

Athena

The Princess of Egypt

Prologue

BC1000 • • •

The Nile shimmered beneath the western sun. The Temple of Luxor and the Pharaoh's palace overlooked the bustling city of Thebes below, as merchant vessels drifted ceaselessly along the Nile.

The flickering torchlight cast its glow upon walls adorned with vivid murals of Egypt's rivers, trees, and wildlife in brilliant reds and greens. The Pharaoh took the hand of Ashendra, who was soon to become his queen. The Pharaoh was but a boy of fifteen. He wore a gold-and-navy striped nemes headdress above sun-bronzed skin, thick black brows, and dark eyes that gleamed like polished scarabs. His nose was proud, his chin finely cut, and the arms extending from the sleeves of his blue-dyed linen robe were slender enough to belong to a young woman. At his side stood Ashendra, the elder bride-to-be. Her skin was as dark as polished ebony, her long silver hair flowed like spun silk, and cool grey eyes shone beneath its silken strands. Draped in a gown of shimmering silver, she possessed a quiet grace that seemed to belie her years.

"Your Majesty, be at ease. I am by your side."

"I see."

A trace of uncertainty lingered in the Pharaoh's smile as he drew aside the crimson drapery and stepped into the great hall, where the rulers of many nations awaited him. Long black whiskers framed his full lips, while beneath thick brows that swept outward like the fronds of a cycad, a pair of jet-black eyes watched with quiet intensity. His head was shaven to the crown, leaving his hair to fall long behind, and a crimson sash bound the black robe that marked his rank.

"Tomorrow is the day of Your Majesty's coronation. Your bride shall stand beside you, and at last you shall receive the blessing of Amun-Ra. Hold your head high, Your Majesty, and let all who behold you witness the dignity of their Pharaoh."

"I know..."

At Amenhotep's words, the Pharaoh's fingers tightened around hers.

"Once Your Majesty has received the Rite of the Sun God's Blessing and become the living incarnation of the divine, only then shall you become the true Pharaoh. Thereafter, even the heavens themselves shall bend to your will. We shall proceed at once to the Rite of

Abundance."

Amenhotep read aloud from a papyrus scroll as he led the Pharaoh toward the banquet table.

Before them stretched a banquet fit for kings: platters of roasted quail, fresh bread, and baskets overflowing with grapes and figs covered the tables, while musicians from every corner of the kingdom filled the hall with graceful melodies.

"To all who have gathered here, you have my gratitude. May prosperity ever bless both your kingdoms and mine. Tonight, I ask only that you set aside the affairs of state and enjoy the feast."

With that, Pharaoh descended from the dais beside Ashendra, raising cups and exchanging greetings with each ruler in turn. Among the musicians, one of the flautists concealed a poisoned dart within the tip of his flute and silently took aim at the Pharaoh.

The moment Ashendra caught the flautist's suspicious movement, she threw herself before the Pharaoh. The poisoned dart struck her in the neck, and she crumpled to the floor.

"Ashendra? No... It cannot be. Stay with me, Ashendra!"

The Pharaoh caught her as she collapsed to the floor and pulled the poisoned dart from her neck.

"Guards! Seize him!"

Amenhotep pointed at the flautist and shouted.

"A physician! Quickly! Ashendra! Ashendra!"

The Pharaoh's anguished cry echoed through the stunned chamber.

Princess Atena

At that very moment, in Athens, the seventeen-year-old Princess Athena slipped through a wooden door at the rear of the palace, a grand edifice upheld by towering stone columns overlooking the Aegean Sea. She raced down the stone steps that traced the fortress walls and reached the blacksmiths' quarter, where she paused to listen to the rhythmic songs of the smiths as their hammers rang against glowing iron.

♪ Our iron rings!
♪ No foe shall stand!
♪ None can break us!
♪ No foe shall stand!
♪ None can match us!
♪ Strike!
♪ Strike!
♪ Our iron brings
♪ Fortune's hand!
♪ Fair Greece, our glorious land!
♪ All hail Athena, goddess grand!
♪ Our princess shines, a goddess bright!
♪ All hail Princess Athena!

"Morning, Princess! Off to the sea again?"

"Take care out there!"

Athena, with her long golden hair falling in gentle waves, eyes as deep and clear as the sea, and skin as fair as sunlit sand, smiled and waved to the blacksmiths as she passed. She dashed through the blacksmiths' quarter, raced across the beach, cast off her shawl, and plunged headlong into the sea. In waters as blue and crystal-clear as sapphire, Athena was welcomed by a pod of dolphins. Schools of brightly colored fish gathered around her before she drifted alongside a great sea turtle, the two gliding together through the tranquil sea.

Slipping off her sand-covered sandals, Athena padded barefoot through the rear entrance of the palace. No sooner had she stepped inside than one of her maids came hurrying toward her.

"My goodness, look at you! You're soaking wet! His Majesty has been looking everywhere for you. Come now, quickly!"

Once her maid had helped her into a fresh gown, Athena was ushered into the audience

chamber. There, she bowed before the King and sank gracefully to one knee.

The young King sat upon a golden throne, a vast mural of the sea unfolding across the wall behind him.

"Ah, there you are at last, Athena."

The King rose from his throne and drew Athena into a warm embrace.

"Leave us."

At the King's command, the guards bowed their heads and withdrew from the chamber.

"There is something I must tell you, Athena."

He hesitated for the briefest moment.

"I would have you wed the Pharaoh of Egypt."

"What...?"

"It is only natural that you should be surprised. Hear me out. The King of Egypt has recently lost his queen and is now in mourning. You, too, have come of age, and he has just lost the one who stood beside him. I would have you stand at his side... and become the bridge between our two kingdoms."

"It's all so sudden..."

"Yes... Even so, I cannot help but feel for the King of Egypt. Yet this is also an opportunity."

The King fell silent for a moment, his gaze drifting beyond the palace windows toward the distant sea.

"His council believes that, should he take a new queen, the ill omen that has befallen his reign will be laid to rest, and the affairs of state may at last move forward once more."

"Yes... Brother. I shall go to Egypt."

"Ah... then you understand."

"If it is your decision, Brother... then so be it."

"Thank you, Athena. With this... I can devote myself fully to the unification of Greece at last..."

When Athena returned to her chamber, she threw herself face-down upon her bed. After a long while, she rolled onto her back and lay staring at the ceiling. At last, she rose and drifted toward the window.

♪ I have no friends to call my own,
♪ No heart to trust with all I hide.
♪ Only the friends who wait beneath the sea.
♪ Within these palace walls,
♪ I'm only a doll dressed up each day.

♪ The husband I've yet to meet...
♪ Will he ever speak with me?
♪ Will we find a way to live as one?
♪ Are men gentle?
♪ Or are they to be feared?
♪ If I could choose just one wish...
♪ I would greet each day with a smile.

A sparrow, marked with a tiny crimson circle upon its brow, fluttered down beside Athena and greeted her with a cheerful trill.

"My... who might you be? Will you be my friend?"

"Chirp."

The sparrow fluttered playfully around her head.

"Hehe... It's a pleasure to meet you, little sparrow."

After sharing a final embrace with her brother, Athena left the palace with her attendants and began the journey to Egypt.

At the harbor of Egypt, servants loaded baggage onto waiting camels while Athena struggled to keep her balance atop one of them.

From within a crystal sphere, a witch with long slit-pupiled eyes watched her every movement. Countless serpents writhed upon her head in place of hair.

"So... you shall not have him. The Pharaoh belongs to me... and to me alone."

The stone mason

In Egypt, Roy, a master stonemason, worked a block of limestone with hammer and chisel. His wavy chestnut hair framed a sun-bronzed face, and he stood well over six feet tall. Years of hauling stone had given him the lean strength of a desert gazelle. Yet somehow, every woman he carved emerged broad-shouldered and solidly built, more warrior than maiden. Beautiful she was not.

"You're the finest mason in town, Roy, but the moment you carve a woman, it all falls apart. That's why we lost the commission for the Queen's tomb."

With a weary sigh, Roy's master brushed past him, still muttering under his breath.

Roy looked at the unfinished statue and shook his head before turning away.

Humming softly to himself, he picked up another block of stone and began carving a falcon. Within moments, the bird looked so lifelike that it seemed ready to take wing.

♪ I don't know...

♪ I don't understand women.

♪ I can carve most anything.

As he hummed, Roy brought a cat, a dog, an eagle, and a bull to life in stone with effortless skill.

♪ But women...

♪ Women alone defeat me.

♪ Even when they're right before me,

♪ I can't bring myself to look.

♪ Don't look at me...

♪ Not with eyes like those.

♪ What do they mean?

♪ Why do you smile at me that way?

Roy let out a weary sigh. Once again, the woman he had carved bore the muscular build of a man, complete with a sidelong gaze.

♪ I don't know...

♪ I don't understand women.

♪ Beneath those pretty dresses...

♪ They're still a mystery to me.

"You blithering fool! Another useless lump of stone! That's another block wasted! You'll haul the next one yourself!"

The master glared at the growing collection of his apprentice's misshapen statues.

"Yes, Master..."

With a large wooden sledge in tow, Roy left the village behind and made his way into the vast desert.

After cutting a fresh block of stone from the cliff face and loading it onto the sledge, he began hauling it home.

Then slate-gray clouds swallowed the sky. A crack of thunder split the air, and fierce winds came roaring across the desert.

"This is bad... A sandstorm? Where did that come from?!"

Snatching a hooded desert cloak from the sledge, Roy abandoned the cart without a second thought and sprinted for shelter.

Behind him, a towering wall of sand rose like a mountain and thundered across the desert.

Pulling the cloak over his face, Roy ran with every ounce of strength he had as the roaring storm closed in.

Then, through the swirling sand, he caught sight of a caravan struggling ahead.

The camels were already half swallowed by the shifting sands, while the travelers disappeared beneath the raging desert one after another.

An elderly attendant fought desperately to lift Athena onto the back of a camel before the desert swallowed them both.

"They're in trouble!"

Roy veered toward them at once. By the time he reached Athena, the camel beneath her gave a desperate cry before the shifting sands swallowed it whole. Her elderly attendant was already trapped as well, buried to his shoulders.

"Princess Athena... Save her..."

The old retainer's voice trembled.

Roy leapt onto the camel's hump and swept Athena into his arms.

For one silent moment, Roy's eyes met those of the old retainer.

Then the desert claimed him.

"Old Father!"

"Raaagh!"

With a mighty heave, Roy hurled Athena clear of the shifting sands. Before they could claim him, he tore one leg free, then the other, fighting his way through the churning sand until he

collapsed beside her.

Throwing his cloak over them both, he shielded Athena with his own body.

A heartbeat later, the sandstorm swallowed them whole.

At last, silence returned to the desert.

Then the sand began to stir, rising and falling in slow, uneven swells.

"Gah!"

Roy burst up through the sand, gasping for air before doubling over in a violent fit of coughing.

Slowly, he lifted his head.

"The girl... Where is she?"

Roy lowered his gaze.

Against his chest lay a cascade of golden hair glowing beneath the sun, and skin as fair as untouched sand.

For the first time in his life, he simply looked.

He couldn't look away.

Athena coughed softly, and her eyes fluttered open.

The first thing she saw was a broad, muscular chest.

"Aah!"

They both sprang apart at the same instant.

Athena's head struck Roy squarely in the jaw, sending him sprawling backward onto the sand.

She looked around.

"Oh... They're all gone..."

She slowly sank to her knees.

Finding no one else, she quietly began to cry.

Rubbing his aching jaw, Roy lowered himself onto the sand in front of her.

"Y'alright...?"

He managed a faint smile.

"That was... really close."

"Oh... I'm so sorry. You saved me, and yet..."

Her eyes widened at the sight of blood on Roy's lips.

She reached up to touch his face.

"I'm so sorry! Are you hurt?"

"Yeah, I'm fine..."

Roy couldn't take his eyes off her.

"Um... is something wrong?"

"No, it's just...", he let out an awkward laugh. "Are you... some kind of angel?"

"Me?"

"No... It's just... You weigh almost nothing, like a feather, and..."

Roy faltered.

"You smell... nice."

"I smell nice?"

Athena knitted her brows.

"No, that's not what I meant."

Roy rubbed the back of his neck, flustered.

"I mean... you're more beautiful than anyone I've ever seen. Like... a desert flower."

"Th-Thank you."

Athena lowered her eyes for a moment before looking back up with a shy smile.

"You have a body like a suit of armor... just like the soldiers in my kingdom. What do you do?"

"I'm a sculptor. My master works me to the bone hauling great blocks of stone around."

That's why..."

Roy struck a proud pose, flexing his arms and chest.

"See?"

Athena burst into laughter.

"What's wrong? Was it something I said?"

"I-I don't know."

Athena wiped away her tears.

"Maybe... you just made me feel at ease."

"I was scared too,"

Roy admitted with a sheepish grin.

"I've never run that fast in my life."

He paused.

"By the way... where were you headed?"

"To the royal capital. I'm to become Pharaoh's bride..."

The color drained from Roy's face.

"Then... you're a princess...!"

He dropped to one knee at once and bowed his head.

"Please forgive my rudeness!"

"Please don't."

Athena quickly shook her head.

"You saved my life. If anything..."

She hesitated, her cheeks warming ever so slightly.

"I'd like us to be friends."

"Cheep!"

"Oh, thank goodness! You're safe too!"

Athena kissed the little sparrow.

The tiny bird dissolved into light within her hands.

"Right now... he's all I have."

She lowered her eyes.

"I've lost Old Father... and all of my brother's men..."

Her voice trembled.

Tears finally spilled down her cheeks.

Roy gently placed a hand on her shoulder.

Unsure what words could possibly comfort her, he simply stayed beside her.

After a long moment, he finally spoke.

"All right."

"I'll take you to the royal capital."

A faint smile touched his lips.

"My name's Roy. It's a pleasure to meet you, Princess."

"I'm Athena."

She returned his smile.

"It's nice to meet you too, Roy."

Roy lifted Athena gently onto the stone sledge, then took hold of the rope and started pulling.

"Hey, Athena... tell me about your homeland."

"I'd love to."

Athena began to sing of her childhood and the land where she was born.

- ♪ My homeland lies beneath blue skies,
- ♪ Embraced by seas of deepest blue.
- ♪ Athens, jewel of Greece.
- ♪ My gentle father fell in war,
- ♪ And my dear brother raised me on his own.
- ♪ He grew so busy with his duties,
- ♪ He couldn't play with me anymore.
- ♪ We fenced with sticks,

♪ We kicked a ball,
♪ And swam together in the sea.
♪ The water shimmered like sapphire,
♪ As though the sky had fallen into the waves.
♪ Such a beautiful sea.
♪ The only friends who truly understood my heart
♪ Were the dolphins and the little fish.
♪ Everyone in the castle worried about me,
♪ But no one truly listened to what I had to say.

"That sounds lonely. But your homeland sounds really beautiful."

Athena nodded.

"Still... I guess I'm not so different."

Roy began to sing his own story in return.

♪ The Nile took both my parents
♪ When its flood swept through the land.
♪ The one who found me was my master.
♪ Around me stood nothing but burly apprentices!
♪ So I talked to stone statues instead.
♪ My master's never been a man of many words,
♪ But he's always watched over me.
♪ He only ever says,
♪ "Give everything you've got to what you love."
♪ That's all I've ever needed.
♪ Now I'm the finest sculptor in the village!
♪ Temples!
♪ Royal tombs!
♪ Bring me a block of stone,
♪ And I'll carve anything...
♪ Well...
♪ Almost anything.
♪ Women take one look at me and run away,
♪ So I guess...
♪ I still end up talking to stone statues instead.

Beneath a sky strewn with stars, Roy trudged across the desert, pulling the sledge with Athena and the block of stone upon it.

Far away, the witch watched them once more through her crystal ball.

"You're a stubborn little stray, aren't you...?"

Draping a black cloth over the crystal, the witch rose to her feet.

"It seems I'll have to go to the royal capital myself..."

At once, the snakes writhing through her hair burst into excited chatter.

"Yes! We finally get to go out!"

"Anything's better than this dusty old place!"

"Ooh! Do you think we'll get to eat mice?"

"Enough!" The witch flicked her hand impatiently. "Quiet."

With a sweep of her hand toward the floor, a magic circle flared into existence.

She stepped into its center.

When she stepped back out, a crimson aura enveloped her.

"Wait for me..."

...my beloved."

She drew the hood of her wine-colored robe low over her face and vanished into the darkness.