

The Free day

The following morning, Roy finally reached the village.

Athena was fast asleep on the sledge beside the block of stone.

The door of his master's house flew open, and the old craftsman hurried down the street toward him.

"That sandstorm was one hell of a beast! I was worried sick about you, lad!"

"Sorry, Master," Roy gave an apologetic smile. "Someone got caught in the sandstorm. I couldn't just leave her there."

"Roy...?"

Athena murmured sleepily.

"Are we there?"

The master leaned in for a closer look.

"Well, I'll be..." His eyes widened. "The boy actually brought home a girl!"

At once, the rest of the stonemasons came running.

"She's adorable!"

"Would you look at that? Her hair's gold!"

"I've never seen skin that fair!"

"She smiled! She smiled at me!"

"No, she smiled at *me*!"

"Uh-oh... Nope. Nope, nope, nope."

Roy quickly waved them back with both hands.

"Hah!"

His master burst into laughter.

"The lad's jealous already!"

"No! You've got it all wrong!"

Roy protested.

"She's the Pharaoh's bride! I rescued her during the sandstorm!"

Silence fell.

The master looked at the others.

Then, without another word, every stonemason dropped into a deep bow.

"A thousand pardons, Your Highness! Please forgive our dreadful manners!"

"Please, don't."

Athena smiled gently.

"Roy and I are friends now. Anyone dear to my friend is welcome in my company. No offense has been given. Please... rise."

The master straightened up, slipped an arm around Roy's shoulders, and muttered under his breath,

"Well done, lad. We'll be eating well for months!"

Roy lowered his eyes.

"I'll leave that to you, Master. I just... want to stay her friend."

The master rubbed his hands together with a grin before turning to the others.

"Right then, you lot!" he boomed, "we're escorting Her Highness to the royal capital! She's our lad's friend, so that makes her one of ours. Got it?"

He gave Roy and Athena a quick wink.

"Aye!"

The cry rang out across the village.

"Nituke, Pashed!" the master barked. "Take a few men and go back for Her Highness's belongings. Move!"

Athena rode the master's donkey while Roy led it across the desert. They passed beneath the silent gaze of the Great Sphinx, standing eternal beside the Great Pyramid of Giza. From there, they followed the Nile upstream until, at last, the towering gates of Thebes rose before them, their massive stones reaching high into the sky.

"Oh... it's wonderful!"

Athena's eyes sparkled as she gazed upon the bustling streets of Thebes.

"May we have a look around?"

"Of course. Whoa—!"

No sooner had Roy answered than Athena seized his hand and pulled him into the marketplace.

At the market, watermelons and figs were piled high beside mounds of fresh-baked bread. A cheerful merchant insisted Athena try a mug of beer from one of the great wooden casks. After a few sips, her cheeks began to flush.

She giggled.

"You make the funniest face."

Before Roy could react, she reached out and gently tickled the tip of his nose with her fingertip.

Roy scratched the back of his head, completely flustered by Athena's sudden playfulness.

"Well now, miss, aren't you a pretty one?" the jeweler said with a warm grin. "Passing through?"

He lifted an elegant necklace of eight strands of beads woven together with fine gold thread and gently draped it around Athena's neck.

"There now!" He stepped back proudly. "Fits you perfectly."

"Oh... thank you."

Athena touched the necklace with a smile.

"It's beautiful."

Roy smiled apologetically.

"I'm sorry... it's all I can afford."

He counted out the few coins he had and placed them into the jeweler's hand.

Without a word of complaint, the jeweler carefully removed the necklace and fastened a simple single-strand beaded bracelet around Athena's wrist instead.

"Ah, don't you worry," he said with a wink. "That one's on me."

"I'm sorry..."

Roy lowered his eyes.

"No, no!"

Athena shook her head at once, her smile brighter than ever.

"Thank you. I love it!"

She gently touched the little bracelet.

"No one but my brother has ever bought me a gift before."

At last, they came to a halt before the gates of the royal palace, with the Temple of Luxor standing proudly nearby. Towering obelisks rose toward the heavens before the palace. Beyond them, small birds flitted among the cycads, their songs echoing softly through the gardens.

"Cheep!"

Athena's little sparrow fluttered off toward the palace gardens. Roy's master and the stonemasons quietly fell in behind Roy and Athena as they approached the palace guards.

"We have escorted Her Highness, Princess Athena of Athens, safely to the royal palace."

The master bowed respectfully.

"She was caught in the sandstorm. My lad managed to rescue her. I'm sorry to say the rest of her party did not survive. As for Her Highness's belongings, some of my men have gone back to recover them and will arrive shortly."

"Wait here while I verify your report."

The guard disappeared into the dark entrance of the palace beyond the stone-paved court. Great columns, painted in rich reds and blues like the trunks of towering trees, upheld the lofty ceiling before the entrance. Across it, the gods of Egypt were depicted in brilliant colors, watching silently over all who passed beneath them.

"Thank you... truly."

Athena turned to Roy and his master.

"You'll come see me again. Promise?"

She smiled at Roy, her eyes filled with quiet warmth.

Roy managed a smile.

"Yeah... I'll come see you."

Yet his brows remained drawn, and his shoulders sagged ever so slightly.

"Princess Athena!"

High Priest Amenhotep hurried down the palace steps and bowed deeply before her.

As he straightened, his gaze settled upon Roy and the others.

"You have served your purpose well."

He inclined his head ever so slightly.

"You may go now."

"Um... if I may, Your Eminence... about the reward..."

The master cleared his throat, reluctant to let the matter rest.

"Ah, yes. Quite right."

Amenhotep gave a slow, measured nod.

"Then let your foreman accompany me."

Athena looked back over her shoulder.

"See you soon!"

She waved brightly to Roy and the stonemasons before following Amenhotep into the palace, Roy's master hurrying after them.

Roy remained where he was long after everyone had vanished beyond the palace gates.

The Mummies

As dusk settled over the desert, the witch arrived at a lonely valley.
Rows of ancient tomb markers rose from the sands, each one marking a passage to the burial chambers below. Crows circled overhead, gathering one by one with harsh, echoing cries. The witch lifted her arms and began to chant an ancient spell.
Then she sang.

♪ At last, my love, the hour is nigh,
♪ How long I've watched the empty sky.
♪ To think a heart could burn so bright,
♪ No soul is blessed as you tonight.
♪ Your joy is mine, your fate is bound,
♪ No truer love shall e'er be found.
♪ For none but I... shall claim your heart.

"Come, my faithful servants... It is time to welcome my beloved."
The witch spread her arms toward the darkening sky.
The crimson aura cloaking her body unraveled into smoke, drifting across the valley before slipping into the stone sarcophagi that lay beneath the ancient tomb markers.
Thud...
One by one, heavy lids crashed to the ground.
Wrapped in age-worn linen, the mummies stirred... then slowly rose from their long sleep. Clad in gleaming golden breastplates and bearing long spears, they gathered around the witch.
As one, they began to sway with her in a slow, eerie dance.
Rolling her shoulders to the rhythm of her song, the witch led them deeper into the valley, toward a great tomb that towered above all the rest.

♪ Awake... arise...
♪ Zem-Zem, swordsman of old.
♪ Carry me unto the royal throne.
♪ Carry me to the one who is mine.
♪ Together we'll forge a kingdom anew,
♪ Pharaoh... my love...
♪ Come, my servants all.

♪ Raise our realm!
♪ Raise the night!
♪ Let darkness reign!

As the crimson smoke poured into the great sarcophagus, its massive stone lid was hurled aside with a deafening crash.

A thunderclap split the heavens.

From within, a towering mummy rose, cloaked in black and hidden beneath a deep hood.

A low, rumbling growl echoed through the valley.

Even Kashim, the little reddish-brown snake, trembled at the sight of Zem-Zem before darting into the shadows.

That evening, Athena was invited to dine with Pharaoh.

Seated across from him at the long banquet table, she cautiously lifted her eyes to look at him.

Pharaoh never looked up.

He slowly lifted a spoonful of soup to his lips without once looking at her.

"You honor us with your presence, Princess."

Amenhotep spread his arms in welcome.

"The mourning period has run its course. Let us proceed with the wedding without delay.

The people eagerly await Pharaoh's coronation."

"...Very well."

For a long moment, no one spoke.

Pharaoh quietly set his spoon upon the table before rising to his feet.

"I shall retire. Princess of Greece... you have traveled far. Rest well."

"My apologies."

Amenhotep lowered his voice.

"His Majesty has yet to recover from the loss of his queen."

With that, he excused himself and followed Pharaoh from the hall.

Just then, a tremendous crash erupted from somewhere beyond the dining hall.

Furniture toppled. Metal clashed against metal. A chorus of terrified screams echoed through the corridors...

Then came a silence so profound it rang in their ears.

Amenhotep quickly ushered Pharaoh away before fixing his eyes on the great arched doorway, now swallowed in darkness.

A moment passed.

Countless emerald eyes appeared within the blackness.

They shifted.

They glimmered.

They writhed.

Athena caught her breath.

From the darkness emerged the witch, her countless serpents writhing where hair should have been.

Behind her loomed a towering figure.

Zem-Zem.

The giant mummy knight ducked his head to enter the hall. At the sight of his enormous frame, everyone was left speechless.

"At long last... we meet, my beloved."

Gathering the skirts of her gown, the witch dipped into a graceful curtsy.

As she lowered her head, she lifted her eyes to Pharaoh, gazing at him from beneath her lashes with a smile that sent a chill through the hall.

"I am Ilvana... the one who loves you."

The serpents coiled upon Ilvana's head lifted themselves as one, their emerald eyes fixed upon Pharaoh.

Pharaoh's eyes widened.

He stumbled back a step.

"W-What a hideous creature...! G-Guards!"

His arms drew tightly around himself as his whole body began to tremble.

Ilvana bit down on her lip.

Slowly, she straightened her back.

Then she fixed Pharaoh with a piercing glare.

"What... did you just call me?"

Her voice fell into a low, trembling growl.

"Hideous? "

"Me?"

"I... who love you more than anyone in this world?"

Lifting her chin with wounded pride, Ilvana began to advance toward him, one slow step at a time.

Pharaoh's legs gave way beneath him. He collapsed onto the stone floor.

"Come now... no more arguments."

Ilvana slowly extended her hand.

"Come with me to my temple. There, we shall love one another until the day you die..."

The serpents woven through her hair hissed in unison.

Before Pharaoh could answer, Athena stepped between them.

"Stand aside, little girl."

"I won't. He doesn't want to go with you!"

Ilvana's smile vanished.

"Had you simply stayed out of my way, I might have spared your miserable life. Such was my generosity."

Her eyes narrowed.

"Now move... you insolent little wretch!"

A crimson bolt of lightning burst from Ilvana's outstretched hand, hurtling straight toward Athena.

"Cheep! Cheep!"

From nowhere, the little sparrow darted into the hall.

Circling above Athena's head, it burst into golden light.

The radiant glow wrapped itself around her.

Ilvana's crimson lightning crashed against the golden aura like a raging waterfall striking solid stone.

It split and streamed harmlessly around Athena.

"No...!"

Ilvana's voice rang through the hall.

"I will not let you steal my Pharaoh from me!"

With both hands outstretched, she drove the lightning forward with all her strength.

At last, the crimson torrent pierced Athena's golden aura.

A blinding flash swallowed the chamber.

"Oh, my... what a hideous sight!"

Ilvana threw back her head and laughed.

"Ahahaha...!"

Athena looked down.

Where her legs had been, a long tail covered in gleaming ivory scales now coiled across the floor.

Nearby, a fallen basin had spilled its water across the stone floor.

In its still surface...

A great white serpent stared back at her.

Athena drew back.

So did the serpent in the water.

"Cheep... cheep..."

The little sparrow fluttered in the air, its cry filled with sorrow.

"Come to me..."

Ilvana reached out her hand toward Pharaoh.

The crimson aura surrounding her began to flicker.

Its glow grew dim.

The smooth skin on the back of her hand slowly withered into that of a mummy.

She gritted her teeth.

"Tch... Outside my temple... this is as far as my power reaches."

She lowered her trembling hand.

"I've spent too much of it on the girl's curse..."

Her voice fell to a bitter whisper.

"I must keep enough strength... to return."

Ilvana snapped her fingers.

At once, the mummies dissolved into the wavering air and were gone.

She looked straight at Pharaoh.

"If you will not come with me..."

She slowly raised both hands.

"...then we shall be together in the Land of the Dead."

A violet mist poured from her palms and drifted toward Pharaoh.

"My curse shall feast upon your life."

The violet mist coiled around him.

"If you wish to remain in this world, come to my temple."

She smiled once more.

"Choose to live with me, and I shall lift your curse... and gladly keep you by my side."

Her smile widened.

"Refuse me..."

She tilted her head ever so slightly.

"...and I shall simply await you in the Land of the Dead."

"Hohohoho..."

Her laughter echoed through the hall as her body dissolved into darkness.

Pharaoh was swallowed by the violet curse.

His eyes rolled back...

and he collapsed unconscious.

"Take Pharaoh to his chambers!"

Amenhotep turned sharply toward Athena.

"Take that serpent alive! Throw it into the dungeon!"

The guards rushed forward.

But Athena, now trapped in the body of a great white serpent, slithered swiftly up the palace wall and slipped out through a high skylight.

She slithered across the palace gardens.

Then—

A drunken man staggered into her path, swaying with a mug of beer still in his hand.

The moment he saw her...

"Aaaagh! A snake!"

Athena darted into the nearest bushes and lay perfectly still, scarcely daring to breathe.

"Over here!"

The man shouted.

"It was huge! Big enough to swallow a man whole!"

Within moments, men came running with spears and nets.

Terrified, Athena slipped away under cover of darkness, leaving the city behind as she made her way to the banks of the Nile.

Athena looked into the still waters of the Nile...

And quietly began to weep.

Staring back at her was a creature with enormous eyes, a mouth split almost to its cheeks, a long forked tongue, and silver-white scales that gleamed beneath the moonlight.

In the distance, a growing sea of torchlight approached from the city.

Athena slipped silently into the Nile and began swimming toward the opposite shore.

Raindrops began to fall.

One by one, they dimpled the dark surface of the river.

Athena pulled herself onto the opposite bank.

Behind her...

A great eye blinked upon the water.

"Eeep!"

"Aaah!"

Athena leapt back.

A gigantic crocodile stared at her with wide, frightened eyes, his hands clasped tightly to his chest.

"Huh? You're a snake?"

The crocodile let out a long sigh.

"Phew... You're so big, I thought you were a monster!"

His eyes drifted over Athena.

"You've got beautiful scales."

Moonlight flowed across her ivory body until it shimmered like silver.

"I've never seen scales like yours."

Athena lowered her eyes.

"Th-Thank you..."

"Whoa..."

He looked from the top of her head all the way to the end of her tail.

"You've even got a lovely little golden band! "

Around the tip of her tail rested a golden circlet and the beaded bracelet Roy had given her.

"I've never seen anything like that."

"Those... belonged to me when I was human."

She hesitated.

"The truth is... I used to be human."

Athena told him everything that had happened.

"I see..."

"So that witch cursed you and turned you into this?"

Athena lowered her head.

"Can you ever change back?"

"I... don't know."

"Hmm..."

For a while, only the river could be heard.

"Um..."

"Have you ever seen someone who looks like this?"

With the tip of her tail, Athena drew Roy's portrait in the sand.

"I have to see him... just once."

The crocodile leaned closer.

"Wow... You're really good."

"Yeah, I know him."

Athena's head lifted.

"You do?"

"Sure. ...He's down by the river almost every day, hammering away at stone. Everyone around here says that stretch of river's too noisy to sleep."

"Could you take me to him?"

Johnny rubbed his chin.

"Hmm... Maybe. ...If you give me one of those shiny rings."

Athena glanced at the ornaments around her tail.

"If... the gold one will do..."

The crocodile's eyes lit up.

Athena carefully set Roy's beaded bracelet upon the sand, then slipped the golden circlet from the tip of her tail and onto Johnny's foreleg.

"Name's Johnny."

"C'mon! Follow me."

Johnny slipped into the river and swam downstream. Athena picked up Roy's bracelet and followed after him.

Hidden among the reeds, a little black puppy watched them go.