

Journey of the Pharaohs

Prologue - Valley of the Kings

Egypt, 1074 B.C.

(During the time of the 18th Dynasty)

Heat shimmered in waves across the Valley of the Kings as the merciless sun baked the desert sands into clay.

High above the valley, at the edge of a cliff, a bearded man named Khemet lay flat on his stomach, sweating beneath the noonday sun and looking for any sign of movement. A fly buzzed around his ear. Sweat trickled down the side of his face, but nothing moved down below.

The valley was still—as the resting place of the buried Pharaohs should be. The only movement was a dust devil that rose from the southern end and danced across the sand.

Khemet slid back from the edge. Several men in linen robes crouched there. A small boy stood next to them. Khemet addressed the child. “What is it you’ve brought us here to see?”

Villagers in Thebes called the boy *Qsn*—which meant Sparrow. They used the term not because he was small for his age and tended to chirp as he spoke, but as an insult. To the people of Egypt, the sparrow was a nuisance, stealing food and spoiling fruit. The townspeople saw the orphaned boy in the same light.

Khemet knew differently. The child was a beggar, but not a thief. In fact, he worked hard for the smallest of coins, gathering information, watching everything with sharp eyes. His size and age meant he was often invisible even in plain sight.

The boy crawled to the edge of the cliff, looking over the valley and then tugging at Khemet's arm. He extended a tiny finger, pointing down into the valley. "Pharaoh's tomb has been opened. The stone has been thrown down."

Squinting to see in the bright sun, Khemet looked past the magnificent three-story temple of Hatshepsut, with its long central stairway and rows of towering columns, he ignored the piles of rubble sealing the entrance of some lesser known ancestors, and finally focused on a gap in the rock where smooth limestone blocks denoted the entrance to the tomb of Horemheb one of the more recently buried Pharaohs.

His eyes weren't as sharp as the child's but after shielding them from the sun he began to see into the shadows. The whitewashed slab which had been used to seal the tomb, lay on the ground, broken in two where it had fallen. The path in front of the tomb had become heavily rutted from carts and oxen.

"The boy is right," Khemet said. "The tomb has been violated."

"And just what does he want us do about that?" one of the other men said.

The boy looked back unafraid to address the adults. "You are the Medjay," he said in his small, high voice. "You are the servants of Rameses XI of Memphis. You guard the resting places of the Sons of Amun."

Khemet smiled. He *had been* a captain in the Medjay—a force of warriors appointed by the Pharaohs to guard the tombs of their ancestors—but his position had been swept away in the political upheaval that was dividing Egypt.

“Perhaps the sparrow doesn’t hear everything,” one of the men said. “We’re no longer needed by the Sons of Amun.”

“But Rameses- “

“Rameses rules in Memphis and Alexandria,” Khemet explained more patiently, “but this is Upper Egypt and Herihor has taken the title of Great-House for himself.”

The boy’s face showed contempt for that. “Herihor is only the high priest, he is—”

“Here he is a king,” Khemet snapped. “There are those who would cut your tongue out for saying otherwise.”

The boy shrank back.

Khemet allowed the lesson to sink in before adding, “Fortunately, we’re not among them.”

The men behind them laughed. The child looked relieved.

“Egypt is not what it was,” one of his men said. “The weaker it gets, the more Pharaohs it needs. Soon there will be one in every region.”

This brought more laughter from Khemet, though the boy looked stricken. He was still young enough to believe in concepts like duty and honor and above all: the glory of kings descended from the gods. Those beliefs were not unlearned without great pain.

Khemet turned his attention back to the open tomb. “We should investigate and see what they’ve taken.”

Leaving the cliffside, he led the group around and down a secret trail that took them to the valley below. These were hidden paths only the Medjay used.

Arriving in the valley the light became brighter and more dazzling, as if they were walking the path to heaven itself. Unlike the tawny cliffs around them, the valley floor was covered in white dust and pulverized limestone, shavings and chips from the great blocks that had been worked and cut and manhandled into place almost continuously for the past thousand years.

The reflected light caused Khemet to pull a scarf across his eyes and he entered the tomb of Horemheb looking like a bandit.

Once inside, he removed the wrap and stood in the entry corridor. The cool air caressed his body, while his eyes adjusted slowly to the dark. As his pupils dilated, the splendor of the artisan's work appeared before him; the ceiling and walls whitewashed and covered in hieroglyphics. Statues, carvings and other works of art. All lit up by the light from the entrance of the tomb and the torches mounted on the wall which gave off a pure white light as they burned a smokeless blend of castor oil and natron.

Khemet took one of the torches and moved forward. His men followed close behind. The boy walked at his side.

Passing a second doorway, they entered the burial chamber reserved for servants and lesser wives.

Khemet stopped and pushed the boy back into a cleft in the wall. "Quiet now," he said. "We're not alone." Reaching under his garment and pulling out a short sword he waved the men up beside him. "Be ready."

Without a sound, Khemet stepped through the next doorway. He passed two statues of Anubis, the flickering torch in his hand casting shadows of the unmoving beasts on the far wall.

“Worthless guards,” one of the men whispered of the Anubis, “sitting idly by as robbers plunder the belongings meant to equip the Pharaoh in the afterlife.”

The sound of a tool hitting stone could be heard up ahead. Moving into the Pharaoh’s burial chamber, Khemet found the source of the noise, a priest and a stonecutter carving a message into the far wall. Between them lay the stone sarcophagus of Hoermheb. Its heavy lid had been thrown down and discarded. The golden coffin, death mask and the mummified pharaoh were gone.

The priest and the stonecutter turned as they noticed the flickering torch light. “It’s high time you’ve returned,” the priest said without looking back. “We have more items that need to be moved.”

“You mean stolen,” Khemet said.

Only now did the priest turn. “Who are you?” he demanded.

“I am Khemet, captain of the guard. And you are a thief.”

The priest did not back down. “I am the hand of the Great House. Servant of Pharaoh Herihor. I do the Pharaoh’s work. You men are trespassers and deserters.”

And I will be a hero when I serve your head to Rameses, Khemet thought.

He stepped forward with his sword raised. “What have you done with the Pharaoh? Where are his gifts?”

“They have been relocated,” the priest said, “to keep them safe from scavengers like you.”

The priest's voice had turned snide and awfully bold for a scrawny man facing a soldier with his sword drawn. At the sound of movement Khemet knew why.

An arrow flew down the corridor, piercing one of his companions from behind. The man fell with a grunt and nothing more.

A spear followed, catching another of the men as he turned.

Khemet pressed himself against the wall as a second arrow flew past. This one sailed into the burial chamber and hit the stone cutter in the stomach. He tumbled off the ledge and hit the floor, writhing in pain.

With the reflexes of a veteran warrior, Khemet dropped low and charged the archer in the hallway, upending him before he could string another arrow. Thrusting his sword, Khemet impaled the man, yanking the blade back violently and pulling it free.

Seeing the last of his men speared, Khemet threw his sword, impaling the attacker. The man dropped to his knees and then fell sideways. Only the priest and Khemet remained, but the priest had used the fighting in the outer chamber to his advantage.

With Khemet engaged, the priest had drawn a cobra-headed dagger from beneath his gaudy robes. He rushed forward, plunging it into Khemet's side.

Khemet twisted and slashed with a dagger of his own as he fell back. A hand closer and it would have been a fatal strike, but the priest had pulled out of range.

Falling to the ground, Khemet reached for the knife he'd been stabbed with. He could not remove it. The blade was deep, the wound burned strangely.

Fueled by anger he stood, raising his weapon. The priest backed off further, but curiously did not flee.

“Face me,” Khemet said. “And I will send you to the afterlife you claim to adore.”

He stepped forward trying to close the gap, but his feet were unsteady. He swayed to one side, placing a hand on the wall. Steadied, Khemet remained upright, but his head swam.

This was strange, he thought. He’d been wounded in battle a dozen times, once he’d almost bled to death, but never had he felt like this. He reached for the dagger, pulled it from his side and noticed an empty chamber cut out from the center of the blade.

“The poison was meant for the stone cutter,” the priest said. “To keep him quiet when his work was done. It will serve its purpose just as well in your blood.”

Khemet threw the cobra headed knife down. Steeling his resolve, he stepped forward again, but by now his eyes were playing tricks on him. The shadows around the tomb came alive. The Anubis and the crocodile moving and speaking.

The chamber began to spin. Khemet’s own dagger fell to the ground, clanging against the stone floor as it hit. Fighting to remain upright and summoning the last remaining stores of his strength, Khemet pushed forward, lunging for the priest with his bare hands, grasping at the priest’s robe and catching nothing but air.

He landed face down on the stone and rolled over on his side. He heard music. Voices. But saw only the face of the treacherous priest. The man leaned over him, mouthed a curse and then straightened raising a stone over his head, preparing to smash Khemet’s skull.

Before he could strike, the priest’s face tensed in agony, and the tip of a blade burst out through his belly. The stone fell backwards, and the priest toppled over dead and looking quite surprised to be so.

The boy appeared from behind the body.

“I’m sorry,” he said rushing to Khemet. “I shouldn’t have told you. I am *Qsn*. The bringer of sorrow.”

Khemet tried to focus on the child. As he did a swirl of light and shadow grew behind him, spreading like wings. In his delirium, Khemet saw the boy as a living bird, but not one so small and weak. “You are the falcon,” Khemet told him. “You are Horus, the last protector of the Pharaohs...”

He reached out and laid his hand on the boy’s shoulder. And then the world turned to blinding gold and all he saw and knew, vanished.

The boy stood silent as Khemet’s hand fell to the ground. The tomb was cold and silent and filled with death, but not the glory of the Pharaohs. He could think of nothing to do, no place to go, but he knew he would be killed if he stayed there.

Getting up, he rushed to the entrance and back out into the blazing sun. The ruts and groves in the hard-packed ground led off to the south. The trail of thieves. He followed it almost without thinking.

By sunset, he’d caught up to a slow-moving caravan as a row of heavily laden carts neared the banks of the Nile. There, beyond a bend in the river, lay a natural harbor and more ships than *Qsn* had ever seen. Large ships, with long oars and masts built for heavy sails.

Some were tied up at a limestone dock, others waited their turn anchored in the quiet water, while still others were out in the channel, allowing the current to move them slowly downstream.

As the boy watched, treasures that belonged to the dead were loaded on ship after ship. Goats and other animals were brought aboard as well. Food-stocks and amphoras and bags of dates and other fruits. In the midst of the commotion, the boy slipped aboard one of the ships, hid among the animals and soon fell asleep.

He woke to find himself part of a fleet heading south under full sail. They passed Memphis, the city of Rameses in the dark of night. They sailed into the flooded delta the next day. And then out into the sea.

By the time the boy was discovered and captured, the fleet had sailed from the mouth of the Nile and out beyond the edge of the known world.

Chapter 1

Roosevelt Field, New York

May 1, 1927

On a pleasant afternoon that marked the first day of May, a small crowd gathered at an airfield on Long Island. A roped off area was set aside for reporters, while further back spectators from the general public jostled for position. Nearby, on a small platform, a brass band played.

A photographer snapped a picture of the crowd and the band. “You have to give Jake Melbourne credit,” the photographer said. “He really knows how to put on a show.”

Jake Melbourne was a World War One ace, a celebrity daredevil aviator and, as the photographer had noted, and all-around showman. While other pilots wore brown leather and drab wool pants for warmth, Jake wore a bright red jacket adorned with epaulets. He wrapped his neck in a golden scarf and his feet in ostrich skin boots. Over the years he’d become famous, winning various flying contests and plenty notoriety. Now he was going after the biggest ribbon in aviation: the Orteig Prize; \$25,000 to the first pilot to fly non-stop from New York to Paris, or vice versa. It meant hopping the Atlantic Ocean in one leap, and many people thought it couldn’t be done.

“What good is it if he gets himself killed,” one reporter said.

“It makes for a good headline,” another reporter said.

“Winning the prize would be a better one,” another reporter said. “If anybody can do it this guy can.”

“You think Melbourne’s going to make it?” the photographer asked. “You really think he’s going to be the one? What about this Lindberg guy?”

“Who?” the reporter said.

“The guy with the silver plane. He’s parked over at Curtiss field next door. Flew in last week from San Diego. Set a cross country record on the way.”

“Oh, you mean *Slim*,” the reporter said with disdain. “Not a chance. His plane’s only got one engine. Melbourne’s got two and the power to carry more fuel.”

“If you ask me it can’t be done,” another reporter leaned in to say. “Four men have already been killed. Three other planes have crashed and the French team in the *White Bird* are still missing. It’s been a week. Wherever they are, they’re not still flying.”

The *White Bird* was the English translation of *L’Oiseau Blanc*, the name Charles Nungesser and François Coli had given their airplane. They’d left Paris on May 8th in spectacular style but hadn’t been heard from since crossing the coast of Normandy. Searches for the plane and its crew were being carried out on both sides of the Atlantic, even as Melbourne and other contestants prepared for their attempts.

“You wonder where Melbourne gets his money from?” The skeptical reporter continued. “Bryd has the Wanamakers, Fonck had Sikorski.”

“I heard Melbourne is funding the flight himself,” the photographer said.

“And I heard he’s flat broke and desperate for the prize,” the reporter replied. “Likes to gamble you know.”

The photographer considered that. “Well, it doesn’t get much higher stakes than risking your life. Makes you wonder why anyone would even try it.”

* * *

In a planning room, near the back of a hanger, Jake Melbourne and his financial backers were having a similar conversation.

Melbourne stood tall with his boots on, hair slicked back and his red jacket hanging open. His meticulously trimmed mustache gave him a passing resemblance to Errol Flynn. He’d slept in very late in order to be rested for the long solo flight, but he looked tired and angry. “I’m not going,” he insisted. “Not with that thing onboard.”

He was pointing to a compact steamer trunk, which, though it was small in size, was extremely heavy.

The men across from him seemed unimpressed by the outburst. There were three of them, very different from each other but with a family resemblance.

The older man in the center was thin and balding with glasses on and wearing a double-breasted Mackinaw overcoat. Beside him was a bruiser who looked like he’d come straight from jail or a bare knuckles boxing ring. His nose was flat, one eye recently blackened, and his ears chewed up like he’d taken a hundred punches to the side of the head.

The third member of the trio was younger still. He was of more average height and build and he considered himself Jake’s friend. But that didn’t count for much at the moment.

It was the older, bespectacled man who responded. "Listen to me Jake. We're all here to help each other. Remember when the Irishmen wanted to break your hands for stiffing them on the three grand you owed? We paid them off for you. Not only did we do that, we helped you buy this plane and bought out your other markers. Now, we need something from you."

"I'm going to pay off those markers after I win the prize," Jake said. "That was the deal. You get half, plus we sell the plane. The rest I keep."

"That *was* the deal," the older man said. "We got a different deal in mind now. In this deal, you get to keep the whole prize. You just have to deliver that trunk to a friend of ours on the continent. He'll meet you in Paris after you land."

Melbourne shook his head. "If I put that thing on my plane, I'll have to offload fifty gallons of fuel. One bad stretch of weather and I'll never make Paris. A little bit of a head wind and I might not even make the coast."

"You said, going east instead of west puts the wind at your back," the older man insisted.

"I still need fuel."

"Maybe we could take out some other equipment," the youngest member of the trio said. "I've heard Lindberg isn't using radio. I heard he doesn't want a parachute. Says the equipment is too heavy and unreliable." The young man turned to Jake. "You taught me how to dead-reckon," he said. "You can use compass and your watch."

"Lindberg's crazy," Melbourne replied. "Once he takes off, he's gonna vanish just like the French. I need that equipment. And I need every gallon of fuel. Why don't you put the trunk on a steamship? Then I'll meet your friend in Paris and tell him which ship it's on."

The older man looked at his sons. The bruiser shook his head. "Hoover's boys are closing in fast, and the docks are crawling with flatfoots looking for us. Besides who could we trust?"

"Hoover?" Melbourne blurted out. "You're telling me the Bureau of Investigation is looking for this thing?"

The older man nodded. "We've had a misunderstanding with them," he admitted. "Why do you think we funded you in secret?"

Melbourne rubbed at his temple and ran a hand through his thick blonde hair. Stepping forward he grabbed the trunk, strained to lift it up and then put it back down. "Way too heavy," he said. Out of instinct, curiosity and stupidity, he opened it to see what was inside. "What in the world?"

A boot slammed the top down so suddenly that Melbourne almost lost his fingers.

"I wish you hadn't done that Jake-y." It was the older man. His foot on the trunk, a revolver in his hand.

"You can't be serious," Melbourne said.

"Now what," the bruiser said. "Those stones can tie us into everything. The guys we killed at the train station were carrying them. We get caught it's the chair."

"I didn't see anything," Melbourne stammered. "Just a bunch of..."

Without finishing his statement, Melbourne threw a punch knocking the revolver out of the old man's hand. As the weapon hit the hanger floor, Jake turned and sprinted for the door, but the bruiser tackled him around the waist, landing on him like a sack of flour.

Melbourne squirmed to get free and managed to slam an ostrich skinned boot into the man's already flattened nose. Blood spurted and the man grabbed his face, letting Melbourne go.

Jumping up Melbourne froze in his tracks. The youngest man in the group had blocked his way, and he now held a pistol as well.

“You have to fly it,” the young man said. “Otherwise we all go down, and that means you too.”

Melbourne was past caring. He pulled open the top drawer on his desk, reaching for a Derringer that lay there.

“Don’t!” the younger man shouted.

It was too late for reason. Melbourne grabbed the pistol and spun. The fight ended with a pair of gunshots ringing out.

* * *

To the crowd outside, the shots were barely noticeable. Muffled by the walls of the hanger and masked by the playing of the band, no one could be sure if they came from bottles of champagne being opened, a rimshot from the drummer, or the backfire of a nearby car or plane.

Any thoughts of the sounds were forgotten when the doors of the hanger opened and the crew pushed Melbourne’s plane out into the sunlight.

The aircraft was beautiful. Painted bright red, with Melbourne’s name on the tail and his personal symbol, a polished brass emblem in the shape of a ram’s head, on the side.

The plane was also a technological wonder for its time. One of kind, with an all metal fuselage and a mid-mounted wing, design cues that foretold the future direction of aviation. It had twin engines; inline twelve-cylinder power plants that were water cooled and developed 450 horsepower each. Its streamlined appearance and extra power made gave it a top speed nearly twice what the average plane could fly. Its only weakness was that those engines consumed a lot

of fuel, Melbourne's plan had been to shut one engine down when he reached maximum cruising altitude. Spend an hour slowly losing altitude and then fire the sleeping engine up and climb back into the sky. It was risky plan, twin-engine planes didn't fly particularly well on one engine, controlling them was difficult, and restarting engines in flight had a spotty record of success. But Melbourne claimed to have practiced it and thought he could pull it off.

It was precisely this level of daredevil confidence that made the crowd love him. And when he came striding out behind the plane, in his red jacket, leather helmet and goggles, the crowd roared with delight. He bowed and waved to the crowd, and then climbed onto the wing of the plane.

From a spot behind the rope, the photographer raised his Anso Memo Box camera to take a picture. But just as he centered it on Jake, the reporter beside him pushed the camera down, the shutter snapped, but the photographer knew the photo would be blurred.

"What gives?" he said sharply.

"Never take a photo of a pilot before his flight," the reporter told him. "It's bad luck."

The photographer sighed. "Can I get the plane?"

"Wait until it's moving."

As the photographer waited, the band struck up a rendition of "Grand Ole Flag" by George Cohen. The crowd sang along as Melbourne climbed into the cockpit. Within minutes both engines had been fired up, and the Golden Ram was heading toward the far end of the Runway. There were no preflight checks, no delays, nothing that would cause the plane to spend more time on the ground burning fuel. It taxied out onto the runway, turned into the wind and began its takeoff roll.

The photographer took a photo and then lowered his camera.

With its twin engines thundering the craft accelerated but slowly. Halfway along the field, its tail wheel came up, with only a quarter of the runway to go, it finally it lifted off the ground, clawing its way into the air, fighting for every foot.

Every person in the crowd held their breath. Many of them had seen Rene Focke's overloaded plane crash and burst into flames at the same spot the previous year. If they could they would will the Golden Ram into the sky.

With the end of the runway nearing, the landing gear was jettisoned from the aircraft, the idea being that two hundred pounds of metal wasn't worth lugging all the way to Paris when one could land on the skid underneath the planes belly.

Relieved of the landing gear the plane climbed more easily, clearing a set of telephone wires strung along a road at the end of the runway. Only now did the photographer snap his final shot. It caught the red plane turning east, the sun glinting off the polished emblem heading for the coast. The Atlantic Ocean beckoned and on the other side, Paris, fame and fortune.

The photographer developed his photos the next morning. His pictures of the Golden Ram in flight would be used repeatedly over the next month. First, in articles describing the great hope on the day of the flight, and then, during the unsuccessful search for the plane, which would go on for weeks after the Golden Ram vanished.

Despite the possibility of selling it for a large sum of money, the photographer would never publish the slightly blurred picture of Melbourne climbing onto the wing.

Bad luck the reporter had called it. And for the rest of his life the photographer would believe it had been just that.

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