

The God of War

From the palace terrace, Pharaoh watched his army preparing for war.
A sparrow fluttered down before him.
In an instant, Amun-Ra appeared in the form of an old man.
"Good day, Pharaoh."
"Lord Amun-Ra! The preparations for the blessing ceremony shall begin at once. If only you would grant us a little more time..."
"Peace, peace. I know what has transpired."
"Y-Yes, my lord!"
Pharaoh rose, intending to kneel before him.
But his legs gave way.
Catching himself on the arm of his chair, he collapsed back into it.
"Stay where thou art and listen. We have found the witch who cursed thee."
"Truly?!"
"Canst thou depart at once?"
"Without question. I have waited so long for these words..."
Amun-Ra spread his wings and soared into the sky, the sun at his back.

Far below, Pharaoh's army marched toward the temple.
At the rear of the column, Roy strained against a supply wagon, pushing it uphill from behind as the horses struggled to pull.
When the army emerged from the narrow canyon, an immense rocky hill loomed before them.
As they drew nearer, towering pillars carved with coiling serpents lined both sides of the road. Beyond them stood a temple hewn directly into the face of the rock.
The commander of the expedition raised his hand, bringing the army to a halt.
At the rear of the column, Amenhotep walked over to Pharaoh.
Amenhotep looked toward the dark passage that disappeared deep into the temple.
"Your Highness... what are your orders?"
"The darkness favors our enemy. They may attempt a night attack. Let the men rest, then prepare for battle at once."
"At once, Your Highness."

Roy handed weapons and armor from his wagon to the soldiers as they finished their drink.
From the rear of the Egyptian ranks, Roy looked toward Ilvana's temple.

(Has Athena already arrived...?)

As his thoughts lingered on her, his eyes searched the temple grounds.

Then a cloud of sand burst upward before the entrance.

Mummified soldiers clawed their way out of the earth.

Nearly a thousand of them rose with spears in hand.

They formed two flawless ranks between the colossal serpent pillars that lined the approach to the temple.

At last, Zem-Zem emerged from the darkness within the temple, a great spear strapped across his back.

"M-Mummies..."

He froze.

Then, without thinking, he took a step back.

At Pharaoh's signal, war drums thundered across the battlefield.

The Egyptian army advanced.

Archers loosed volley after volley.

Arrow after arrow pierced the mummy soldiers, yet they came on without slowing.

As the archers fell back, chariots surged to the front.

Behind them, ranks of spearmen and swordsmen charged headlong into the mummy army.

The bearded captain of Roy's unit drew his sword.

He knocked aside a mummy's blade and cleanly severed its head with a single stroke.

The severed head spun through the air, then settled neatly back onto its shoulders.

The mummy raised its sword once more and locked blades with the captain again.

Even with spears driven through their bodies, the mummy soldiers kept advancing, bringing their swords crashing down. Terror swept through the Egyptian ranks, and the soldiers broke and fled.

At the temple entrance, Zem-Zem, commander of the mummy army, stood motionless.

One hand rested upon the hilt of the sword planted before him.

The Egyptian commander's chariot thundered toward Zem-Zem, its bladed wheels cutting down mummy soldiers as it barreled forward.

Zem-Zem sheathed his sword, pulled the iron-shod spear from his back, and broke into a run. He drove the shaft into the ground and braced it against one of the chariot's spinning blades. Forced backward several yards, he held his ground.

Then, with a powerful upward thrust of the iron shaft, he heaved the chariot aside.

It lurched onto one wheel, lost its balance, and slowed.

In that instant, Zem-Zem hurled his spear.

It pierced the commander straight through the back.

"What... a formidable warrior..."

With those final words, the Egyptian commander fell from his chariot and died.

One after another, the Egyptian soldiers fell, and the mummy army closed in on Pharaoh's chariot.

Pharaoh lashed the reins, sending the horses charging forward.

The chariot tore through the mummy soldiers, scattering them in every direction.

Yet the enchanted bandages stitched them back together as though nothing had happened.

The revived mummies dropped to all fours and slipped beneath Pharaoh's chariot as though diving into a river.

The wheels climbed over them.

The chariot lurched onto its side.

Their arms and legs pointed every which way, but the living bandages wriggled happily, tugging each limb back into place.

The mummies looked at one another, grinned, high-fived one another, then charged back into battle.

"Your Majesty!"

The bearded captain turned toward Pharaoh.

In that instant, a cold blade drove into his back and burst through his chest.

Pharaoh was seized by the gathering mummies.

They lifted him high above their heads and carried him toward the temple.

"Oh no..."

Seeing Pharaoh being carried into the temple, Athena started forward.

Then she saw Zem-Zem standing guard at the entrance.

She stopped in her tracks.

Roy pulled a torch from the supply wagon and struck flint to light it.

"I have to do this... for her!"

He stared into the trembling flame, his own hand shaking as he spoke.

"Follow your heart..."

As Athena's face filled his thoughts, the wavering flame gradually steadied.

With a low whoomph, the flame flared brightly, filling Roy's eyes with fire.

"Come on, then!"

Roy charged straight at Zem-Zem, swinging the torch in wide arcs to drive back the advancing mummies.

With a sharp metallic ring, Zem-Zem drew his sword from the ground and settled into his stance.

Roy drew his sword and charged at Zem-Zem.

"Athena, run!"

The words had barely left his mouth when Zem-Zem knocked the sword from his hand.

A crushing kick slammed into Roy's stomach.

He dropped to his knees.

"G-Go... hurry!"

Roy shut his eyes.

He braced himself for death.

Yet the killing blow never came.

Seconds passed.

Still, Zem-Zem's sword did not fall.

Roy slowly opened his eyes.

Set had sunk his teeth into Zem-Zem's cloak and was dragging him backward.

"Now! Do it, boy!"

At Set's shout, Roy snatched up the torch and drove it into Zem-Zem's robe.

"Grrraaaah..."

Zem-Zem let out a low groan as flames raced across his dried wrappings.

"Go, Athena!"

Roy and Set shouted in unison.

Athena dashed through the temple entrance.

Zem-Zem stood before Roy and Set, his body blackened by the flames.

The two exchanged a glance. Both let out a sigh of relief.

Then, without warning, Zem-Zem's eyes snapped open.

Roy's sword still lay where it had fallen.

"Take the woman alive..."

At Zem-Zem's command, the mummy soldiers who had crushed the Egyptian army turned as one.

Roy lunged for his sword.

Zem-Zem's blade slammed down, cutting him off.

As Zem-Zem raised his sword with both hands, Set sank his fangs into his ankle and thrashed his head from side to side.

"Go after Athena, boy!"

Roy snatched up his sword and sprang to his feet.

A line of crocodiles barred the mummy soldiers' advance.

"Yeeah! Leave this to us!"

With Johnny leading the charge, the crocodiles lashed their tails, sending mummy after mummy crashing to the ground.

One mummy raised its sword to strike a crocodile.

Before the blade could fall, a massive black serpent coiled around the mummy and crushed it to pieces.

The mummy crumbled into sand and scattered across the earth.

"I've brought my kin! Forgive me for the delay. I leave my sons in your hands!"

At the Serpent King's mighty hiss, great serpents emerged one after another from behind him.

Roy sprinted toward the temple with everything he had.

Set kept darting aside, narrowly avoiding every slash of Zem-Zem's blade.

After dodging a thrust, he lunged and sank his fangs into the wrist that held the sword.

His jaws tightened.

The bones creaked beneath his bite.

Zem-Zem let out a low groan...

Yet a smile spread across his lips.

Releasing the sword, he caught it with his other hand in one smooth motion and slashed upward at Set.

Set twisted clear of the strike...

But the blade ripped across his belly.

He crashed to the ground.

Zem-Zem wheeled around and charged after Roy.

"Sorry! Behind you!"

Clutching his stomach with one foreleg, Set desperately used his magic to heal the wound.

In those precious moments, Zem-Zem closed the distance behind Roy.

Roy spun around and instinctively threw up his shield.

Craaang!

The clash of steel echoed across the battlefield.

Amun-Ra's shield spun high into the air.

Roy thrust forward with his sword...

Zem-Zem knocked it aside with a single stroke.

Then the blade drove deep into Roy's abdomen.

"Boy!"

Set lunged toward him.

He was too late.

Roy collapsed to his knees.

Deep within the dimly lit temple, the cord of the beaded bracelet Roy had given Athena suddenly snapped.

Beads scattered across the stone floor.

Athena quickly scooped them into her hands.

Then, unease filling her heart, she turned to look back the way she had come.

Roy trembled violently.

One hand pressed against the wound in his abdomen.

Unable to remain standing, he sank to the ground, his forehead resting against the earth.

The warmth drained rapidly from his body.

(I wonder... did Athena make it to Pharaoh?)

Roy's vision slowly faded to white.

His consciousness drifted away.

"Then... there is no choice but to leave this body behind..." Set said between ragged breaths as he watched Roy collapse. "Roy, wilt thou accept my soul? Know this—until my task is fulfilled, or until thou dost die, our souls can never be parted. Even so, if thou wouldst live... if thou wouldst continue to fight... answer me with thine own lips!"

"Anything... for her..."

"Roy! Speak the words of our covenant!"

"Set... I accept you..."

"So be it!"

Set's soul left the dog's body, becoming a sphere of radiant light before shooting straight into Roy's chest.

Roy pressed a hand against the wound in his abdomen. Blue light flowed from the wound, slowly healing it.

As the wound closed, black mist rose from Roy's shoulders.

It coiled upward, swallowing his face in darkness.

Then the shadows hardened, taking the form of a jackal's mask.

"Magnificent! It's been ages since I've had a human body!"

Set's voice echoed inside Roy's mind. Before Roy realized it, his hands moved on their own, slowly curling into fists.

"What's... happening?"

"Until my purpose in this world is fulfilled, or until this body perishes, our souls are now bound as one."

Wearing the jackal's mask, Roy snatched up his sword and shield and charged straight at

Zem-Zem.

Steel clashed against steel as Set and Zem-Zem traded blow after blow, showers of sparks bursting between them.

"Hahahaha...! Now this takes me back! Roy, thy body is splendidly trained... it moves exactly as I will it!"

Set swept low for Zem-Zem's legs.

Zem-Zem sprang clean over the attack...

...and lashed out with a flying kick.

Set caught the blow on Amun-Ra's shield.

Using the momentum, he spun around and drove a roundhouse kick up beneath Zem-Zem's jaw.

"Come at me with everything you've got."

Set turned his palm upward and crooked a finger, beckoning Zem-Zem closer.

Zem-Zem slowly fixed his gaze upon him.

Gripping his sword with both hands, he raised it high overhead and brought it crashing down.

But before the blade could reach him... Set slipped past his flank like a shadow.

His sword carved across Zem-Zem's torso as he slipped past.

Zem-Zem's upper body lurched to one side, yet he regained his balance and raised his sword toward Set once more.

"Immortal... are you? Then let's try something else."

Dodging Zem-Zem's thrust, Set lunged forward.

His sword flashed again and again, driving Zem-Zem relentlessly toward a stone pillar.

The instant Set's assault ceased, Zem-Zem struck back.

Set merely tilted his head, letting the blade whisper past his neck, then answered with a single horizontal slash.

The charred wound across Zem-Zem's abdomen sealed itself once again closed once more under the witch's dark magic.

As Zem-Zem raised his sword for another strike, Set calmly sheathed his own weapon and turned his back.

"I wasn't the one who struck you..."

The ground rumbled.

Behind Zem-Zem, the towering stone pillar gave way...

...and crashed straight toward him.

Zem-Zem spun around, threw aside his sword, and caught the falling pillar with both hands.

But the immense weight drove him into the earth beneath a cloud of dust.

"That ought to slow him down... for a while."

"Amazing..."

Roy whispered beneath the jackal mask.

"Johnny... Serpent King... you've done enough. Leave the rest to me. "

Spinning his sword once through the air, Set charged headlong into the horde of mummies.