



It began with a nightmare.


Hecuba, queen of Troy, was with child. The night before the birth, she awoke shrieking. "The fire!" she cried out. "It spreads!"

King Priam bolted up. There was no fire. Hecuba had been dreaming. Shaking, she stammered what she'd dreamt: that instead of bearing a child, she'd brought forth a tangle of flaming snakes.

"Send for Calchas!" commanded Priam.

Old feet shuffled through the palace. Priest of Apollo, interpreter of omens, reader of dreams and the future, Calchas gave ear to the queen.


"The vision speaks plainly," he pronounced. "The child will bring fire and ruin upon Troy. There's but one course of action." He peered at the queen, then the king. "When it's born, cut the infant's throat."



At first light Hecuba gave birth to a boy. She held him until noon, weeping all the while. Priam at last took the baby from her arms, but couldn't bring himself to kill him. Still, he knew what must be done. He had a herdsman brought to the palace and entrusted him with the child and the deed. "Take him high on Mount Ida," he instructed. "Seek an untraveled spot—and leave him." He touched his son's face, then the rattle his wife had pressed into his tiny hand. He turned away.

The herdsman obeyed and left the infant to die. Five days later he returned to the place—and gaped. No crow-pecked corpse lay before him, but a living baby, being suckled by a she-bear. Amazed, sure the boy was fated to live, the man carried him home to his wife.

The next day, he walked to Troy and presented Priam with a dog's tongue as proof that the prince was dead. He returned to his hut. He would raise the child in secret. He and his wife named him Paris.



The lad grew up hardy, handsome, and as quick with his wits as his feet. He tended cattle, unaware that he was a prince. When the herdsmen set their bulls to fight, fair-minded Paris was often asked to judge the winner. Zeus, chief among all the gods, watching from his palace on Mount Olympus, took note of the young man.

It was at this time that the gods attended the wedding of the sea goddess Thetis. They'd all been invited, with one exception. Eris, the spiteful goddess of strife, had been shunned. Incensed, she plotted her retaliation, and in the midst of the festivities she flung a golden apple into the throng. Written upon it were the words: FOR THE FAIREST. Zeus' wife Hera assumed it was meant for her. Athena, goddess of wisdom and battle, boasted that her own beauty outshone Hera's. Appalled, Aphrodite, the goddess of love, insisted that the apple should be hers. Their quarrel grew vicious, halting the feast. Watching Eris grinned. Finally, Zeus had to be called on to choose the most comely of the three. He eyed them, knowing that the two he passed over would make his life a misery. He longed to pass the task to another.

It was then that he remembered Paris.



"How can I choose without favor?" asked Zeus. "Hera is my wife, and Athena, my own daughter." He handed the apple to Hermes, the gods' messenger, and sent him winging away. "The Trojan herdsman Paris will judge instead. He's much admired for his impartial decisions. You'll find him on Mount Ida."

Grazing his cattle, Paris was agape when Hermes appeared and announced Zeus' will. He humbly tried to decline, but was refused. A moment later the goddesses alit.

They disrobed before a dumbstruck Paris. Nervously, he regarded Hera first. "Award me the apple," she coaxed, "and I'll make you emperor of all Asia." Athena, next, promised to make him the wisest of men and invincible in war. Then he came to Aphrodite. "I can make you emperor as well—of the heart, and invincible in love. Name the woman and she shall be yours."

Paris paused, distracted by this offer.

"Queen Helen of Sparta, for instance," Aphrodite continued. "The most beautiful woman in all the world, whose looks approach even my own."

Paris gazed upon the goddess' body, imagining she were Helen and his. Then he remembered. "But Helen is married."

"My magic will make her as a moth, and you a lantern. She'll follow you, entranced with passion, leaving her husband and home without a thought."

Paris' judgment buckled beneath the weight of this bribe. He took a step back. "I find Aphrodite the fairest," he announced, and placed the golden apple in her palm.

She nodded at him, sealing their pact, and gave her rivals a superior smile. Hera fumed. Athena's eyes blazed. Furious with Paris, the two stalked off, vowing revenge on him and all Trojans.