Paris's chair creaked as he settled on it, his large frame testing the vampires'



workmanship.

I sat next to him and shifted in my seat to look behind us, watching our flank. I wasn't too worried, though, as the vampires seemed genuine and welcoming, especially when I'd seen the children. I couldn't imagine any children flitting around the Bloodkeep under Desmerada's bloodthirsty gaze.

"Do you think they'll help us?" I whispered.

"I don't know." Paris squeezed my forearm before affecting a cool air, hiding his feelings under an inscrutable mask.

I kept my palms out on my lap, ready for trouble. I hoped the symbol, the one that had ensnared Paris as we'd watched the battle at the tower, was not leading us astray. The vampires at this settlement clearly lived outside the reach of Desmerada, but I didn't know if they would turn on Paris. After all, he was a prize long sought by the self-appointed queen of vampires and had a sizeable bounty on his head.

Captain Lewin returned from the antechamber with a radiant woman on his arm. A simple tiara rested atop her dark hair bound in braids similarly to the girl from earlier. Her hazel eyes were warm and welcoming, and her ebony skin shone in the low light. She smiled at us as she took the few steps into the room. She looked at the throne and then back to Paris, before choosing a smaller chair closer to us.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:06 am*

Captain Lewin helped her sit.

“Thank you, Faren.” She looked up at him with open adoration. The captain’s face softened for her, the scars that marred his cheeks fading in the flickering candlelight.

“Askenith,” she said to Paris and bowed her head.

“Shakorah,” he repeated.

I had no notion of what these words meant, but they were said with such reverence by the vampires that I knew they carried weight.

“Have you come to claim your throne, finally?” The woman beamed.

Paris shifted forward in his seat, the wood screaming its disapproval. “You are still loyal to the line of my father?”

“We are. My name is Shildreth. I have been the regent in your absence. But now that you have returned”—her eyes shone with tears—“we will take back our homeland from the vile Desmerada.”

Captain Lewin spat onto the dirt floor at the mention of the vampire queen’s name. I was satisfied there was no love lost between this group and Desmerada’s minions in the Bloodkeep. How much they were willing to help retake the keep remained to be seen.

“She hunts us, tortures us whenever she captures one of our number. None of us have

escaped suffering at her hands,” Shildreth said, her eyes downcast.

Captain Lewin moved closer to Shildreth, though he did not touch her. A light was in his eyes, something that spoke of a deeper affection than simply a warrior to his regent.

Shildreth looked up at Paris. “But now you have returned. Now we have a chance to end her.”

The fire in the graceful vampire’s voice, the desperation to destroy the queen, was unexpected. I believed her words, knew that many had suffered and died because of the evil at the Bloodkeep. Shildreth seemed to wrangle her emotions into check by smoothing the coarse fabric of her dress.

“Why did you never send for me?” Paris asked, his tone hard and streaked with something verging on grief.

“We couldn’t risk it. Desmerada has spies everywhere, and you aren’t exactly easy to find. We have limited resources. We used them to survive as we continued to hope that one day, you would come.”

Tears welled in her eyes as she spoke, hope tingeing her voice. She drew back, breaking the moment, and turned her attention to me.

“And who is your lovely companion?”

“This is Elena de Artemis, warrior maiden of the goddess.” Paris spoke with such pride that I had to take a steadying breath.

Shildreth reached out and grasped my hands. Thank the gods my magics were calm; otherwise, there would have been a problem.

“Is she to be your queen, then?” Shildreth asked.

I coughed and sputtered. Queen?

Paris put a steady hand on my knee. “We haven’t gotten quite that far yet.”

“My apologies, my lady.” Shildreth retracted her hands and bowed her head in apology, the tiara glittering even in the low candlelight.

I tried to fight down the blush that crept into my cheeks. “Oh, don’t apologize. And don’t mind me. I’m just a warrior out for blood. It so happens we have yet another enemy in common—Menelaus.”

Another plop of Captain Lewin’s spit.

Shildreth searched my face. “Why do you have cause to seek our ancient enemy?”

I shrugged. “It’s personal.” I needed to learn more about these vampires before giving away my secrets.

Shildreth accepted the answer, though I could tell she wanted to know more.

“Menelaus has waged war against the vampires for millennia,” Shildreth said. “He is even more dangerous than the queen. However, we have long suspected Desmerada and Menelaus to be secret allies. It could be that taking down one may lead to the demise of the other. But we must work together if we have any hope of destroying either of them.”

The vampire regent rose, and Captain Lewin helped her up. I could see no infirmity, yet it was obvious Shildreth was in pain. She covered it well, but there was more to the regent than beauty and simple grace.

Paris rose along with her, as did I.

“You both must be weary from your travels. No doubt you had to fight your way to our enclave. The Darkwood is treacherous for those who do not know its ways, and even for those who do. We have a communal dining hall. Dinner will be served within the quarter hour. Your people will be anxious to see you, my lord.”

Paris nodded, seemingly at a loss for words.

“Once again, welcome, both of you.” Shildreth’s eyes glittered, tears brimming again, before Captain Lewin escorted her back to the antechamber.

That had gone as well as could be expected. Instead of just the two of us, we now had the backing of a strong, resilient vampire clan. I could work with this. I rose and paced, thinking of our next moves.

Paris’s gaze was distant, unfocused. He shook his head slightly, as if some thought came to the fore and he immediately pushed it away. Some war raged within him. And I could guess its cause. The vampires who lived here were barely surviving, fighting the very forest just to keep themselves and their families safe. Not to mention the threat from the Bloodkeep. Instead of fighting alongside them, he had been on earth or Olympus, cavorting with Underworlders and mortals alike. That had to twist inside him like a knife.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:06 am*

I knelt in front of him. “You didn’t know they were here.”

“I should have searched for them.” He bent over and rested his head in his hands.

“If you had even come near here, Desmerada would have killed you.”

“I should have come before. Should have helped. Instead, I was out partying. Women, drugs, blood, sport. Elena, I’ve done things. Things I can’t even tell you about because the shame of them would make you hate me even more than I hate myself. I’m not good enough for them or you. I’m the last withered branch on what had been a strong tree.” He rubbed his palms against his forehead, as if trying to slough away his past.

I grasped his hands and pulled them away from his face, locking him in my gaze. “You are here now. We both are. Now is the time when we can strike our enemies down and take what is rightfully ours. Sitting here and wallowing in self-pity gets us nowhere except killed. We have to be strong. We have to lead.”

The swirling symbol was carved into the walls all around them. It was no longer the symbol of Troy or of Priam, but of Paris. “These are your people. You owe it to them—to yourself—to lead them from this darkness and into the very walls of the Bloodkeep. And with me at your side, you will.”

Paris’s back straightened as I spoke, as if my words were injecting iron into his spine.

“Together?” he asked.

“You have my word.” He stood and brought me up with him. He kissed me, not gently, but with a fierceness that sent heat blazing through me. It was a brand, one that kindled my very soul, lighting me with that same swirl of life.

He slanted over me, our kiss deep and intoxicating. He ran a hand through my hair before fisting it and tugging. Relinquishing my lips, he kissed along my jawline until he reached my neck. His tongue played against my skin before he settled his mouth at my jugular, licking and sucking. I sighed and clutched his sides, desperate for him as he was for me. He slid his hands down my back and lifted me so that I could wrap my legs around him. He took my mouth again with renewed fervor, his tongue lapping at mine.

It was too easy, this attraction between us. I couldn’t deny the pull, hadn’t been able to from the moment he burst into Menelaus’s house to rescue me. But I didn’t care anymore—not when he held me close.

I clung to him, relishing the taste of his mouth. When I felt his fang, I ran my tongue along it, drawing blood. He groaned as the metallic taste filled our mouths. He lapped at my self-inflicted wound as his hands dug into my backside, rubbing my core against his hard length. I couldn’t stop, wouldn’t stop. I entwined my hands in his hair and pulled his head back. Licking up his neck, I relished the salty taste, and bit him lightly.

“Gods, Elena.”

Someone cleared their throat. I released my hold on Paris and regained my feet. A vampire stood at the door, his gaze fastened to the floor. He seemed young, like a teenager, and was dressed in a coarse tunic and trousers. I should have felt embarrassed, but I didn’t. Paris’s eyes remained fixed on me as I moved past him and approached the boy.

“Yes?” I asked, my voice breathy.

“I’m, uh, I’m supposed to, um, show you to dinner?” He pushed the hair from his eyes to get a better look at me.

“Askenith.” The boy bowed low to Paris, almost touching the floor.

“Shakorah.”

“It’s this way, my lord.”

The boy skirted the square and led us to a long, squat building. Many voices rose and fell, carrying out into the night. The doors were open. Inside, there were at least two dozen long tables full of vampires, the adults drinking from goblets and the children eating food.

“The children don’t drink blood?” I had no idea that vampires were so like other races.

“Natural-born vampire children eat like humans,” Paris said.

When the vampires realized Paris and I hovered at the door, the room quieted. Table by table, silence fell until only the crackling of the fire and the wind in the trees remained. Shildreth stood from a table in the center and beckoned us toward her. When Paris stepped over the threshold, every vampire in the room stood and bowed.

We hastened to the table at the center so the people could resume their meals. When Paris sat, the rest of the room followed. But there was still no conversation, and all eyes rested on him.

“Askenith, the people are overjoyed at your presence.” Faren handed Paris a goblet,



and Shildreth passed me a plate of food from the children's table. There were a variety of root vegetables and a strange meat I was too polite to inquire about further.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:07 am*

Their food supply seemed meager at best, especially given the inhospitable nature of the Darkwood. These vampires were hardened survivors.

The little girl from the courtyard was there. Her mother was cutting the child's meat and vegetables into manageable bites. When she was done, she ran her hand along the girl's braids and kissed her on top of her head. The way the vampires doted on their children heartened me and reminded me of the warmth and love of my sisters.

Conversations around the room sprouted up again, and children laughed and played with each other.

Faren took a big swig from his goblet. "Now, how are we going to take the keep?"

Silence fell among the adults, though the children still kept at their games, oblivious to the momentous decisions being made around them.

Paris glanced at me. "Elena is my chief strategist. She is a warrior for the gods, a master tactician."

The dark-haired little girl from earlier stopped eating and stared at me, her eyes wide. Perhaps my true nature was even more fantastical than being a fairy as the girl first thought?

Faren put his goblet down. "The gods don't rule here, my lord—you do."

"Faren, give him a moment. He just got here. Tonight, we celebrate. Tomorrow, we plan." Shildreth stood and raised her cup. She spoke in the vampire language. I didn't

understand a word, but I got the gist from the vampires' reactions. The soldiers placed hands over their hearts, and the parents hugged their children. Hope was in every one of Shildreth's words, permeating the air. Her voice rose, reaching the conclusion of her rousing toast before she dropped her head and said, "Askenith."

The entire room shook with the one repeated word.

Paris rose and bowed low to the room, a gracious move from their long-lost prince. "Shakorah," he said as a deafening shout went up from the crowd.

I stuffed my pack under my bed. It was in Shildreth's home, which was the largest building in the settlement, though it only had three rooms. I would be comfortable enough here for the night. The cot looked inviting, adorned with a handmade quilt. I placed the little doll the girl had given me on the pillow before sliding the Olympian blade onto the floor next to the bed.

Paris had been invited into Captain Lewin's home next door. His gaze had lingered on me until the captain clapped a hand on his back and showed Paris inside. I laughed at the propriety of it all. Artemis would have been pleased. Funny how my thoughts really hadn't strayed to my mistress since I began this journey. I should have been worried. I should have been coming up with a plan to fix whatever damage Paris had done to my relationship with the Moon Goddess. But instead of worrying about Artemis, Paris occupied my thoughts. His passionate gaze or his sinful mouth. What did he think of me now that he'd gotten to know me as Elena, not the Helen of his past?

I shrugged off my thoughts and prepared to bunk down for the night. The front door opened with a creak, and I recognized the sound of Shildreth's shuffling gait. She came to the bedroom and rested her cane against the door frame. Her eyes still shone that friendly hazel.

“I hope it is to your liking, my lady.”

“Oh, it’s very nice. Thank you so much for allowing me into your home.”

“You are always welcome wherever I am.” She walked over to the other bed in the room and sagged down onto the edge. The effort from simply walking seemed to drain the vampire of any energy.

“Is there some way I could help? Something I could do?” I asked as lightly as I could.

Shildreth shook her head and removed her tiara to place it on the nightstand.

Despite my offer, I wasn’t sure I could do anything to remedy whatever it was that ailed Shildreth. My powers were solidly in the destructive realm. I could neither heal nor bind, and could only make a temporary glamor when needed. Even if I could call upon healing magics, something told me that Shildreth’s injuries were not of the sort that could be fixed.

She glanced at her legs, hidden beneath her skirt. “It was Desmerada, you see.” Shildreth shifted back onto her bed and lay down, sighing with relief as her body settled. She ran a hand along one of her braids as she stared into the darkness above, a faraway look on her face. “One of her soldiers captured me when I was in the forest. It was foolish of me, really, to even be out alone. But I went to meet someone. In secret. He was set upon by a wolf and could not make it to our meeting place at the appointed time. He blames himself for this.” She gestured toward her legs. “Even now.”

“Captain Lewin?” I guessed.

Shildreth turned her head, her eyes in shadow. “Yes. It was him. But it was long ago. Things are so different now between us.”

I shook my head. “There’s love there, and a great deal of it. I’ve been here for all of a few hours and I would bet my life on the love between the two of you.”

Shildreth sighed. “I wish it could be like it was back then. But the day in the forest, when he couldn’t get to me in time, changed us both. Some things, once done, can never be undone. Even if they were mistakes. Even if it’s only a little thing, something tiny.”

Her voice quieted as she went on. “As I waited for Faren, a vampire soldier stumbled upon me and captured me. He took me to the Bloodkeep, to his mistress. When Desmerada found out I came from one of the oldest vampire clans loyal to Priam, she threw a grand celebration. She invited all her nobles and soldiers to witness my downfall. I can see it even now, a great sea of crimson full of leering faces. How they spat and laughed. Desmerada mocked me, paraded me around like an animal. She had me for a month. A month of torture, of beatings, of...” Her voice shook so badly that it jarred her to silence.

She smoothed her hands over her stomach, almost lovingly. “One day, after the soldiers had their fun with me, they left me broken in the guard tower near their barracks. I still lived, but barely.”

Even in the fading light, tears shone on Shildreth’s face, like gossamer orbs on a dark

rose petal.

I moved to the edge of Shildreth's bed and took her hand in my own. "You don't have to go on."

"I do. I need you to know why we need Paris. Why he is our salvation." She squeezed my hand. "I pulled myself to a window and flung myself from the tower of the keep. I landed in a tangle of Spinis, thorns with powerful poison in each tip. My legs took the brunt of the fall, saving my life. But the thorns ripped the flesh from my bones." She shuddered.

"I lay there for three days and three nights before one of my own found me. They heard the alarm bells at the keep and knew Desmerada's soldiers were looking for me. In a stroke of fate, my people found me first. They brought me back home, but by then, the poison had ruined my flesh. I froze into my immortality shortly after, such that what was lost could never be regained." Shildreth hitched up her dress. I drew in a deep breath. There was only bone, covered with wasted muscle, gleaming white even in the darkness. Her flesh had been ripped away, ruined.

"Gods, no." I couldn't fathom the pain, the agony she must have gone through.

"But that wasn't the worst." Shildreth's tears came in a torrent now, falling down her face and wetting her pillow. "Desmerada took—"

The anguish in her eyes caused my own to mist.

"I was with child, you see, when I was captured. I carried Faren's son." Shildreth ran a shaking hand down her face. "Desmerada took him. Took him out of me. He was so tiny, so small. She slit his throat." Her voice had grown weak, thin. "I had to watch. She made me watch the whole time. I remember his faint little cry before the sound was cut off."

Shildreth ended her tale with a sob that felt like a knife in my breast. The horror of what I'd just heard sank into me, like the poison that had destroyed Shildreth's flesh. My hands shook as rage bubbled up within me and an ethereal wind whipped around us.

"Do you see now? Why we need him to take his place on the throne? Why we need your help? My men told me of your magic. The two of you are our only hope. Please help us. I beg of you, my lady."

The wind died down, and I looked into Shildreth's eyes. "I swear, on my honor as a warrior of the gods, I will end Desmerada's reign."

Shildreth nodded and settled back on her pillow. She wiped the tears from her cheeks. "Thank you, my lady. You don't know what that means to me—to us."

I could never swim the depths of grief that lived in Shildreth's heart, but I would make the cause of the wellspring pay. With blood.

## Chapter Sixteen

### Paris

I hesitated outside Shildreth's door, the dark wooden panel rough-hewn and worn. I raised my knuckles, dropped them, raised them again, and then turned my back on the door entirely before crossing my arms over my chest.

I cursed under my breath.

Then I worked up my nerve. I'd never had trouble wooing women before. Not even Helen. We were so destined that we'd fallen in love easily, our souls already familiar with each other.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:07 am*

Somehow, Elena was different. She'd been told for millennia that she was a warrior maiden, untouchable, above any man who thought to claim her. She'd warmed to me over the past few days, but that bond hadn't snapped fully taut. I smiled at the memory of her in my bed, wanton and panting. Mine. The way she should always be.

I sighed. There was more. More I needed to tell her. About me, our past. About the coming battle and how I could never risk her in the fight to win my kingdom. No matter how powerful, she could still be hurt, killed. My face fell at the memories that threatened on the edges of my mind. Memories of death. Her blood. So much blood.

"So, are you just going to stand out here all night?"

I whirled to find Elena behind me, a smirk on her beautiful face. She wore only a long t-shirt. Did she have panties on under there? My cock sprang to life in my pants, instantly hard. But her sexy smirk faded as soon as she saw my face. She stepped toward me, and I took her in my arms.

"What is it?" she whispered.

"Nothing. Just...memories, is all," I said into her hair.

"Bad ones, I take it." She was so warm against me; her breaths calm and even. So alive.

I stroked a hand down her back. "Yes."

She pulled away and looked up into my eyes. "You won't lose me."



How did she know what my inmost soul needed to hear?

She put her hand on my cheek, and I leaned into her touch. “I can’t, Elena. I couldn’t bear it. Not again.”

I smoothed her hair behind her ear and bent to her mouth, our breaths mingling. She pushed up on her toes and made the first, perfect contact. Her lips were so soft, like rose petals. I kissed her gently until she wrapped her arms around my neck and pressed her breasts into me.

I deepened the kiss, slanting my mouth over hers and stroking her tongue. I bent her back, her body safe in my arms as I made every inch of contact between us. Magic began to bubble in the air, a whirl of effervescence in the dark. Relinquishing her mouth, I licked up her neck, enjoying how her heart beat faster under my touch. When I moved my hands lower, I discovered she did, indeed, have panties on. Just thin fabric between me and the sweetest skin I’d ever tasted.

She made a throaty noise. I rubbed my fangs along her neck, and she let out a sultry moan. I couldn’t imagine a sexier sound. When I scented her arousal, it was all I could do not to sink into her, taking her blood and everything else she had to offer.

I pushed her back through the door, and we tumbled into a heap on the floor. I studied her face, now flushed and luminous, before kicking the door shut behind us.

She pulled my face down to hers and resumed our kiss. I tasted her fully, deeply. Her magic swirled faster around us. We were in the eye of the maelstrom, as we always had been.

She opened her mouth. I relished the fast beat of her heart, the warmth of her skin, the hard tips of her nipples crushed against my chest. I wanted it all. Our tongues warred as the magic increased.

I slid a hand down her side and to her stomach. She trembled at my touch, and the eruption of goosebumps along her smooth skin pleased me. My fingers dipped even farther, tucking beneath the fabric of her panties. Her warmth only increased the lower I went, drawing me to the vee of her thighs.

She made an mmm sound into my mouth as my fingers ghosted against her curls, already wet. I sat back, pulled my shirt over my head, and tossed it aside. Elena's gaze raked down my chest, my stomach, and lower. She let out a hard breath when her gaze strayed to my pants. Then her hands were on me and her mouth was on my chest, sucking and biting.

I put my hands on her shoulders, barely clinging to control. I wanted—no, needed—to claim her. To make her mine again. When she circled my nipple and her hot mouth clamped around it, I sank my fingers into her hair.

I wrenched her head away—though it hurt to lose the contact—before stripping her shirt. No bra, thank the gods. Her perfect breasts begged for my touch, my mouth. She unbuttoned my pants and reached in. Her small hand wrapped around me, and my hips bucked forward at her touch.

Pushing her back to the floor, I took her mouth again, worshipping her as she deserved. When my length hit her hot core, separated from me only by the thin material, I lost control and ground my hips into her. She latched on to my shoulders, her fingernails cutting and marking.

## Page 44

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:07 am*

She was wet, the fabric drenched with her sweetness. I needed to sink into it, to feel it coating me, owning me. I edged my fingers to her core and moved the fabric aside. Her folds were slick, hot. When my head teased her opening, she lifted her hips to me. Her magic grew brighter at the contact.

I hesitated. Did she want this? Had I gone too far?

It took every bit of strength in me not to plunge inside her, but I wouldn't hurt her. Never.

Her eyes were glazed with desire as she looked up at me, her rosy lips bruised and plump.

“Elena, do you want—”

She thrust her hips up, and I sank into her with a groan. The magic surrounding us grew bright as the suns, blinding me. But I was already blinded by my need for the temptress beneath me.

I could hold back no longer and began moving inside her, sliding into her snug heat. She rocked her hips up to me again and again, clawing at my back and wrapping her legs around me. Her body was euphoric, addictive. I had never stopped wanting her; I never would.

I claimed her in a smooth rhythm and retook her mouth, stabbing my tongue inside her to mirror our lovemaking. A fine sheen of sweat covered her body, and I wanted to lick off every drop.

Raising up on an elbow, I stared down at our joined bodies. We were perfect together, made for each other. I took her nipple into my mouth as she clutched my hair, squeezing until it hurt in the best possible way. Swirling my tongue around the rigid tip, I let my fangs graze her skin.

I took her thighs in my palms and pushed until she was spread, completely open to me. I had to see it all. Sitting back on my haunches, I plunged into her faster and faster, and took in her lidded eyes, surging breasts, and pink core. Her nub was desperately in need of attention. I would give it. Releasing one thigh, I ripped her panties away before pressing my thumb on her clit. She bucked, her gaze locked on me.

“Ah, gods,” I grated. “Look at me when you come.”

“Paris,” she breathed, the green of her eyes storm-tossed and needy.

She was panting as I rubbed my thumb over the tight little bud. The magic crackled even louder as she met my strokes with her own, rising to meet my thumb. She was getting close, her walls clamping down on me, her movements getting wilder. My cock begged for release, but I refused to give it. Not until she came, not until I satisfied her.

“I-I’m—”

I cut off her words by leaning down and sinking my fangs into her neck. She jerked beneath me, her sweet walls convulsing around me as she cried out. The magic in the air screamed, right along with Elena. Her blood poured over my tongue, coppery and sweet.

I wanted to make it last, to hold out until I’d made her come again and again, but she was too much. Her taste, her feel, everything was here for the taking.

My cock kicked inside her and lashed her with hot jets. I groaned into her neck as my release pounded through me. She milked me, her bliss continuing as I filled her with my seed and took her blood. I ground into her until I was spent.

I released her neck, licking the drops of blood that still escaped. She let out a small, high-pitched sound. I froze and rose up on my elbows.

“Did I hurt you?” I cursed myself. I should have gone slower.

She smiled, sultry and wanton. “No, my prince.”

Her words went straight to my cock, bringing it back to life. I gripped her hair. “You will ruin me, woman.”

A shadow crossed her eyes and then was gone. She ran her hand along my cheek and rested it there. “I only want to save you, you know?”

I didn’t understand the change in her. The sudden sadness. “I know. What do you mea—”

A noise came from the inner room.

Elena’s eyes widened. “Oh no. Shildreth!”

I came back to myself. We were in someone else’s home, making love on the living room floor. Elena scrambled out from beneath me, and I growled at the loss of her heat. Labored footsteps reached my ears, and I got to my knees, yanking my pants closed.

Elena dragged her shirt over her head and searched for her panties. It was no use; they were ruined. She gave me a cross look. I grinned and shrugged.

“Everything all right out there?” Thankfully, Shildreth hadn’t come all the way into the room.

“We’re fine,” Elena answered a bit too quickly.

“My lord, is that you?”

I coughed. “Yes, it’s me. Sorry to bother you, Shildreth.”

Shildreth laughed, a lovely wind chime sound. “No, it’s I who am sorry for bothering you. Carry on.” Her footsteps retreated.

## Page 45

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:07 am*

Elena stifled a laugh. She was beautiful. Rosy cheeks and wild hair. Her T-shirt barely covered the flushed skin between her legs.

“You’d better leave.” Her voice was breathy.

“I’d better.” I didn’t budge.

“We need our rest.” She took a step closer to me.

“We do.” My muscles hummed with the need to take her again.

“Shildreth will hear,” she whispered.

I licked my lips. “She might.”

Elena took the final step and closed the distance. I kissed her as fiercely as my heart demanded. She answered and wrapped her arms around my neck.

“My lord?” Faren’s voice at the door.

I bit out one of the only curses I knew in the old language.

I held Elena’s gaze, pinning her to the spot like I wanted to pin her to the floor. Again. “Soon.”

She gave me a look that was even hotter than her fire magic. “Yes, my prince.”

## Chapter Seventeen

### Paris

I woke with a headache. My heavy drinking the night before came crashing down, landing right on my temples. But those memories were far overshadowed by the pleasures I'd shared with Elena. I smiled like an idiot at the memories—her voice in my ear, her mouth, her delicious blood. Not even the vicious headache could blot out those flashes of bliss.

Faren had drunk far more than me yet was perky and up and about as soon as the suns dawned. Thankfully, he left for an hour or two while I slept off my hangover. I rubbed my temples to stave off the throbbing ache. One look at my half-empty cup from the previous night turned my stomach.

“Up and at 'em, my lord.” Faren burst in the front door and handed me a fresh cup of what I hoped was water. It was.

“Your queen has been up for hours, talking to my men and Shildreth. You may want to keep an eye on that one.”

I was about to correct him about the “queen” part but thought better of it. I rather liked the sound of her as my queen, even though I had no kingdom as of yet and may never have one.

“What has she been talking about?”

Faren laughed, the sound a bit off, as though he didn't think a thing was funny. “Like I said, keep an eye on that one.”

Now my curiosity was well and truly piqued. I dressed and headed out into the



daylight. Elena was ahead of me. She, Shildreth, and several soldiers were gathered around a diagram of what appeared to be the Bloodkeep. Elena motioned, showing plans of attack, no doubt, and the men followed her hands.

“The sooner the better,” she said. “Surprise, understand?”

As I approached, Shildreth cleared her throat. Elena stopped speaking and rolled up the map. The soldiers played it casual, as if they just happened to be standing around an in-depth battle plan review led by a lethal warrior maiden of the gods.

I ran a hand through my hair, attempting to smooth down the bed head. “What’s going on?”

“We were just going over the best ways in and out of Bloodkeep.” She was dressed in another set of Daphne’s leather pants. They clung to her hips and flat stomach. Her shirt was likewise fitted, the fabric molding to the curves of her breasts. The Olympian sword glinted at her side. I noticed some of the soldiers staring at her, their greedy gazes traveling up and down her body. If they’d been any others, I’d have spilled their blood. As it was, they were my kinsmen, so I forced the anger down.

I took point next to her. “Do we have a plan?”

“We do,” Elena chirped, a bit too quickly.

“We do.” Faren stepped up to the table. “But first, we need to do a scouting mission. Reconnaissance around the keep. See what patrols they’ve changed, how many guard the walls. We’ll need to know their movements before we can sufficiently plan our attack.”

“So, it’s going to be an open offensive?” I was surprised Elena would take such a direct tack, but if she thought this was the way to win, then I had no problem with it.

“Right, but first, like I said, recon. I suggest you and Elena here gather up your weapons for our little tour, just in case.” Faren turned toward the soldiers. “Scout team, with me. The rest of you stay here and make yourselves ready.”

A dozen vampires stepped forward, most the same from yesterday’s group. Faren spoke to them in the vampire language. I could only make out a few words here and there— “protect” and “plan” and “hold steady.” The rest was lost to me.

Shildreth pulled me aside. She leaned on me as we walked away from the crush of the soldiers.

“My king, we have chosen a bloody path to the keep. But”—she stopped and pierced me with her gaze—“we will stay the course. We will see it through until you reign over these lands.” Her tone softened. “But you must trust her. Do you understand? Trust is the only way we will prevail.”

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:07 am*

I sensed Shildreth was sending me a veiled message, but I couldn't see through to its heart. "I already do trust her. With my life."

She patted my arm. "If that is true, then we have nothing to fear and everything to gain."

"Is there something I should know?"

"My king, it's time," Faren said.

Faren and Shildreth shared a look that was a mix of passion and determination. I stepped back so they could say their good-byes, but there were no words exchanged between them. Faren ran a hand down her cheek. She closed her eyes and leaned into his touch. I turned my back, feeling as though I'd watched a stolen moment.

The boy who had led us to our quarters last night came into the crowd, leading the amaranths behind him. He bowed low and handed a set of reins to me. He did the same with Elena but then continued down the line as normal, assigning each vampire a beast. I would have preferred that Elena ride with me, but I didn't protest. She was more than capable of handling herself. We mounted up and headed for the entrance to the village. As we cantered down the cobblestone street, the villagers bowed and said, "Askenith."

I nodded to each of them, acknowledging the vampires who put so much faith in me. Still, their reverence was disconcerting, given the fact that I knew none of them. How did they know I was worthy of any sort of deference? Surely they'd heard the tales about me at Troy, the rumors about my cowardice. Though false, they persisted.

Perhaps they'd even heard of my debauchery in the centuries since. Was I capable of rewarding their blind faith with action, with victory?

I looked back at Elena, who smiled easily at the vampires. She seemed born to be royalty. I, on the other hand, would have to work at it. When we were almost to the wooden gate, the little girl with the braids ran up to Elena and handed her a necklace made of dark flowers.

Elena reached down and took it, placing it around her neck with an exaggerated show of pride. The girl, beaming at Elena, ran back to her mother and hid in her skirts, now shy after her big moment. I caught Elena's eye as I turned, and she gave me a smile in return.

We entered the forest, and the gates receded behind us. The woods were quiet—too quiet.

Foreboding took hold in me. Something wasn't right. I turned to Elena, but Faren rode beside her down the slope, the two of them deep in hushed conversation. Her confidence hadn't wavered, her shoulders back and a sense of purpose in every movement. I re-settled in my saddle. Perhaps my misgivings were nothing more than nerves.

One of the scouts passed me and led the front of the column away from the village, farther still into the Darkwood.

"How far is the keep?" I asked the soldier.

"It's a three-hour ride. Should be there at noon or shortly after." The scout turned back ahead and guided the amaranths through the trees. I settled in for the long plod, unease accompanying me on the trip.

We didn't stop until the suns were high overhead and tipping into their downhill journey toward night. The trees had been thinning for the past hour, sunlight filtering down to the ground.

We dismounted in a thicket and tethered the amaranths to a fallen trunk. Trees still blocked the view, but I could sense the immensity of the keep wall not far ahead.

Faren gave orders to his soldiers in the old language. Half dispersed into the woods and underbrush while the rest stayed.

Elena petted her amaranth and looped her flower necklace around its crown before turning to join me. She took a deep breath as if to steady herself. I'd wanted to speak with her on the trip, but she spent most of the ride talking with Faren. I didn't appreciate that I wasn't included, but continued along, watching through the trees for any trouble. She could chat, but I would be on guard and keep her safe.

"Everything all right?" I knew my tone verged on jealous, and I hated myself for it, but damned if I knew why Elena didn't talk to me on the way here. I glanced at Faren, envious of the time they'd spent together.

"Everything is fine." She ran her hand down my arm, smoothing my ruffled feathers.

"Well, stay close to me. I don't want anything to happen to you." We were accompanied by fierce vampire warriors, but she was mine to protect, to watch over, not theirs.

"Don't worry. There won't be any spider bites in your future." She smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes.

"Elena—"

She cut off my words with a kiss. It was desperate and long—the taste of her lips was honey on my tongue. I drew her closer to me, crushing her against me. Her mouth was proof of the link between us, binding our fates together.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:07 am*

She broke our kiss and whispered, “Trust me,” before striking out ahead. I matched her pace, and the soldiers hurried after us.

I wanted to ask questions, to find out what was going on, to learn what she’d discussed with the soldiers that morning, but couldn’t risk it this close to the wall. Desmerada’s spies were everywhere. Faren had spoken of how her soldiers perched along the wall at intervals, always watching the Darkwood for any sign of enemy forces.

We crept through the thinning trees until the wall became visible. It was at least forty stories high and smooth. Impenetrable. Threads of gold laced the stone, glinting in the sunlight. The whole side was a roving mural that must have continued along the length of the entire structure. Through the trees, I could make out the scene of a wolf gnashing its teeth at a vampire lord. I wasn’t familiar with the tale wrought upon the wall, but I was amazed at its sheer magnitude.

Elena couldn’t possibly think their band of vampire soldiers, even if they numbered in the thousands, stood a chance at breaching the expanse of stone and metal. Whatever she’d cooked up this morning would need to be adjusted, maybe even abandoned.

We continued on, the wall becoming more foreboding with each step. No way in. Up ahead the forest road was bathed in light. It was open, no more swirling mists and encroaching gloom. The road ended at the wall, cut off by the imposing gate of a sally port. We knelt in the high grass and watched the gate. Soldiers dressed in Desmerada’s signature crimson armor stalked from the opening and set off along a well-worn footpath around the base of the wall.

We were so close I could make out the detail of their helmets. It didn't make sense for us to have come this near to a guard entrance. Reckless. What were we doing here?

I caught a flash from the corner of my eye as Elena sprinted across the distance to the gate. Gods, no!

I jumped from my hiding spot and took off after her. What was she doing? A party of vampires sprang from the woods across the road, just ahead of Elena.

She barreled ahead, slowing only to draw her sword and engage the vampires.

She swung her blade out in an arc, cutting only air. One of them pierced her shoulder with his sword. She cried out and fell to her knees as another slashed at her back, ripping through to her skin. It was a deep cut, and the scent of her blood permeated the air.

Rage obliterated any hint of thought. I had to get to her.

Why was she not using her magic? And why weren't Faren and his soldiers coming to her aid?

I glanced behind me. Faren and his men were gone. The horrible truth struck me—they had led me to the enemy and fled. Traitors. I roared and flew at the attacking vampires, but they had retreated into the woods as quickly as they'd come. They'd been Faren's men all along. Cowards.

Desmerada's crimson soldiers poured through the gate, drawn to the sounds of battle. They advanced on Elena and me, their weapons drawn.

I reached down to pick her up and run, but Elena blasted me off my feet with a



powerful hex. I flew back and crashed into the wall. The sharp crack of my skull breaking was the last thing I heard.

## Chapter Eighteen

### Paris

Two male voices faded in and out. One gruff, the other young. The pain in my head made them sound far away, though they were growing sharper by the moment.

“—explosion?”

“Some sort of magic bomb, they think.”

“Well, is it him?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never actually seen him.”

“Then how do we know it’s him?” The younger vampire’s voice rose in pitch.

“We don’t know.”

“We can’t take him to her until we know for sure. She’d gut us and leave us to rot outside the wall. With the spiders and such.”

“What about the other one?”

“She’s out. Karnax knocked her a good one with the hilt of his sword. I wouldn’t mind getting a taste of her while she’s out. The queen would never know.”

I heard the tinkle of a belt buckle coming undone.

They were talking about Elena. I wanted to rip their throats out. I opened my eyes just enough to see the speakers to my left. I lay on my side in a cage of silver. The skin on my arms burned where it touched the bars. I ignored the sizzling heat.

“Is that a good idea? What if she wakes up?”

“What if she does? She’s weak. Look at her. Practically bled out as we carried her up here. What a waste.”

I readied to jump at the younger one. Maybe I could reach him through the bars. Take the larger one’s sights off Elena.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:07 am*

The door to the chamber creaked open, and a man in noble attire—deep green robes with a crimson sash—strode in. He eyed the guards. “And just what were you planning on doing with the queen’s captives?”

The larger one refastened his belt. “Nothing.”

“Nothing what?” the noble hissed.

“Nothing, Spymaster.”

“That’s better.” He turned toward Paris’s cage. “Is it him?”

“We aren’t sure.”

The noble approached as I continued to feign unconsciousness. “Oh, it’s him all right. And what a prize.” His tone rose with a sick glee. “The other one?”

“Why don’t you ask her yourself?” It was Elena’s voice but weak, nothing more than a whisper.

The noble strode to her. She lay crumpled on the floor, in the same position where the guards no doubt dropped her. She pushed up onto an elbow as he approached.

“And you are?”

“Elena de Artemis.” She turned her neck and ran her fingers down the runes there.

“What is a servant of the gods doing in the Underworld with a wanted traitor?” The spymaster knelt next to her and drew in a deep breath, scenting her blood more fully. He ran a finger along the bloodied tear in Elena’s shoulder and brought it to his mouth.

She winced.

He groaned. “You, my dear, are good enough to eat. But first, my question. What are you doing here?”

“Paris displeased my mistress. You may have heard that he tried to woo the great Artemis.”

The spymaster tipped his head toward her.

She continued. “Well, he failed, and instead of smiting him as he deserved, she bade me bring him here. Told me I could collect Desmerada’s reward and spend it how I see fit.”

I now saw the plan that Elena had formed. She had gotten us into the keep, into the very heart of Queen Desmerada’s lair, without a single casualty. Was I angry that she hadn’t told me her plan? Yes. But would I have gone along with it if she had? No. I would never allow her to come to harm. I thought back to what I’d told her of Desmerada. How she would only entertain the weak. Now I was bound, and Elena was injured. She had used every grain of information she had and fashioned a plan. I was willing to bet that the rest of my people were massing for an attack, if they hadn’t already found a way to breach the wall. Brilliant.

“And what would a beauty such as yourself spend such a vast amount of gold on?” The spymaster practically purred. His desire was thick in the air, the taste of her blood bringing out the full predator in him.

“My sisters. Jewels for them.” Elena gave a demure smile. “And me. I love pretty things.”

The spymaster tilted her chin up and took in another deep breath. “As do I.” After he perused Elena for a long moment, he stood. “She’s no threat. Escort her to my chambers after we’re done with the queen.”

The spymaster turned toward the cage, a sharp smile breaking his harsh features. He drew a short blade from his scabbard and ran it along the rails of my cage. “Wake up, prince. Your death is nigh.”

I sat up, some of my skin ripping free and staying behind, sizzling against the bars.

The spymaster gave a perfunctory bow. “Lord Sanguine, at your service.”

“If that’s the case, then I’d like you to serve me the key to this cage.”

He drew a hand to his heart in mock surprise. “Maybe some other time. For now, I go to the queen’s chambers to tell her the glorious news: the blood traitor has finally been delivered to her for judgment.” He smiled, his fangs stained yellow. “She will be anxious to meet you.”

Lord Sanguine turned on his heel and disappeared down a long corridor, his steps fading from earshot. I reached up to the crack in my head and felt the blood dried and the break healed. She had knocked me a good one, though. I shot a glance at her. She looked everywhere but at me.

Her shoulder was healing, though still marred by the gash from the soldier’s blade. I thought back to it and realized the vampires from the woods were the same six of Faren’s soldiers who’d separated from us when we’d first dismounted near the wall. A wave of anger crested inside me at the thought of one of my own daring to harm

her, though she, no doubt, was the one who ordered them to do the very thing.

I sighed and sank back to the floor of the cage. Now we could do nothing more than sit and wait for the judgment of Desmerada.

## Chapter Nineteen

Elena

I moved slowly, and not just because my wounds still smarted. I wanted to give the appearance of nonchalance as I entered Queen Desmerada's throne room. The two guards from the antechamber carried Paris's cage. They grunted with exertion as they struggled to maintain their hold on the wooden litter.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:07 am*

The great doors swung noiselessly inward and revealed a spectacle. The ceilings rose high above, and individual spires dotted the four corners of the room, flying ever higher. A mural done in hues of gold and crimson marked the ceiling, a nude of Desmerada reclining in a bath of blood. Artemis would have called it gaudy. I just called it pathetic.

Guards lined the walls of the room, easily numbering close to five hundred. Their eyes remained ahead, though I knew they watched. To my right lay a body, shriveled and drained. Next to it sat a woman. Her eyes were downcast, and she was chained to one of the thick stone columns that supported the ceiling. Her disheveled hair hung around her face, and her robes were ripped and soiled. Another of Desmerada's victims. She glanced up as I passed, and—winked at me? I arched an eyebrow before returning my gaze forward.

At the very back of the room, a golden throne was perched high atop a number of steps. There, lounging in a crimson robe, sat Desmerada. A draping gold and crimson banner hung above the dais, and Desmerada's visage looked at them from several paintings and busts scattered around the chamber. She had carved herself into every corner of the Bloodkeep.

Lord Sanguine stood to her right, a self-satisfied smirk on his face. A handful of nobles waited at the base of the stairs, watching the scene with stony countenances. They wore fine clothes, like Sanguine's, and each was decorated with a crimson sash.

The guards dropped Paris's cage with a clang. The smell of his burnt flesh wafted over to me, almost making me gag. I choked back my need to free him and the even greater need to destroy anyone who would treat him so cruelly.

I glanced at the queen for only a moment before training my gaze on the floor, lest I give away my intentions. But I didn't need to worry. The queen's attention was focused on Paris, still locked in the silver cage. He stood, back straight, facing his fate.

Desmerada cackled with delight. "My prize is finally here."

She pranced down the steps, her stilettos clacking on the marble as the nobles moved aside for her. Her crimson robe was only loosely tied, revealing her pale skin beneath. Her long black hair almost swept the ground, an ebon waterfall at her back. She was a beautiful nightmare. She strode past me, never even looking at me, and approached Paris. I turned my head slightly and kept the queen in my peripheral vision. Keeping a low profile was key, as facing Desmerada fully would no doubt undermine my performance as nothing more than Artemis's servant.

"Askenith." Derision oozed from her.

Paris didn't respond.

"So handsome, my prince. Or, you're trying to be king now, right?" She clucked her tongue against her teeth.

Desmerada ran her fingers around the bars as she circled him, her skin scorching as she went. "If I didn't need you dead so badly, I would take you to my bed and fuck you until you screamed for mercy."

"Don't flatter yourself." His tone was acid.

She stood before him and opened her robe. "Does it look like I'm flattering myself?"

"I've seen better." I could hear the smirk in his voice, imagine the corner of his lips



turning up just to bait the queen. I stifled my own smile.

The queen shook the cage, her rage quick and consuming. She latched on to the bars, reminiscent of one of Arachne's spiders. "You will suffer, Priam's bastard. You aren't even worthy to stand in my presence."

"Yeah, it's been a real pleasure. Can we get on with this? I don't think I can bear to look at your face any longer, much less the rest of you."

She dropped from the cage and turned her back to him. "You don't fool me, king—you're still the coward you always were. Running from battle. Crying to your father to save you. It's pathetic, really. You would never have been strong enough to rule Bloodkeep. Priam's power died at the end of Menelaus's blade. Just like the rest of your family."

She tied her robe back together before facing him once more.

"It's funny, you know. My seer"—she motioned to the withered body in the corner—"informed me that I would fall this very day. But here I am, alive and well. And there you are, trapped in the cage where you will stay until I take your worthless head. So, perhaps he was half-right. A ruler of the Bloodkeep will fall today, but it won't be me. Half-right prophecy, all-dead seer."

She pointed to the chained woman. "You would do well to remember that."

Desmerada's gaze bored into my back. "And this is the maiden you told me about, Sanguine?"

"Yes, my lady. She has come for the bounty."

"Pretty, pretty." Desmerada stood behind me and ran a hand through my hair.

“Maybe instead of Paris, I could take this one to my bed. Her blood smells positively honeyed. I suppose you could still be considered a maiden after I’m done with you. I could show you a few tricks for your sisters.” The queen snaked her tongue out and licked the runes on my neck. I stood still, tamping down my disgust as I played my part. I stared at the floor, never raising my face to Desmerada’s.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:07 am*

Before the queen could continue her inspection, Sanguine interjected, “Oh, she must be on her way back to Olympus. We wouldn’t want to anger Artemis.”

Desmerada erupted. “Sanguine, I don’t give a fuck about angering some bitch on Olympus with cobwebs in her pussy.”

She stormed away from me. I took a breath and wrestled my magics away from the surface. It was a struggle. Desmerada’s presence made my skin crawl, and I itched to torch her. But it was too soon. Though the queen would be gone, I wouldn’t make it out alive. There were too many soldiers posted in this room and likely throughout the keep. I had to be patient so the plan Faren and I worked out could unfold. He needed more time. The board was set, and the pieces were moving. I could only stay silent and hope I’d wagered correctly on the queen’s next moves.

Desmerada climbed the steps and sank back down onto the throne. The queen smiled, her eyes alight with glee as she admired Paris within the silver cage. “Let’s have a celebration to welcome our returning king.”

Sanguine snorted in derision.

Desmerada waved a hand. “Take him to the great hall. I want my people to look upon their enemy and watch as I take his head. Sad that he will turn to dust. I would rather have liked his skull as a trophy. Too bad. Do it now. Summon them all. The sooner we’re rid of this garbage, the better.”

I had guessed correctly. The great hall, all the nobles and soldiers in one place to witness Desmerada’s shining moment. Desmerada didn’t even realize she had just

fallen into my trap.

“And Artemis’s maiden?” Sanguine asked.

“Pay her half the bounty and do with her what you will, Sanguine. I’m done with her.”

“Come with me, my dear.” Sanguine offered his arm.

I hesitated. It wasn’t part of the plan for me to leave Paris’s side. I assumed I would be given a seat at the celebration of his capture, as was custom. Instead, we were being split up. On top of being evil to the core, Desmerada lacked any semblance of manners.

I wasn’t in a position to negotiate. I needed to make sure all the pieces were set before the final move. With Shildreth’s and Faren’s help, it would be one that would live in Underworld lore for millennia to come. But, first things first. Faren and his soldiers needed more time.

“Don’t worry, you’ll get your gold and more,” Sanguine whispered in my ear.

I fought my gag reflex. With a deep breath, I took Sanguine’s arm and turned my back to Desmerada. I forced myself to giggle at his words, playing the maiden. It worked. Sanguine smiled down at me, his fangs lengthening.

I didn’t chance a glance at Paris, but I could feel his eyes on me as I walked.

Desmerada said, “Angry that a female delivered you to your doom, little king? Just wait until you see what I can do. Guards, take him!”

The chained woman caught my eye and mouthed one hour at me. That was the

remaining time allotted for Faren's sneak attack. Did the woman somehow know? Was she a threat? Even if she was, I was powerless to do anything about it. The woman winked again and settled back against the column, as if pleased with the turn of events.

"Don't mind her." Sanguine pressed my arm into his side. Even through the fine fabric, I could feel his coldness. "Liatra's supposedly the Oracle of Delphi, but she hasn't been able to give Queen Desmerada an intelligible message since she got here. We kidnapped her, you see, after the queen's usual seer met an untimely end." He glanced back to the shriveled body at Liatra's feet. "But her readings were no better. Just kept on and on about thorns and dragons. Nonsense."

Kidnapping Apollo's Oracle was no small matter. The queen must have been desperate to take such a powerful servant of the gods. It was akin to taking a bone from Cerberus. A lethal no-no. Apollo would come for what was his.

Sanguine and I continued out of the cavernous throne room and into the hall. He took a different turn from earlier, leading me into another wing of the keep. The high walls glittered with precious stones, though every so often there would be an overdone painting or sculpture of Desmerada. Always with the crimson.

"Are we going to get the gold?" I asked, though I was well aware Sanguine had no intention of letting me go so easily.

"Yes, my lovely. But first we must stop at my chambers for the key to the vault, you see."

Of course we must. "A vault? Oh, I bet that's wonderful."

"It is. The kingdom is flush with wealth, especially after Desmerada raided all the former nobles' stores. And this was after she inherited Priam and Hecuba's jewels.

We are well stocked, I can assure you. Ah, here we are.”

## Page 51

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:07 am*

He swung open a large, dark door, revealing his bedchambers within. “Do come in. Now, where did I put that key?” He made a show of digging around in a desk.

There were two doors, one at my back and one to the far left of the chamber that likely led to a dressing area. Two soaring windows perched on either side of the bed, giving an expansive view of the Darkwood. The bed was covered in rich velvets. Beautiful but highly flammable. I wouldn’t be able to light Sanguine up without risking burning down half the keep.

“Could you shut the door? It gets so drafty in here, you see.”

Sure it does. I obeyed.

Sanguine sprung the trap.

### Chapter Twenty

#### Paris

I grabbed the bars as the guards jostled the cage on their way to the great hall. My hands stung, but I ignored the pain. Where was Elena? Had she healed from her injuries? More than anything, I wanted to know the rest of her plan.

Surely this was part of it. Doubting her was not an option. I pressed my hands against the bars, the heated agony rushing up into my wrists.

Tilting my head back, I saw stained glass in the high windows that lined the hallway.

Images of the previous rulers of the Bloodkeep were arrayed there. Beautiful kings and queens of ages past watched me as I was carried to my fate.

Priam's stark eyes glared down at me, so different from the loving look I remembered on my adoptive father's face. Priam had been strong, yes, but by the time he adopted me, he had no longer been a creature of fire and blood. Instead, he had been more interested in his legacy, passing down the customs and history of his people.

But the king had failed. The largest pane of glass along the hall had Desmerada's likeness, draped in crimson fabric and surrounded by severed heads. Her vile taint marred even this hall of vampire legend.

The guards dropped me unceremoniously in front of two oaken doors. I could hear murmuring in the chamber beyond—Desmerada's nobles already congregating to see my demise. The guards draped a length of crimson curtain over my cage, clearly wanting to make the big reveal as flashy as possible. The queen's flair for the dramatic was almost as widely known as her love of carnage.

My thoughts drifted back to the tiny village in the Darkwood. If I were to die here, I only hoped that they would be able to thrive. This castle was their home. They rightly belonged safe inside these high walls, masters of the vampire kingdom. Instead, they suffered. If only I could make it right.

In the dark, I sank to my knees and sent up a humble prayer to Priam and his line, seeking the strength to face my destiny.

## Chapter Twenty-One

Elena

The moment the latch clicked shut, Sanguine was on me. He dragged my wrists



behind me, crushing them in his cold grip.

“Did Shildreth and her peasants give you as warm a welcome as I’m about to?”

My heart sank. He knew about Shildreth and the rest. My fear for the villagers increased with each of my troubled breaths. If he knew about the Darkwood vampires, they were in grave danger. My thoughts flitted to little Keilana—the girl’s doll still sat on my bed in Shildreth’s home. The cold creature before me wouldn’t hesitate. He would kill them all if it served his ends. But how much did he know?

“That’s right, maiden, I know all about you. I wouldn’t be much of a spymaster if I didn’t, now would I? I know how you entered the Darkwood with Paris. I lost you for a few days after that but picked you back up when you crossed into the traitors’ enclave.”

He squeezed my hands harder. The tendons stretched painfully, but I didn’t make a sound.

“Aren’t you going to cry out, maiden?” He sneered in my ear as he walked me to the bed and pushed me facedown into the blankets. He pulled some rope from a bench at the foot of the bed and bound me before flipping me over. The rope dug into my injured wrists, but still I didn’t make a sound. Keeping my powers in check took every ounce of my willpower.

He settled on top of me, wedging his bony knee between mine. “Why so quiet? I like it better when you struggle. And if you cry?” He licked his lips. “That’s my favorite part.”

He yanked my head to the side before sinking his fangs into my neck. The ripping pain unleashed the finest edge of my power, and it danced in the air around us as my revulsion grew. Sanguine was too preoccupied with my throat to notice. I forced my

magic to dissipate. I needed to play along until I got the information I needed.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:07 am*

He took three deep pulls before releasing me. He studied my face, no doubt hoping to find fear there. I was more than happy to disappoint him. Undeterred, he went for my mouth, but I turned away from him.

He dragged my chin back to the center before crushing my lips with his, drawing blood as I struggled against him.

“That’s better,” he purred and licked the droplets from my lips. “You are delicious, little spy.”

Focus. “You knew about the Darkwood vampires?”

“I’ve known about them for centuries.” He laughed and drew his nails down the front of my shirt, shredding the fabric with no effort. “I’ve waited for them to make a move on the queen, to destroy her so I could take the throne. But they are weak.”

“If I were a spy, why would the queen let me leave her presence alive?”

“Because I haven’t told that moronic cunt about your little friends.” He shoved his other leg between my thighs, pushing me open. “I thought you would be what the Darkwood vampires needed, that they would finally kill the queen, but alas, they have failed yet again. Pathetic. Their hero is trapped, soon to be killed by the pretender. Paris was their last hope. Now, I’ll have to wipe them all out. Prove my loyalty to Desmerada by dusting the lot of them, and come up with another way to end her.” He sighed, though his eyes smiled at the prospect of destruction.

He left my neck and pushed up onto his elbows. He darted his tongue to his lips as he

saw my breasts peeking from the ruined shirt. “But at least I’m going to get something out of this little misadventure.”

I remained silent, thankful Sanguine didn’t seem to know I had intentionally gotten captured. If he’d known of Faren’s attack, he would have no doubt already sounded the alarm. My plan was still in motion, the king in play, and I hoped my moves were the only ones not going according to plan.

In my mind, I saw the battlements emptying—the soldiers amassing in the great hall. Each watchtower would be guarded by a solitary vampire. The rest of the horde would be in the great hall, packed in to witness Desmerada’s greatest triumph. The queen would want everyone there, even down to the lowliest soldier, as she ended the line of Priam and ensured her place atop the Bloodkeep. Faren’s troops would make their way through the towers, taking out the lone guards as they went. No alarms, no survivors.

The grandest diversion—Paris on the chopping block—was the only thing that could get Desmerada to let her guard down. It was a huge risk. But this was the only chance they’d ever have to finish her and retake the vampire homeland. I had convinced Shildreth and Faren, barely, to agree to my plan.

Risking Paris was not something they were inclined to do. But my strategy was the best they’d had in the long years since Desmerada’s reign of blood began. I regretted being unable to tell Paris, but he was too set on protecting me to ever let me stray into the queen’s clutches.

This was the only way. And I knew it was the perfect strategy. Surprise attack. But in order for it to work, I needed to be in the great hall, where I could do the most damage. As it was, my hands were at my back and the clock was ticking.

He smirked and hooked a claw in my pants, splitting the leather down to my hip

bone. “Don’t worry, maiden, I’ll be gentle.”

“I won’t.” The air wavered as I took the risk and summoned my fire. Sanguine’s eyes widened with fear as the bed went up in an inferno.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

### Paris

I shifted in my darkened cage, wondering what Elena had up her sleeve. The sounds in the great hall grew louder, more and more voices joining until the room was bursting with noise and movement. I had no doubt Elena could easily disentangle herself from the spymaster. But that still left me in the dark about the rest of the plan. I sat and bided my time until a hush fell over the great hall.

Desmerada’s voice wafted through the wooden panels. “I’m sure you’re all wondering why I’ve summoned you here on this fine evening. I have quite a special treat for all of us.”

The doors swung open and the cage began to move. I sensed a room packed with my kind, a multitude of vampires come to witness my execution. The only sound was the muffled steps and grunts of the guards as they labored through the room, lifted the cage higher, and finally perched it atop a platform.

Whispers fluttered around me as intrigue grew in the air.

“As your queen, I have always endeavored to annihilate any threats to our homeland.”

A smattering of applause.

“This is no different. However, I have now captured the biggest threat to our joy. Not even the demon Menelaus is a greater enemy. No, this is a traitor who has terrorized our peace and good fortune, haunted our very dreams, for thousands of years.”

A roar of murmurs swept through the crowd like wildfire. One word was on the air, carrying from one noble to the next. Paris.

“Silence!” Desmerada boomed before settling back into her conciliatory tone. “Even now, after all this time, I have continued our hunt for the one who would seek to destroy us. And now”—her voice rose for the flourish—“see for yourselves!”

The curtain was ripped from the cage, and the nobles nearest me backed away. A discordant rush of hisses rose in the room. Some of the female nobles clutched the jewels at their throats, and they all bared their fangs.

These were not the nobles of my father’s reign. Instead, they were the dredges left after Desmerada purged any and all who were still loyal to Priam’s line. The real vampire lineage lived in the Darkwood village. They were the last light, the last hope for the vampire race, not the adorned pretenders surrounding me.

Desmerada sat at the head table, front and center in the hall. She raised a golden cup to me, and the nobles followed suit. “To the traitor. Askenith.”

The nobles repeated her words before draining their cups. The air was thick with anticipation. Desmerada rose from her seat. She wore a crimson gown that plunged in

a deep V down to her stomach. Her dark hair was coiled on her head. The crowd parted and bowed as she approached my cage.

A dozen guards ascended to the platform. One readied to open the latch while the others tensed to grab me. I didn't fight—simply walked out and into their rough grips. There was nowhere to run. Nothing I could do. I placed all my trust in Elena. That trust wouldn't fail me, not even if Desmerada's sword took my life and sent me to Hades. I would never stop believing.

“Kneel.”

The guards shoved me down to my knees. I raised my gaze to meet Desmerada's. She smiled, cruel joy on her face, as she took an ornate sword from one of her guards.

“For your crimes against my kingdom, I decree your death.” She moved to my side as rough hands pushed my head down, baring my neck for the blade.

I sensed her raising it high over her head. Closing my eyes, I envisioned Elena, her green eyes and golden hair giving me a calmness I never thought possible. She was my white queen.

The blade sliced the air, whispering death on the way to my neck.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

Elena

I hurried through the empty hallways. Tripping over the long hems of Sanguine's trousers, my disguise became a stumbling block. After I'd dispatched him in a screaming vortex of flame, the bed was an inferno. I'd raced into the dressing area and thrown on some of his clothes. They would at least give me a chance at sneaking

into the great hall without attracting too much attention. I could do nothing for the fire and only hoped it wouldn't rage beyond Sanguine's room. But I didn't have the time or inclination to worry about it.

Desmerada's voice was in the air, and I followed the sound. I slowed my pace when I saw a crowd of vampires, both nobles and soldiers, hovering outside the massive doors to what must have been the great hall. They paid me no attention as I skirted them and darted inside. It was packed, thousands of vampires in standing room only. Some had climbed atop various banquet tables scattered around the room to see the spectacle.

At the center, atop a gilded platform, Paris stood in his cage. His back was to me as he faced Desmerada. She raised her glass in a toast, and the vampires around me echoed the words in response. I dove in, wending my way closer and closer to Paris. None of them seemed to care. They couldn't rip their gazes away from Desmerada's prize.

The hour was up. Faren was late.

Desmerada mounted the platform. I continued toward Paris and the queen, the vampires ever thicker the closer I got to the center of the room. Now I had to fight, pushing and elbowing my way along.

The guards forced Paris to kneel as Desmerada drew her sword. She raised it above her head for the killing blow. It was now or never. I jumped atop the nearest table to get a clearer view.

Desmerada swung the sword. I hurled a firebolt, the scorching ray burning through the air. It struck the queen square in the chest and hurled her backward before she could finish her stroke. The sword clanged to the ground as the crowd surged up around me. A multitude of hands pulled me down from my perch. I summoned two



storms of fire and incinerated dozens of vampires in my radius. The ones outside my hex backed away, and the remaining vampires panicked and ran. I ignored them and turned back to Paris.

## Page 54

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:07 am*

The guards had him on his feet and held fast. Desmerada, her chest and face blackened, pressed her silver blade to his throat, burning him.

When she saw my face, her eyes grew wide. “Helen!” she screeched.

Déjà vu swirled inside me. Desmerada knew me. How? A fragment of a memory flashed through my mind—Desmerada sitting next to a cauldron of Hades fire. Then it was gone.

Desmerada bared her fangs. “One step closer and I will end him. I swear it.”

The nobles had cleared out, but the soldiers advanced on me, staying just outside my blast radius.

“Elena, run.” Paris ignored the burn of the blade and bored into me with his gaze.

Desmerada sawed the blade back and forth, cutting into the first layers of flesh. Paris grunted but did not cry out as blood poured from the wound.

Desmerada stilled her movement. “She’s not going anywhere. Menelaus would give me anything for her.”

I maintained the fiery maelstrom swirling around me, keeping the soldiers at bay. Several of them launched a volley of arrows. The flames ashed each one before it could find its mark.

“Don’t kill her, you idiots. Take her!” Desmerada cried.

The soldiers hesitated at the edge of the destructive magic.

“I will burn through them all,” Elena said. “And then I will burn you.” The air roiled and surged with flames. I let the full force of my power flow out, the flames hot enough to bubble the stone floor and send every soldier nearby into puffs of ash.

“Your magic won’t last forever.” Desmerada bared her fangs.

“Long enough to destroy you.” I dove deep, pulling up the heart of my power and infusing the air with flaming death.

“Burn yourself out, sweet Helen. Then you’re mine.” She sawed deeper into Paris’s neck.

He kept his eyes on me. “Run, Elena. Leave me.”

Desmerada cackled. “He’s still in love with you, after all this time. How quaint.” She shook him. “I’ll ride him like a stallion while you watch, then bathe in his blood. I’ll—” Her voice died as an arrow pierced her throat. Her soldiers were momentarily shocked, as was I.

She released the sword and scrambled to withdraw the bolt from her neck. More flew in, piercing her so many times that she dropped to her knees.

Paris dropped down and swept his leg out to knock everyone on the platform off their feet. He gripped the sword and began fighting the nearest guards, the clang of metal shooting through the hiss of the fire.

I kept the intensity of my spell, even as the magics drained me. More vampires at the periphery were set alight—some incinerated on contact. Paris battled in a blur of ferocity, taking down soldier after soldier. He gave no mercy, dispatching every

adversary as he fought his way to me.

My spell's radius began to shrink, the vampires getting closer and closer as my ability to wield the power slowly faded. I had never used up so much magic, never needed to when I had my sisters at my side.

I dropped to my knees, the soldiers creeping closer as the flames pulled back. But then they turned away from me, their backs to the fire as they began fighting a new front. Faren's soldiers were overwhelming the room from all directions. Desmerada's forces were pinned between my fire and the invaders' blades.

In one final push, I seized the power inside me and pushed it out, birthing a wide arc of fire that cut down hundreds of soldiers. I was a supernova, giving my last bright light before going cold and dark.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

### Paris

I watched Elena sink. She'd released the last burst of power she could before falling forward on her hands. I scented her tears, the taste of her sadness cracking me open, and I rushed to her side.

The sound of battle echoed through the hall, and arrows flew all around. Faren's forces overwhelmed the last soldiers who still lived after Elena's volcanic onslaught. Because of her, they were no match, and the Darkwood vampires rolled over their enemies.

The vampires no longer crowded around Elena. They were too busy fighting the invaders. Elena had fallen to her side, and her breaths came fast and shallow. I lifted her into my arms. Clearing the nearest standing banquet table in a violent sweep, I

laid her down before checking for any close foes. There were none.

The hall had emptied of crimson soldiers so that only one enemy remained. Desmerada, still atop the platform, a look of utter disbelief on her haughty face. She seemed to awaken from her stupor and crawled toward the back of the room. Another arrow hit her in the shoulder.

“One more step and I’ll end you,” Faren called from behind me.

Desmerada shrieked as she ripped the arrow out. “How dare you!” she cried. “I am your queen. You will stand down or suffer my wrath!”

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:07 am*

Another arrow, this time joining the one in her chest. “Stop talking,” Faren ordered as he approached her. He was bloodied but victorious. “One more word and it will be your last.”

Faren climbed the platform, nocked an arrow, and aimed it at her face. Desmerada opened her mouth to speak again, her brows drawn together in fury, but the silvery tip of the bolt seemed to change her mind. Silence.

Satisfied that there was no threat to Elena, I turned back to her. Her eyes fluttered open, and a weak blast of fire radiated around her. I withstood it, ignoring the pain, and pulling her tightly into my arms. The fire dissipated as soon as I touched her.

“Paris,” she whispered.

“I’m here. Rest now.”

“Safe?” she asked.

“Safe.”

Her lashes lowered, the gossamer gold resting against her pale skin. “Good. Wouldn’t w-want you t-to be spider bait.”

I pulled her to my chest and buried my face in her hair as she went limp, exhaustion stilling her.

Elena

I slept deeper and better than I ever had in my life. Awakening in a strange room, I peered at the dark furniture and overdone crimson accents everywhere. It was easily the hugest bedroom I'd ever seen. After living in Artemis's woods for thousands of years, I might never get used to such grandeur.

The walls were heavily paneled with the same near-black wood that grew in the Darkwood. Images of Desmerada hung everywhere—dressed in a crimson robe, sitting astride some large, dead beast, its blood coating her mouth, and on and on. The boudoir paintings were the worst. Who had close-up, detailed paintings of their own most private areas lining the walls of their bedroom? Desmerada.

The ceiling soared away overhead, intersected by sturdy beams of the same dark wood. Mirrors hung over the bed. I could see myself, curled up on my side, my hair in a tangle. I wore one of Paris's shirts, though I didn't know how I'd gotten into it. I caught a shadow moving in a reflection and rolled to my right.

It was Paris, hopping on one leg as he stabbed the other into some pants.

I smiled. "Going somewhere?"

He gave up the effort and fell back onto the bed. "I didn't know when you'd wake and figured you needed your rest."

"How long have I been out?"

"Just overnight. The suns are rising over our kingdom."

He encircled me in his arms and kissed me, taking my breath away with the steady pressure of his mouth. I had a million questions but seemed to forget every single one

when he kissed me. I could focus on nothing but him.

I opened my lips for him, and he slipped his tongue inside, stroking mine. I ran my fingers through his hair and gripped him. He pulled the blanket away from my body and moved on top of me, one leg between my knees as he continued his now-fervent kiss.

He set a fire within me that had nothing to do with magic and everything to do with how he made me feel. Gods, the hard sensation of him against me would drive me to do something wanton. I squeezed his locks until I knew it hurt. He growled into my mouth, eased a hand up my shirt, and cupped my breast, teasing the hard nipple with his thumb. He swallowed the moan that rose from me.

A cough from across the room had me crashing back down to reality. “My lord, I-I’m sorry to interrupt, but you’re needed...”

Paris broke our kiss. “Faren, I forgot you were there.”

“Been here the whole time, my lord.”

I looked across the expansive room and could see Faren’s broad smile even from that distance. With a quick yank, I pulled the blanket over me. Faren’s low laugh caused heat to seep into my cheeks.

“Sorry,” Paris whispered in my ear. “I really did forget. You do that to me.”

“What’s going on? Where are we?”

“This is our bedroom. Well, it’s the king’s chambers.”

“This is going to require a lot of redecorating,” I said, hoping that I never saw another



crimson piece of fabric as long as I lived.

Paris leaned back toward me, perching on his elbow. “Does that mean you’ll stay?”

“Can we talk about this later?” I shot a glance to Faren.

“We can.” Paris’s tone was cool as he pushed away from me and managed to get his pants on.

Though my feelings for Paris were intense, this victory changed nothing. I still intended to take Menelaus’s head. And after that? I didn’t know. Who was I if Artemis no longer wanted me in the ranks? Where would I go? I needed to think, to plan, but all that crumbled whenever Paris caught me in that sky-blue gaze. He was now locked into my deepest heart, though he may have been in there all along. How could I explain all these feelings? Was there a strategy for that?

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:07 am*

“My lady, you’re needed as well,” Faren said. “Please join us in the throne room once you’re ready.”

Paris covered the distance to the door in rapid strides, and they left without saying another word.

I rose and stretched. It felt like I’d been in battle for months. The soreness in my joints would take a few days to subside. I had never used so much of my power, not even in the wars of Olympus. I still felt the hum within me; the magic was always there, always strong.

I went to the colossal walk-in closet. The clothes in there were mostly crimson. I rolled my eyes as I ran my hands along the rows and rows of gowns and corsets. I didn’t want to remove Paris’s shirt but couldn’t wear that in front of his people. I pulled it over my head and buried my face in his smell, breathing deeply before setting it aside. My wounds had healed, and I’d been cleaned. Hopefully by Paris and not some stranger. The thought of him giving me a bath, lathering me up all over, made me lean against the shoe rack.

Shaking the thoughts from my mind, I continued perusing the clothes. Toward the back, I found a section of black items, thank the gods. I chose a black top, the back open in a crisscross pattern. There were no pants to be found anywhere, so I donned a black skirt with a hem that was far north of my knees. There were no flats, only high heels after high heels. I chose a random pair, but they fit well enough. My outfit was the best of the worst.

I continued through the closet into a marbled bathroom. A huge tub was sunken in the

floor, and overhead were hooks. I didn't want to know what the hooks were for, though I could guess. At one of the large mirrors, I chose a hairbrush from a tray and smoothed my hair, the yellow of my strands discordant against the backdrop of crimson and black. Sometimes, standing out was a good thing.

I left the king's chambers and followed the sound of voices. The throne room was nearby. A table had been erected in the center, and Paris sat at the head with Shildreth and Faren on each side. A small contingent of Faren's soldiers stood at each door, ready for any trouble.

"We've secured all ingresses. The portal is secured. Desmerada had it bewitched so that it only works as an exit. None can enter. We have guards on it at all times, just in case. The keep is ours. Most of the nobles fled into the Darkwood. The ones who stayed are locked in the dungeon. We have our emissaries going to the townspeople in the keep and making inquiries. All in all, they are relieved to be rid of Desmerada and are welcoming you with open arms. They have suffered under her reign, as have so many others."

Paris stilled when he saw me enter the room and followed my every move like a predator.

Shildreth rose and opened her arms as I approached. I went to her and accepted a hug that almost squeezed the very last breath from my body.

"You've done it!"

I held Shildreth at arm's length. "You have the strength of a bear, you know that?"

"You should see what she can do in private." Faren laughed.

Shildreth swatted at him before patting the seat beside her for me.

Paris rubbed the five o'clock shadow on his face when I sat, his gaze going to my knees and farther up.

"Everything all right?" I asked and batted my lashes at him. I'd been sly in warfare, but this was a new battlefield for me. I rather liked it, especially when Paris's fangs lengthened as he watched me.

Faren clapped him on his back and seemed to awaken him from his stupor. "Now, on to the particulars. We've managed to put out the blaze in the east wing."

Paris tilted his chair, balancing on two rear legs and grinning at me. "Is that so? How did a fire start all the way on that side of the keep?"

"I'm not entirely sure, my lord. But the spymaster's quarters were destroyed right along with him."

Paris nodded. "Good riddance. Continue."

"We have two more pressing issues. The first is Desmerada—"

"She lives?" I figured Faren would have destroyed her as the first order of business.

"For now." Faren nodded. "It is for the king to decide her fate."

Paris dropped his head back, as if he'd find the answer in the gaudy bath scene above their heads. "What should we do with her? Obviously, I want her dusted. Anyone have any reason why that shouldn't happen?"

Shildreth and Faren were silent. Shildreth's demeanor chilled, and a tremor went through her. Faren reached across the table and took her hand. They were both riding the high of taking the keep, but the ghost of their lost child no doubt lingered in their

minds, a wound that could never heal.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:07 am*

“I think Shildreth should get the final say,” I said.

Paris brought his gaze down to me. He had a question in his eyes. I just nodded slightly toward Shildreth.

Paris seemed to take my faint hint. “Shildreth?”

Shildreth shook her head. “This isn’t for me to decide. So many have suffered at her hands, not just me and”—she looked at Faren—“our child.”

Her well of grief for the baby that was lost was closer to the surface than even I had guessed. It seemed bottomless yet overfull as a tear slid down Shildreth’s smooth cheek.

Paris leaned forward and rested his elbows on the table, his brows knitting together. “I see. I didn’t know. I’m sorry.”

Shildreth nodded and wiped a tear away with the back of her hand.

Paris put his hand on Shildreth’s. “Elena’s word is as good as mine. Shildreth and Faren, it is for you to decide Desmerada’s fate. Whatever you choose, I will see it done.”

I was surprised to hear him give my word such weight. After all, now he was the vampire king. And I was... Well, I still didn’t know what I was. But I didn’t belong at this table with vampire royalty, not really.

Shildreth shook, more tears spilling from her eyes. I embraced her and wished I could wick her pain away. I couldn't even begin to imagine the agony of losing a child, much less losing one to Desmerada's whim. All I had to offer was my support.

Even so, Shildreth calmed in my arms before drying her eyes and straightening her back. "Thank you, my lord and lady. Thank you. We will think on it and come to a decision. May we have some time to discuss it?"

"That's fine." Paris seemed to tick that off his list. "She isn't going anywhere. She's getting well acquainted with my silver cage. Now, what was the second thing?"

Faren took a shaky breath. "And the second is Liatra."

"Oh, gods, where is she?" I knocked my chair over, I rose so quickly. I'd forgotten all about the captive seer. If Apollo arrived and found Liatra chained, he would smite first and ask questions later.

"She is in Desmerada's lounge. We've treated her as an honored guest ever since we found her," Shildreth said.

"Did she tell you who she was?" I asked.

Shildreth shrugged. "Just a seer. Kidnapped after Desmerada killed her own."

I backed away from the table. "I'll, uh, handle Liatra."

It was probably a good thing they didn't know of the danger hanging over their heads. I would do my best to take care of it before Apollo showed up and leveled the keep.

"What is it?" Paris could read me too damn well.

“Nothing. Don’t worry.”

He narrowed his eyes but didn’t press me further.

“Which way is Desmerada’s lounge?”

“Out the way you came and to the left, seven doors down on the right,” Shildreth said.

I took off and felt Paris’s gaze roving my backside, so I added a little extra sway to my hips as I went. The sound of snapping wood had me looking over my shoulder. Paris had gripped the edge of the table so hard, it had cracked. His gaze was pure heat that sent a thrill down my spine. I could get used to looks like that.

“Easy, my lord,” Faren said, humor returning to his voice as I turned the corner out of Paris’s sight.

I trotted down the long hall and into the antechamber. Liatra sat quietly in Desmerada’s predictably overdone lounge. The room was done in rich silks, all in black for a change. But in the center sat an enormous ruby, roughly cut, yet still brilliant in the sun that filtered through the skylights. It was gorgeous and no doubt priceless. Too bad it was crimson.

Liatra stood as I entered and bowed.

“Queen,” she said.

“Oh, I’m not the queen—not a vampire, not, you know—anyway, I don’t quite know what...” I trailed off, silenced by the seer’s midnight eyes. They were hypnotic yet warm.



“You may not know, but I do.” Liatra smiled and sat.

I did the same, taking a seat opposite from her. “We have to get you back to Delphi, and sooner rather than later. Before Apollo comes for you. I know there’s a portal here in the keep somewhere. Is there one in Delphi?”

“No, but—”

“Is there one close? We could portal to the nearest one, and then I’ll escort you back to your home. Apollo will be none the wiser.” I held out my hand, ready to put my plan in motion.

“Oh, Helen. It’s too late for that. He’s already here.”

A shimmering arrow flew past my ear and lodged in the paneled wall.

I jumped forward and covered Liatra with my body before turning to face my attacker. My mouth gaped open a little when I saw my sister maiden standing in the doorway, her bow drawn taut.

“Elena?”

I knew the voice. It warmed my heart. “Lilah?”

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:07 am*

“What are you—”

“You shot at me!”

“I didn’t know it was y—”

“Oh my gods, I’ve missed you.”

Lilah lowered her bow, letting it fade into the ether as we rushed to each other. I gave my sister a Shildreth-sized hug. Tears stung my eyes. I hadn’t realized just how much I missed all my sisters, especially Lilah.

Apollo strode in behind Lilah and watched us, openly admiring the view of the warriors’ embrace. “Now this is more like it.”

He was the perfect male of legend—tall, built, blond, and utterly full of himself in every way possible. I ignored his lusty overture.

Lilah pulled away, her blue-gray eyes troubled. “Surely you didn’t take Liatra?”

“No, no. It was Desmerada.”

Lilah glanced around. “Where is that harpy? I’m going to punch her in the tit for cheating me out of my Wife of Bath money.”

Before Lilah entered Apollo’s service, she’d written a scathing tell-all on the vampire queen, at the queen’s behest, of course. But Desmerada cut Lilah out of her share of

the profits. Seemed it was still a sore spot.

“My city is bursting with gold,” Apollo said. “You can have as much as you want, whenever you want. Why do you want hers?” His eyes twinkled, as if he knew exactly how this conversation was going to go. He enjoyed goading Lilah almost as much as I did.

“Because it’s mine, that’s why,” she said.

Lilah turned back to me, her black hair whipping out in a streak as her ire rose even further. “Where have you been? We’ve been searching all over earth for you, and I find you here? We’ve been worried sick! Between you and Iphi—gods!”

“It’s a long, long, long story. Wait, what’s the deal with Iphi?”

“We don’t really know. She sent a message via fairy saying she was on some sort of vacation, being treated like a princess somewhere. You know how she is. She just, you know, does stuff without thinking. She seems fine, though, if the Cheetos smudges on the letter are any indication. So we’re letting her have her fun before hunting her down.”

“Hasn’t Artemis been looking for her?” I couldn’t imagine the goddess would let one of her best warriors travel too far afield.

Apollo laughed. “She’s still nursing a broken heart over your shared lover boy. But I think she’s more mad that he didn’t punch her v-card than anything else.”

My eyebrows hit my hairline. “Wait, what? Paris never—I mean, they never...sealed the deal?”

Apollo chuckled me under the chin. “Artemis talked a big game, but when it came

down to it, my sis still couldn't give it up. Her prudery knows no bounds. Oh, the shame of having such a sister." He put the back of his wrist to his forehead, as if ready to faint.

I'd assumed the entire time that Paris had dallied with Artemis—and I mean dallied. But he hadn't. It was surprising what a relief that knowledge gave me.

Lilah elbowed Apollo out of the way and gave me a stern look. "Now it's your turn. Spill."

They all sat, even Apollo, as I recounted my harrowing tale of the past week. Liatra nodded along, as if this was an old song she knew by heart.

By the end, Lilah's chin was set in anger, and she was ready to march on Decanum that very instant and take Menelaus's head.

Liatra smiled and took my hands. "That was an excellent story, I must say. But there were quite a few parts missing."

Huh? I went back over the events and could only think of a few things, mainly the canoodling with Paris, I'd left out. My color rose. Surely Liatra didn't want an accounting of those moments? Here, in front of Apollo and Lilah?

Liatra smiled at me. "No, not that. I mean your past as Helen of Troy. You still don't remember it. But I can give you back the memories Artemis took."

My head spun as I considered Liatra's offer. To be given the memories that flitted at the edges of my mind? The ones of Paris and me? Gods, I wanted to know. But with the good would come the bad. From what Paris had told me, I'd spent years with Menelaus before I ran away with Paris. Could I bear to regain those memories too? I could only guess at the terrors that resided in those recollections. The thought sent a

chill through me.

Lilah wrapped an arm around me. “It’s up to you, but those sound like some awesome memories. Crazy war adventures in ancient Greece? Sign me up.”

I didn’t want to seem weak, but I couldn’t help voicing my fear. This was Lilah, after all, the one with whom I’d always shared my secrets. “The memories of Menelaus, though.”

“You can handle it. We can handle it together.” Lilah’s arm gripped me tighter. Her voice was cold iron. “Besides, I have no doubt that you will deal with that son of a bitch with or without the rest of your memories.”

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:07 am*

“It’s up to you, my dear.” Liatra’s eyes were changing from midnight into starlight. Flecks of silver swirled in her gaze.

Apollo shrugged. “Carpe diem, I always say.”

“No, you don’t. I’ve never heard you say that.” Lilah smirked.

“No, I’m sure I’ve said that so many times. Or maybe it’s ‘veni, vidi, vici,’ I say?”

“Nope, you don’t say that, either.”

Apollo crossed his arms over his wide chest. “Come on, Lilah, I know I say the ‘I came’ part a lot, at least.”

Rake.

I ignored the repartee that continued around me. Would getting my memories back change me so much that I became an entirely different person? Or would they make me more of who I truly was? I chewed my bottom lip. A long history of memories already filled my head. Making room for more seemed impossible, maybe even unwise. But to be able to finally know what Paris meant when he’d described his Helen, to possibly see myself as he did, was too much of a draw. Even if it came with memories of Menelaus, they were my memories, every last one of them.

I took a deep breath. “I want them back. Let’s do it.”

Liatra nodded. “But first, the small matter of payment.”

“That’s my girl.” Apollo laughed.

I took an inventory of my possessions. They were few and far between. “Well, I don’t have much...”

The seer’s gaze fixed on the fabulous, yet garish, ruby that dominated the room.

“Be my guest,” I said. “It’s all yours.” I doubted Paris would mind parting with it, especially given that it was in Desmerada crimson.

“Many thanks.” Liatra tipped her head before holding out her palms, face up. The starfire in her eyes was growing, taking over the midnight completely.

I examined Liatra’s hands. They looked normal—no magic there. Nothing to show the intense power that lay within them. Moments ticked by as my thoughts came in a rush. What would the knowledge do to my relationship with Paris, or even my bond with Artemis and my sisters? Lilah’s elbow to my ribs nudged me from my thoughts.

“You need to know.” Lilah’s familiar, frank gaze was convincing. “And you’re in good hands with Liatra.”

I exhaled a shaky breath and put my palms on Liatra’s. The world fell away, and only a maelstrom of memories was left. They flitted through my mind, like a scene from one of the viewing pools that grew darker the closer it got to the end. A tragedy unfolding in my mind. Me, as a child, in a bright yellow dress, picking flowers with my brothers, Castor and Pollux. Our mother, Leda, trailing behind us, glowing in the sun. “Helen,” Leda called out as I took off through the grove.

Tears welled, the memories so comforting and warm. But then they hazed. Me again, this time naked and bound on an auction block. Vile creatures of all kinds making offers for me, seeking to own me like chattel. Menelaus offering the winning bid.

Despair washed over me, the same as I'd felt when he'd claimed me from the block.

I blinked and saw Castor and Pollux, dead at our mother's feet. Desmerada binding my powers. Then Leda, eventually falling ill and dying after Menelaus had broken me beyond repair. The darkest despair, the thoughts of ending it all.

But then the sun began creeping through the gloom. After my mother's funeral, I had strayed through the rose garden at Menelaus's Greek palace. The rose buds were preparing to bloom, their scent already heavy in the air.

I dreamed of escape and thought to end my suffering that very night. Menelaus had no one left to threaten, no one whom I loved now that Leda had passed on to the Fields of Elysium. He couldn't punish me any longer with threats to my family, and I had no desire to continue living this accursed life. How should I end it? Perhaps jumping from the battlements, perhaps poison...maybe just a simple blade. In any case, I could not fail, could not let Menelaus touch me again.

I stopped in front of a tangle of two rose bushes, joined and intertwined with each other so that I couldn't tell where one ended and the other began. Through the thorns, I somehow saw a piece of the sky, brilliant in its blue glory. But the sky moved and emerged from behind the thick leaves. It was an eye—a man's eye!

Paris. His face like a new day, the sun breaking through and giving me a chance at a life in the light.

My memories skipped along even faster. Paris and I running, sailing across an endless sea to the safety of Troy. We'd been happy there. Perfected in love. But the cloud of Menelaus threatened. The storm of war rained down over us and eventually deluged the city in untold sorrows.

Paris dead in my arms. Menelaus's soldiers. A flight of doves. My hand flew to my



neck. The red mark. Where I'd driven my dagger deep into my body to finally escape from the demon king.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:07 am*

The memories faded back into my mind, though still a part of me. I blinked, and my vision cleared. Liatra's eyes had returned to the calm midnight. I had been clutching the seer's hands so hard, I'd no doubt hurt her. I let go.

"It's all right, my dear. No harm done." Liatra leaned back on the couch and let out a breath. Her body shook beneath her robes, and she gripped the nearest cushions as the tremors grew and subsided. Her abilities were clearly taxing. I could relate.

Lilah's hands were on my cheeks, and she wiped away the tears that had run freely. "You okay?"

I drew in a shuddering breath. "I think so. It's just... It's a lot." I relaxed into Lilah's arms, laying my head on my best friend's breast.

"I really am Helen. The Helen of Troy." My voice was small beside the enormity of my past.

Lilah stroked my hair, soothing me. "Are you trying to say you're prettier than me? Is that what this is about?"

I snorted a laugh through my tears.

Silence fell on the room, a hush created from the power of memories and Liatra's abilities. I just let the steady rise and fall of Lilah's breaths bring me back down, safe here in the present.

Apollo spoke up, "You know, when the songs say Helen had a face that could 'launch

a thousand ships,' what they were really saying was that Helen had a body that could 'stiffen a thousand—'"

"Thanks for the history lesson, boss," Lilah cut in.

I laughed as I settled back into the current time. Apollo smiled and gave me a friendly nod, as if to say welcome back.

"As much as we'd like to stay and chat, Liatra has had a rough week, and I need to get her back to Delphi. Her son has been having some ragers while she's been gone. The place is a mess, let me tell you."

Apollo and Liatra stood.

Liatra sighed. "I already knew he would do it, but I'm still disappointed that he did. Oh, the life of a seer and the mother of a teenage boy."

Lilah gave me one more squeeze before standing. I knew I couldn't ask Lilah to stay, though I wanted to.

As if reading my mind, Lilah said, "I'll be back to visit. Promise. Besides, I'm sure Apollo wouldn't mind if I aided you in taking down Menelaus. Right?"

Apollo crossed his arms over his broad chest, flexing his pecs. "Lilah, Helen can fight her own battles. Besides, you'll be busy fighting mine. Ares is still at the top of my list."

Lilah balled her fists. "Mine too."

"I guess we're off, then," Lilah said before leaning in and whispering in my ear, "I'm totally coming back to visit, and soon."

“I have the hearing of a god, Lilah,” Apollo said, his eyes twinkling with mischief.

“Yeah, yeah, whatever you say.” She shook her head.

Apollo easily lifted the enormous ruby from its stand and tucked it under his arm. They moved into the hallway, the god leading the way. He seemed to know it by heart, though I was already lost.

I was so happy to have gotten to see Lilah, to feel the love of my sister again. It reminded me of another, someone who had a greater need of love than any creature I’d yet encountered. Perhaps I could do something about that.

I steeled myself before asking the next question. Seeking favors from the gods was never a good idea. They always wanted something in return.

Still, I had to try. “Apollo?”

“Yep?” He kept walking.

“Can I ask you something?”

“You just did.”

Smartass.

Lilah looked over her shoulder at me, puzzled.

I took a deep breath before plunging ahead. “Well, see, there’s a maiden in the Darkwood who was cursed a long time ago, and I think, well, I hope, that you could do something to help her get back to the way she was, or maybe talk to Athena about it?”

“No can do, Queenie. Athena and I are on the outs at the moment. She’s taking Ares’s side in the dustup we’ve got going on.”

“Hades,” I cursed.

“Actually, Hades is on my side for once. Can you believe that?” He kept striding on down the hall. The chances of winning his help faded with each step.

“Right, but, Apollo, this maiden. She was treated unfairly, and I think that if you just help Arachne—”

Apollo whirled, sending the crimson banners along the walls floating violently in the sudden breeze.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, are you saying Arachne is here, in the Darkwood?” Apollo’s face lit, looking almost angelic. Almost. “I’ve had ‘do a half spider/half woman’ on my bucket list for millennia!”

Lilah smirked, Liatra gave a “boys will be boys” shrug, and Apollo slapped his thigh with his free hand.

“Ladies, looks like we’ll be making a little detour on our way back to Delphi.” The god rubbed his chest in anticipation.

## Page 61

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:07 am*

“Right, but could you help her too, not just, um...” I wasn’t sure how to couch the request. Apollo had effectively destroyed my strategy on the point.

“Sure, sure. I’ll see what I can do, but I’m far more interested in what she can do, if you follow.” He waggled his eyebrows before turning back around and continuing out of the corridor, his pace ever quicker.

“Needle teeth,” I called after him.

“Under control,” he called back.

Lilah and Liatra hurried to keep up. Apollo wasn’t wasting a second, it seemed, to get to work on his bucket list.

“Cad,” I muttered.

Apollo’s voice echoed through the corridor: “God hearing, Helen. God hearing.”

And then they were gone.

### Chapter Twenty-Six

#### Paris

I had listened patiently as Faren gave me a total rundown of the Bloodkeep’s defenses, vast riches, fortifications, escape routes, history, and even its pageantry. I had heard it all, but my thoughts kept straying to Elena. She’d been gone overlong.

The light of the suns was already fading into a serene twilight outside. Inside, there was a flurry of activity. The Darkwood vampires, along with the loyal keep-dwellers, had set about removing every trace of crimson from the keep. The effort would take weeks, if not months. But every so often, when a banner came down, the swirl emblem, highlighted in hues of blue and gold, was revealed. The symbols were etched into the immovable walls of the keep.

Desmerada had only managed to cover over Priam's legacy, not destroy it entirely. I would try to continue in my father's footsteps, though the mantle of such a king was a heavy burden. Protecting the Bloodkeep was a monumental task. Defeating Menelaus and his demon horde was even more daunting. But with Elena by my side—I gazed around the room as the workers revealed more emblems by the moment—I could manage it. She'd brought me this far.

I couldn't stop the smile that turned the corners of my lips when I remembered her calm decree back at my mountain home. How she would take the Bloodkeep. I had been a fool to have doubted her then and would be an even greater fool to do so now. We would destroy Menelaus, together, as it was always meant to be.

"My lord, it is almost time to greet your subjects," Faren said.

"I'm as ready as I'll ever be." I was humbled at the thought of having subjects but wanted to reassure all vampires that the Bloodkeep was once again a safe haven. With the help of Elena, Faren, and Shildreth, the Bloodkeep could reclaim its former glory.

Faren cleared his throat. "Well, my lord, you, uh, you'll need to change first."

Paris looked down at his T-shirt and jeans. Not exactly regal. Faren was right.

"Not to worry, my lord. Shildreth found some things when she was down in the

servants' quarters doing her inspection. Many of them saved several items of your mother's and father's before Desmerada spoiled the keep. Made from the Darkwood spiders' enchanted silk, they are just as beautiful now as they were during Priam's reign. I think she's found something more fitting for you to wear to your first audience."

I rose, suddenly nervous at the thought of an "audience." It was all so formal.

"You'll do fine," Faren said. "Just go make ready. I'll have everything prepared so it should go smoothly."

The captain's confidence was a balm, though not quite strong enough to erase all my doubt. I found my way back to the cavernous bedroom. It was already more to my liking, the crimson touches all but gone. A blue robe with gold piping was laid out for me, along with a simple white button-down and dark slacks. But that wasn't what caught my eye.

Elena stepped from the closet, freshly showered. Her hair was in damp waves, and a towel was wrapped loosely around her. The slightest tug would send it cascading to the floor. Gods, I needed her.

"Elena." The only word I could get out.

She stilled and caught me in her emerald gaze that turned sultry. Without a word, she let the towel drop. Daring me to take her.

I needed no further provocation. I slammed the door behind me, making the room vibrate with the sound. I rushed to her and grabbed her up in my arms before tossing her to the bed. She laughed, low and sensual. I knew that sound—it played in my mind from our many nights together. I didn't stop to think about it, didn't care about the why of it. I only knew that she wanted me. Now.



She watched every movement as I undressed. When her gaze hung on my hard shaft, I could almost feel it. Her arousal was heavy on the air. My need for her on my tongue was unbearable. When she let her knees fall apart and bared herself to me, I was past all sense, all logic. I was a being of passion, and I existed only for her.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:07 am*

I stalked on top of her, pinning her beneath me, and claimed her mouth. Her core was so wet and so hot, I groaned as my cock settled against it. She opened her mouth to my searching tongue and answered my thrusts with her own. I palmed her breast—the tip already pearled into a perfect point. I sank down to it, sucking it into my mouth and teasing it with my tongue. Her hands ran through my hair, urging me on.

“Taste me there.” Her voice was throaty, erotic. I intended to lock her words in my mind and play them again and again.

I glanced up, unwilling to relinquish the bud. Our eyes met. She pulled my hair, goading me into following her command. Sweet gods, she wanted my bite. I struck, piercing her breast above the nipple. She moaned as I lapped at her. Honeyed sweetness poured onto my tongue. Her taste was my undoing.

### Chapter Twenty-Seven

Helen

I reveled in the bite of my lover. My core tensed, the pressure building as Paris took draw after draw from my breast. His hand trailed down my stomach, making me quake, until he ghosted over my mound, through the folds, and to my nub. He circled it, teasing me as he still drank from me, slowly now, savoring it.

He released my breast and followed the path left by his hand. Just the sensation of his lips on my stomach was overwhelming. The feel of his hands spreading my legs even wider thrilled me. But his tongue—gods, his tongue.

He settled in, feasting on me with a low groan. I rocked my hips along to his rhythm, unable to stop myself. His tongue was nimble, flicking my nub. The tension increased and blotted out any thoughts. Only Paris and I remained. His tongue on me. Until he slipped a finger into my tight sheath. Then, the wave crested, sending me over the other side on a current of bliss. I cried out at the release, savoring each echo of pleasure coursing through me.

He rose up my body, but I wasn't letting him go on until I too had a taste. I pushed him up and rolled over on top of him. He growled and palmed my ass.

"Not so fast." My voice was barely a sound.

I dropped kisses down his neck and into the golden hair that dusted his chest. I took one of his nipples in my mouth, sucking and biting. His hands fisted the sheets on either side. I moved to the other one, doing the same. Biting down harder, I elicited a growl. I smiled and continued my way down, kissing his hard stomach. When I got to his shaft, he fisted my hair. I let out a breath on the length of him, and it jumped. The smooth head was wet, needing.

"Gods, woman," he bit out.

I licked the tip, and he bucked underneath me. When I took him into my mouth as deeply as he would go, he cried out. I moved up and down on the hard length, grazing the back of my throat before withdrawing. Up and down I went. His hands fisted my hair harder and harder. I enjoyed the feel of his tension, the rising power of his imminent release. I didn't think I could get any wetter. I was wrong. The sheer power of him beneath me, inside my mouth, was making me melt. He was under my control now, and it turned me on more than anything else ever could.

"I'm going to come," he said. It was guttural, barely controlled.

“Not yet.” I rose up.

I positioned his tip at my entrance and eased onto his shaft. He gripped my hips, slowing my descent, allowing me time to accommodate him. The slight hint of pain and the huge surge of pleasure had me moaning low in my throat.

Those blue eyes, now hazed with desire, watched me. As I began to rock on top of him, he matched me with his stroke. Slowly, so slowly, we started our dance. He reached up and pulled my face down to his, owning my mouth once again. We were joined in every way, melded together into a single being. One, just as we always had been.

Paris

I LIFTED my hips, following her lead and enjoying the sensuous rhythm. The way she rode me sent shivers of pleasure to every extremity of my body. And her mouth was an erotic playground of its own, her tongue darting and caressing, her teeth marking me.

She increased her pace, punishing me with the need to come inside her. My release begged to be freed. But I would not give it to her, not until she had come for me again. I wanted to knead her gorgeous breasts, but my hands would not relinquish her ass. Instead, I reluctantly left her mouth and moved my lips down her neck. She gripped the headboard, arching her back as she rode my cock.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:07 am*

Taking in her unbitten nipple was a homecoming, the flesh resplendent in my mouth. She sped up, riding me even faster, rubbing her tender clit against me as I pressed deeply inside her. She was so tight, squeezing me with the finest friction.

I used my hands to guide her movements, grinding her against me as I pistoned up into her heat. She moaned and threw her head back, the waves of her hair flowing around her in golden ribbons. I had never seen a more beautiful sight and knew I never would. She was my goddess. None on Olympus could ever match her strength or beauty.

She came with a cry, my name on her lips and her walls clamping around me, tighter and tighter still. I finally gave in, her moaning voice the key to my release. I emptied into her, the hot jets pulsing out of me with such force that I bit my lip to keep from yelling at the top of my lungs. She kept undulating, wringing every last bit out of me before collapsing onto my chest.

She dotted kisses up my neck and grazed my lips with hers. A sweet thank-you that I returned. She nestled into my chest, and I wrapped my arms around her, loving the feel of this. It was so right. The way it used to be and the way it would be from then on.

“Elena—”

“It’s Helen.” She gave me a deeper kiss.

I opened my eyes wide, suddenly drawn from the mind-blowing stupor she’d put me in. What? I rolled over, still inside her, and pinned her beneath me.

“What? How? What?” My mind wasn’t firing at all.

She smiled up at me. “I may have gotten my memories back.”

“It’s you?” I couldn’t stop the mist that sprang up in my eyes.

She kissed each of my cheeks. “It’s me. I mean, it’s me Elena and it’s me Helen. Maybe I should change my name to Helena?”

I didn’t care if she called herself Medusa as long as she was mine. “You remember us? All of us?”

“I do. But we may have a problem,” she said and furrowed her brow.

My heart sank. There was always a price to be paid for such miracles. Always. “What is it?”

Her eyes twinkled, two mischievous emeralds. “Remember that time, when we were leaving Greece and we were in the stern of the boat?”

Of course I remembered it. The sex we’d had at that moment was burned into my memory. Her breath, her sweetness.

“Yes.”

“Well, I don’t think we’ve managed to top that, so we’re going to need to go again.” Her smile was both cherubic and devilish.

My cock tingled back to life, still couched in her wetness. “Oh, I think we can beat our high score.”

“You’d better hope so.” She licked up my neck.

There was a sharp rap at the door.

Faren’s voice barely penetrated the wood. “My lord, the nobles are assembled. It’s time.”

I gave a smooth thrust into her, my cock coming back to life with a roar. “They can wait.”

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

Helen

After Paris left with Faren, Shildreth stayed to help me get ready for the audience. Shildreth was already prepared, dressed in a gown of gold with her gleaming hair done in a crown braid atop her head. She looked like a princess, beautiful yet also solemn.

Shildreth brought a gown of azure for me, the stitching done in the same gold to match Paris’s robe. I hadn’t been dressed this formally since my days in Troy.

I sat at the vanity as Shildreth expertly managed my hair into an attractive formal coif. It was half up, leaving the waves free to fall down my back.

Shildreth beamed at me in the mirror, admiring her handiwork. “A servant gave me your dress. She had hidden it behind her wardrobe when Desmerada swept through the castle. It once belonged to Queen Hecuba. I think it should fit you nicely.”

I lifted my arms and shimmied into the gown. It draped across my breasts, skimmed my waist, and hugged my hips before flaring out at the bottom.

Shildreth stood back and admired the total package. “You are a vision. And I brought the perfect piece to set it off from the vault.” She spoke through the hairpins in her mouth.

She drew a velvet bag from the counter and opened it tenderly to withdraw a stunning tiara. It glittered platinum in the light and was adorned with diamonds and some strange stone that was at once blue and then gold, depending on the angle.

“These stones are the most precious in all the Underworld. We call them changelings. These were mined by the vampires in ages long past and given to each king or queen in turn. This tiara hasn’t adorned any vampire royal in ages. But now”—she gingerly set it atop my head and pinned it—“it’s yours.”

I was mesmerized by the gems, and the whole look of vampire royalty, really. But I shook my head, only slightly lest I unseat the priceless jewels. “I’m not vampire royalty, Shildreth. This tiara doesn’t belong to me.”



*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:07 am*

Shildreth put her hands on her hips. “It does belong to you, because the king told me that anything within the vault was yours.”

“I know, and I love him for it.” The word rolled off my tongue so easily, everything clicking back into place. Paris and I were united as we were meant to be. But it wasn’t so easy. I remembered my vows to Menelaus. Willingly given? No. But given all the same. I could not wed Paris, could not be the woman Shildreth wanted me to be, until Menelaus was slain.

“Just wear them for tonight, my lady?”

I looked at Shildreth’s eager eyes in the mirror and knew I couldn’t say no. “Fine.”

“Excellent. Shall we go?”

I stood and put out my arm for Shildreth.

She took it with a grateful smile. “Thank you, my lady.”

We made our way to the great hall, a large swell of voices already rising inside.

“Have you and Faren come to a decision about Desmerada?”

Shildreth stumbled, but I held her steady.

“We have not. Faren has left it up to me, and I feel I cannot make the decision until I look her in the eye.”

“Just know that Paris and I will be there, right alongside you the whole time.”

“I know, my lady. Thank you.”

We arrived at the oaken doors leading to the great hall from the royal chambers.

I took a deep breath, not sure if I was ready to greet Paris’s subjects. Shildreth was less wary and motioned for the guards to open the doors.

“Wait!” a woman called, her voice a high, melodic sound. I knew that voice. A scuffle sounded through an antechamber door. Hissing and the frightened yells of vampire soldiers raised a clatter.

“Let her through!” I banged on the door. “Open up!”

“But, my lady, it’s not only her,” a guard said through the wood.

“I don’t care. Open the door this instant.”

The guards did as I commanded, and I gasped. Just as I suspected, Arachne stood beyond the door. But she was changed. No longer did she have the body of a spider or the rows of deadly teeth. Her hair shone mahogany and framed her face. She was a beautiful maiden once again. The only marker that remained was her eyes of shiny black obsidian. She was dressed in a gown of deep emerald. Two spiders escorted her, hissing at the guards.

I left Shildreth and hugged Arachne. The maiden froze before tentatively returning the embrace, and the guards were at a total loss.

“It’s fine. She’s with me.” I shooed them back to their posts.

“And them?” a guard said and pointed to the spiders.

“They’re with me too.”

Arachne smiled, her teeth gleaming white and even. No more needles, thank the gods.

“They’ll behave, I promise.”

I gave her one more look, letting my amazement shine on the transformed beauty that stood before me. “I have no doubts. Shildreth, please allow me to introduce you to Arachne, Lady of the Darkwood.”

Shildreth bowed. “My very great pleasure.”

“The pleasure is all mine.” Arachne drew a handkerchief from her pocket and dabbed at her eyes. I kept my tears of joy at bay, barely, but sent up a silent thanks to Apollo.

Arachne took my hands. “I can’t thank you enough.”

“There’s no need. I’m just glad that Apollo was able to help.” He had done me a good turn, and I would not soon forget it.

Arachne smiled and studied her feet as her cheeks pinked. “He certainly did.”

“I want all the sexy details from you later, but for now, we’ve got an audience to attend.” I retook Shildreth’s arm and offered my other to Arachne, who accepted it and once again beamed that heart-stopping smile.

Together, the three of us entered the hall with the two spiders following close behind.

A hush fell, voices quieting to murmurs. The room was full of vampires, though not quite the crush that Desmerada had the previous night. These vampires seemed

different, friendly, though perhaps it was my imagination. They stared at me, no doubt wondering what a non-vampire was doing in royal dress. The men bowed as I passed, and the women curtsied. So many eyes on me. I wondered if I was leaning on Shildreth and Arachne more than the other way around.

A few of the nobles backed away and stumbled into each other when they saw the spiders marching along behind us. The spiders hissed and clicked their teeth at the commotion but didn't break ranks. Arachne had trained them well.

In the center of the room, in a stroke of turnabout, Desmerada stood trapped in the silver cage on the platform. She was bound and gagged. Not a good look. And beyond her, at the head table, sat Paris, resplendent in his robes of gorgeous blue. A simple golden crown adorned his head. Magnificent.

Faren was dressed in blue-and-gold finery, though somewhat subdued. His dark hair graced his forehead, and his clean-shaven face was handsome, bright. He was sitting at Paris's right, conversing, but when he looked up and saw Shildreth, he stopped midsentence. Paris, in perfect mimicry, froze as he gazed at me. Heat rushed into my cheeks at the way his eyes ate me up. He left no curve unseen, no inch of fabric or jewel free from his consuming scrutiny. He looked hungry, and I could feel myself burning just knowing that hunger was for me.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:07 am*

“We are the two luckiest females in all the Underworld,” Shildreth whispered.

I couldn’t have agreed more. After seating Shildreth next to Faren, I took the seat at Paris’s left and patted the next chair for Arachne. The spiders lined up on either side of their mistress, like faithful dogs. But with too many creepy eyes. And those teeth.

Angling my head to Paris, I found him still watching my every move.

“I have half a mind to throw you over my shoulder, carry you back to our chamber, and make you scream my name,” Paris whispered.

I placed my hand on his knee, enjoying how he tensed at my boldness. “Would you like it if I screamed ‘my king’ instead?”

He growled and moved my hand under his robe to his hard shaft. “This is what you do to me, woman.”

The guards at the rear of the room swung the massive doors closed, and the room silenced.

“You’re on,” whispered Faren.

I removed my hand and pinched Paris’s knee for encouragement.

Paris rose from his seat, thankfully hidden by the table from the waist down.

Every male vampire in the room took a knee, and every female bowed low.

“Askenith,” they said as one.

“Shakorah.” Paris’s voice boomed out over the crowd.

I couldn’t stop the pride that welled in my heart. I could only imagine how proud Priam would have been to see this moment.

After silence reigned again, I heard a small squeak. It was Desmerada, trying to scream around her gag.

“I want you all to know that we”—he motioned to the trusted Darkwood and keep vampires seated at the head table, along with Arachne and me—“intend to make the Bloodkeep the jewel of the Underworld once again.”

The crowd stood and sent up a cheer that would have deafened a mortal.

“This will not be an easy road. We have lost our relationships, our prestige. We are no longer trusted or looked upon as a source of good. These things must change. This change must start here.” He rapped his knuckles across his breast.

Another deafening cheer.

“Together, we can take back what was stolen from us by the one you see caged and chained before you.”

The crowd hissed at Desmerada. The open aggression was palpable.

“Many of you have suffered at her hands, and many have died because of her treachery. I would decree her death here and now—”

Another cheer.

“But I have given her end over to the hands of the faithful. Shildreth, the leader of the Darkwood vampires and your new prime minister, has lost more at the hands of this vile creature than most. Therefore, it is only fitting that she decrees her fate.”

Faren assisted Shildreth to her feet. She was formidable, her spine rigid as she faced her tormentor.

“Remove her gag.” Shildreth’s voice rang out steady and strong.

The guards obeyed, reaching through the grates and ripping the fabric from Desmerada’s mouth.

“Do you have any final words? Can you answer for your crimes?”

“I have no need to explain myself to some Darkwood peasant,” Desmerada spat. She rose to her full height, straining against the chains. Her hair was matted and her gaze darted about, an insane glint in her eyes. She cackled. “Your son’s lifeblood did wonders for my skin, by the way.”

The crowd gasped.

The self-appointed queen was still a vicious harpy to the last. But Shildreth did not move.

Desmerada stilled as her eyes bored into me. “You would dare pillory me when Menelaus’s queen is offered to you as vampire royalty?”

I sat still as stone as the vampires turned their enquiring gazes to me.

Shildreth banged her fist on the table. “You would dare question the future queen in such a manner? Helen has saved this kingdom from your destructive grasp. Your

cruel reign is over because of her. Thank the gods. Each one of you”—her gaze swept over the crowd—“owes a blood debt to Helen. Never forget it.”

The vampires all bowed low to me. “Askenor,” they said in unison.

Paris smiled down at me. “It means ‘my queen.’”

I inclined my head, acknowledging the vampires. They accepted me, an outsider, even though Desmerada’s words were true. My emotions rose into my throat at their warm looks. I returned Paris’s smile before he straightened again.

“Shildreth, have you come to your final judgment?” Paris asked.

“Just a moment,” Desmerada interrupted. She still locked me in her gaze. “I have one last request for you to consider.”

“Speak, witch,” Shildreth said.

Desmerada paused in melodramatic fashion. “As Helen knows, she can’t harm Menelaus. All that power.” She tsked. “But she can’t use it to destroy the one being who is the ultimate enemy of this keep. I’m the one who hexed her. Only I can remove it. If you kill me, the curse becomes permanent.”

Shildreth glanced at me. I nodded in response, confirming the truth of Desmerada’s words.

“What is your bargain?” Shildreth asked.

Desmerada grinned. “If you will promise me that I will leave the keep alive, unharmed, through the portal, then I will remove the curse.”



*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:07 am*

“Why should we trust the word of a known liar?” Shildreth shot back.

“If I don’t do as you ask, you can kill me here. But if I do, you must promise that I will leave this keep alive. If you don’t agree, remember that Helen will be utterly powerless against Menelaus. When he gets his claws in her again, and he will, she won’t be able to stop him. He can do anything he wants to your queen,” she sneered.

“Do not make this creature any promises,” I warned. “Dispatch her so she can’t spew any more of her poison. I will deal with Menelaus some other way when the time comes.”

Shildreth looked to Paris and then Faren.

“If I may.” Arachne rose and went to Shildreth. Arachne whispered in her ear. I could not make out the words. The sidebar ended with a perfunctory nod from Shildreth.

Arachne retook her seat as Shildreth gave her decree.

“We do not accept your offer. But we do have a counter. If you unbind Helen, you will be allowed to leave the keep alive and enter the Darkwood. None here, nor any under their control, will harm you while you are in the keep or the Darkwood. Where you go from there is up to you.”

Desmerada’s mouth twitched as she considered the offer.

Her beady gaze slipped to Arachne. “This deal includes hideous Arachne and her monsters? They can’t harm me either?”

“That is correct,” Shildreth said.

“Well, as much as I’d love to take the word of a dirty peasant, I’m going to need your word, Askenith. Do you agree to those terms?”

“If Shildreth agrees, then you have my word,” Paris said.

Desmerada’s cackle filled the hall with malice.

“Done.”

Shildreth sank back down into her seat and buried her face in Faren’s shirt.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

Paris

I ended the audience with an entreaty to the line of Priam to watch over the Bloodkeep and guide all within it to a future of rebirth. The thunderous applause and roars threatened to bring the keep down on our heads.

My council and I retreated to the antechamber. Faren escorted Shildreth to the closest divan and held her to his chest. Helen looked stricken as she took her seat. Arachne followed, her spiders close at her heels. When the doors swung closed, Shildreth kissed Faren on the mouth, surprising him. He almost fell off the seat.

“What’s this?” he asked as he took her hands.

“She will leave the keep alive and go into the Darkwood.” Shildreth laughed.

I looked at Helen, who seemed equally puzzled.

“Well done. The trap is set.” Arachne clapped. Her spiders clicked their teeth and hissed.

“You’re happy she will live?” Faren was dumbstruck. He wasn’t the only one.

“Don’t you see? I agreed that she will leave the keep alive. I agreed she would enter the Darkwood. With a little insight from our new friend”—Shildreth inclined her head to Arachne—“I realized that was an excellent deal.”

Helen straightened and beamed at Shildreth, clearly having figured out the plan. “Oh, I see. Which tower shall we set up in for the unbinding?”

Faren and I exchanged blank looks. What had these females cooked up?

Shildreth planted another kiss on Faren. “You’ll see. Trust me.”

I had no problem letting the women work their strategy, especially if it ended with Desmerada dispatched.

“It’s in your hands.” I whipped my robe off and draped it on the nearest chair. I was going to be a more casual dress sort of king, if that were even possible. I reached up to remove the crown.

“Leave it,” Helen said, taking in every inch of me with her stare. “I’ll remove it later, after we’ve dealt with her.”

Faren whistled through his teeth as Shildreth rested her head on his shoulder.

The look in Helen’s eyes was pure desire, and I needed her on my cock sooner rather than later. That settled the timeline, even if I was still unclear on the plan.

“Let’s get this over with.” I hurried to the door and ordered the guards to clear the great hall immediately.

Helen smiled, her warmth setting me alight. We waited a few more moments for the guards to escort the crowd from the room. Desmerada taunted the guards. Promising them pain and retribution if they didn’t release her. Fool.

I wrapped my arm around Helen’s waist, pulling her into my side as we approached the cage.

I nuzzled against her ear. “Are you going to tell me what you’re up to?”

“You’ll see.”

I quickened my pace even more, carrying Helen along with me. Every minute spent away from our bedchambers was a problem.

“Shildreth, the floor is yours.” I waved a hand toward Desmerada’s cage.

“We’ll need to do this in the southwest tower, top floor. We can set up there. It will keep the rest of the castle safe should anything go wrong.”

A handful of guards hurried off to make the room ready.

Shildreth approached the cage. Desmerada’s beady eyes took in the vampire’s walking difficulties and smiled. “You escaped, but not unscathed, I see. Good.”

## Page 67

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:07 am*

Shildreth ignored the taunt. “What do you need to unbind Helen?”

“I wouldn’t expect an ignorant peasant such as yourself to understand the finer points of magic. See if you can keep up. Hades fire, of course, three black owl feathers, two vials of great spider ichor, down from a fury’s wing, two drops of gorgon venom, a skin of amaranth blood, and a changeling stone.”

“Helen, do these sound right, or is it some trick?” I asked.

“No, for once she’s telling the truth. I remember some of those things from the day she bound me.”

Shildreth whispered some more ingredients into Faren’s ear. Realization dawned on his face.

When she finished giving her directions, I said, “Faren, please collect what’s needed and take it to the southwest tower. We’ll meet you there. Guards, bring her.”

Helen

The top of the southwest tower was sparsely furnished, used as a lookout and rarely so.

I arranged the ingredients and the fire pit from memory.

“Do you think it will work?” Paris asked, helping me set the room.

“Only one way to find out.”

“Are you going to tell me what’s actually going on?”

I stole a quick kiss, tasting his lips briefly. “No time.”

Faren had carried Shildreth up the many stairs and placed her inside. He kept his arm around her as her steely gaze roved the room, no doubt remembering the tortures she had endured here. She focused on the window, a cold wind whipping through it. Closing her eyes, she shook her head, as if clearing away the bad memories.

I gripped her hand.

“I’m okay. Really. I’ll be fine when it’s done. Are you all set up?” Shildreth asked.

“I think so. Faren managed to get all the ingredients. The smith in the keep’s village had some Hades fire, and Desmerada had expansive magic stores.”

The guards dragged a cursing Desmerada up the stairs, her chains clanging against each step, and threw her into the room. She didn’t seem to recognize it, didn’t realize this was the tower that Shildreth had thrown herself from to escape. But she would.

Desmerada shook her wrists. “You’ll have to unbind me.”

“Close the door.” Paris pointed to the guards. “All of you stand watch. If you hear anything even verging on a struggle in here, you are to dust Desmerada immediately. Dust first, ask questions later. Understand?”

For a new king, Paris was adept at giving orders. I was pleased he was no longer content to be a prince or a libertine. Now, he was in command.

“Yes, my lord.” A guard removed the chains and left the room, closing the door soundly behind him.

“Unbind her,” Paris said.

Faren warily removed the shackles.

Desmerada rubbed her wrists before taking stock of the supplies. “I suppose this is adequate.”

She settled on the floor, next to the flames, and motioned to me. “You, Queenie—sit in front of me.”

Paris, quick as light, was at Desmerada’s back. “Harm her, and you’re dead. Understand?”

Desmerada rolled her eyes. “What am I going to do? Stab her and run right into the guards on the fucking stairs? Now, let me work.”

She began combining ingredients in a bowl, grinding them with a pestle. “I’ll need a drop of Helen’s blood.”

“No,” Paris growled.

“Do you want me to unbind her or not?” Desmerada snapped. “Fucking prima donna,” she added under her breath.

“It’s fine. Paris?” I held up my hand for him to prick my finger. He did as asked, though I could tell he hated spilling even a drop of my blood. I squeezed my finger into the bowl, the blood drop causing a sizzle and a pop.

Desmerada stopped her work. “Tell me, did Menelaus ever try a pair of silver bangles on you?”

I narrowed my eyes. “Yes. How do you know about them?”

“Did they work? Were you bound?”

“Yes, for a short time until I had them removed.”

She beamed. “I knew they would work. I demanded the blood of one hundred virgins in exchange for those little beauties. And can you believe he delivered? I bathed in it, swam around in it like I was in a pool of silk. It was wonderful.” Her mind was far away, the spell at hand forgotten. “He cheated, though. Half of it was the blood of children.” She shrugged. “I didn’t count it against him. Finding adult virgins is hard. Besides, the younger the child, the better for my complexion. Am I right, Shildreth?”

Faren put his blade to her neck. “Do the spell and shut your mouth.”

She looked up at him, a serene smile on her face. “Or what? We have a deal. You can’t harm me, remember?”

“Faren,” Shildreth said and put a hand on his arm. He lowered his blade and backed away. Desmerada continued grinding.

“When Menelaus gets you again, he’s going to break his dick off in you. And he will get you again. Surely you know it’s true? Deep down. His army is formidable. How do you think I took the Bloodkeep in the first place? They destroyed any who would dare challenge me. They’ll do it again when I retake the keep. I bet your blood will be magical. I can already feel it sinking into my pores. Mmmmm.”



“Get on with it, hag,” Paris said.

I didn’t care if she talked and talked. As long as the spell worked.

“This is done.” She swished the mix around in the bowl before throwing it into the flames. The voices of the damned rose from the fire to earsplitting levels as Desmerada recited an incantation. I braced myself for the spell. As the voices calmed, so did Desmerada’s, until there was only a whisper. Then silence.

“You’re all set. Now show me out.” Desmerada rose from the floor and straightened her crimson dress.

“Did it work?” Paris asked.

I looked at my hands. “I-I don’t know. I don’t feel any different.”

“Witch!” Paris cried and rammed his blade under Desmerada’s throat.

“It’s done, I swear,” she shrieked. “I swear, that’s the spell. I undid it.”

“Is there any way to test it?” Faren asked.

“Not unless you want to invite Menelaus over and give it a try. But I get the feeling you all will be seeing him soon enough.” She cackled. “Now, for my release.”

Shildreth knocked on the door, and the guard opened it. She motioned everyone out of the room until only she and Desmerada remained. Faren, Paris, and I waited on the

landing near the door.

Shildreth lingered at the entry and regarded Desmerada's smug face. "You are now free to leave the keep and make your way in the Darkwood."

Desmerada spit. "Yeah, I got that, moron. Show me to the gate."

"I'm afraid that wasn't part of the deal," Shildreth said, vengeance coating her words.

Paris looked down at me, surprise playing across his face before he raised his eyebrows in understanding.

"But I was not to be harmed. I was to be given safe passage from the keep." Desmerada's voice rose, fear sharpening the notes.

"No, the deal was that you would be allowed to leave the keep alive and enter the Darkwood where none here would harm you. Those were the parameters of the bargain."

"But how am I—" Desmerada's haughty voice choked to a halt. Several beats passed, each one heavier than the last. "Is this the tower?" she asked, her voice thin.

"It is. As I said, you are free to leave the keep at any time and go into the Darkwood beyond. None here will harm you, according to your wishes. Though, I can tell you from experience"—Shildreth lifted her skirt, showing Desmerada the withered bones—"you may wish for death before it comes."

"You can't do this. You bitch! You fucking bitch! I will kill you! I will kill you all for this!" Her screeching echoed on the cold stone of the tower.

Faren brandished his sword to keep Desmerada at bay as Shildreth left the room and

closed the door. Desmerada hurled herself against it, her nails scratching down the wood. But there was only one way out of the tower for Desmerada, and this door wasn't it.

Shildreth collapsed into Faren's arms. She had been so strong for him and for the child they'd lost. My heart broke for her.

The bricks and mortar Shildreth had ordered were sitting on the steps while a brick mason waited. His face was grim, as he was already aware of his task. Walling in the vampire queen was no small matter. He bowed to Paris.

"Brick it up," Faren said and scooped Shildreth off her feet. "Station guards on it at all times, two below and two here, even after the bricks are in place. Send word the moment she jumps."

"Aye, Captain."

Faren took off down the stairs at a brisk clip as Shildreth sobbed against his chest.

Paris picked me up and followed them.

"I can walk, you know." I nestled my head against his chest.

"I know." He shrugged and pulled me tighter.

Desmerada's screams dimmed the farther down we went. I couldn't drum up even a hint of sympathy for the evil queen. Arachne and Shildreth drove a hard bargain. Caveat emptor.

The spiders would maintain a lookout on the tower. If the former queen should survive the fall and make it free from the Spinis thorns below, Arachne would know

about it.

“Is it really over?” I asked.

“For now. But we still have people to rule and a demon to slay.” The rumble of his chest comforted me.

“Right, other than those things.”

He laughed. “Other than those two things, yes, it really is over.”

He hit the bottom step of the tower and made easy work of the distance to our bedchambers.

He laid me on the bed, greedily taking in my form. Unbuttoning his shirt, he revealed the golden skin that begged to be kissed. He pulled me forward and drew the dress over my head. I lay back, letting him get an even better view.

“Mmm,” he said. “What happened to your panties?”

“I seem to be fresh out, my king.” I drew the crown from his head and dropped it on the nightstand. “Now take off the rest.”

He obliged, sliding his pants off and then his boxers. His shaft was already hard and gleaming in the candlelight. I rolled onto my side and licked his slick head. I relished the salty taste before taking him deeper into my mouth. He pulled my hair tight through his fingers as I reached up to remove my tiara.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:07 am*

“Leave it.” His voice was gravelly.

I continued sucking him, using my tongue to crisscross along his shaft. He pushed me back onto the bed and slid on top of me. His chest raked against my taut nipples, making me arch up into him. His fangs had extended, the sharp tips setting off a primal need inside me. I reached down and took his shaft in my hand and fed it into my core. He pumped, seating himself to the hilt as I licked his mouth, teasing him. He captured my wrists and held them above my head as he started a steady rhythm. I wrapped my legs around him and kissed him in earnest, letting him delve his tongue into me as I answered with my own. He nipped me with his fangs, causing the heat to build even faster.

He relaxed his grip on my wrists and slid his hands down my sides before kissing my breasts, licking one hard tip before going to the other. He sped his rhythm, thrusting deep into me. He must have sensed me tightening and withdrew.

“No,” I cried and tried to pull him back into me.

“Turn over,” he grated out and tugged me onto my stomach.

Gods.

He pulled my hips up to him and sank into me from behind. I thought I would come just from the feeling of his thick shaft rubbing me in all the right places. His chest was to my back as he pumped into me. When he reached around and began rubbing my most sensitive spot, I gasped. He kept his pace before taking a handful of my hair and turning my head to the side. His mouth sent thrills down my body.

“Bite me,” I said.

He pulled my hair harder and fixed his lips to my tender neck.

“You can do better than that,” he whispered in my ear.

“Bite me, my king,” I breathed.

He struck, plunging me into a euphoria I hadn’t even known existed. His mouth was attached to my neck, his fangs deep inside me. He pulled me up so I sat on his shaft as he continued his pistoning strokes. I was so close. When he took another pull from my neck, I felt the edge of my bliss fast approaching. He caressed my nub faster with one hand and rolled my nipple between his thumb and forefinger with the other.

The sensations washed over me, and I couldn’t stop myself. He kept pumping into me as waves of pleasure shuddered through my body. They kept cresting until he tensed inside me and gave two powerful thrusts. His bite intensified and he groaned through his release. I cried out as the pain and pleasure mixed.

When we both drifted down the other side of the wave, he slowed his pace and removed his fangs. I made a small noise of disappointment.

He laughed against my neck. “I’ll have you again before daybreak, my queen. And next time”—he circled his fingers around my almost painfully sensitive core—“I’m going to taste you here.”

## Chapter Thirty

Helen

The next day was another flurry of activity. Faren called early and claimed Paris. I

was left to lounge in our bed, still sated from the evening's—and morning's—pleasures. I rolled over and buried my face in the pillow, smiling at the things we'd done. The bites on my neck ached slightly, almost healed. I looked forward to getting a few more once Paris returned.

I didn't know I could feel so light. Floating on Paris's waters, regarding the blue of his skies above me.

But the dark cloud of Menelaus still threatened on the horizon. I rolled back to my side. The glint of light on the white queen's sword caught my eye. Paris had set the game piece on the high bureau, giving the stony warrior a view of all the wanton delights we'd had through the night.

With Desmerada, the opening salvo had been struck and won, but the game was not over. Not until Menelaus was no more.

I sighed. It seemed there was always a battle to wage. But I was ready for it. And I spoiled for the fight with the demon king who had thought to own me. I scratched my back where the brand was and looked forward to the day when it no longer lived under my skin. The day when I got justice for my brothers and mother.

A knock at the door had me pulling the covers up to my neck. "Yes?" I called over the expanse.

"It's me, my lady." Shildreth's voice barely carried to the bed.

"Come in."

Shildreth made her way to me and sat down. The corners of her mouth were drawn down in worry. "We've had reports from what few loyal spies remain that Menelaus is amassing his troops for war. They also confirmed something we had long

suspected. Menelaus and Desmerada had worked out a truce of sorts, sending their soldiers into battle only when a thinning of the herd was needed. All moves were orchestrated so that each ruler could keep their people in check by having a constant outside threat.”



*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:07 am*

Not surprising, especially given my knowledge of their past. They were cruel leaders, only interested in keeping themselves propped at the head of their realms. One down, one to go.

“But more than that, we received word that he intends to send a scout team to take you before marching on the keep.”

“He’s coming for me.” The chill in my bones doused the fire that had burned inside me for the better part of the night. I sat up.

“My emissary was unable to give me any more information except for this: he said that Menelaus kept a secret, one that he would use to get you and keep you.”

“A secret?” I had no idea what that could mean.

“That’s all his missive revealed. In any case, the scouts have already been sent out to claim you. We don’t know when they’ll strike. I can only hope they aren’t already here. Our army is new, and though the keep is fortified and protected, Desmerada’s relationship with Menelaus is troublesome. No doubt he knows a few more ins and outs of the keep than we would like. I came to tell the king that I think it would be best if you stayed in the Darkwood with Arachne, or perhaps even farther away. It’s not safe here for you.”

Menelaus’s plot was already moving, the pieces hemming me in and forcing my hand. The Bloodkeep was just now coming back to life. Its fledgling army could not defeat Menelaus’s hundreds of thousands of trained demon warriors. They would overrun the entire vampire civilization in hours and take it apart brick by brick. The

Darkwood would burn, and all would perish. I had watched as they razed Troy and would not allow history to repeat itself here, among the vampires who had taken me in and treated me as one of their own. I would save Paris this time, succeed where I had failed and keep him safe from Menelaus's blade.

I dashed to the closet and dressed quickly. "I'm not running, Shildreth."

Shildreth sighed. "I thought you would say that. But we will need to let the king decide."

"No." I already knew what his decision would be. To send me far away from any hint of danger. And that was a result I could not allow.

Shildreth watched, crestfallen, as I drew on a pair of boots and tucked silver blades into each. "What do you intend to do?"

"I think I'll take a turn about the keep. See what there is to see. Get a good feel for all its nooks and crannies." I threw on a black leather jacket. If the scouts were already inside the Bloodkeep's walls, it wouldn't take me long to run into them.

Shildreth's eyes darkened. "Please don't do this." Her voice was quiet, barely breaking the surface of sound.

I embraced her. "I will see you again. I swear it. Tell Paris..." I wasn't sure what I wanted Shildreth to tell him. That I had decided to let myself be taken so I could destroy Menelaus once and for all? Paris would come for me as soon as he learned what happened. I only hoped I would have enough time to end the war before it began. But if Desmerada had lied and my magics were still bound, they would all be swept up into the same bloody tide that drowned Troy.

"Tell him this is the only way to checkmate." I gave Shildreth what I hoped was a

reassuring look and strode from the room.

She would no doubt hurry off to find Paris and Faren. Workers still labored in the bright halls, removing every hint of Desmerada and letting Paris's emblem shine through. They bowed low as I passed. I answered with curt nods and smiles.

I found the nearest stair and continued down, the air chilling the lower I went. The workers' voices soon faded, and only the hushed sound of my boots on the steps remained. I beat a steady rhythm until I came to an empty and cobwebbed corridor. This was as good a place as any.

Stepping from the curving stair, I lazily made my way past the empty rooms full of dusty furniture. The windows were boarded, causing the chill, and only slivers of light made their way in. These rooms must have been for the older children of the keep long, long ago. There were knickknacks scattered around, and more than a few beds still had crumbling books opened on them. A thick layer of dust covered everything, quieting my steps. They must have been attacked by Desmerada's forces at night, taken from their beds, and led to a grisly end. No more children ever lived in the keep, which perhaps was a good thing.

Spider silks hung in the undisturbed air, pulling at my hair like skeletal fingers. I shivered and continued, the gloom growing the farther I strayed from the stair.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:07 am*

Behind me, near-silent footsteps haunted my path. Shildreth's intel had been correct. The scouts were already here. I only hoped Shildreth would be able to trace where they had entered the keep and secure it, so that none of Menelaus's demons could hope to snuff out the vampire king in his sleep. The many servants and soldiers on the upper floors reassured me, but still I worried.

The demons picked up their pace, hot on the trail of their prey. I continued my leisurely tour, as if oblivious to them.

I knew I would never return from Decanum. Never see Paris's face again. But this was the only way to end the demon who would see the keep and all within it dead. And Menelaus had the power to make it happen with the snap of his fingers. I did not look forward to my fate, but neither did I fear it. I would die as a warrior and take Menelaus down with me. My heart faltered at the thought of losing Paris, but this was the only way to give him a chance to become the king I knew he could be.

A hand dropped over my mouth, silencing the scream I didn't bother making. The assailant forced a cloth to my nose, the scent like summer flowers tinged with something darker. It was the darkness that overtook me.

### Chapter Thirty-One

Paris

Faren and I had walked through the village at the edge of the keep and inside the high walls. It had once been filled with scores of vampire families, though portions of it were now decayed and gone under Desmerada's harsh rule.

The few vampires who still lived there were hesitant at first, scared that I would be just another Desmerada. But they began to speak with me and show me their shops and homes. I was humbled by them. They had suffered so much under Desmerada's rule, but persevered, surviving and raising families. They were the future of the race, not the dark and twisted nobles who had laid waste to Priam's legacy.

We continued along until the suns began their gradual descent. We'd circled the great keep and moved up another level to the Nobles' Road. The houses here were grander but silent—their masters having fled or taken up residence in the dungeon. I was pleased to see the Darkwood vampires moving in along the road, as well as some of the villagers with larger families. The crimson was coming down here, as it was all over the keep.

The friendly little girl from the village was helping her mother unload their sparse belongings from a cart. I strode up and petted the family's friendly amaranth before hefting several heavy bags and a ragged chest of drawers up the grand steps into the home. The items from Darkwood clashed with the glitzy interior of the manor house, though I rather enjoyed the meeting of the worlds.

The mother bowed, and the child did her best to do the same. I caught her before she toppled onto her nose. I settled her back on her feet as she darted her shy gaze away. "That bow was good, but it may need a little more work, precious one."

Her mother bowed even lower. "Askenith."

"Shakorah."

"Halt!" Faren yelled from outside the building.

I tensed and glanced to the main road. "Stay here and lock the door."

The mother obeyed as I rushed out onto the stoop, closing the door behind me. Faren stood on the bottom step, his sword drawn as a vampire came running down the road at a hellish pace.

“It is I, my lord.” The runner stopped and bent, putting his hands on his knees.

Faren recognized him and sheathed his blade. “What’s got you running like one of Arachne’s spiders is after you?”

“Shildreth sent me. They’ve taken her.”

“My Shildreth? Where, who?” Faren dashed to the exhausted soldier.

“No, not her. Askenor. The demons came for her. Shildreth sent me to find you.”

My blood turned to ice. If Menelaus even thought to harm Helen... I yelled to the amethyst firmament, my anger a scourge on the air.

I rushed to the winded soldier and dragged him up by his collar. “How long has she been gone?”

“Hours, my lord. I tried to find you, I ran through the village, I-I—”

I didn’t wait to hear the rest. Dropping the soldier, I took off up the steep road leading to the keep. Faren followed close behind. I blew through the open keep doors and hurried to the throne room. Shildreth sat there on the steps, her face drawn.

“They took her through a lower corridor. A secret passage even the servants didn’t know about. I’m so sorry, my lord. So sorry.”

I paced, trying to think of a plan, some way to get to Decanum and reclaim Helen.

But she was the tactician, and she was gone beyond my reach.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:07 am*

“She knew,” Shildreth said. There was not even a single note of hope.

I rounded on her. “She knew what?”

Faren stood between Shildreth and me. He put a hand up toward me to ward me off. “Give her a chance to—”

“She knew what?” I yelled.

“I told her they were coming for her. I had intel, you see, just this morning. She knew, and she let them. She let them...” Her voice broke on a sob. Faren went to her.

I sank to my knees and gazed up at the ceiling. The workers hadn’t gotten to this part of the keep yet. The crimson image of Desmerada in a bath of blood was still there. Her eyes taunted him, laughing at her inside joke. The king, powerful and victoriously returned to his throne. But those laughing eyes knew, as I knew, I was nothing without my queen.

She had sacrificed herself for me. Her plan was no doubt to kill Menelaus. But even if she managed to cut off the serpent’s head, the rest of it would coil around her and take her life. Menelaus’s army was legendary for their brutality. They would make her suffer. I had failed her yet again, allowed her to slip through my fingers and back into death’s tight grip. Here I was, playing at being king, while she put her life on the line to take out the most powerful enemy of all vampire kind.

I had to get her back. Her resolve, her fire, spurred me back to my feet. “Faren, how many days to Decanum from here?”



“It’s impossible, my lord. The Desert of Thorns is rife with Menelaus’s soldiers. There is no way to get there without paying with your life.”

I knelt before Shildreth and Faren. “I need your help. I’m not asking you as your king. I’m asking you as her friends.”

Shildreth put a trembling hand to my face. “I’m afraid Faren is right. There is no way to reach Decanum alive through the Desert of Thorns. And there is no way around it. Decanum has no other entrance. Our portal cannot access theirs, and in all the time our spies have been searching, not a single secret passage has been discovered. I am so sorry, my lord.”

Shildreth’s gaze strayed from my face and focused on a point behind me. I turned to see Arachne and a contingent of her spiders. They followed in two even lines behind her.

“She’s right. You will never make it through the Desert of Thorns. But”—Arachne ordered her spiders to stay put as she came to my side—“you could fly over it.”

It would take Zirga days to get to the Bloodkeep, and I had no way of summoning her. The furies would be of no help—they worked only as assassins, not couriers. Out of options, I asked, “What did you have in mind?”

“Farnkelan.”

Faren scoffed. “The dragon? He’d never let a vampire ride him, especially after what Desmerada did to him!”

“Like all wild things, he can be tamed.” Arachne’s black eyes glittered in the light, giving her an otherworldly beauty.

I remembered the great wings and talons I'd seen through the dark branches of the wood. A dragon that size could carry a band of soldiers and me to Decanum, and take out legions upon legions of soldiers with its fiery breath. But it was an insane strategy. If gentle Zirga had misgivings about me, how would I convince Farnkelan to trust me?

Helen's words drifted through my mind, how she pitied the dragon for its mistreatment. How anything, if given a chance, could become something better. I would take my chances if that meant I had even the slightest hope of getting her back.

I stiffened my resolve. "Faren, bring your six best soldiers. We're going to the Darkwood. After that, we rain down destruction on Decanum."

## Chapter Thirty-Two

Helen

Cold seeped into me, chilling my bones. Only one spot on my body radiated any warmth—the demon mark on my back.

I opened my eyes and saw I lay chained to a bed, my body bare to the chilled air that wafted through the room. Large windows hung open on either side, allowing the breeze to blow through from the cold dunes of the Desert of Thorns. Decanum. My hands were bound above my head with simple chains.

I smirked. That wouldn't stop my magic. Instead of burning the chains and the bed into ash, I settled my heartbeat and closed my eyes, feigning sleep. I needed my enemy to come closer before I struck.

It wasn't long before I heard a door open, followed by quiet footsteps. It was Menelaus, his brand searing my skin. The bed shifted. He settled down beside me, no

doubt taking inventory of his prize.

“Helen,” he whispered and ran a hand down my neck, my side, and then rested it on my hip. He was so close now. It was time. I felt him draw a sheet over my body, the light touch shielding me from the winds.

## Page 73

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:07 am*

“Bring her,” Menelaus ordered. Someone scuttled outside the door. Bring who? Foreboding bloomed in my heart.

“I know you’re awake, my love. I have a present for you.” He was so close to me his breath stirred my hair.

I dropped the act and turned my gaze on him. He was a mix of triumph and lust. His eyes were bottomless, and he was still the monster of my nightmares. The air shimmered, my powers on the edge of a knife.

“Not so fast. Wait until your present arrives.” He tsked at me.

Voices in the hallway pulled his gaze away from me. Laughter and banter rose to a cacophony outside the door. There was a woman’s voice telling a dirty joke. The voice and the joke were both familiar. I stared at the door, praying that it wasn’t who I thought.

At the sound of more raucous laughter, Menelaus drew a hand up and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“For the love of Hades,” he cursed.

A knock. “My lord, she’s here.”

I held my breath as my stomach roiled.

“Enter!”

The door swung open, and in walked two shirtless guards followed by two more fully clothed soldiers. Behind them was a woman, fried pork skins in one hand and a set of cards in the other. “What’s up, Uncle? We were just playing strip poker—”

My heart sank. “Iphi!”

## Chapter Thirty-Three

### Paris

The Darkwood was steeped in twilight. Mist roiled as my men and I sped toward the destroyed watchtower. Arachne accompanied us, her spiders trailing behind her.

“How do you intend to tame him?” she asked.

I hadn’t the faintest clue. “I’m just going to play it by ear.”

“That’ll be a short tune, my lord,” Faren said.

“May I suggest something?” Arachne asked.

“I am definitely taking any helpful input at the moment.” I ducked, avoiding a low-hanging branch.

“What moved me to spare both you and Helen was her thirst for vengeance, her desire for justice. It answered my own thirst that I’d hidden deep within my breast.” The spiders tittered. “To hear the echo of trust betrayed or love shattered in another is the only thing that moves wild things who do wicked deeds to assuage their own anguish.”

“Well said, Lady of the Wood,” Faren agreed. “But I’m not entirely sure Farnkelan

will listen to reason.”

“I’ll do anything to get her back. Anything.” Every second lost was a dagger to my soul.

The ruined tower finally came into view. The dragon was not perched atop it, but a rustle in the trees above alerted us to the winged terror overhead.

I slid from my amaranth and shouldered my massive shield. I only hoped the swirl pattern would awaken fond memories of Priam in the creature’s breast. If nothing else, it would bear the brunt of the dragon’s fire...at least for a time.

Turning to Faren, I said, “Stay in the woods. If I fall here, find a way to get her back. I don’t care what you have to do, just get her away from Menelaus.”

“Aye, my lord. Askenith.” Faren took a knee, as did all his men.

“Shakorah.” I hoped it wouldn’t be my last word.

I turned to the clearing and picked my way over the blasted hunks of stone and twisted roots.

The first shot came fast, a blur of flame in my vision. I hefted the shield and felt my skin singe where the orange flames licked around the metal. Farnkelan seemed to be in no mood for visitors.

A whoosh of wings and the dragon was off again, soaring into the starlit sky. Its ridged tail lashed the air, and its green scales glinted in the light. It was easily one of the largest creatures I had ever seen as it moved through the air with the swooping, powerful strokes of its wings.

“Farnkelan,” I cried, “I have come here as a suppliant—”

Another blast rocked me off my feet. I landed on my back and drew the shield over me as fire rained down. The dragon screeched a terrible roar and took off again.

I would not be quieted, even as the flesh on my arms began to sizzle against the overheated metal.

I rose back to my feet. “I am the son of Priam, the true king of the Bloodkeep.”

A black shadow blotted out the swirling stars as Farnkelan made another pass, the fire burning even hotter against me, taking me back to my knees. My hair was singed and the flesh on my hands was blackened. The onslaught was rapid and furious. The dragon’s wrath was impatient. Still, I would not retreat.

“Farnkelan!” My voice cracked. “Menelaus has taken my queen. She who defeated Desmerada at the Bloodkeep. I come to you to beg for your help. If you want my life, it is yours. But I beg of you to bring back the one who has given this kingdom, our kingdom, a new future. I beg you to help me exact vengeance on the ones who dared take her from us.”

The dragon screamed through the night.

I dropped my shield, the metal already losing shape and useless from the intense heat. This was for her. All for her. My life meant nothing if I couldn't live it with Helen. And I would give my last breath to save her.

"Farnkelan, I am the last of the line of Priam. Remember us. Remember the way it used to be and could be again if only you will help me." I stayed on my knees and faced my doom, waiting for the final burst of flames. Farnkelan shot low over me before rising up and settling on top of the tower. Its snakelike green eyes considered me.

I had never seen a beast so massive. It was covered in luminous green scales that graded darker up toward its ridged back. Its great talons dwarfed the tower, making it look like more of a plaything than an actual perch. This creature belonged atop the Bloodkeep, sitting and watching over the vampire homeland from a great height.

I bowed my head, giving respect where it was due. Farnkelan bent its head to examine the vampire at its feet, the large nostrils and fangs only a short length from me as I raised my face again to the dragon. Farnkelan seemed to be looking through me, seeing into my very essence and measuring my worth. Those reptilian eyes were somehow thoughtful, considering. Farnkelan perused me for a long while, chuffing air from its nose every so often, the heat scalding my skin anew. But I did not move, just let the beast judge my mettle.

Seemingly satisfied, Farnkelan rose back to the top of the tower and bellowed out a roar that could have been heard all the way to Decanum. It was terrible and mighty,



raising goosebumps along my flesh.

The dragon looked back down at me and then tapped its talons against the ruined bricks. Chunks fell to the ground below as I struggled to my feet. Was it asking me to speak?

“Farnkelan, Helen has been taken by Menelaus—”

Another roar.

“I take it you know him. He is our mutual enemy.”

The talons clicked.

“He has taken Helen. She is a proud warrior, and she is the one who ended the reign of Desmerada.”

The dragon shot flames into the air that went so high, I swore they touched the stars. The pure fury of the beast was terrifying, but I could not stop now.

“I want to get her back and exact vengeance upon the one who took her. The one who killed my father, Priam.”

Farnkelan blinked, the narrow slits of its eyes glinting in what seemed like recognition of the name.

“But I need a powerful ally. One who knows these lands and one who can aid me in crushing the demon army. I need you, Farnkelan, to help me destroy Menelaus and bring back the savior of the Bloodkeep.”

Arachne stole from the trees. Farnkelan reared back, readying to release its fire,

before lowering its head and tilting it to the side.

Arachne waved. “It’s me, old friend. The king speaks true. Helen did this for me.” She twirled as Farnkelan watched, its talons clicking on the stone. “And I have a gift for you. If you agree to help the king in his destruction of the demons and rescue of Helen, I happen to know where a certain false queen waits, soon to be caught in a thorny bramble of Spinis. Of course, I can’t tell you to harm her, because you are a proud dragon that doesn’t do anyone’s bidding but your own.” Her eyes glittered that shiny obsidian. “But we will need your help first.”

Farnkelan lowered its head to Arachne. She stroked its scaly ear, a purr rising from its throat, making the ground tremble.

I crossed my arms over my chest. “You knew Farnkelan all along and let me come out here alone, without your help?”

She shrugged. “You need to prove yourself a king. This”—she scratched behind Farnkelan’s ear and its hind claw started kicking even more bricks from the tower—“was the only way to do it.”

I looked back at my soldiers in the wood. They stood, mouths agape. Arachne was right. They’d seen me gentle the dragon, and their tales would cement my reputation and secure my throne. With Arachne and Helen around, I would always be two steps behind, if not more.

“Farnkelan, will you do it? Will you help me bring her back?”

The dragon head-butted Arachne gently before dropping down from the tower. A tree fell in the Darkwood from the quake that rumbled through the ground. The dragon bent a knee and chuffed blazing steam from its nose. Assent.

I held my hands out, showing I meant no harm. “I’m going to ask my men to come out of the forest. We’ll need all the help we can get in Decanum, and they could use a ride.”

Another chuff.

Arachne made a clicking sound, and twenty large spiders marched from the wood and lined up behind me.

“Keep my darlings safe,” Arachne called before stepping back into the trees and away from Farnkelan’s massive wingspan. The spiders clambered onto the dragon and latched on to the hollows in the spines along its tail. Farnkelan tremored and let out halting noises akin to a laugh, as if the spiders were tickling it.

This was an odd beast.

The vampire soldiers took hesitant steps into the clearing.

I waved them forward. “It’s all right. Farnkelan is a friend. Everyone mount up.”

They bowed to me before approaching the dragon. Despite their trepidation, the men climbed up and seated themselves on Farnkelan’s ridged spine, grabbing hold wherever they could. I jumped up and took the ridge at the front.

Seated behind me, Faren asked, “You ready, my lord?”

“To ride a dragon, storm a demon stronghold, and rescue the most beautiful woman in all the worlds? This is what we were born for.” I looked up and beyond the trees. “Farnkelan, the sky is yours.”

Chapter Thirty-Four

Helen

Iphi dropped her snacks and rushed to me. Menelaus backhanded her and sent her flying across the room. She crashed against the windows, glass shards skittering across the dark floor.

“Take her.” The guards who still had their clothes on obeyed, dragging Iphi up by her arms and shaking her like a rag doll. Her head lolled forward, her unruly red mane covering her face. I knew Iphi too well. She was “playing possum,” as Lilah called it. What did Iphi mean by calling Menelaus her uncle, and how had she even wound up here?

Menelaus slid back between the sheets. “You see, Helen. I have this little idiot under my thumb. Harm any of my demons, and I’ll make her pay with interest.”

“When Artemis finds out—”

Menelaus laughed. “Do you still not understand the way the Underworld works? The gods do not rule here. The Titans created the Underworld to escape them. I rule Decanum, and soon I will rule the Bloodkeep. After that, everything is up for the taking. Even Olympus. With you at my side and all the peoples of the Underworld under my control, we could overrun even Zeus.”

I pulled against my chains and stared down the evil before me. “I will never help you enslave the Underworld.”

He pinched my chin and drew my face to his. “You will, or Iphi will start losing fingers. They’ll grow back, of course, but that won’t help the pain. Not to mention, there are other ways to make you comply.”

He crushed my mouth with his and fisted a hand in my hair, subduing my fight. It

wasn't so much a kiss as a stamp of ownership. My power shimmered around us. He let me go. "It's a shame Cranfel got away with those bracelets. They would have made it a lot easier to help you control yourself. But it doesn't matter. Your sister will do the trick, and I have nothing to fear from your little bouts of temper."

I readied myself to end the demon and hoped Iphi was prepared.

A knock at the door stayed my hand.

"What?" Menelaus asked.

"I'm sorry, my lord, but there's something over the desert. It's big. My spies have sent word that it's, well, you aren't going to believe this, but—"

"Get on with it!" Menelaus roared.

"It's a dragon. It's laid waste to our outposts, burning them to the ground in seconds. It will be here in minutes. And there are riders atop it, though we don't know who."

My heart lightened. It had to be the great untamed creature on the watchtower. Had Paris gentled the beast and convinced it to aid him?

Menelaus stood and dressed hastily.

"Keep her close to you. If Helen does anything untoward, cut off one of Iphi's fingers."

"Yes, my lord," the guards said in unison.

"You two idiots—follow me." The strip poker losers followed Menelaus as he dashed from the room.

Godsdamnit. I had missed my chance.

“Don’t worry, my lady, he’ll be back for more.” One of the guards leered at me. His horns were short and curved back over his pale head. “Did you know I saw you the day you...” He mimed stabbing himself in the neck. “Yeah, I was there. Want to know what Menelaus did to your body before Artemis showed up? I watched.”

My magic sizzled in the air. The demon drew one of Iphi’s fingers into his mouth and showed me his sharp teeth. One bite would ruin Iphi’s ruse of unconsciousness. I calmed and willed my magics back down.

The guard released Iphi’s finger and shoved her into the arms of the other demon. “I think I’d like to get another glimpse of the woman who launched a thousand ships.” He grabbed his crotch for emphasis. I looked away.

He came closer, standing at the end of the bed. The sheet slid down my body, revealing first my breasts, and then the rest of me.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:07 am*

“That’s what I’m talking about.” The guard’s voice dropped an octave, lust thick in his words. “It’s even better alive.”

I needed him closer to keep my magic from harming Iphi, but he made no move to touch me. Menelaus would not have forgiven such a trespass.

I turned back to him. “It feels even better than it looks,” I purred.

His horns seemed to extend farther out behind his head, matching the heavy shaft in his pants. Still he held back. I allowed myself to shiver in the cold. He looked to my hard nipples, already budded in the night air. When he raised his gaze back to my eyes, I licked my lips. That tipped him over the edge. He jumped on top of me and scrambled to free his erection. Iphi looked up and winked. Done.

The demon was charred before he even knew he was on fire. He rolled off the bed and hit the floor, sending up a plume of ash. The chains flowed away from my wrists in molten ropes.

Iphi had taken the other guard’s blade and shoved it deep in his heart. He looked so surprised, it was almost comical. I jumped from the bed and threw on the clothes piled on the floor as Iphi took the remaining weapons from her guard.

“What in Hades are you even doing here?” I asked as we went to the door and listened.

Iphi blew a red corkscrew of hair from her face. “Long story. But I can say it was fun while it lasted. I’m awash in ingots and men’s clothing from all my poker matches.”



She waggled her eyebrows.

“What am I going to do with you?” A smile crept up on me. Gods, Iphi had always been too much.

“Well, I suggest we go kick some major demon ass and then toss back some margaritas? But, of course, I defer to your strategy and all.” Iphi made a decidedly male, lewd pumping motion with her hand.

I laughed. “Oh, Iphi, I’ve missed you, and your plan’s as good as any.”

We backed up and kicked down the double doors before rushing out into a hallway filled with guards.

Iphi cracked her knuckles. “Let’s have some fun.”

## Chapter Thirty-Five

### Paris

I marveled at the sheer power the dragon possessed. It destroyed every demon outpost in the Desert of Thorns, raining fire on anything within its sights. Countless demons had already fallen, and we hadn’t even made it to Decanum yet.

The oasis sat just ahead, beckoning like a mirage in the dunes. Exotic trees rose around a magnificent palace. The array of domed roofs and gleaming marble walls was a wonder of Underworld architecture. I almost hated to destroy it.

Farnkelan continued the path of annihilation until we swooped down over the high domes. Legions upon legions of demons massed in the courtyards and along the high wall surrounding the palace. None of them would survive the dragon’s fury. It

breathed fire along the ground, the demons falling like wheat before a scythe.

After charring the largest courtyard, Farnkelan settled to the ground in a fluid movement. Flames leaped in the palace, many of the ornate buildings already alight with dragon fire. I dropped to Farnkelan's foreleg and then down to the ground. My men followed.

The spiders jumped, using their silk to rappel down the giant before skittering off into the dark night. Nearby soldiers screamed, but the sounds were cut short. The spiders worked fast. More fighters rushed us, and the vampire soldiers skirmished with them, holding them off.

I didn't know where Helen was being kept, but I raised my eyes to the largest of the palace domes. Menelaus would no doubt claim the finest, largest tower for his chambers. I turned to Faren. "There." I pointed to the top, where curtains billowed from open windows in the cool night air.

Faren commanded the soldiers in the ancient vampire language. They sprinted to the palace, slaying any demons who stood in their way. Farnkelan took to the skies again, its rage still not sated. Fire bloomed along the ramparts and inside the walls once more.

My soldiers rushed the stairs, and I led them up and up. We fought our way through. Demon soldiers poured through the doors at every landing, seeking to escape Farnkelan's wrath more than anything. But they strayed into my path and paid with their lives. Nothing would keep me from Helen. My soldiers seemed to agree—they fought with renewed vigor. The terrified demons were no match for the prepared vampires. Blood coated my armor and sword, and I was still thirsty for more.

Higher and higher we climbed until we emerged in a verdant paradise. The garden was full of the same roses as Menelaus's earthly palace, and I recognized the scents

of the blooms in the air. The demon had recreated the same beautiful prison for Helen.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:07 am*

Farnkelan screamed overhead, blood in the very timbre of its roars. The dragon's rage fueled me along. I was getting close to Helen, could feel her tugging at my heart and pulling me closer.

We hurried through the roses and entered the top of the tower. Helen and one of her sisters, though I was unsure which, were fighting in the long hallway. Demons attacked them from all sides, but the warriors of Artemis fought as one. Helen cast vicious hexes, felling demons with a touch of her hand. Iphi was a bruiser with her fists and fast as a snake with daggers. These were the warrior maidens of legend, fighting their way from the palace.

I let out a battle cry and rushed into the fight, taking out demon after demon. I would not stop until she was safe in my arms. My sword rang with battle. The demons here were putting up far more of a fight. They must not have felt Farnkelan's flames on their hides yet.

I fought a large rage demon, which had to be at least eight feet tall. Its aura inspired the other demons to fight harder and dirtier, spurred by the essence of rage. I rushed the demon with my shield but clanged off him with a jarring backward step. The demon roared with laughter and raised a broadsword over its head. It could easily split me in two.

I darted to the left and plunged my shortsword into the demon's side. Its laugh turned into a howl, and it dropped to one knee. That was all the opening I needed. I jumped onto the demon's knee, then vaulted myself onto its shoulders before driving my blade deep into its neck.

“Well done, my lord,” Faren called as he removed a lesser demon’s head.

I allowed the falling rage demon to carry me forward into the soldiers surrounding Helen and her sister. The other demons’ tenacity flagged as the rage demon’s influence waned. They fell before the onslaught on both sides. I cut my way closer and closer to Helen, like a fuse burning toward black powder.

I had almost made it to her when a demon grabbed her from behind and put a blade to her throat. Menelaus. He pushed the silver deep into Helen’s neck, and her blood ran down his blade. Her sister stilled and glanced from me to Helen.

“Stop, or I’ll end her!” he screamed.

The sister cursed and dropped her daggers. The demons around her converged, kicking and punching her into unconsciousness before lifting her limp body.

The air was quiet, the battle sounds of a few moments ago dead and whisked away by the desert winds.

“Now you.” Menelaus motioned for me and my men to drop our weapons.

Helen’s gaze was locked on me, though I could divine no message there. Only her steady confidence shone like a beacon. It chilled my blood. I knew what she meant to do. I shook my head, a silent plea. If Desmerada lied and Helen was still bound, any attempt to use her magics on Menelaus could drive him to kill her. The dagger was already lodged in her neck.

“She belongs to me.” Menelaus dug the blade deeper. “Drop your sword.”

Blood bubbled from her mouth, though she made no sound. I dropped my weapons, and my soldiers followed suit.

Menelaus laughed without warmth. “That’s right, little coward. Same old Paris.”

The demon licked the blood from Helen’s neck. “I’m going to fuck her raw. You’re going to watch. I’m going to make you a permanent fixture wherever we go. Your eyes will never stop seeing me on top of this bitch. You will hear her moan my name every night. And that’s not all.”

The remaining demon soldiers formed a wall around me, the tips of their blades at my neck.

“I’m going to kill every last vampire in the Bloodkeep. Anytime I even hear the mention of a vampire, I will send an assassin. I will hunt and kill your kind until there are none left to befoul the Underworld, or any other world, for that matter. How does that sound, king of the vampires?”

Menelaus smiled. Those cruel eyes were the same ones that looked down on me in the dusty battlefield outside of Troy. The demon believed he had won. Just as he believed it that fated day in front of the gates of Troy. But each time—then and now—there was a piece at play that Menelaus hadn’t considered. The white queen.

Helen’s hands erupted in flame, scorching Menelaus’s sides. He let out a gasp and backed away, keeping his dagger at her throat. He looked down at his body, aghast at the charred, melting flesh.

Desmerada had told the truth—Helen’s magic was no longer bound.

“Stand down, or I will torch him all the way,” Helen called to the demons. The ice in her voice was the perfect complement to the fire in her hands.

## Page 78

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:07 am*

The soldiers surrounding me did not move. Helen summoned a small fireball and pushed it into Menelaus's chest. He sank to his knees, yowling from the pain.

"Do as she says!" he gasped.

The soldiers dropped their blades and backed away. I took only a step before Menelaus roared up from the ground and sank his blade into Helen's chest. She cried out and fell to her knees.

"I would rather destroy her than let you have her," Menelaus screamed and twisted the blade.

Helen pinned me with her emerald gaze as my heart froze. So much in her eyes, so many things left unsaid and undone.

I shook my head. Please, don't do this.

She closed her eyes, her magic building. Menelaus pressed the dagger deeper.

"No!" I dashed forward.

Helen exploded into a burst of pure light, Menelaus turning into ash and the blast blowing me backward. A whooshing boom rang in my ears, followed by a chafing silence.

I could only see white. I blinked over and over, trying to regain some semblance of sight. Stumbling forward, I tripped over bodies until I reached a clear area. There, my

feet kicked only ashes. She had to be close. I dropped to my hands and knees, ignoring the remains of the demons unlucky enough to have been close to Helen when she went supernova.

“Helen?”

I felt a warm body under my fingers and ran my hands up. I would know Helen anywhere. It was her. I sat and drew her into my arms. She was alive, but I couldn't tell the extent of her wounds. My vision was slowly repairing itself, but I could only see hazy colors and light. I ran my hand along her throat and winced when I felt the blood still spilling from her veins. I ripped the blade from her chest. She convulsed in my arms but made no sound.

Pressing one hand to her neck and the other to her front, I stanching the flow as best I could. I rocked her back and forth and sent up silent prayers for someone, anyone to save her.

Could I turn her? Give her my blood and save her as she'd done for me? Or would it be of no use since she was no longer mortal? I held her tightly in my arms, listening to her shallow breaths and feeling her blood flow onto my hands. The memory surfaced of that night so long ago when I'd awoken in the same pool of her precious blood. I couldn't let it happen again.

“Please, please, my love.” I still couldn't see her. Could only hold her to me. I pressed my lips to her forehead. “Please.”

Her breaths sputtered before resuming their shallow rhythm. Fear took hold in my breast. She had to survive this.

“Iphi?” Helen's voice was so faint, I almost thought I was imagining it.



“I don’t know, my love. I can’t see her.”

“She’s here, if she’s asking about the other female,” Faren said. “We have her, my lord. She’s only a little singed.” He coughed and inhaled deeply.

I heard a slap and a growl.

“Hands off the goods!” That had to be Iphi.

“Play nice,” Helen said, her voice still a whisper.

“Since when has playing nice been a part of warrior maiden protocol?”

I sensed Iphi approaching and saw a vivid slash of red. “What’s with your eyes?” she asked. “Wait, you watched Elena go all kaboom? Should have closed your eyes like this here smart maiden. Oh, and this guy over here with the scars. His eyes are fine too, though half of him is charred. Gross. But you? Silly vampire king.” She plopped down next to him.

“Does Helen look okay? How is she?” he asked.

“Helen? Who’s Helen?”

“I’m Helen,” Helen said.

“Wait, what?”

“Elena is Helen,” Paris said.

Iphi snorted. “No, Elena is Elena.”

“Just tell me how she is!”

“She’s okay. Well, okay for someone with an extra smile on her neck. Ew. And the dagger to the chest. Just bad form, Uncle Menelaus.” She whistled. “He’s getting toasty by the fire in Hades right about now.”

Movement blurred ahead of me.

“Don’t move,” Faren growled.

“What is it?” I drew Helen even closer to my chest, wary of any threat.

My vision was improving by the second.

A demon knelt, his head bowed in deepest respect.

“Uh, why are you bowing?” Iphi asked.

“Queen Helen is now the ruler of Decanum.” The demon’s voice trembled.

“Are you shitting me?” The slash of red came into better focus as Iphi whipped her head around.

“She killed Menelaus, which makes her—”

“The boss! Well fuckin’ A!” Iphi cried and clapped her hands.

“Order the demons to stand down, now.” Helen’s voice, now a little stronger. Her breaths were deeper, the blood flow easing.

“Shh, now. Just rest.” The scent of her blood was still too strong. She needed to heal.

Her golden hair was like a halo in my blurred sight, though I thought it appropriate.

## Page 79

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 9:07 am*

The demon hurried off. Helen leaned against me. I held her, at peace just knowing she still drew breath. More screams erupted in the palace below us.

“Did you bring more soldiers?” Helen asked.

“Sort of. Faren, take the men, wrangle the spiders—”

“You brought spider soldiers? Like, are we talking giant spiders?” Iphi asked.

“That’s correct,” Faren said.

She jumped up in a blur. “Sweet. I’m going to see if I can make one my pet!”

“I wouldn’t—”

“Don’t worry about her,” Helen said. “She’ll probably wind up feuding with Arachne over which one of them the spiders love most.” Her strength seemed to be returning. Thank the gods.

“Yes, my lady.”

“And, Faren, see if you can talk Farnkelan down,” I added.

A burst of flames and explosions thundered behind us. Faren coughed.

I smiled. “Well, at least try to talk the dragon down. I can’t have it destroying Helen’s palace.”

“I’ll do my best, my lord.”

“You tamed a dragon for me?” She nestled against my chest. I breathed her in, the honey scent intoxicating.

“I’d do it again in a heartbeat.”

Farnkelan shrieked in irritation, the rush of its wings stirring the air even in the enclosed hallway. Faren had his work cut out for him.

I didn’t release her for the entire time Faren and his men were clearing the palace. After a while, long after the yelling died down, Helen struggled to sit up. My eyesight had fully returned. She was almost healed, the wound on her neck closed and the one on her chest nearly closed, as well. Still, I didn’t want her hurt. Not anymore. Not even a scratch.

“I’m okay. Really.” She brushed her lips against mine, shifted in my lap, and settled back against me.

Farnkelan landed somewhere nearby, the whoosh of air from its wings like a gust of hellish wind.

Calming the dragon was a feat, but I had another wild thing to tame. Helen was free now. “Look, I know you just got out of a bad relationship...”

She giggled against me, tickling my chest with her breath. “Understatement of all time.”

“But now that you’re on the market, I’d like to formally ask for your hand in marriage.”

Helen sighed. “I’m afraid I can’t agree to that.”

I stiffened. Was there another? Had she fallen out of love with me? Would I have to kill another to claim her hand? I would do it.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea to pledge myself to a vampire who stands a very real chance of becoming spider food,” Helen said. “Strategically, it’s not a smart—”

I stopped her with my mouth, kissing her with a claim more powerful than any other.

When I finally released her, in a breathy voice she said, “I accept your terms.”

## Epilogue

### Helen

The Bloodkeep was a misnomer today. It was adorned with thousands upon thousands of white flowers, the very ground I walked on a mass of petals. I wore the traditional vampire gown of royalty—sky blue with a cape of gold. The bodice was strapless and tight, leaving nothing to the imagination. Diamonds covered the entire top, and the bottom stood out in cascading waves of poof. It was overdone, but for a royal vampire wedding, somehow just right. My veil flowed out behind me, dancing on the breeze created as Farnkelan flew by before settling atop the battlements. I entered the vestibule of the Great Hall and greeted the rest of my wedding party. Iphi was entertaining Lilah and Roth with her latest tales of bravery, this one involving some sort of oil wrestling with nymphs.

I bent down and kissed Keilana, my flower girl, the dark braids wrapped around her head in a beautiful crown. “Now go, little one. And don’t forget to throw the petals as you walk.”

“Yes, my lady.” She tottered off in her little girl heels.

“Ready?” Apollo asked. He was dressed to kill in a sleek tux. His wavy golden locks were smoothed down, and his bright eyes flashed. “I’ve never had to give someone away before. I usually take maidens, if you know what I mean.”

Iphi snorted.

“That’s not a very royal sound, Iphigenia,” Apollo chided.

“I’m the ruler of a demon keep full of, ya know, demons. How royal do I have to be, really?” Iphi pulled at the hem of her gold dress, putting her ample chest even more on display.

Apollo nodded in approval.

I had ceded my control of Decanum to Iphi, who was of royal demon lineage. Her father, Agamemnon, was Menelaus’s brother, though no one had heard from the demon royal in years. Most feared him dead. That was just fine with Iphi, since Agamemnon was the one who sacrificed her to Artemis long ago, before the Trojan War. As it was, I had enough on my plate as soon-to-be queen of the Bloodkeep without having to worry about the neighboring kingdom. Right now, I just had to keep my wedding party together until I got down the aisle.

The music started playing. Showtime.

“You got this, sis,” Lilah said.

Roth offered Lilah his arm. “Carissima.”

She took it, smiling up at him with heartfelt warmth.

Together, Roth and Lilah walked through the double doors and down the aisle. Her sisters Lynxia, Shayla, and finally Iphi passed through the doors and into the packed hall. Emissaries and visitors from all over the Underworld were in attendance. This was as much an affair of state as it was of the heart.

“We can still run away together, you know,” Apollo offered. “You’re already launching my ship in that dress.”

I began regretting, for at least the tenth time that day, Lilah’s suggestion that Apollo give me away.

“No? You sure? Ticktock. Last chance. Okay, it’s gone, the moment’s gone.” He winked at me.

We pushed through the doors. Everyone in attendance stood, thousands of creatures watching me. I recognized quite a few of the vampires from the village, and many more whom I’d become acquainted with in the keep. Daphne, dressed in highly revealing nymph fashion, waved and dabbed at her eyes.



“Do you know her?” Apollo whispered. “She seems familiar.” Daphne wrinkled her nose at him as he passed.

Arachne stood toward the front, a spider at either side of her. She’d put bow ties just below their mandibles. They were almost cute, if it weren’t for the eyes, and the teeth, and the poison spines on their legs, and their love for live meat.

Focus, Helen.

No longer scanning the crowd, I looked straight ahead and felt my heart skip quite a few beats. Paris wore a crisp black tux with a tie of blue. The crown atop his head sent prisms of light into the air. But none of those things compared to his beautiful gaze. His eyes were full of fire. The passion that set him apart from all others in my heart shone like the sun through clouds.

When I took his hand, the board stopped moving. All the pieces were perfectly in place, and I had no strategy for what lay ahead.

The ceremony, officiated by Shildreth, was a short blur and ended with a kiss from Paris that I felt all the way down to my toes. A thunderous cheer erupted as he bent me back, holding me close and kissing me in front of all these guests. Literally took my breath away.

Shildreth set a crown of gold atop my head, adorned with changeling stones to match Paris’s, and another cheer went up. Paris scooped me off my feet, carried me through the doors at the front of the room, and turned away from the main palace.

“But the banquet—”

“Can wait.” He strode quickly to our bedchambers. Kicking the door open, he strode inside and dropped me on the bed. “I need to be inside you right now.”

Gods.

I reached up to remove my crown.

“Leave it.”

He prowled on top of me and reclaimed my lips, now in private. His tongue massaged mine, and he reached down to pull up my skirts. After more than a few moments of pulling and searching, he rose up to his knees. “Where does this end and you begin?”

I laughed and grabbed a huge swath of tulle, pulling it up far enough for Paris to see my bridal panties, a white thong. He licked his lips, and his fangs extended even farther. He disappeared under the fluff of skirt. He snapped through the lace with his teeth before his mouth was on me.

His tongue took no prisoners, stroking me into a frenzy. He eased two fingers inside as he continued licking and sucking at me, making me moan. He spread my legs wider, his large palm pressing down on my inner thigh. I was so open to him that every touch of his tongue sent a vibration through me. The tension increased as he worked his fingers in and out in the same rhythm as his mouth. When he bit my tender flesh, I came with a cry, startling myself with the force of my pleasure. I clenched his fingers inside me as he kept licking me, groaning.

When I came down from the high of his touch, he settled on top of me. I weaved my hand down past the fabric and felt his shaft, hard as a rock in his trousers.

“I want it,” I breathed.

He growled and moved my hand away. Springing himself free, he rubbed the head of his cock against me, teasing me with the tip. I whimpered and tried to scoot down so that he was inside me, but he moved away.

I wrapped my hands in his hair and pulled him down to my mouth, licking and biting. He kept promising pleasure but holding back.

Tease.

I reached down and stroked him, loving the smooth flesh in my grip. He trembled as his need for me grew. Why wouldn't he claim me? I licked his throat before settling back down and gazing into the heavens of his eyes. Oh, how he burned for me.

“I need you, my king.”

He sheathed himself inside me so fast, I gasped. “Gods.”

He started a punishing rhythm. I loved every thrust and fastened my teeth to his neck.

“My queen,” he growled and put even more force behind his words. The bed shook as he claimed his bride. I reveled in his pure power.

“Come for me.” He sank his fangs into my neck.

He didn’t have to tell me twice. His fangs were a weapon. When he used them against me, I couldn’t defend myself from the rush of pleasure. The pressure grew, and he never slowed his pace. The sensations each tremor sent through me were like sweet torture.

When he took another pull at my vein, a scream of ecstasy ripped from me, filling the room with the sound of our lovemaking. He gave a few more thrusts as I milked him, and he followed me down into the depths of bliss. His seed filled me as he groaned at my throat. His shaft kicked as he spent himself. He slowed and stilled before rolling me over so I was on top of him.

“My queen.” He gave me one more lingering kiss.

I was sated, and more than happy to spend the rest of our wedding night in the confines of our bedchamber. But we had responsibilities.

“The banquet,” I said and pushed myself up on my elbows.

“I thought you’d never ask.” He flipped me on my back and slid down my body before beginning anew.

My cries echoed through the keep for the rest of the night and many, many nights thereafter. I had given myself to Paris, utterly and completely swept up in the passion of the blood prince.