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## Excerpt from The Necklace of Goddess Athena

### Prologue

Efimios stood at the edge of the precipice. Down below, the sea raged with tremendous force. A howling wind caused his robes to billow like broken sails on a ship lost in a storm. He glanced at the necklace in his hand, his lips twisting with hate. The salty bite of the wind stung his eyes but, strangely enough, that gave him comfort. He couldn't have chosen a better place for what he was about to do.

"Athena, almighty Pallada! Protectress of the city of Athens, hear me!" He cried out with all his might, yet his voice was barely audible over the deafening crash of the waves on the rocks below. As he stretched out his hand, the sky erupted with lightning and loud crashes of thunder. The

pendant was now hidden from view inside his fist, but its golden chain was swirling in the wind, whipping his hand. Undeterred, Efimios looked up to the rumbling heavens, his teeth clenched, his eyes alight with fury.

“Here in my hand,” he bellowed, “I hold the necklace that you gave me when I was only a child. For all the services I have offered you, you have repaid me with cruelty! I could understand it if you were to punish only me. But my son? What has Phevos ever done to you? He is just a boy! How could you do this to him?”

Efimios shook his head forlornly, then took another look at the necklace. It sparkled under the flashes of lightning that ripped the sky, yet its beauty was lost upon him.

“Do you forget so easily?” he burst out, eyes darting skywards. “I have been at your command for so long! And this is how you thank me? Did you think that following your orders has been easy for me? Because of you, I belonged nowhere and to no one, having anything but a normal life. Since you chose to repay me in this manner, surely you cannot expect me to serve you any longer! Indeed, this is where it all ends! Your wretched cave in the Acropolis hill will *never* be used again! I have made sure of that! As for your precious necklace, this evil noose you had me wear around my neck, I have minded it for you long enough!”

With a forceful throw, the necklace of Goddess Athena disappeared in the vastness of the foamy sea. A multitude of thunderbolts flashed all around Efimios as he started to walk away from the precipice. He quickened his pace, and his face brightened with the promise of a smile. His heart felt lighter already. Without a shadow of a doubt, he knew one day his suffering would end.

# Chapter 1

## Eleven years later

First, there was this tremendous roar. Everything around them shook, and a blinding light surrounded them as they were taken through a cyclone of ear-piercing sounds.

Phevos held the hand of his sister Daphne within the forceful vortex of time. Neither of them knew where they were headed as they swirled frightened beyond description, their bodies surrendered to the powerful whirlwind. Their eyes were tightly shut against the blinding flashes of light, and a sound that resembled a tornado tortured their ears.

In the twenty years of his life, Phevos could never have imagined the intensity of the experience. Despite his agony, he managed to recall random fragments from his father's stories while the storm of light and sound continued. Efimios, his father and teacher, had described to him many times the Passage through time, but the young man had never expected there would come a day when he would experience it himself.

Phevos gasped when his sister's hand slipped away from his, despite his best intentions. He called out her name, but the tremendous roar of the Passage drowned out his voice. All at once, there was darkness, then a soothing silence. Next thing he knew, he was lying on the ground.

A strong buzz still sounded in his ears. It took a few moments to fade as he opened his eyes and tried to gather his wits. His body felt numb at first, but he managed to sit up and look around him. The ground felt wet under him, and the air smelled of grass. The moon shone high above in a starry sky with a velvet light that was ample for him to inspect his surroundings with ease. He was in an orchard. There were trees, plants and bushes all around him. His heart gave a thump. He was alone.

“Daphne!” Phevos darted his eyes in all directions, his expression frantic. His sister was only nineteen. Up until a few minutes ago, she was living a secluded life within the safe walls of their rich estate house and its beautiful gardens. He knew well that adventure did not suit her disposition.

“Over here!” came a wavering voice from the bushes to his left. Fearing the worst, Phevos sprang to his feet. His attire, a white shirt and jeans, although perfectly suitable for a young man his age, would have been baffling to anyone who might have known where he had just come from. Both garments were heavily stained with mud. Phevos ran jumping over the bushes, his shoulder-length blond hair waving in the air like a lion’s mane.

Daphne sat by a lemon tree, holding her head with one hand. When she looked up, her eyes were huge, childlike. Auburn hair fell on her shoulders in rich, bouncy curls. Her skin was perfectly white, her facial features flawless and delicate. She looked like a fine porcelain doll. Her deep blue dress was simple and rather unimaginative, but the stunning jewels she wore on her ears and around her neck befitted perfectly her rare beauty.

“Almighty Zeus! What has happened? Are you all right?” Phevos knelt before her, his face alight with concern. Willing himself to calm down, he used the cuff of his sleeve to wipe the blood from a minor wound on Daphne’s temple. It was only a scratch, but Phevos felt guilty all the same. He’d tried all he could to hold her hand through the Passage but he had failed. *What if I’d lost her?* He shuddered at the very thought.

Daphne grimaced when he pressed the fabric on her temple again, but then she forced a smile. “Don’t worry! It is nothing . . . I just slipped and fell. I must have hit my head on a rock . . .” Her voice trailed off, her face contorting with discomfort from a strong migraine.

“It’ll be all right,” mumbled Phevos, not knowing what else to say. He could see his sister’s injury was minor but felt uneasy, all the same, knowing he couldn’t ensure her safety

in this unknown world. The thought overwhelmed him, and he made a silent plea to the Gods for protection.

“Come here, sweet Sister, try to stand up!” Phevos pulled her up gently. When he attempted to let go of her, she faltered on her feet and grabbed his waist to steady herself.

“I do not think I can walk, Phevos . . . I feel very dizzy,” she said, bringing a hand to her brow. Then, they both heard frantic barking. They turned and saw a small-sized dog standing a few feet away, making a noise that was too loud for its size. Phevos and Daphne were stunned by this encounter but not frightened. The dog didn’t look fierce.

Its anxious barking, combined with its small size, seemed rather comical to them, and they would have grinned, amused, had their situation not been grave. The last thing they needed was a yappy dog that could attract strangers to them.

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Ksenia sighed. Manos’s room was messy as usual. As much as she loved her little brother, she wished she could trade one of his many good points for his disregard for tidiness.

A few items of clothing were lying in a heap on the armchair under a mutated warrior, a T-Rex, and a half-eaten pack of biscuits. Ksenia picked up the clothes, then darted her eyes to the bed, her lip curling with distaste at finding a dozen comic books scattered on it. Under the bed, dirty socks lay on the carpet, others half-hidden inside two pairs of shoes. Ksenia wrinkled her nose with disapproval and picked up the socks, adding them to the pile of clothes in her hands.

As she turned to go, she noticed the computer screen on the desk. A screensaver she hadn’t seen before displayed a series of stunning underwater pictures. Intrigued, she left the clothes on the armchair and approached the monitor to take a closer look. Although she didn’t have her own computer, at the university where she studied Business

Administration she had plenty of opportunity to use them. She was quite computer literate, but her twelve-year-old brother was already a bit of an expert. She didn't mind that he spent hours at his desk every day playing computer games, although she'd prefer that he spent less time indoors and more out on the street, playing with other children.

Ksenia clicked on the mouse to see what was running on the computer. Manos was downloading freeware games. Ksenia raised a single brow and gave a knowing smile. *No surprise there.*

"What are you doing here?" Manos stood at the door, his dark hair tousled. He had his hands on his hips in an inquiring manner, but his face revealed no trace of irritation.

"Busted!" Ksenia giggled raising both hands. She picked up the clothes from the armchair and turned to face him again. "I came in here to find you, and instead, I found these." She put out her arms and pulled a face of mock indignation.

Manos rolled his eyes. "I'm willing to forget you were spying in here, if you promise not to nag about my room again. Okay?" He gave a crooked smile.

"Sounds good to me." Ksenia giggled as she walked past him. "And just to show you what a multi-talented spy I am, I'm going to go in there now and make you pasta for tonight, all right?" Smirking, she pointed to the kitchen across the hall.

"Great, I'm starving!" Manos rubbed his tummy and turned around to follow his sister. "Oh! I'd better feed Odysseus. He must be hungry too by now."

Ksenia chuckled. "That's for sure! He'll start barking outside the door any moment now if you don't hurry."

The kitchen felt warm. The big table that reminded Ksenia of happy dinners with her parents was set with a white tablecloth. On one corner, there were neat piles of freshly ironed clothes. Thick curtains with a flowery pattern hid the view to the orchard from the window. Ksenia placed the clothes in the wash and put away the ironing board while

Manos opened a dog food can and went out the kitchen door to feed their pet.

The young girl looked at the round clock on the wall. It was eight. She'd finished all her house chores by dinnertime just like any other Saturday. She didn't mind that as long as her Sundays were free to do as she pleased. Since their parents' mysterious disappearance eleven years ago, Ksenia and Manos had no other family but each other. Sunday was their special day, which they'd always spend together having fun. If they chose to stay at home, they'd watch TV or play good old-fashioned board games. Sometimes they'd go out instead, but it didn't have to be anything fancy. Simple things often provided greater pleasure.

Every week they'd decide together what to do on Sunday. This was something that their parents used to practice and now the children carried on the family tradition. Ksenia had experienced countless Sunday pleasures in the company of her parents. Her memories were crystal clear despite the fact she couldn't have been older than eight years old at the time. She remembered, for example, having ice cream cones together in the summer. Under the scorching sun, they'd wind up giggling madly as they licked melted chocolate off their fingers.

Sometimes, they'd sit in a park feeding and petting the stray cats. Even today, the purr of a cat reminded Ksenia of her father. He was a bit of a cat-whisperer, in the sense that he could tame even the wildest creature, getting even the biggest males to lie belly up and purr loudly in response to his gentle petting. Yet, amongst all the simple Sunday pleasures they'd often sought as a family, some had been quite exceptional. The fact that you had to wait for months on end for these, only made them even more special.

There were nights in August for instance, when the view of the full moon from the top of the Acropolis hill or from a high terrace could steal your breath away. The moon would slide over the clouds like a seducing princess dressed in her

finest, silvery silk. The sky would be full of stars that trembled feebly, like servants that bowed before her. During those nights under the light of the August full moon, the city of Athens would become an enchanted kingdom that slept lazily under the sweet light of its ethereal mistress.

Those nights had the power to make you feel strong and weak at the same time, because the soul could then fly all the way to the moon. During these experiences, Ksenia had come to believe that if she were to whisper a wish, the stars would surely hear her. These are beliefs that once entered in the soul of a child, can never be uprooted from it, no matter what blows life may have in store. And so, the power of faith was kept safely inside her chest, where her soul remained forever gazing at a starry sky, the scent of basil lingering in the air.

Ksenia smiled melancholically. She'd just returned to the kitchen after putting away the ironed clothes. She walked to the window to peer outside, but it was far too dark to make anything out. Her mind wandered again. Manos was only a baby when their parents disappeared, so he had no memories of them. Ksenia, on the other hand, remembered so much! One Sunday, they had all returned home wet to the bone. A sudden rain had caught them by surprise, as they were walking lazily around the lanes of Plaka, the old quarter of Athens where Ksenia still lived. Despite being wet, they were laughing madly when they got home. Their spirits were high on the smell of the soil and the aroma of honeysuckle and jasmine coming from every front yard.

This particular memory often led Ksenia back to the same lanes. She picked flowers during her walks there, like her mother used to. She'd put them in the vase that still stood on the windowsill in the kitchen, and Ksenia now did that too. She felt it was her duty to pass on her memories to her brother, and to keep them alive for their parents' sake.

Tenderly, her fingers caressed the heads of two pink carnations that stood lonesome inside the vase. Ksenia



would never give up on her parents. She always hoped that one day they would return and explain everything. She knew in her heart they were alive, and that was enough for her to keep believing.

She turned her back to the window and tried to focus her mind on happier thoughts. Her brother would walk in any moment, and she didn't want him to see the sorrow in her eyes. For the next morning, they had planned a walk to the Pillars of Olympian Zeus through the lanes of Plaka. Then, they'd visit a computer & games exhibition at the nearby Zappeion Hall. This would be Manos's main treat for Sunday morning.

Afterwards, her contribution to the plan for the day would take them to the adjoining National Garden for a leisurely stroll. This was her favorite place in the whole of Athens. She couldn't wait to sit on a bench before the duck pond. She could see the sunlight now, dancing on the thick foliage of the trees, fluttering above her. Soon, it would reach down to caress her face again. It would fuse with the children's laughter behind her closed eyelids, lifting her out of herself for a while.

The sound of the door opening startled her out of her reverie.

"Ksenia, Odysseus is not outside. I can't find him!" Manos had returned ruddy-cheeked, his facial features pinched.

Ksenia gave an exasperated sigh. "Oh no! Just a sec; I'll just get our jackets. Let's try to find him before he causes chaos again," she said, bolting out of the kitchen. Five minutes later, they were outside in the cold, March night. Manos led the way holding a flashlight.

Odysseus hadn't got his name by chance. He had been named after the leading character of the Odyssey for a reason. His roaming adventures had become legendary in the area and had caused his owners embarrassment with the neighbors more than once. The little dog often managed to find small openings in the wire fencing of the orchard

despite his owners' best efforts to mend them. During many of his getaways, he had trampled on the neighbors' vegetable patches. It had been mortifying to Ksenia to apologize to her annoyed neighbors who'd bring him back, announcing in every detail the damage to their produce.

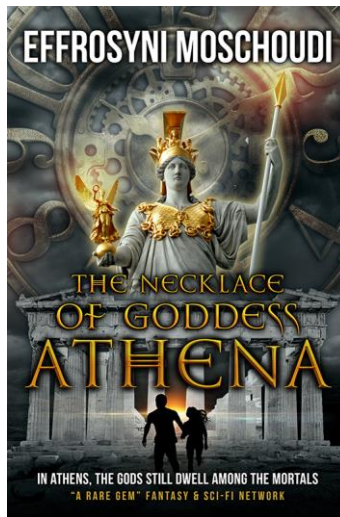
But Ksenia and Manos loved their pet despite all that. They had raised him from a tiny puppy, and he was now a sprightly three-year-old. To them, he was the most faithful friend and guard. They couldn't get enough of petting him while looking at his clever little eyes that gazed back at them with adoration. Whatever frustration his antics caused them to feel, it never lasted long. Of course, they were now livid with him once again, having to roam in the semi-darkness because of him, their stomachs grumbling with hunger.

The orchard was inaccessible in many parts, as nobody had tended to it for a good while. It was a stretch of almost two acres. Wire fencing on either side marked the boundaries between the property and neighboring gardens of fellow Plaka inhabitants. On the back, the land reached up to the foot of the Acropolis hill where a massive rock face stood vertically. Ksenia and Manos felt grateful for the border on this side of their property for two reasons: first, the Parthenon towered over their land offering them a stunning view of one of the greatest miracles of the ancient world. Secondly, and more trivially, the rock face meant they had one less side to worry about when it came to their pet's Houdini-style escapes.

Tonight, the Parthenon stood proud as always, despite its deterioration over the ages. The moonlight surrounded it with a misty, surreal light. Ksenia halted to marvel at it for a few moments and then continued to follow Manos, treading carefully, her eyes glued to the rough ground. There were dips and bushes everywhere. Ksenia stubbed her toe on a rocky bump and let out a small cry. Her delicate leather shoes didn't offer much support for trekking in such inhospitable grounds in the dark. She assured her brother,

who came to her rescue, that she was all right and silently, scolded herself for her procrastination. She was forever putting off finding someone to tend to the orchard and to sort out this unacceptable mess.

Then, they heard Odysseus. Ksenia and Manos exchanged wild glances and broke to a sprint, following the frantic noise their pet was making. It sounded as though it was coming from the rock face. Little did they care now about the mud that splattered on their clothes, as they ran through murky puddles of rainwater.



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