

3. Helen

The girl's face is a blur at first, but gradually becomes clearer. I've never seen anyone so beautiful before: her large eyes are a dazzling deep blue and her skin is milky-white, like a statue I saw in a museum once. She's wearing a long, shimmering purple dress down to her feet with gold-coloured straps across her shoulders, purple sandals and a chunky purple beaded necklace. Her hair is a mass of red-gold curls reaching to her waist. For a moment we stare at one another and I'm so freaked out I can't stop shaking. Who is she and where am I?

'Helen!'

The girl jumps and drags her eyes away from me.

'I beg your pardon, Mother,' she says nervously to the woman in the pale green dress lying on the opposite couch. You couldn't call *her* beautiful: she's got a face like a smacked backside. Her dark hair is tied tightly on top of her head and her eyes are painted with heavy purple eye shadow. She's literally *dripping* in bling with the gold band in her hair, dangly red earrings, a heavy red necklace and bangles on her arms.

'Take your attention away from that slave girl and pay heed to your tutor!' she snaps. 'As a daughter of Sparta you are privileged to receive an education when so many of your sex in Greece are denied!' She turns to the bald-headed bloke sitting on the stool next to her. He's wearing a dress, too, a beige one that only reaches to his knees. 'Continue, tutor.'

Slave girl? Is she talking about *me*? Then for the first time I notice what *I'm* wearing: a horrible brown tunic thing made out of what feels and looks like an old sack. I sniff at it and pull a face; it smells dodgy and I feel hot and itchy in it. I scratch my chest and look down at my bare, grubby feet. What's going on?

The girl says nervously, 'My feet are hot, Mother. I would like the helot to bathe them.'

'Mother' makes an impatient hissing noise and turns to me. 'Well, what are you waiting for, child? Fetch warm water and oils for my daughter and attend to her wishes.'

I stay put, matching her glare with my own.

'Are you deaf?' she bellows, and the girl – Helen – jumps again. 'I said...'

'I heard what you said, missus,' I snap back, 'but you can't mean me! *I'm* not a slave.'

You can hear a pin drop. The tutor's jaw drops open, Helen's eyes can't get any wider and the woman, her face red, leaps from her seat, her jewellery rattling like a chain.

'LYSIS!'

A lad of about eighteen with dark curly hair and brown eyes runs in and kneels down at her feet, his head bowed.

'At your beckoning, my Queen.'

'Take this – this *creature* to the dungeon until I decide what to do with it!'

'Oh, *no*, Mother!' squeaks Helen as I'm grabbed roughly by the waist and carried across the room. I'm kicking and yelling at the lad to put me down while trying to prise his hands away from my body, only he's tall and strong and I'm not that big for my age. 'Alisha is my most attentive servant.' How does she know my name? 'I just believe she is a little out of her wits today because of the heat and forgot her place for a moment. Lysis,' she says to the lad, 'release her so that she may prostrate at the queen's feet in supplication.'

Lysis stops and looks at the older woman with me still trying to wriggle out of his clutches.

'Stop that,' he hisses in my ear. 'Queen Leda is unmerciful; she will throw you to the dogs if you persist.'

Queen Leda turns to her daughter with a face like thunder.

'My daughter, though you may soon become consort to Menelaus and eventually succeed me as Queen of Sparta, it does not at present give you the right to overrule my instructions to my helot. For now, I remain queen of this land and Lysis heeds my commands, so he will take the girl to the dungeon.'

She claps her hands and Lysis whisks me away. I'm carried through a cold, dark, smelly narrow corridor. There's water trickling down the walls and on the floor. Oh, God! Where is this place, how did I get here, who are these people and how can I get out?

Lysis is shouting at me. 'For the love of Zeus, girl, control yourself, or I will call the guards!'

'I'm not going to no dungeon! Put me down, yer moron!'

He moves his hand over my mouth and I bite hard into his fingers. He yells out and drops me to the ground.

'It stinks in this place!' I can hear squeaking! Rats? I hope not! 'I'm not a slave an' I don't know who any of you are! Let me go! My family will be wondering what's happened to me!'

Lysis smacks me hard across the face. I put my hand to my cheek, panting like an angry animal cornered. No one hits me and gets away with it, especially not a lad just a few years older than me! I jump up and pounce at him, digging my nails into his cheek, drawing blood. He pushes me away.

'If Queen Leda says you're to go to the dungeon, you're to go to the dungeon!' he says angrily, feeling the scratches on his face. 'Tyndareus is King of Sparta, but it is his wife who rules this household and she is not one to be defied. I am her personal helot and it will be my life if I do not do her bidding.' He pauses and sighs. 'I do not think she will have you killed, though you have tried her and she has had slaves slain in the past. You are already a favourite with the princess and though she speaks harshly to her, the queen loves her children and thinks only of their comfort.' He looks me up and down. 'You are tired and hungry. I will take you to the kitchen to eat a modest meal before I escort you to the cell. You will spend but one night there and will be released in the morning to continue your service.'

I push my hair away from my face, take a deep breath and ask, 'Do you know me? What's my name?'

He cocks his head on one side like a confused dog and frowns.

'Your mind is troubled, girl. You are the name Princess Helen gave you: you are Alisha. You are come to this household as a helot slave upon your thirteenth year, as is the custom.'

'Is this the first time you've seen me?'

'Yes. Slaves come and go. It is not unheard of. I thought perhaps you were a gift to the princess from her suitor Menelaus.'

'Yeah, well, you're wrong. My name *is* Alisha and I'm no bloody slave or helot or whatever you call it. Listen,' I grab his arms, 'I was on holiday in Cyprus and I heard this awful wailing from someone called the Siren and then I saw a girl called Iris...'

'Siren? Iris?'

'Yeah; anyway, Iris said she was a goddess and she told me the Siren's wailing was a message from someone else called Selene...'

'What would you know about the Sirens, Iris the messenger goddess and Selene of the moon?' demands Lysis impatiently, snatching his arms away. 'Goddesses would not speak to a mere mortal and certainly not to a helot slave of Sparta.'

'Well, Iris spoke to *me*!' I reply just as impatiently. 'She dragged me here from the future because she said I had to help someone called Helen, only I don't know who she meant and I don't want to help her, I just want to go home, back to England.'

'You are raving, girl!' laughs Lysis. 'I think I should fetch the physician to you if you believe you are from this place – England – which I have not heard of. Helots are enslaved from Laconia – my place of birth – or Messenia. You must be from one of those lands. Helen is a princess of Sparta, the daughter of Tyndareus and Leda, and she is soon to marry the prince. Tyndareus is to resign the throne to Menelaus, who will become King of Sparta, and Helen will become his queen. The only help you will give is to serve at their wedding banquet.'

I open my mouth to swear at him, but the words don't come. My head feels warm, the corridor spins, a bright light flashes and I feel like I'm spinning out of control.

When I open my eyes, Helen is leaning over me, pressing something cool and damp on my forehead.

‘There, there. You will be all right after you have rested.’

Lysis and an old man with grey hair, who looks like he could do with a haircut and a shave, are standing behind her with worried faces. I’m not ready to come round properly yet, so I close my eyes again.

‘If the queen should catch you, my Princess,’ says Lysis worriedly, ‘it will be all our heads, even yours! Please leave before you are missed!’

‘I am not going anywhere, Lysis, and neither is Alisha,’ replies Helen firmly. ‘She will not go to the dungeon, she will stay here in the kitchen until she has recovered, then she will continue with her duties at my behest. My mother will not know because you will not tell her, and neither will any of the other slaves.’

‘But, my Princess...’

‘My Princess, the slave girl has been seized by an attack on the brain,’ interrupts the old man with long grey hair, waving his hands dramatically. ‘She has been touched by the falling sickness, the epilepsía, at the will of the Moon Goddess Selene. I beg you to disassociate yourself from her madness. Allow me to attend to her at your pleasure with potions by all means, then let me send her back to her family, who may do with her as they wish.’

‘Yeah,’ I murmur drowsily, ‘let me go home, will yer? The joke’s gone on long enough.’

‘You are going nowhere.’ Helen moves closer and whispers in my ear, ‘Iris told me of your coming. You have to get word to Travis before sunrise. You will be well again before then.’

‘What?’ I stammer. ‘What are you talking about? I don’t know anyone called Travis.’

‘Physician,’ snaps Helen to the old man, ‘the girl’s head is confused. Give her a potion to make her sleep, but ensure she wakes by the end of the day and send her to my chambers for her evening tasks.’

‘And what of the queen, my Princess?’ asks Lysis.

‘The queen will sleep soundly in the knowledge that the slave is held within the dungeon,’ says Helen. ‘Is that not so, physician? You will add a sleeping draught to my mother’s wine.’

The old man with the long grey hair bows. ‘As you wish, my Princess.’

The next thing I know he’s holding a cup to my lips. I don’t remember what happens after that. I’ve fallen into a deep sleep, one with a dream disturbed by a beautiful, slim girl with multi-coloured hair flying around my head telling me I have to go with her, and some weird howling in the background. Any minute now, Mum will be nagging at me to get up for breakfast...

‘Wake up! Wake *up*, girl!’

That’s not Mum’s voice and she wouldn’t shake me hard like that. My eyes shoot open. I’ve never seen such an ugly-looking old woman in all my life. Her grey hair is matted, her dark eyes look mad and she has a wart on her chin. All that’s missing is her pointy hat and broomstick.

‘Come out from under there,’ she orders. I’m lying on a hard stone floor underneath a table.

‘OW!’ My arm’s gone to sleep and I crawl out carefully. ‘Who are you?’

‘The cook,’ says the woman. ‘You have slept too long. The Princess Helen has sent for you. Take this to her.’ She hands me a wooden tray with fruit, a chunk of bread and a wooden cup. Really fed up at being pushed about, I let out a loud growl and shove the tray back at her.

‘Here, *you* take your stupid tray to your Princess Helen! I’ve had enough of this madhouse, I’m going home!’

The old woman doesn’t take the tray and it clatters to the floor, sending the food and drink everywhere. Something strange happens when she raises her hand to me, it’s like she’s moving in slow motion. Her voice slows down, too, and I can’t make out what she’s saying. Time for me seems normal. I duck and watch, fascinated, as her hand glides over the top of my head. I butt her in the stomach and she takes her time flying across the room until eventually, she lands with a very long scream. I see my chance and run to the door. Someone in the doorway stops me and grabs me by the shoulders.

‘Are you Alisha?’ he asks.

He’s about sixteen and good-looking with short dark, untidy wavy hair and blue eyes. He’s wearing jeans and a black T-shirt with the words *Dazed and Confused* in white letters on the front. There’s also a tattoo on his left arm, the letter R. I wonder what it stands for.

‘Yeah, I am,’ I reply. ‘How did you know?’

‘Iris told me you’d arrived. Come on.’

He grabs my hand. As we run, I’m breathlessly chucking questions at him: ‘Am I dreaming? Who are you and why aren’t you wearing funny clothes like me? Are you real? Where are we? Is it really Sparta? How come everyone speaks English? What’s your name? Where have you come from? Where are we going now?’

Equally breathlessly, he replies, ‘No, you’re not dreaming, this is really Sparta and no one’s speaking English, they’re speaking ancient Greek because they don’t know any other language. You’ve been speaking it, too, even if it does sound like English to you. My name’s Travis; yes, I’m real and I’m English like you, from a different time in Britain to yours, the end of the twenty-first century. I’m a sort of time traveller and I jump through things called portals. Someone once told me my name means “to cross over.” My clothes never change unless I change them and sorry, I don’t know why you’re dressed like that. I’m used to all this stuff, but I know it’s all new to you. I saw you being carried off and heard you tell that lad you wanted to get out of here. I can help you.’

‘Can you?’

‘Yeah, so now’s your chance,’ says Travis. ‘I don’t want to stay here any longer than I need to, either, but when I heard her story I did promise Helen I’d help her and that means getting her out through a portal. My seizures bring them.’

‘*You’ve* got epilepsy, too?’

‘Yes.’

‘What’s a portal?’

‘No time to explain right now; but whatever you do, don’t believe a word Iris tells you when she says it’s Selene who brings them. That’s a load of barking mad rubbish! Worst fairy story ever! Your seizures bring portals because of powerful electric activity in your brain when you have a fit. I’ll explain how that works, too, some other time, if we meet again, that is. Oh, yeah; I’ve met Iris and Selene, all right, but I don’t believe they’re real! We come to a stop and he heaves a deep sigh as I pant for breath. ‘It’s a shame Helen isn’t here! I don’t know where she is and it’s a nightmare trying to get her alone because there’s always someone with her. Anyway, Iris told me I’d been chosen to help Helen and that you’d been sent, too, and that’s the one and only time Selene interfered with my seizure. Still,’ we start running again, ‘here we are, and fingers crossed the portal’s stuck around, and if that’s the case it wants you to leave, so hurry up. With any luck, you’ll go back to your hotel and not to another time, but if that happens, sorry, it won’t be my fault. Portals have a nasty habit of mucking you about; they don’t always stay put and sometimes they take you where *they* want you to go...’

‘You’re not making any sense!’ As we run along the dark corridors I recognise from before, I can feel myself getting a bad stitch. We stop again. It’s not dark any more and there’s a large, flickering, bright oval light hovering ahead of us.

‘Good!’ says Travis. ‘It’s still here.’

Terrified, I step back. ‘What – what is it?’

‘I told you,’ says Travis, ‘it’s a portal; yours, actually.’

‘*Mine?*’

‘Yes, you had a fit, didn’t you? Quite a strong one, too, judging by the glow on that.’

‘How do you know I had a fit?’

‘Oh, keep up, can’t yer! Haven’t you been listening? Powerful electric activity in the brain! *Your* brain this time! I know it’s not mine because I haven’t had a fit for a few days, so it must be yours. Look at the light: do you see a chariot?’

I look carefully. 'No.'

'Me, neither.'

'But I saw the chariot before, pulled by white horses and with a girl dressed in white, too. Iris said it was Selene. You said Iris brought you, too.'

'I know I did and I saw the chariot first time around as well, but it's not here now, is it? Trust me, Selene has naff all to do with it.'

'But the gods must exist. We both met Iris and the gods are in that book I read at school, *The Iliad*,' I point out.

'No time to discuss it!' He grabs my hand and he drags me towards the light. 'Quick, before a palace guard or someone else comes. It's OK,' as I hesitate, 'it doesn't hurt.'

'Hey, hang on a minute!' My feet are sliding across the stone floor now as he pulls frantically at me. 'OW! Watch it; I've got no shoes on!'

'Come *on!*' he bellows. 'Unless you want to remain a slave in Sparta I suggest you go in now. It's your only chance. It'll probably suck you in, anyway. It does most of the time, but I find it's best if you go willingly. *Jump!*'