

THE PRINCESS  
*of*  
PROPHECY  
HEROES OF THE TROJAN WAR, VOL II

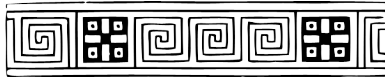
*by*  
*Aria Cunningham*



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## CHAPTER 13



### THE COURT OF THE SUN

THEY ENTERED THE palace through a set of columned porticos, the first courtyard open to the air with thick pillars stretching almost as high as the mud brick walls behind them. Setnakhte led onward without comment, stopping before a set of royal guards holding body-length staves tipped with curved blades. The men recognized the general immediately and moved aside, giving him access to the palace interior.

Helen entered the palace after him, the thin soles of her sandals slapping against the flagstone floor of the entry hall. The space was enormous, its corbeled ceiling soaring a hundred feet above her. A dozen columns, thinner and more richly decorated than those outside, divided the room into a set of corridors. Each wing branched off into even more corridors half the height of the room they stood in now. It created the dizzying affect of a labyrinth where one descended into the depths of the palace.

Helen was instantly disorientated as the general wove through a series of intersections, the stoic man leading ever onwards. In a manner of seconds she was hopelessly lost. The sheer scale of the architecture dwarfed her. She had no doubt the palace could have fit three Mycenaean fortresses side by

## THE PRINCESS OF PROPHECY

side. Before such grandeur, she could not help but feel insignificant.

A spike of stubborn defiance flared within her. She squared her shoulders and lifted her chin. Perhaps others walked these halls and quivered with inferiority, but not a daughter of Sparta.

Nor a prince of Troy. Paris marched ahead of her, his eyes locked forward and his step confident. She was determined to match him stride for stride.

Bay and Setnakhte walked alongside each other, setting a fast pace as though each man vied to outdistance the other. She could not tell which man she distrusted more. Bay was a loathsome creature. There was a sick desperation and lust behind his vacant eyes. He was clearly a man without scruples. But Setnakhte was dangerous too, if in a different way. When he cornered Paris at the Heracleion fort demanding information on the Trojan envoy, she was certain he would have killed them all had Paris given the wrong answer. Such strength of conviction could be honorable... *if* the soldier fought on the side of justice. A distinction yet to be determined.

*Trust no one.* Paris' wise words echoed back to her.

They turned down another corridor and the distant sound of music greeted them. The instruments were familiar to her — a mixture of flute, harp and lyre, but the melody was distinctly foreign. It was strangely seductive, as though the plucky chords tugged directly on some force inside her.

Setnakhte halted just outside the main audience hall and Helen and Paris peered past him into a crowded room beyond. The throne room of Pharaoh was a spacious hall. Its vaulted ceiling was supported by two rows of columns. Between those columns several hundred nobles and officials milled about. The center of the room was open from the entry doors all the way to the throne, creating a processional walkway to a raised dais where the royal family presided over the gathering.

A band of female musicians performed before the throne,

the women attired in shimmering gowns of sheer silk. Across from them, a troupe of dancers wove around the room, contorting into bends and flips with acrobatic ease. The dancers were both male and female, and wore only a colorful wrap about their hips. Some held ribbons, the vibrant colors of red, yellow and blue spinning in the air with their elegant moves.

Beside each pillar stood a priest, a censor of burning incense dangling from a chain in his folded hands. Each man was shorn of hair, and his body was draped in the archaic white robes of his office. As the dancers spun past them, they stared forward, never blinking.

The dancers came together in the center of the room, bending over backwards like petals of a flower unfolding before the sun. Their steps were in perfect timing with the quickening tempo of music. Beside the throne, a gong was struck, the resonant note hanging in the air. Dancers and musicians scurried out of the way as the crowd broke into a quiet hum of anticipation.

Helen craned her neck, trying to get a better view. As the musicians tapped a steady beat on their drums, a young calf was led into the hall by a coterie of female attendants. The animal shook with fear, cooing softly. His forlorn cry echoed throughout the chamber and back to the Trojans waiting in the corridor. It was a pitiful sound that reminded Helen of many similar scenes from her childhood. A pang of sorrow flooded her, knowing the future did not bode well for the poor creature.

He was a magnificent animal, even for one so young. His coat was the sleek black of the finest obsidian. Someone had bathed him in milk, making his hair shine under the light of a dozen braziers burning throughout the throne room. The attendants pranced before him, sprinkling lotus petals before the calf's hooves, their sleek young bodies and perfumed wigs making the women almost identical in appearance. Once they were within ten feet of the throne, the women fell to the floor,

## THE PRINCESS OF PROPHECY

prostrating themselves before their king.

But the man who descended from the high seat wore no crown. His head was covered in a short black wig, a simple band of gold circling his noble brow. His skin was bronzed, a noticeable shade lighter than the workers Helen had spied in the fields. About his waist he wore a *shendyt*, a pleated kilt that fell to his knees and gathered into an ornate pendant at his pelvis. Bands of electrum decorated his well sculpted triceps and on his chest was the most elaborate piece of jewelry Helen had ever seen. The pectoral, in a dazzling display of color, hung to his breast and was inlaid with ivory, lapis-lazuli, garnet, and faience. He was of a similar age to Paris, but where her prince frequently wore a studious frown, this man smiled and effused an air of leisure and indulgence. Was this truly a God-king?

Paris drew a sharp breath and turned to their guides. "Where is Pharaoh?"

Setnakhte instantly shushed him. Chancellor Bay, ignoring his companion's dark glares, leaned in close to Helen and whispered in her ear. "The Crown Prince Seti II. A marvelous specimen of Egyptian nobility, wouldn't you agree?"

Helen stiffened and shifted away from the chancellor. "I couldn't rightfully say."

Inside the hall, Seti lifted an ornate headdress from a pillow offered by a priest. Two tusks of ivory framed a thin plate of hammered gold, the centerpiece shaped into a perfect circle. As Seti raised the sun-disk high, the musicians lifted their voices in a light hymn.

"Re, I call upon Him, in all His names, to provide protection for His chosen. To preserve the Mnevis' flesh in health, strengthen his muscles, maintain all his members in good condition and plenitude for all eternity, just as certain as Re rises in His solar barque across the sky." The prince placed the headdress on the calf's head, tying it into place. The poor creature could scarcely keep its head up.

Seti clapped his hands and servants spilled out of hidden

alcoves carrying heavily laden trays of food. They placed the trays in a fan around the calf. The steamy fragrance of stewed meat blended with the perfumed incense of the room to make a sickly-sweet aroma.

"Accept this banquet, Mnevis of Re, from your venerable father Horus, the Great God of the Sky. He praises you, He loves you, He preserves you, He strikes down all your foes!" The prince's voice rang out with authority.

The calf was too frightened to eat, so the female attendants took plates from the trays and tried to entice the beast, offering up the morsels like prayers before an altar. When it was clear the animal would not cooperate, Seti clapped again, signaling that the ceremony was over. The dancers and musicians started back up, and the hall broke out into light conversation.

"What of the calf?" Helen broke their company's silence, her curiosity getting the best of her.

"He is Mnevis of Re." Bay smiled at her ignorance. "He will retire to the temple where a whole priesthood and harem of heifers awaits him. You are fortunate to see this. A new Mnevis bull is only selected once every fifteen years."

"They don't eat him?"

"Of course not!" Setnakhte gagged at her innocent question.

Bay moved to intercede, but Paris stepped between them, his hulking presence a warning for the chancellor to keep his distance. "The Mnevis is a sacred animal endowed with the gift of prophecy, or so the priests claim. They will honor him as a god so long as he lives."

Helen turned back to the room, watching the attendants fawn over the innocent calf with a new understanding. They beseeched the animal for favor, cooing like vestal virgins before Aphrodite's altar.

*Over an animal?* She shook her head in disbelief. The practice seemed barbaric to her, like those of the pagan tribal men who dwelt in the northern ice lands. This place was truly as mysterious as it was strange.

## THE PRINCESS OF PROPHECY

"Are you ready now?" came Setnakhte's terse response. The general was oddly tense, like a man expecting a knife to be pulled on him.

"Whenever you are." Paris motioned Glaucus and his royal guard forward.

The Trojan and Egyptian guards preceded them into the hall, marching directly to the royal dais. With the jubilant atmosphere of the room, they stirred little notice. The crown prince lounged on a gilded chair, one leg strewn over its arm, as two servants cooled him with colorful fans of ostrich feathers. He was surrounded by various officials and a handful of elegant nobles. An expression of idle curiosity lit up his smooth face as he watched them approach. Bay immediately stepped before the prince and dipped into low bow.

"Your Grace," the chancellor simpered.

But Seti looked past the bald official to his military commander. "I thought you were stationed in the Delta, Setnakhte. What brings you to court?"

Chancellor Bay, reluctantly, quickly made room for his rival. Setnakhte stepped forward and fell to one knee. "An unexpected guest who needed a chaperone, My Prince." He waved Paris forward. "May I present Prince Paris of Troy, second son of King Priam." Ignoring the ugly sneer from Bay, the general stationed himself between the royal household and the Trojan host, his eyes darting between Seti and the other members on the dais, searching for the-Gods-only-knew-what.

"Your Highness." Paris bowed before Seti, holding the *kerykeion* out before him.

On sight of him, Seti leaned forward, his forehead furrowed in thought. "Do I know you?"

"It was a long time ago, Your Highness, but yes." Paris settled into a relaxed stance, allowing his role as diplomat to take control of his facilities. This opening of courtesies was a familiar role for him, and he knew to adopt the manner of his host or risk countless offense. Seti, it appeared, preferred a

casual atmosphere. "I came to Memphis for the coronation of your father Merneptah."

"That's right." Seti pushed back into his cushioned seat. "Troy has long been friend and ally of the realm. May Amun-Re's light shine on you, Prince Paris." The prince sounded certain, but he gave a quick glance over his shoulder to a heavily robed advisor for confirmation. When the vizier nodded, a flash of color drew Paris' attention to the shadowed eaves of the platform.

He froze. *It was impossible.* The woman standing behind the throne was certainly a princess of Egypt, her dress and jewelry distinctly identified her from the Two Lands. *But that face...* sharp and angular with a yellow-tinged pallor, was not Egyptian. She had the blood of the Hatti in her veins, he would swear to it.

There was no doubt the princess was a great beauty. Her thick jet-black hair was natural, unusual for an Egyptian court that standardized the use of wigs. Her full bosom and lush curves were accented by a tight fitting dress, the gossamer fabric as light as spun gold. Her narrow hazel-green eyes, eyes that would have stuck an average man dumb, stared directly at him. He shivered despite the humid warmth.

A sharp grunt pulled Paris back to himself. The disgruntled sound came from the general beside him. Paris stepped back from the dais, trying to mask the revulsion he felt for his ancient enemy, a hatred that was instilled in his bones.

*She is Egyptian, you fool. Not Hatti.* He tore his eyes away from the royal woman just as Seti addressed him again.

"What brings our northern allies to the City of the Sun?"

"A spontaneous sojourn, Your Highness." Paris collected himself. "I am returning home from a voyage to Mycenae. I wished to show my companion the splendors of the Temple. Fortune graced us that the royal family was at court."

"Fortune, indeed." Seti nodded. "We are always pleased to host our Trojan friends. Welcome and well met, Prince Paris. I



## THE PRINCESS OF PROPHECY

pray your company provides a much desired diversion to the crown before the river inundates again." He waved his guard forward, this final sign of acceptance apparently what Setnakhte was waiting for.

"We found the Trojans in the channels beset by pirates, My Prince." The general addressed the throne, the set of his shoulders indicating some minor attempt to relax. "The reavers are becoming more brazen in their attempts."

A stir of upset rippled amongst the gathered nobles. Bay stepped forward, his face flushed an angry red, discontent to be ignored any longer. "You should clear out the rabble, Great Prince. Take a phalanx of your best charioteers and chase them back to deserts and beyond. If you rode at the vanguard, like your noble father once did, victory would be assured!"

"*You dare?*" Seti snapped, a flash of anger directed at his chancellor. Every noble on the dais took an involuntary step back. "You open your mouth and I hear my brother's words parroted out to me. Do you serve the crown, Bay? Or Amenmesse?"

Bay immediately dropped to his knees, kissing the floor before the throne. "The crown, Your Highness! I serve Egypt and all Her glory. *You.*"

"Good. You'd do well to remember that." Seti settled back into his throne, his eyes ablaze. "My place is here, Bay. Not in the field, and not chasing rebels. I should strap your ears for spouting such foolishness while Pharaoh is ill."

Paris tensed. Seti's lightning fast switch to full fury was shocking. It was dangerous to deal with rulers who ran so hot and cold. The crown prince's moment of ire, however, was quickly masked with a false smile, and he turned back to Paris, a shade of embarrassment lingering on his face. "I am distressed you encountered troubles. These Sea-Peoples are becoming a greater nuisance. Some five years prior, Father dealt them a hefty blow, but still they continue to grow in numbers."

"Pirates trouble the northern seas as well," Paris agreed

delicately, his eyes alert for any sign that would set the crown prince into a rage. "My father has formed an armada to keep them from Troy's golden shores. But Your Highness, did I hear you correctly? Is Pharaoh ill?"

A shadow of grief fell over Seti, and he slumped into his chair. "Pharaoh's light wanes on the western horizon. Soon he will join the Gods in the eternal twilight, and my time will rise as king of the Two Lands. The physicians say he will not see the river swell."

Paris swallowed a nervous lump. "My condolences, Noble Prince. We should not disturb you in your hour of grief. If it pleases you, I can retire to Temple and be about my business. My father is expecting a swift return at any rate."

"Nonsense." Seti waved off his protests. "As I said before, your company will be a much desired distraction from the events at hand. Stay, enjoy the endless summer." His invitation was resoundingly final and had the feel of command.

*Of all the ill-fated luck...* Paris cursed silently. He had witnessed the transference of power in Egypt before. It was not an experience he wished to repeat.

"I am honored by your hospitality." Paris began with slight hesitation, unsure how to continue without offending his host. "A respite in the Eternal Lands will be most welcome. Truthfully, though, I cannot dally long. My father *is* expecting our return."

"And your companion?" Seti asked, one eyebrow raised as he looked past Paris to the princess.

Helen had tried to stay inconspicuous throughout the royal exchange. They conversed in Egyptian, so she could not follow their conversation at any rate. She did her best to absorb what she could with her eyes.

To Helen, Seti's pampered manner seemed out of place for a ruling monarch, and the nobles behind him had neither the decency nor grace to mask their ill-mood. Their stiff posture and dark glares spoke of a haughty nature that oozed insult. Only the woman standing directly behind the throne, a

## THE PRINCESS OF PROPHECY

princess of such exquisite beauty Helen had rarely seen her equal, held her composure. Her hazel eyes glinted with curiosity as she studied Helen from afar.

As Paris continued to converse with the regent, Helen found her attention wavering, and her eyes strayed over to the Mnevis. The calf cowered away from his attendants. He now wore several wreaths of flowers along with the enormous headdress.

*Poor thing*, she thought to herself, locking eyes with the terrified animal. She was so enraptured with the creature that when Paris took hold of her hand to pull her forward, she was taken completely off-guard.

"And who might this be?" Seti leaned toward her, an amused twinkle in his eyes.

"Introduce yourself," Paris interpreted into her ear.

Gracefully removing the shawl from her head, she dipped into an elegant curtsy. "I am Helen, Your Grace. From the —"

"She's an Islander," the robed vizier cut her off, hissing viciously and speaking in perfect Greek. "*From the North!*"

Helen was unprepared for such a negative reception. Every noble within hearing distance broke out into shocked whispers, pointing at her with angry fingers. She turned to Paris for direction, but he was at as much a loss as she.

"*Nemhet!*" Seti rebuked his official. "Mind your tongue."

But the vizier was not content to follow commands. "You should heed my words, Highness. An unannounced foreigner lands on our soil caught in the company of pirates, and in his midsts he brings one of *them*? Pharaoh rots in his bed. You should not treat with those who tried to unseat him!"

*How dare he?* Helen bristled with deep offense. Even Menelaus at his most paranoid would not speak so brazenly of a guest before the court. "*Them?*" She could not keep the heat from her voice. "I know not whom you speak, but I am a Princess of Sparta. Disparage my honor at your shame!"

A stunned silence followed her words. Too late Helen

realized she had exposed herself. She was not supposed to claim her parentage. A royal woman traveling in the company of foreigners was highly suspicious. No one would think twice if she were some minor noble seeking her future fortune in Troy.

*The vicious harpy*, Helen simmered. The vizier meant to insult, or he would not have switched to Grecian tongue. So unsettled was she at the man's actions, Helen had forgotten about Bay.

The sickly chancellor, already standing so close it bordered on impropriety, gaped openly at her. "*Princess?*" His face reflected his horror, and he backed away, finally embarrassed by his indecent behavior.

A loud clap broke the tension, followed by several more. Seti lounged in his throne, clearly entertained by the drama unfolding around him. "Of course she is a princess!" He laughed, also switching to Greek. The cutting note in his mirth was directed back toward the chancellor. "You are a fool if you did not see it, Bay. And I thought you more clever than most." When his attention turned back to Helen, his eyes lingered appreciatively as he studied her up and down.

Helen stiffened under the scrutiny. She could always tell when a man desired her. It was in his eyes. His pupils would constrict and his breath became heavy as though the lust-filled thoughts fought for control. Before he could act on those impulses, however, the Egyptian princess stepped forward, a restraining hand placed on Seti's shoulder.

"What is it, Twosret?" He simmered over the interruption.

"Such fire and grace," the princess whispered in awe, her hazel eyes locked on Helen again, soaking in every detail. "If Hathor took human form, I would swear it were She. Nemhet has wronged our guest, Husband. We must make amends."

Helen studied Twosret with equal amazement. She was the beauty of a starlit night and spoke with a courage uncommon in women of the Hellas.

Seti waved her back with an imperious gesture. "My wife

## THE PRINCESS OF PROPHECY

speaks true, Princess. Please forgive the brash words of my vizier." He stared crossly at the scowling official, the disapproval evident on his pinched face. "Ask what you will of Egypt, and we will do our best to comply."

"Thank you, Your Grace." Helen blushed with discomfort. "I require nothing. We came to marvel at the splendors of your Temple. That privilege should suffice."

But Seti was not a man one refused. He leaned forward, a mischievous glint to his dark eyes. "Surely there is something you desire?"

Helen turned to Paris, trying to get some guidance, but his face was a blank slate. Her mind racing, she hunted for a response. "Well, there is one thing..." The admission fell from her tongue before she could think better of it.

"Yes?" Seti pressed.

With the undivided attention of the court upon her, she had no choice but to proceed. "Prince Paris spoke to me of a purification ritual," she stammered. "If it is not too much bother, I would like to undertake it."

Shocked dissent broke out amongst the nobles. Even the priests were affronted by her request, their complaints piling on top of one another:

*"Preposterous."*

*"She's a woman!"*

"Would you offend the Gods?" One priest's shrill voice pierced through the others. "She's a foreigner!"

"The Gods of the Two Lands are the Gods of All." Twosret shot back at the thin man. "A truth, as Second Prophet, you well know, Penanukis!" But the princess' argument only sparked further protest. The dais quickly resembled the atmosphere of a tavern brawl. Fists shook and angry slurs filled the air.

"Quiet!" Seti screeched the command. He waved down the other protestors until order resumed on the dais. Slowly, while his advisors quietly begged his forgiveness, the wild affront

melted from Seti's stiff posture and his indulgent smile returned. He shifted his focus to Helen, lifting the decorated crook and flail from his lap, rubbing the objects suggestively. "By my eyes, Helen of Sparta, you *are* perfection. What need have you for purification?"

She stiffened, knowing she was being mocked. Though her pride flared, demanding these insults be challenged, she heeded Paris' warning for caution. "You flatter me, Your Grace." She nodded to Seti and the other nobles on the dais, locking eyes with the only sympathetic face before her, that of the Egyptian princess. "I did not mean to offend. Had I known the ritual was forbidden to women, I would not have asked."

"But it is not!" Twosret objected, drawing the angry mutters of the gathered priests. Again, the princess' courage amazed Helen. She could never have spoken so openly in Agamemnon's court. The Mycenaean king made it abundantly clear how he dealt with unwelcome outbursts from his queen and royal sister.

Twosret stepped forward, her proud stance silencing her detractors as much as Seti's demands. "If the need is great, Pharaoh can approve your petition." With a delicate gesture, she dipped her head respectfully to her husband. "Pharaoh, or his Prince Regent."

Seti's eyes narrowed. He had the look of a man weighing his options. He glanced between his wife and the priests, his mischievous smile returning. "State your case, Princess," he urged her, "and know that Egypt will treat you fairly."

Helen hesitated, her heart hammering in disbelief. Was it possible? Could all she had suffered in Mycenae and before, all the guilt and shame, be washed away? That possibility took hold of her, and a flare of hope blossomed in her chest. She found herself desiring this ritual with a desperation that frightened her.

Before she could answer, Paris stepped beside her. "*It's not safe, Helen. Withdraw the request. Tell him you made a mistake,*" he whispered urgently into her ear.

## THE PRINCESS OF PROPHECY

But it was not a mistake. She wanted a future in Troy, not just a chance to live. Just as leaving Mycenae required a leap of faith, so too did this. Helen pushed him away. Steeling her nerves, she approached the throne. "I have lived my whole life along the western frontier, Your Grace. Our ways are brutal, cruel." She poured all her hurt into that plea, allowing her hope to show naked on her face. "I wish to be cleansed of it before I travel to more... civilized lands. Please, grant me this boon."

She could see Seti waver. He stared deeply into her eyes like one struck. Helen did not blink. Nor did she turn her head. "Please," she pleaded again and dropped to her knees. She prayed it was enough to sway the prince.

Paris had to fight himself from rushing to her side. He hated seeing Helen humble herself before any man. He had no idea what possessed her to ask for the ritual, or why she petitioned for it so fervently, but there was something compelling about her honest plea. Seti would be a man made of stone to deny her.

Unfortunately, despite what Twosret claimed, Seti's authority only went so far. It was a matter for the Temple, and the decision did not rest with the crown alone. The five priests crowded about Seti and began bickering amongst themselves in Egyptian.

*"She's a woman. It's never been done before."*

*"Perhaps, but we should consult with the First Prophet."*

*"Impossible, we can't let a foreigner into the inner sept! Her pagan blood will offend Amun. The First cannot change that."*

*"We must refuse."*

Paris' heart sunk as he listened. Helen had not stirred from her respectful pose. She was fortunate not to know what they said. Her courage, which so clearly captivated Seti, would evaporate with that knowledge.

But Helen was not blind. She could sense defeat in the air. Seti said something sharply to his advisors in Egyptian, and they answered back with similar bite. The sterile priests

studied her with heavy frowns. There was no question of their position on this request.

*I tried.* She tried to console herself, but all the anxiety and frustration of the past two weeks overwhelmed her. Her shoulders sagged and she dropped her gaze to the floor, cursing herself for her naiveté. From the moment Paris spoke of the ritual, she felt drawn to it, as though the Gods were speaking to her, showing her the way to reclaim her honor, to prove that her rash decision to run away with Paris was right.

*You naive fool,* she chided herself. She was too old to cling to such foolish hopes and dreams. Her tenure in Mycenae should have taught her to be wary of that nonsense. She raised her head, determined not to let her hurts show on her face.

What awaited her was far more upsetting.

Every person on the dais, *in the entire throne room*, was staring at her, eyes wide with disbelief. Too late she realized their heated conversations had come to an abrupt halt. In its vacant place, a gasp echoed down the hall. She lifted her head, curious to discover what new drama this foretold.

A soft touch on her elbow jolted her from her thoughts. The warmth of hot breath tickled her skin and was soon followed by a kiss from a slimy, rough tongue. Helen turned, surprised to see the young calf nuzzling at her side.

The Mnevis Bull had come to comfort her.