

Roy's Love

Johnny led Athena to the riverbank.
Eight statues of Athena stood in a silent circle. At its center, Roy was carving the ninth.
Roy sang as he swung his hammer.

♪ My heart is aching
♪ I've never felt this way before
♪ If only I could forget you... life would be so much easier
♪ Yet thinking of you is the only thing that soothes my soul
♪ If only I could see you once again
♪ If only we could talk once more
♪ You're so far away... yet never far from my heart
♪ Thinking of you is the only thing that keeps me whole

♪ Beneath this endless night sky
♪ I wonder what you're doing now
♪ You've gone so very far away
♪ Even if I caught a glimpse of you at the palace
♪ I could never call your name
♪ If only I could see you once again
♪ If only we could talk once more
♪ You're so far away... yet never far from my heart
♪ Thinking of you is the only thing that keeps me whole

♪ I miss your smile
♪ Now all I can do is carve your face from stone
♪ Yet even that can never fill the emptiness inside me

♪ If only I could see you once again
♪ If only we could talk once more
♪ If only I could hear your voice
♪ Just once... beneath this same night sky

♪ Ah... thinking of you
♪ Is the only thing that soothes my soul...

Before him stood a life-sized statue of Athena, at last complete.
She was captured just as she had been in the marketplace, running with carefree joy.
The stone seemed almost alive, as though it might speak to him at any moment.
Roy lowered his chisel.
"Even after you've finished being a princess..."
A faint, wistful smile crossed his face.
"I'd like to meet you in the marketplace... just one more time."

Leaving Johnny in the river, Athena quietly slipped onto the shore where Roy was working.
Along the horizon of the Nile, the eastern sky was beginning to brighten.
One by one, the statues emerged from the fading darkness as the first light of dawn touched them.
Athena stopped.
Then slowly coiled herself upon the ground.
"...Amazing."
There she was, huddled just as she had been after the sandstorm...
Sitting upon a block of stone, gazing into the distance.
Smiling as though speaking to someone before her.
Reaching both hands high into the sky to welcome the little sparrow.
Running with joyful abandon before glancing back over her shoulder.
Washing her hair by the river.
Sitting quietly upon the earth, her eyes lifted toward the heavens.
And there...
Arms spread wide, as though welcoming Roy home.
Every statue looked so lifelike that each seemed only a heartbeat away from drawing breath.
Roy set down his chisel and reached for the hand of the newly finished statue, ready to head home.
Then he froze.
At the center of the circle of statues stood a great white serpent, bathed in the light of the rising sun.
"G-Gah...!"
Roy's legs gave way beneath him.
Certain it was about to strike, he scrambled backward across the ground.
Then the morning sun shone fully upon the serpent.
Golden light enveloped her.
And before his very eyes...

The serpent melted away into the light.
When the glow faded, Athena was sitting on the ground where it had stood.
Roy couldn't make sense of what he was seeing.
Then his gaze dropped... and he realized she was completely naked.
His face flushed at once.
He jerked his gaze away.
"I-I'm sorry!"
He threw both hands over his eyes.
"Wh-What's going on...? Is... is this a dream?"
Just then, Athena's sparrow fluttered gently down beside her.
Before their eyes, it was enveloped in a brilliant golden light.
When the radiance faded, an old man stood in its place.
With an unhurried motion, he lifted a hand.
At once, a flowing white robe, bound with a golden sash, came to rest upon Athena.
The old man smiled knowingly.
"There now... that is better."
He folded his hands within his sleeves.
"Shall we sit and speak for a while?"
Roy stared at him, speechless.
"...Mr. Sparrow?"
Athena blinked in confusion.
"You...?"
The old man chuckled softly.
"I am Amun-Ra."
He inclined his head ever so slightly.
"Foreseeing the troubled days that would soon befall Egypt, I watched over thee, Princess Athena, beneath the humble guise of a sparrow..."
"A-Amun-Ra...?!"
Roy immediately fell to his knees and bowed low.
"Easy now, young man. ... Raise thy head. It is rather difficult to speak to thee like this."
His warm eyes turned to Athena.
"And thee, Athena... Forgive me... I was unable to shield thee from that curse."
"...What has become of me?"
"The witch's curse was born of jealousy. It transformed thee into a serpent. Yet while the sun shines, my blessing still reaches thee, allowing thee to return to thy human form. But that grace will not endure forever. Before long, the curse will run its course, and thou shalt

become a serpent in truth. Such was the terrible power of her jealousy."

"Then... that serpent truly was Athena?"

"It was."

Athena lowered her eyes.

"If it is a curse... then we must defeat the one who cast it."

Roy rose to his feet.

"Would that it were so simple. A curse does not fade with the one who cast it."

"Then... there must be another way!"

"Only the one who cast the curse can lift it... Yet I fear she never shall."

"Then how much time does Athena have?"

"I cannot say with certainty... but I do not believe even a month remains."

Roy dropped to one knee.

"Please... You are Amun-Ra. If anyone can save her, it's you. I beg you."

"I wish I could. But there is nothing I can do... And yet, that is not to say there is no hope."

Athena and Roy looked up at him.

"There is but one light that can dispel any curse—the light of true love, freely given and freely returned. Such has ever been the law of this world."

"...True love..."

Athena whispered.

"Athena... thou hast yet to know love. Within a single month, thou must discover it... and find one who loves thee in return. Yet for half of each day, thou must bear the form of a serpent. It is... no easy trial."

Athena lowered her eyes.

"I... I must see Pharaoh once more. If nothing else, he deserves to know what has become of me."

"A wise decision. Yet do not expect a warm welcome. Those who bear a curse are seldom received with open arms. Thou shouldst not go alone. Set... I know thou art there."

From the reeds emerged a tiny black puppy.

"This is Set, one of my companions. He shall watch over thee and journey with thee, for the day will come when my ancient foe must be faced."

"L-Lord Set... The God of War?"

Roy took an uneasy step back.

"Don't get too friendly with me, human. I came to the world of men to hunt Apep. Nothing more."

"Ho, ho... Yet Athena's curse bears the scent of Apep, does it not? Thou hadst already decided to follow them."

"Hmph. I'm only watching over them because you asked."

"You're adorable! Thank you!"

Athena knelt and gently stroked Set's head.

"Knock it off! Humans aren't my concern. Now let go. Quit it!"

Athena wrapped him in a warm hug and rubbed her cheek against his.

"And don't you ever do this while you're a snake!"

"Ho, ho... It seems the two of thee have already become fast friends."

Set shot Amun-Ra a murderous glare from Athena's arms.

"Now then, Roy... Thou, too, must be armed."

Amun-Ra lifted a hand. Roy found himself clothed in the armor of a Greek warrior. A round shield rested upon his back, a sword hung at his side, while his chisel and hammer had been neatly tucked into the pouch at his belt.

"These are divine arms. They shall guard thee against whatever lies ahead."

"I... I am honored. Thank you."

"I have spent much of my strength today. I believe I shall rest awhile. Thee, Set... I leave the rest in thy hands."

With those words, Amun-Ra became a sparrow once more and fluttered into the hood of Athena's robe, where he soon drifted to sleep. Athena reached behind her neck and gently stroked the sleeping sparrow's head.

"Athena. Can you leave at once?"

"Yes. I'm ready."

"And you... keep your mouth shut unless you've got something worth saying."

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

"Hmph."

Set turned on his heel and started walking, leaving the two of them to follow.

"Hey... you. Say something to her."

Set nodded toward Athena, who walked ahead with her head lowered in silence.

"M-Me? What am I supposed to say?"

"Anything. Just get her mind off it."

"Why don't you do it, Lord Set?"

"Huh? Aren't you her friend?"

He looked away.

"...Besides, if I did, I'd look like some mutt wagging his tail after her."

Roy couldn't help smiling.

"I think... you're actually very kind."

Set shot him a glare.

"...You mocking me?"

"Absolutely not! Nothing like that. But... why don't you take a human form, Lord Set? Then you wouldn't have to worry about things like this."

"...Didn't I just tell you to go keep her company?"

"...Tch. Fine. Listen carefully. A god needs a body to walk the mortal world. But to be reborn as a human requires the approval of the Divine Council."

"Why?"

"Because mankind is the vessel closest to the gods. Give a god a human body, and that god can wield far more of his true power. Enough to upset the balance of the world. Hunting Apep alone isn't reason enough for such permission."

"Then... is Apep wearing the form of an animal as well?"

"No. He made a pact with a human."

"A... pact?"

"That's right. If a living human willingly accepts a god into his heart, that god may dwell within him."

"...A vow?"

"Call it whatever you like. Once they consent, that's enough."

"Apep ignored the Council and entered a human vessel. We're here to drag him back."

"But... isn't he a god? Is he truly that dangerous?"

"Gods aren't so different from humans. Some are decent... and some aren't."

He paused.

"If Apep kills Pharaoh before he receives Ra's blessing... this world will become exactly what he wants it to be."

"..."

"Don't concern yourself with that. That's my job."

Set looked past Roy.

"Go cheer her up. That's your job now."

Before Roy could answer, Set slipped behind him and gave him a hard shove.

"Whoa—!"

Roy stumbled forward until he nearly collided with Athena.

He glanced back.

Set bared his teeth.

"Go."

"Uh... well..."

Roy hesitantly reached out and touched Athena's shoulder.

"You've... been through a lot."

Behind them, Set watched in silence.

A short while later, the three of them came to a stop before the palace at Thebes.

"I'll slip inside first and see what we're walking into."

Set sprang lightly over the palace wall and vanished from sight.

Athena stepped toward the palace gate, where the guards stood watch.

"I wish to request an audience with Pharaoh."

The two guards exchanged a glance.

"And who is this man?"

"He's one of my retainers. We were separated during the sandstorm."

"Very well."

"This way, please."

Athena gave Roy a quick wink.

The palace courtyard was alive with soldiers and horses. Chariots stood ready in neat ranks.

"...It's like they're preparing for war."

Roy murmured.

The guards led them across the courtyard. They passed through corridors painted with scenes from the realm of the gods before finally reaching Pharaoh's bedchamber.

Pharaoh lay at the center of a chamber so vast it seemed large enough to contain an entire house, while Amenhotep and the royal physician attended him.

"Your Majesty... the Princess of Greece and her retainers have arrived."

Pharaoh gave a slow nod, and the guards withdrew.

"You've returned to human form?"

Amenhotep studied her with a puzzled look.

"Only while the sun is up. But before long... the curse will consume me, and I'll remain a serpent forever."

"Why are you telling me this?"

Pharaoh pushed himself upright in bed.

Dark circles shadowed his eyes, and the color had drained from his lips.

"Your Highness... you mustn't overexert yourself."

Amenhotep helped Pharaoh settle back against the pillows.

"I thought... it was only right that I tell you."

"I see... Then you have my thanks. But I cannot take a cursed woman as my queen. Forgive me."

"I understand... "

She drew a quiet breath.

"How are you feeling?"

"Not well. I've already begun gathering my soldiers. The witch must be stopped."

"Perhaps... if she's defeated, both our curses will be lifted."

Athena opened her mouth to speak... then quietly lowered her eyes instead.

"A room shall be prepared for thee. Remain there until I return."

"I cannot allow that."

Amenhotep rose and looked down at Athena.

"There can be no guarantee of safety once she becomes a serpent. She must be confined."

"Is that truly necessary...?"

"No. If she returns to Greece with this tale, an outraged kingdom may seize the chance to invade while our army is away hunting the witch. This marriage was forged for politics, not affection. Your Highness... you must never lose sight of that."

"...It seems I have no choice. I leave the matter to you."

Pharaoh turned his eyes away from Athena.

Amenhotep strode toward her.

"That's enough. Run!"

Roy seized Athena's hand.

"Come on!"

"...Okay."

They rushed from Pharaoh's chamber.

"Guards! Seize the Princess of Greece!"

Amenhotep's voice thundered behind them.

They burst into the palace courtyard. The palace guards charged from every side. A black blur flashed through their ranks, kicking helmets and breastplates aside as it tore past. It landed before them.

"Move!"

Set bared his teeth.

"Now!"

They sprinted for the palace gate. Soldiers poured in from the city and blocked their way. Behind them, the palace guards closed in, swords drawn.

"Lord Set! Hold them off!"

Roy sprinted toward the statue of Amun at the center of the courtyard.

"Don't order me, human!"

Set shot Roy a glare, let out a slow breath, and stepped into the soldiers' path.

Roy planted both hands against the statue's pedestal.

"Roy... what are you doing?"

Athena looked from Roy to Set as soldiers closed in from the palace gate.

"Hah... This is nothing compared to hauling stone for my master!"

"Rrraaaagh!"

Roy dug in his heels.

The great statue lurched...

...then began to slide.

He shoved it across the courtyard toward the palace wall, vaulted onto its pedestal, and climbed higher.

"Quick!"

Roy reached down.

Athena sprinted toward him and grabbed his hand.

He pulled her up onto the statue in one swift motion.

Using the towering statue as a foothold, Roy climbed onto the palace wall.

He reached down again, caught Athena's hand, and hauled her up beside him.

"Lord Set!"

Set pushed off the statue with one powerful paw and cleared the wall in a single bound.

"Come on!"

Roy dropped to the ground outside the palace wall and spread his arms toward Athena.

"It's all right. I'll catch you!"

Athena closed her eyes and leapt.

She crashed into Roy's chest.

Then everything seemed to float.

When she opened her eyes, Roy was lying flat on his back.

His arms still held her above him, keeping her from striking the ground.

"You all right?"

"You jumped a lot harder than I expected."

He flashed her a grin.

"I'm sorry!"

"You can put me down now... I'm all right."

Roy slowly lowered his arms.

Athena found herself sitting on his stomach. Taking his hand, she climbed to her feet with him.

Nearby, Amun-Ra lay on his back, tiny feet in the air, his little head spinning.

"Ow..."

Athena sank to the ground, clutching her ankle.

"Did you hurt it?"

Roy knelt beside her.

"I'm sorry... Even after you caught me... I think I twisted my ankle when I jumped."

"They're coming!"

Set bared his teeth.

"Get on my back!"

"But—"

"Now!"

Athena climbed onto Roy's back. Roy took off at a run, Athena clinging tightly to him.

Set was already racing ahead.

"Very well... I shall guide thee from above."

Amun-Ra gave a cheerful chirp and soared into the sky.

"Are you sure I'm not too heavy?"

"Not at all."

"You're as light as a feather."

Even carrying Athena, Roy kept pace with Set.

By the time they reached the edge of the city, black mist began to rise from Athena's body.

"...This is bad. The sun is setting."

Amun-Ra circled overhead.

"Roy! Hurry... put me down!"

"Huh?"

Roy glanced back over his shoulder.

A chill ran down his spine.

Across the ground stretched the shadow of a great serpent, its long body coiled around his back.

"Aaaahhhhhh!"

Roy bolted forward, and Athena tumbled from his back. He danced wildly in place as though something were crawling beneath his clothes.

"...What's wrong?"

Roy looked back.

Behind him...

The great white serpent tilted her head.

"I... I..."

He slowly sank to the ground, staring at her in disbelief.

"I-Is that... you?"

The serpent gave a small nod. Her head slowly lowered.

"I-I'm sorry."

"It's just..."

"...I've always been terrified of snakes."

For a heartbeat, Athena simply stared at him. Then tears welled in her eyes and spilled silently down her face.

"I'm sorry... I really am."

"I just... need a little time."

Athena shook her head. Still weeping, she slipped into the reeds.

Set disappeared after her without a word.

"Wait! I didn't mean it like that..."

"Young man."

Amun-Ra's voice came quietly from above.

"Thou hast done what thou camest to do."

"Now... return to thy life."

With that, he flew away.

Roy could not follow. His legs refused to move.

At last, he forced himself to his feet and drove his fist into the wall.

His fist remained pressed against the stone.

Then his eyes fell upon a notice beside it.

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