

The Serpent King

Athena's tears fell into the Nile, sending countless ripples across its surface.

"I never imagined..."

"...someone could be so frightened of me."

"Don't dwell on it."

Set kept his eyes on the river.

"Most people would've reacted the same way the first time they saw a serpent your size."

"But... it still hurts."

Athena lowered her head.

Without a word, Set moved beside her and gently leaned against her.

"Hmph..."

Amun-Ra tilted his little head.

"Now then... what are we to do?"

"Either way, our choices are few. Convince the witch to lift the curse... or find true love."

Set settled down in front of Amun-Ra.

"True love isn't something one goes looking for."

Amun-Ra gave a slow shake of his head.

"Then we'll have to deal with the witch," Set said. "If she succeeds in claiming Pharaoh... then perhaps..."

"Claim him...? How can you say such a thing?"

"It is fate. We may struggle against it, but we do not choose how it ends. If thou art not there... thou wilt lose both the chance to save Pharaoh and the chance to reclaim thyself. That is why I am here."

Set rose to his feet.

His eyes never left Athena.

"You're right. Besides... I don't think it's right to fight her without first understanding why she's so desperate to cling to Pharaoh."

Athena laid a hand over her heart.

"The trouble is, we know not where her temple lies. She was careful not to reveal it."

"Now that you mention it... why didn't she?"

"Because, to her, it makes little difference. If Pharaoh dies beneath the curse, she believes she can bring him into the Land of the Dead. There, they may love one another for all eternity. Living beside him in this world is merely a wish she is willing to grant... if that is what he desires."

"I see..."

"Then what she truly wants... is Pharaoh's death."

Athena turned to Set.

"Do you have anything to go on?"

Set gave a silent shake of his head.

"Hey! It's the Snake Queen again!"

Johnny burst from the river, showing off the golden bracelet around his foreleg.

"Huh... you've picked up quite the crowd."

"Oh—sorry. Was I interrupting dinner?"

Athena frowned in confusion.

"...What?"

Johnny's eyes wandered from Athena...

...to Set...

...to Amun-Ra...

...then back to Athena.

"How rude. I'm her escort, not her supper!"

"Really?"

"Then let me come with you. This sounds fun!"

"Johnny... not right now."

Athena hesitated. Then she slowly lifted her eyes.

"But... there is something I'd like to ask you."

"Have you ever seen a witch with seven serpents for hair?"

"There's really such a thing?" Johnny's eyes lit up. "...I've gotta see it!"

"...I didn't think so"

"So... what kind of place do you think she'd live?"

"A temple... or something like that. Maybe a stone altar... or a cave..."

"Huh. Then why not ask your own kind?"

"My own kind?"

"The snakes. Think about it. Those are exactly the places snakes like. And if she's got seven of them living on her head... they've probably been there too."

"You're right... But where would I even find one?"

"Why not ask the Serpent King? He's older than anyone. If anyone knows, he will."

"Do you know where to find him?"

"Of course! ...Wait. You don't?"

"I only arrived in Egypt not long ago... Would you take us there?"

"Sure! We'll have to swim, though. Hey, Dog. You can ride on my back."

Set flattened his ears.

"...Don't eat me."

Athena slipped into the river, her long body gliding through the water.

Set climbed onto Johnny's broad back. A moment later, Amun-Ra fluttered down and perched atop Set's head.

"You can fly, Ra!"

Set snapped, glaring up at him.

"Ho, ho... Must thou always be so serious?"

The party continued upstream, gazing at the colossal statues of the Temple of Horus and Abu Simbel as they followed the river.

The Serpent King's lair lay within a cave beneath a sheer cliff.

Its entrance disappeared beneath the waters of the Nile.

They dove beneath the surface and swam into the darkness. Gradually, the water grew shallower until they finally emerged onto dry stone.

"This is as far as I go."

"The path climbs from here."

"I'll wait for you."

Johnny leaned back against the cave wall, settled onto the ground, and rested his chin on his forepaws.

Darkness swallowed the passage ahead. They climbed the rough, stair-like path, their breathing growing heavier with every step. At last, the passage opened into a broad chamber, where a narrow opening awaited them. It was barely large enough for Set to crawl through. Athena slipped through the narrow opening.

Beyond it lay a wide clearing enclosed by towering walls of rock.

Moonlight poured down from the open sky, bathing her white scales in silver.

Countless serpent eyes shimmered in the darkness. High upon the surrounding cliffs, hundreds of snakes looked down like spectators filling a grand coliseum.

Then, as one...

...they began to sway.

♪ Welcome to Snake City!

♪ Sneaker!

♪ No feet!

♪ No shoes!

♪ Still it's snake paradise!

♪ Sneaker!

♪ Slither on!
 ♪ No backing up! (The snakes try... tangle together... and tumble over.)
 ♪ Taste the air! (Hundreds of tongues flick in and out.)
 ♪ Find the hidden kingdom!
 ♪ Sneaker!
 ♪ Never blink!
 ♪ No eyelids!
 ♪ Search with serpent eyes!
 ♪ Snake paradise!
 ♪ Sneaker!
 ♪ Hearts alive!
 ♪ Bodies sway!
 ♪ Dance, Snake! (Top hats pop from tail to head as the snakes dance.)
 ♪ Shake, Snake! (Rattlesnakes rattle their tails like maracas.)
 ♪ Sing, Snake! (A chorus of joyful hisses.)
 ♪ Welcome!
 ♪ Welcome!
 ♪ Welcome to Snake Paradise!
 ♪ Sneaker!

"Who comes before me?"
 The deep voice rumbled through the chamber, shaking the very air.
 Every serpent fell silent.
 Their heads bowed as one.
 A low scraping of scales echoed from every side.
 Set dropped into a low stance.
 Athena peered into the darkness beyond the clearing.
 The walls themselves began to move, winding inward in a slow spiral.
 Then, from their midst, a colossal serpent rose.
 Its body was as thick as the trunk of an ancient tree.
 "I am Athena, Princess of Athens... Forgive this sudden intrusion."
 The Serpent King's great eyes narrowed as his massive head drifted toward her.
 "Fair princess... what brings thee before me?"
 His face was sheathed in jagged scales as dark as obsidian.
 "Yes. I'm searching for a witch with seven serpents for hair. I was hoping Your Majesty might know something..."

"Hmm... Has something been taken from thee as well?"

"Yes. My future. ...Your Majesty... have you lost something too?"

"...My sons. The serpents upon her head... they are my children."

"Your sons? But... why?"

"She consumed them to steal their power. I would save them if I could... but they have become one with her. I cannot strike her down without striking them as well."

"Do you know where she is?"

"I do. Only a few days ago, my youngest sent word that he had seen her."

"Then... would you tell us where to find her?"

"And what then?"

A low hiss rolled from the Serpent King's throat.

"Wilt thou kill her? The God of War, Set, stands among thee... does he not?"

The Serpent King's eyes fixed on Athena.

"No... The only thing I can do is seek the witch's forgiveness. It's the only way to lift my curse."

"...Or perhaps... true love."

Athena stared at him.

"...What?"

"If she comes to know true love, her curse will be broken... and my sons will return to me."

"Then... she was cursed as well?"

"She was. Once... she was to become Egypt's princess."

"Impossible..."

"Let us make a bargain, Princess. Restore her to who she was meant to be. When that day comes... perhaps my sons will return, and perhaps thy own curse shall be lifted as well."

"I will. I'll speak with her. But tell me... what is true love?"

"A difficult question... If I must answer... it is this. To value another's life as much as thine own... or even more. That... is love."

"...Another's life... above my own..."

"Enough. The hour grows late. Return tomorrow night. My youngest shall guide thee."

Athena bowed her head.

"King... one more question. Hast thou any knowledge of where Apep hides?"

Set stepped forward.

"No. I can feel his presence... but he conceals himself well."

"I see."

Set gave a single nod.

"Princess... come visit us again. A maiden such as thee would be most welcome as my

youngest son's bride."

"Ha... ha..."

Athena let out an awkward laugh.

The Moon Light

Bathed in the morning sun, Athena had returned to her human form.

The next morning, she watched the square where Roy's statue of her stood, hidden among the reeds.

"Well now... Princess!"

Roy's master was on his way back after loading stone onto his boat.

He called out from behind her.

Athena gasped and jumped in surprise.

"That fool's gone."

He let out a weary sigh, his shoulders slumping.

"What?"

"He enlisted in the Egyptian army.

Kept saying Pharaoh's life was in danger... said he was doing it for your sake.

He slapped his enlistment bonus down on the table...

...then marched off at first light."

"You... let him go?"

"Never stand in the way of a man's heart. Especially when it's burning that fiercely.

That's the rule I've lived by all my life.

Then the fool threw my own words back at me...

...wasn't much left for me to say."

"...Roy."

Athena turned toward the royal city and clasped her hands before her chest.

"P-Princess?!"

Athena ignored the master and walked away.

"Why would he suddenly join the army?"

"Only he knows."

Set answered with a lazy yawn.

"Nngghhh!!"

Roy was locked swords with a massive captain whose thick beard reached his chest.

"Hah!"

Roy forced the captain back several steps.

But the giant recovered at once. His sword came flashing down and blasted Roy's weapon high into the air.

"Your strength is impressive, but you're hopeless with a sword. I'll teach you enough to

keep yourself alive, but after that, you're going to the supply corps."

"Yes, sir."

Even after the captain walked away, Roy kept swinging his sword.

"I have to get stronger. I have to protect Pharaoh... Maybe then Pharaoh could persuade the witch to lift the curse..."

Roy wiped the tears from his eyes and swung again.

Hidden from sight, Athena could only watch as Roy swung his sword through his tears.

She took a hesitant step toward him.

Then she remembered the fear in his eyes... and the way he had recoiled from her.

She turned away.

"Is this truly what thou wantest?"

Set asked quietly.

"What could I possibly say? Besides... I can't stay by his side like this. Not while I'm a serpent."

Athena wiped away her tears, pulled up her hood, and walked away.

That night, Athena became a serpent once more and returned to the Serpent King's lair with Johnny.

A reddish-brown snake was waiting atop a rock at the mouth of the cave.

"Hey! I've been waiting for you! Name's Kashim. Nice to meet you."

Kashim sprang onto Johnny's back with an easy hop.

"Sure thing. Nice to meet ya, too."

Johnny replied in his usual easygoing drawl.

"So, Kashim... is it far?" Athena asked.

"Hmm... we've got a fair bit of swimming ahead. First, we'll go around that hill over there.

Then we'll head into a narrow river. Oh—but first, stop over there!"

Johnny simply swam toward the shore, following Kashim's directions without question.

Athena watched them with a quiet sigh and gently shook her head.

"Athena. Animals don't measure time the way we do. Be patient."

Set said gently.

"Mm! Delicious. Here—you have it."

Holding a mouse in his mouth, Kashim dropped it onto Athena's nose.

"Squeak..."

Tiny paws pressed together, the terrified mouse trembled as it stared up at Athena.

"Aaaahhh!"

Athena shot straight out of the water, twisting like a whirlwind.

She came crashing back down belly-first with a tremendous splash.

Drenched from head to tail, Kashim blinked at her in complete bewilderment.

"W-What's wrong?!"

"Mice! I just can't stand them!"

While Athena still trembled, the mouse paddled calmly across the water, reached the reeds, and vanished into the grass.

"Hahaha! A snake that's afraid of mice? Now that's a first!"

Kashim rolled onto his back, laughing.

Athena remembered Roy trembling on the ground, terrified of her.

"Oh... what have I done? Of course... this was bound to happen. And there I was... thinking only of my own pain. I'm sorry, Roy..."

"Hmph... you'll see him again. For now... keep moving."

"Thank you... You're much kinder than you pretend to be."

"Tch..."

Set flicked an ear and looked away.

Day by day, they journeyed farther up the Nile.

Night after night, as the moon slowly waned, Athena found her thoughts drifting back to Roy. The waters of the Nile reflected Athena in her human form, and she began to sing.

♪ (Athena) What are you doing now?

♪ (Athena) What fills your thoughts tonight?

♪ (Athena) I'm sorry... for running away from you.

♪ (Athena) If only I could see you now... and tell you how I feel.

Far away, beneath that very same moon, Roy set down his sword. Scooping water into his blistered hands, he drank deeply, then wandered to the palace where he had watched Athena disappear. There, he quietly began to sing.

♪ (Roy) I'm sorry... for being afraid of you.

♪ (Roy) I'm sorry... for hurting you.

♪ (Roy) I promised we'd always be friends.

♪ (Roy) If only I could see you... and tell you I'm sorry.

♪ (Roy) Are you looking at this same moon?

♪ (Athena) Are you looking at this same moon?

♪ (Athena) We share the very same sky...

♪ (Roy) Then why can't I find you?

♪ (Roy) I still remember your smile.

♪ (Athena) I still remember your voice.

♪ (Roy) I never wanted to lose you.

♪ (Athena) I never wanted to leave you.

♪ (Roy) Your face...

♪ (Athena) Your voice...

♪ (Athena & Roy) They're dear to me.

♪ (Athena & Roy) If only we could meet again...

♪ (Athena & Roy) What would I say?

♪ (Athena) If I could become human again...

♪ (Roy) If only I could see you smile again...

♪ (Athena) Would I be allowed to stand beside you?

♪ (Roy) Would you still stand beside me?

♪ (Athena) I'll keep looking at the moon.

♪ (Roy) I'll keep looking at the moon.

♪ (Athena) Hoping you'll be there.

♪ (Roy) Hoping you'll be there.

♪ (Athena) One more chance...

♪ (Roy) One more chance...

♪ (Athena & Roy) Until we meet again.

The reflection of Athena's human form upon the water dissolved with the ripples, and in the form of a serpent, she stood gazing up at the moon.

Roy lifted his eyes to that very same moon.

Neither knew it...

Yet beneath the same moon, they went on searching for one another.

"This is as far as we go by water. Walk a little farther across the sand, and you'll see the temple."

Following Kashim, Athena climbed out of the river.

"I still can't believe it. A human turned into one of us? What a waste. A beautiful snake like you..."

Kashim simply kept talking.

Morning came, and sunlight spilled across the land.

Athena waited for the familiar warmth of Amun-Ra's blessing.

Nothing happened. She remained a serpent.

"Why...?"

Kashim and Johnny could only stare.

"The curse is advancing," Amun-Ra said. "As time passes, thou wilt spend less and less time in thy human form."

Athena lowered her head.

At last, as the sun climbed higher and the warmth of the morning sun touched her, she slowly returned to her human form.

Kashim slithered into her lap and gently lifted his head, as though trying to comfort her.

"Thank you... both of you."

Athena stroked Kashim's head, then reached over and gently patted Johnny's broad snout.

"Kashim, which way from here?"

"Straight southeast."

"Then I'll scout ahead. The rest of you stay here and get some rest."

Amun-Ra spread his wings and soared out across the desert.

Beyond a line of sheer cliffs stood a lone rocky hill.

Before it, rows of ancient pillars stretched across the sands, while mummified soldiers patrolled the grounds.

Amun-Ra's eyes widened.

He circled silently high above the temple.

Athena had begun to doze beneath the warm afternoon sun when Amun-Ra landed softly on her lap with a cheerful chirp.

"Chirp, chirp."

"Mm..."

Athena rubbed her eyes and stretched.

"Grandpa Ra... how did it look? Can we get in?"

"We should reach it by nightfall. But the place is crawling with mummy soldiers."

"Can we break in?"

Set looked to Amun-Ra.

"No. The entrance is heavily guarded."

"Then we'll need a plan."

"I shall go and warn Pharaoh. The rest of thee should recover thy strength and wait until the Egyptian army arrives. Do not act rashly."

"I'll keep watch. Don't worry."

Set gave a firm nod.

Amun-Ra spread his wings once more, soared into the sky, and disappeared into the blazing sun.