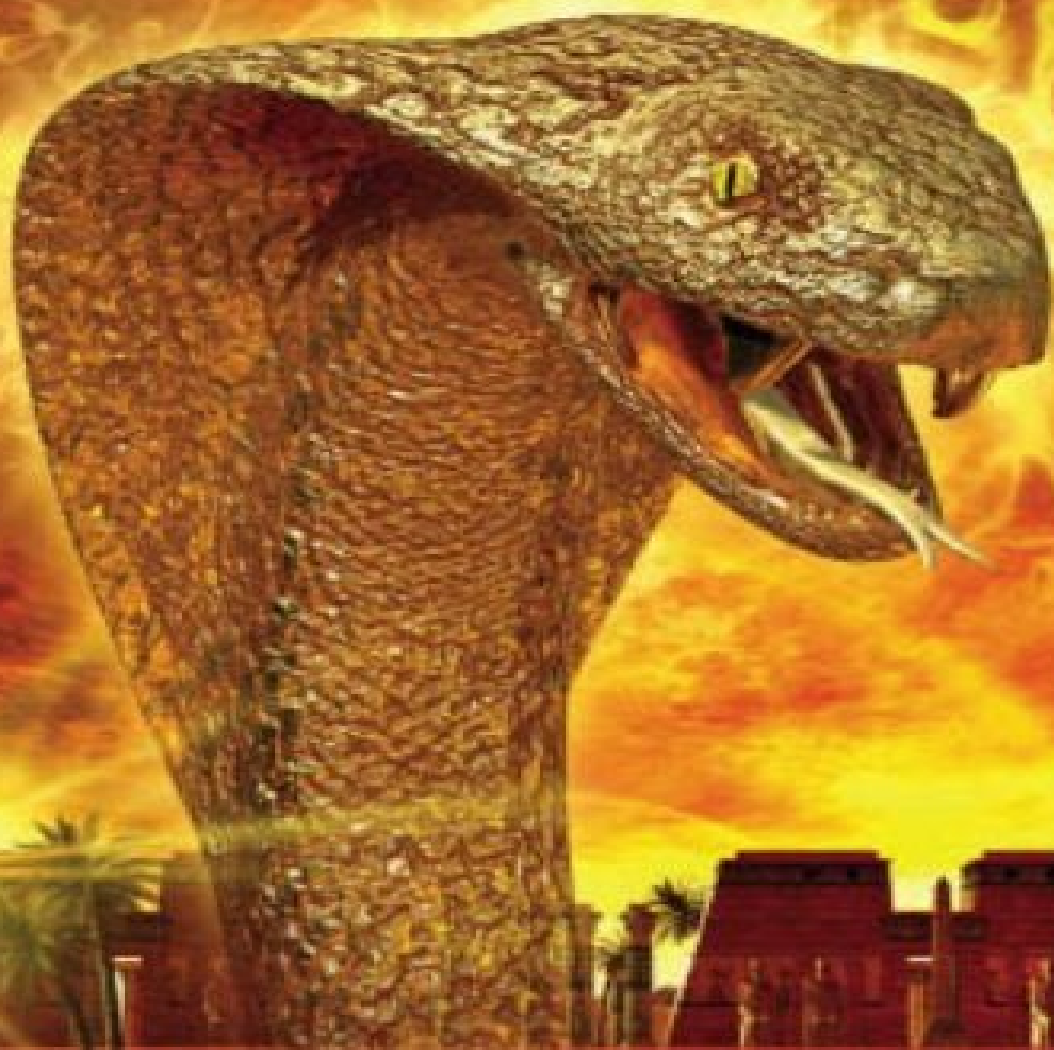


EGYPTIAN CHRONICLES



THE
SPITTING
COBRA



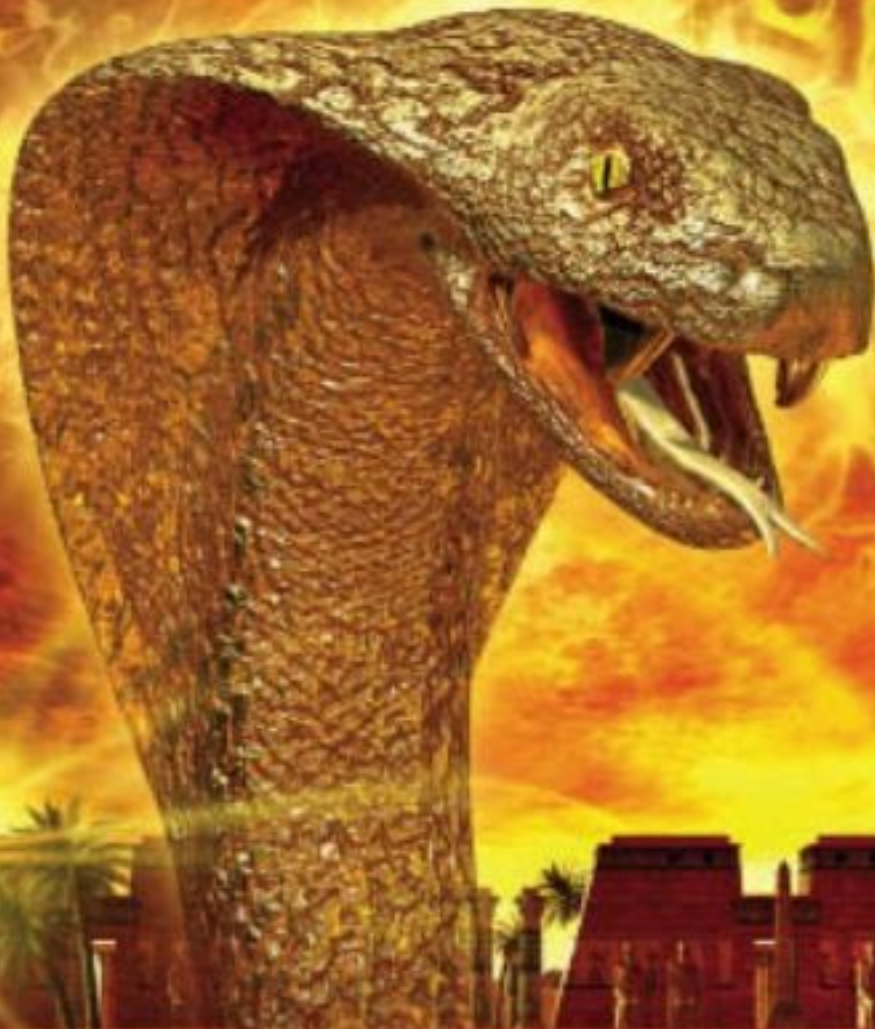
GILL HARVEY

BLOOMSBURY

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SPITTING
COBRA



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EGYPTIAN CHRONICLES

THE

SPITTING
COBRA

Hopi and Isis can remember the terrible accident on the River Nile, when they lost their parents to crocodiles. Hopi still bears crocodile teethmarks on his leg. But five years have passed, and they've been lucky: eleven-year-old Isis is a beautiful dancer, and she's been spotted by a dance and music troupe in the town of Waset. Now they live with the troupe, and Isis performs regularly. Meanwhile, thirteen-year-old Hopi, marked by the gods, pursues his strange connection with dangerous creatures . . .

Join them in the world of ancient Egypt as they uncover the dark deeds happening around them. If there's anything you don't understand, you may find an explanation at the back of the book.

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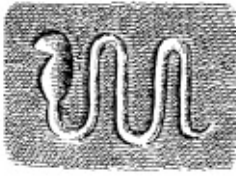
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PROLOGUE

In the flickering light of the oil lamp, the gold on the lid of the casket gave off a fiery glow. Nakht turned the precious object over in his hands, examining it closely. He opened the lid and peered inside. He ran his finger over the fine inlaid patterns of carnelian, lapis lazuli and gold.

‘A very fine copy, don’t you think?’ asked Baki.

Nakht shook his head. ‘This is no copy. I’d know it anywhere,’ he said. ‘I worked on it myself. An old friend of mine placed it in the tomb with my own hands.’

Baki stroked his chin. ‘You’re sure?’

‘By Horus and all the gods, I couldn’t be more certain.’

Baki gave a heavy sigh. ‘Then let us await the messenger.’

The two foremen lapsed into silence. Nakht placed the casket on the floor, and they gazed at it, though it might be able to give them an answer to the mystery.

At last, there was a soft knock on the door. Nakht stood, and went to open it. A young man stepped inside, still breathless from running down the mountain.

‘Well?’ demanded Baki. ‘What did you find?’

‘The tomb has not been touched, sir,’ replied the young man. ‘The door is still in place, with the seals of the Great Place in perfect condition.’

Nakht sat down heavily, shaking his head. ‘Impossible,’ he murmured.

‘You’re sure you checked the right tomb?’ queried Baki.

‘Of course, sir,’ said the messenger. ‘I checked three times, and all the tombs nearby, just to be sure.’

The two foremen exchanged glances. The young man stood nervously, shifting from one foot to the other.

‘You may go,’ said Baki.

‘Thank you, sir.’ The messenger stepped quickly to the door, and disappeared into the night.

Nakht stood up again, and started pacing the room. ‘So,’ he said. ‘This casket has been found in our village, but it belongs in a royal tomb. This much is sure. But the robbers are cunning. They did not break into the tomb via the doorway. They must have made another way in. It all points to one thing, Baki. The robbers live among us, here in Set Maat. No one else knows the mountain so well; no one else has the knowledge and skill to create another entrance.’

Baki ran a hand over his head, then once more stroked his jaw. ‘This cannot be,’ he muttered. ‘I cannot believe that such a terrible thing has come among us.’

‘There is no other explanation,’ said Nakht, his face full of sorrow. ‘We cannot hide from the truth. We must find the robbers, even if they are our relatives and friends. It is our sacred duty.’

‘But how?’

Nakht sat down, rested his elbows on his knees and bowed his head. 'Yes, how,' he murmured.

The two men were not afraid of silence. They had known each other for many, many years. They sat and stared at the beautiful casket once more, each wondering whether the other would come up with an idea. At last, it was Nakht who spoke.

'The harvest approaches,' he said. 'Let us each throw a party. We can afford to be generous; let there be music and dancing and rich food and wine. Indeed, we must make sure the wine flows freely for that is our key. Wine and good cheer encourage tongues to speak freely. Someone will say something that should have remained a secret.'

Baki smiled wryly. 'I am surprised at you, brother,' he said. 'I never thought I would live to see you encourage drinking and revelry.'

But Nakht remained serious. 'Perhaps so,' he said. 'But I never thought I would live to see such things happen in our midst. Do you think it a good idea?'

Baki spread his hands expressively, and shrugged. 'I can see nothing wrong with it,' he said. 'Arrogance and vanity may play a part as much as flagons of wine. If a robber's wife has acquired sumptuous jewellery, she may be tempted to wear it.'

'Then let us go ahead. The sooner the better.'

'Well . . .' Baki frowned. 'It may not be so easy. There are a few problems.'

'Such as?'

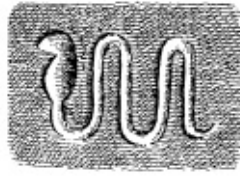
'Our best music troupe cannot perform at the moment. Wab and her family have a sickness, and their finest young dancer has broken her arm.'

Nakht slapped his thigh impatiently. 'But there are others!'

'They are priestesses, brother,' Baki pointed out. 'Can we really call on them for such a purpose? He paused. 'Perhaps it would be better to wait awhile.'

'No.' Nakht was determined. 'We have to carry out our plan now. Rumours are already spreading. If we cannot use our own troupe, we can hire another. Let us send messengers to Waset; there are plenty of performers there. I will pay for them out of my own pocket if I have to.'

Baki could find no other objections. He nodded slowly. 'You speak wisely,' he said. 'We cannot delay. Let us send messengers first thing tomorrow.'



CHAPTER ONE

The woman was hysterical. With a trembling finger, she pointed to the corner of the storeroom, where the water jars were kept. Hopi approached quietly, and peered behind them. A snake lay coiled there perfectly still.

Hopi recognised its blotchy brown and orange markings at once. 'It's not dangerous,' he said. 'If you leave it alone, it won't bite you. And even if it did, you would live.'

'I don't care!' the woman shrieked. 'I don't want that thing in my house!'

'It's only interested in mice,' Hopi pointed out. 'The mice that eat your stores of grain . . .'

The woman shook her head. 'Kill it! Just get rid of it!'

Hopi sighed. 'I'll take it away.'

Carefully, he moved one of the water jars so that the snake was in full view. Then, with a flick of his stick, he reached underneath and whipped it into a round papyrus basket. He fitted a lid on top and put the basket into a linen bag, which he slung over his shoulder.

'Now get it out of here,' the woman demanded.

Hopi looked at her calmly. 'It's harmless,' he told her. 'But as you fear it so much, perhaps you could offer some thanks.'

The woman frowned, and muttered under her breath. She reached for a wooden box by the doorway and rummaged inside.

'Here,' she said. 'Take this. It's a lucky amulet. I suppose a cripple needs all the luck he can get.'

Hopi felt stung. This woman was cruel, and not only to snakes. He took the charm and put it into his bag. 'Thank you, madam,' he said quietly.

He set off out of the house and up the street, trying his best not to limp. But the woman was right. He *was* a cripple. He would never be able to run and walk the way he once had. He was thirteen now. Five years ago, when he was eight, there had been a day that had scarred him for ever. It had left him and his sister Isis without parents, and had given him a terrible wound on his right leg. It had healed slowly. But the marks would never fade, and the leg would always be weak.

As he made his way along the narrow, higgledy-piggledy streets of Waset, younger children recognised him and ran up, tugging his arm.

'Hopi! Hopi!' they cried. 'What have you caught? Is it a scorpion?'

Hopi shook his head.

'A lizard!' shouted the children. 'A snake!'

'Maybe.' Hopi couldn't help but smile.

'Can we see it?'

'Not this time. Sorry.'

'Oh please, please!'

Hopi gently pulled his arm free. 'Not today,' he said. 'This snake needs some peace.' And leaving the children behind, he headed out into the fields.

The music troupe's big costume box was almost empty. Pretty bracelets, collared necklaces, anklets and wigs lay neatly on the floor, and linen gowns were stacked in a pile. Mut and Isis had spent a morning sorting them out, and now Mut bent over the box to fish out the last few items.

'We've nearly finished,' she said. She held up a beautiful collar made of row after row of blue beads, with the occasional row of red. 'This is one of Mother's favourites. Oh – wait a minute. Something's tangled up in it.'

Isis looked up from teasing a knot out of a long black wig. 'That's my cowrie waistband!' she exclaimed. 'I'll wear that for the parties in Set Maat.'

Mut examined the waistband. 'I don't think it's yours,' she said. 'I think it's one of mine.'

'Let's see.' Isis leaned forward and reached for the waistband. Most of it was strung with cowrie shells, but there was a little amulet right in the middle. 'It *is* mine, look. I know it is, because Hopi gave me that scarab.' She fingered the amulet, turning it over so that the scarab shape could be seen clearly.

Mut pulled a face. 'My waistbands have scarabs on them, too.'

'But not *this* scarab,' insisted Isis, feeling annoyed. She knew exactly why Mut was being difficult – it was because she'd mentioned Hopi. It happened every single time. 'This one belonged to my father. Look, it's got a little hieroglyph on the side.'

Mut stared at it, then frowned and snatched the waistband away.

Isis tried to grab it back, but Mut wouldn't let go.

'Careful!' cried Isis.

Too late. The band was still tangled up with the collar, and it caught on the collar's fine threads. One of the threads broke. Blue and red beads scattered everywhere, all across the floor. The two girls gazed at them in horror.

Mut was the first to speak. 'Now look what you've done!'

'What *I've* done?' Isis was furious. 'You did it as much as me – you snatched –'

'It was your fault for grabbing! I'll tell Mother.'

'It was both of us,' said Isis. 'You know it was. Don't you *dare* tell Nefert I did it.'

Mut smirked. 'And what if I do?' she asked coolly.

Isis was enraged. 'I'll tell Hopi to put a snake in your bed!'

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she regretted them. Mut's face tightened with fear. Recently, Hopi had brought a snake home, and shown it to Mut. She had almost screamed the house down. He had said it wouldn't hurt her, but Mut was inconsolable, and didn't want anything to do with Hopi any more. She said he was creepy.

It made life very difficult for Isis. She loved her brother Hopi more than anyone else in the world, and she was used to his love of lizards and snakes and scorpions. Other people didn't seem to feel the same way, and she often had to spring to his defence. Mut was particularly hard work. Whenever Hopi came into the conversation, they almost always started arguing.

Still, it was much better than the life she'd had before. Two seasons ago, when the River Nile was just starting its annual flood, Isis had been spotted on the street by Paneb, the head of a dance and music troupe. He was looking for a dance partner for his daughter Mut, and Isis was perfect; the two

girls were both eleven years old, small, supple and slender. But she wouldn't go anywhere without Hopi, so Paneb had taken them both into the family. It had seemed like a miracle. After the death of their parents, Hopi and Isis had been forced to live with an old, poverty-stricken uncle out on the fringes of Waset. Too sick to work, he had relied on his niece and nephew to beg for an income. The uncle had since died, and his mud-brick house was slowly returning to the earth from which it was made.

So Isis just had to live with the squabbles. Mut turned away, and began to pick up the beads from her mother's broken collar. Isis bent down to help her, her thoughts seething.

Hopi slowed down as he left the town behind him. The great River Nile glinted in the sunlight to his right, while fields of flax and wheat waved gently in the breeze to his left. He sat down by an irrigation ditch, opened his bag and lifted the lid off the basket.

'There'll be plenty to eat out here,' he told the snake. 'Lots of mice and frogs and maybe some rats if you're lucky.'

This time, he didn't use his stick, but reached for the snake with his bare hands. It was perfectly true that it was harmless. It curled itself around his fingers, then, as he placed it near the ground, slithered off between the lush plants that grew along the ditch.

Hopi watched it go, rubbing his injured leg where it ached from walking. It made him think about the day when the crocodile god Sobek had taken his parents to the next world. They were now *hesy* or blessed drowned ones. A crocodile had seized Hopi, too, but the effect it had had was strange. It was as though Sobek had touched him in some special way, and he had developed an affinity with all the feared creatures. His favourites were snakes and scorpions. He spent his time hunting them out and learning their ways; he knew their habits and what they ate, he knew which ones could kill and which could not.

It was frustrating when people didn't trust his knowledge. Of course they were scared, but why couldn't they see simple differences? Not every snake was a cobra. Many snakes did more good than harm, eating the vermin that lived around people's houses. Of course, they might believe him if he were an adult, but he was just a poor boy with a limp. The only person who understood was Isis.

He fished around in his bag for the woman's amulet. It was a roughly glazed piece of faience with the shape of a scorpion moulded on to the top. Hopi examined it carefully, disappointment welling up inside. The amulet was scuffed and chipped. It wasn't even something he could sell in the market for exchange for a few pieces of fruit. He'd have to return home empty-handed, as he did nearly every day, with nothing to contribute to the family income. He was just a burden, dependent on the work of his little sister.

Isis and Mut were still picking up blue and red beads when Mut's mother Nefert walked in. The girl looked up guiltily.

'My best collar!' she exclaimed. 'What happened?'

The two girls spoke at once.

'Isis did it.'

'It was an accident!'

Isis glared at Mut, whose eyes flashed in defiance.

Nefert folded her arms. 'What happened?' she repeated.

‘It was both of us,’ said Isis. ‘It was tangled in my old waistband –’

‘*My* waistband!’ cried Mut.

‘Mine,’ said Isis, raising her voice, ‘and it wasn’t just my fault, Mut grabbed it back –’

‘That’s not true, you snatched it!’ shouted Mut.

‘STOP it, both of you!’ Nefert’s voice silenced them.

Isis felt her heart beating hard inside her chest, her anger fighting to get out. Mut couldn’t get away with this, she just couldn’t. It was too unfair.

Nefert’s mouth was tight with annoyance. She looked from one girl to the other and back again, letting them see just how cross she was. Isis waited, dread slowly replacing her anger. She began to wonder what the punishment would be.

Then Mut spoke, her voice soft and pitiful. ‘Isis said that if I told you, she’d get Hopi to put a snake in my bed.’

The words hung in the air. Isis went cold inside. How could Mut tell on her like that! She felt like grabbing her hair and yanking it hard.

‘Isis, is that true?’

‘I didn’t mean it. Anyway, it wasn’t just me, it was both of us. Mut knows it was but she was angry because Hopi gave me that scarab –’ The words tumbled out.

‘Now look.’ Nefert’s voice was shaking with anger. ‘I’m deeply disappointed in both of you. That was my best collar. But you, Isis . . .’ She shook her head. ‘I can’t believe you would say something so nasty. You know that Mut is terrified of snakes.’

Isis hung her head. ‘Sorry, Nefert. I really didn’t mean it.’

‘If we didn’t have a party tomorrow night, you wouldn’t be eating for the rest of the day. As it is, I want you to understand that I won’t have that sort of behaviour in this house. And don’t you ever, ever threaten Mut with snakes again. Do you hear me?’

Isis nodded, relieved that this time she was going to get away with it. ‘Yes, Nefert.’

‘Now, I want you to finish sorting out the box. Collect all the beads from my collar. I’ll have to get it rethreaded. Then go and help Sheri prepare lunch. We’ve all got a lot to do. I want you to rehearse your new routine once more this evening. We’re setting out for Set Maat at daybreak tomorrow.’

Hopi stepped out of the sun and into the shadow of the house. He moved quietly, as he always did; he might not be able to move fast, but years of tracking desert creatures had taught him to move stealthily. He listened to the noises of the household, trying to work out where everyone was. Nefert and her widowed sisters, Sheri and Kia, were scouring pots in the courtyard, talking and laughing together. He couldn’t hear Isis nor Mut, nor Mut’s two young brothers. Perhaps they were asleep.

‘. . . my best collar,’ drifted a voice from the room at the front of the house. That was Nefert.

One of the cats padded up and rubbed against Hopi’s leg. He bent down to tickle it behind the ears.

‘Rethreading it is not so difficult,’ murmured the voice of Paneb, Nefert’s husband. ‘Can’t you . . .’

Hopi missed the end of the sentence. He stroked the cat to the tip of its tail and straightened up. He was hungry. He had meant to come home for the midday meal, but he’d ended up rescuing the snake from that woman’s house instead. He hoped that there would still be some food around, if he asked Sheri nicely.

Nefert’s voice broke into his thoughts again. ‘No, of course not. I’ve already sent the girls to get it fixed,’ she said. ‘But to be honest I’m more bothered about Isis.’ Her voice sounded serious, and Hopi

went stiff. What had his sister been up to?

‘I don’t know how long it can go on like this,’ Nefert’s voice continued. ‘Ever since Hopi brought that snake in, they’ve been arguing. I thought Isis would be a good friend to Mut, but it’s not working out that way.’

‘Girls of the same age always squabble,’ said Paneb.

‘Not like this. I don’t like it, Paneb. Isis is so loyal to Hopi, and Mut doesn’t get on with either of them. She’s on her own, and I think it’s making her unhappy. And as for Hopi and his snakes . . .’

‘Well, what are you thinking of doing about it?’ asked Paneb. ‘Isis has learnt the routines well. It would be difficult to replace her, surely?’

Hopi suddenly felt sick. *Replace Isis?* But this was their only home! He craned his neck to hear Nefert’s reply, but her voice had faded to a mumble.

‘Don’t do anything rash, Nefert,’ came Paneb’s voice. ‘Think about it.’

Hopi swallowed hard. He couldn’t bear to hear any more. Quickly, he walked through the house and out to the courtyard. He raised a hand in greeting to Sheri and Kia, then climbed up the stairway that led to the upper storey and the roof. His appetite had gone.

‘And again! Together this time!’ Nefert’s voice rang out.

Isis and Mut spun around, their arms in the air, then both somersaulted forward in perfect handsprings. No sooner had they landed than they arched themselves backwards and flipped the other way. They landed on their feet, then swung their hips and raised their arms again in time to imaginary music. Nefert clapped to get them to stop.

‘Much better,’ she said. ‘There won’t be much room to dance at these parties, from what I’ve heard. The houses of Set Maat are small, so you must keep close together and keep your movements tight.’

The girls nodded.

‘And I want you to be on your best behaviour. You will be guests for three nights in the village and you must make a good impression. They are paying us well. We want to make sure they invite us back. Do you understand?’

Isis and Mut nodded again.

‘No arguing. No fighting. I haven’t forgotten what happened this afternoon.’

Isis lowered her gaze. She was still annoyed with Mut, but she knew she mustn’t show it.

‘You can go now,’ said Nefert. ‘I want you to go to sleep early. Tomorrow will be a very long day.’

Isis turned and skipped out of the room. She climbed up on to the roof and found her brother leaning over the low wall at its edge, watching the street below. Dusk had fallen, and twinkling lamps were shining like little stars along the winding streets. She ran up to Hopi lightly and clapped her hands around his head, hiding his eyes.

‘Isis! Let go,’ he protested, tugging at her arms.

‘How d’you know it’s me?’ teased Isis.

Hopi pulled her arms free and turned round to face her. ‘Don’t joke, Isis,’ he said in a quiet voice. He looked across the roof to check that they were alone. ‘I need to talk to you.’

Isis saw that he meant it. ‘What’s wrong?’ she demanded.

‘That’s what I want *you* to tell *me*,’ said Hopi. ‘What happened with Mut today?’

Isis pulled a face. She’d had enough of thinking about Mut. ‘Oh, it was stupid,’ she said. ‘We had a fight and broke one of Nefert’s collars. She sent us to get it mended. Everything’s fine now.’

Hopi shook his head. 'No, Isis, it isn't fine.'

'Why? What do you know about it?'

'I heard Nefert talking to Paneb. She thinks you and Mut argue too much . . .'

All at once, Isis was furious again. 'But it's not my fault! It's always Mut who starts it! She's just jealous.'

Hopi snorted. 'There's nothing for Mut to be jealous of, Isis.'

'Yes, there is. She's jealous of you. Jealous of us, I mean. She doesn't have a brother or sister she's close to. Ramose and Kha are too young.'

'It's more than that, Isis. She's afraid of me. You know she is. And Nefert's beginning to worry.'

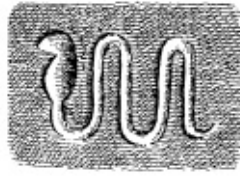
Isis examined Hopi's face, and saw how unhappy he looked. Suddenly, she felt full of fear. She put her arms around her brother and laid her head against his chest.

'What did Paneb say?' she whispered.

Hopi was silent for a few seconds. 'He tried to defend us a little,' he murmured eventually, his voice hoarse. 'But we need to be careful, Isis. We depend on this house.'

Isis heard her brother's heart thumping in his chest, and clung on tighter.

'I'm sorry.' Hopi's voice was full of sorrow and shame. 'But I can't bear to go back to begging. And I don't know how else I'd support you if they replaced you with someone else.'



CHAPTER TWO

Isis closed her eyes, trying to fight back the panic. When she opened them, the River Nile stretched out in front of her, calm and wide, with the palm trees and fields of the west bank on the other side; the desert hills beyond glowed orange-pink in the light of the early morning sun. She saw this view every day – but it was one thing looking at the Nile, and quite another getting into a boat to cross it. She tried to breathe slowly, in . . . out, in . . . out . . .

‘I’m here, Isis,’ said Hopi. ‘It’s going to be fine. The crocodiles live further upstream. Nothing is going to happen to you.’

Isis gripped his arm. She knew her brother was speaking, but his words didn’t sink in. All she could see was swirling water, and all she could hear was her father’s voice: *Look after Isis! Look after Isis!*

Those had been the last words that he had cried amid the catastrophe in the river. Isis would never forget the churning waters turning red as her parents were pulled underwater, nor the snapping teeth of the crocodile that had seized her brother, but then, miraculously, let go.

Hopi was shaking her. ‘Isis. Come on. We have to do this. Everyone’s waiting for us.’

Isis looked at him, gulping air. ‘I can’t.’

‘You can. You *must*.’ He lowered his voice. ‘Isis, remember what I told you last night. I’m counting on you.’

Another, different fear pulled Isis out of her terror. She looked down from the riverbank at the barge that served as the ferry. There were Paneb and Nefert, waiting patiently. There were their two young sons, Ramose and Kha, sitting astride the hired donkey. Sheri was smiling, as always, and waving encouragement, while Kia sat gazing over the water . . . and Mut . . . Mut was leaning over the prow of the boat, watching Isis with a grin on her face.

That did it. Isis pursed her lips. How could Mut mock her like that, when *she* was frightened of snakes! Hopi was right. She *must* get on that boat, even if it killed her – which was exactly what she feared it might do. Holding Hopi’s hand tightly, she stepped forward, down the bank. As she clambered on board, the ferryman steadied the barge for her, but it still wobbled horribly. Isis let out a little scream.

Paneb took her arm and held her firmly. ‘You’re safe, Isis. We’re all safe.’

Isis plucked up all her courage and stepped further along the barge.

‘Well done,’ murmured Hopi.

Sheri reached for Isis and gave her a hug. ‘Come and sit next to me,’ she said. ‘We’ll be over the river in no time. Here, have some dates.’

Isis smiled faintly, but shook her head. She felt sick. She sat down next to Sheri and buried her head in her hands as the boat began to move.

Hopi sat down on the other side of his sister, one arm around her shoulders. He was trying hard to behave normally, but his insides were in a tight knot. It wasn't his sister's fear that made him feel that way. Since overhearing Nefert, he had felt as though his world were coming apart. He and Isis trusted this family as though it were their own; in the space of a few months, Paneb and Nefert had come to seem like parents, and Sheri and Kia like aunts – especially Sheri, who was always so warm and loving. But Nefert's words had shown Hopi the truth. They only belonged because of Isis and the work she did with Mut. If that fell apart, so would everything else.

The little wooden barge glided across the smooth, deep waters, and the west bank drew closer. To the west, where the sun set, was the Kingdom of the Dead, and the rose-pink mountains were the final resting place of Egypt's great kings. The tomb-builders lived in the very village they were heading for now: Set Maat, the Place of Truth.

The craftsmen led a charmed, well-paid life away from everyone else, and Hopi felt a pang of envy. If only he had a craft that he could use to support Isis! Their father had been a wig-maker, but he hadn't passed on his skills before he died. He'd had other ambitions for his son. 'Wig-making is a dead-end job,' he had always said to Hopi. 'I want you to be a scribe.'

And so he had worked hard to pay for his son to study. Hopi had completed two years; he had learned many of the basic hieroglyphs, and had mastered the inks and reed pen. But with the death of his parents, his studies had stopped. Five years had clouded his memory; he could barely read now. And with his injured leg, he was of no use to most other trades. He wasn't strong enough for any kind of manual work.

'Are we nearly there?' whispered Isis.

Hopi gripped her shoulders. 'Yes. Only a few more minutes.'

He stood up as the barge approached the riverbank. *I will find something to do*, he swore to himself. *I must find something to do. Whatever happens, I must look after Isis.*

As soon as she was on the riverbank, Isis felt a rush of relief. 'I did it! I did it!' she cried. She hugged Hopi and Sheri, then skipped up to Happy, the hired donkey, and begged Paneb to let her lead him.

Paneb smiled at her kindly, and handed her the lead rope. 'You were very brave, Isis,' he said. 'We're all proud of you.'

Isis took the rope, smiling back. Paneb might not love her quite as much as he loved his own daughter, but he was very fair. She tugged on Happy's rope and started walking. She didn't want to think too hard about Nefert.

'Make him go fast!' called Ramose, the five-year-old.

Little Kha giggled. 'Yes! Fast!' he chirruped, bouncing up and down on Happy's back.

Isis grinned. The donkey was old, and stubborn. 'Happy won't go fast for anyone,' she said. 'Not even you.'

The troupe trudged towards Set Maat through fields of emmer wheat and past shimmering mortuary temples. At last they reached the desert, where nothing but yellow-white dust and pebbles crunched under their sandals. A well-used road wound up towards the limestone cliffs. It was as though the village were in the heart of the mountain itself. Isis shivered with excitement. This place seemed full of magic.

A workman came to greet them and led the way to the gate, where Medjay policemen were posted.

as guards. They looked over each member of the family and checked the bags on Happy's back before allowing them through. Isis was impressed. This village took itself very seriously. They walked through the gate and along a narrow street lined with small whitewashed houses.

'You will stay in three different houses,' explained the workman. He nodded at Isis, Hopi and Mut. 'The three young people will stay here.' And he knocked on a red wooden door.

Isis felt her heart sink. The man couldn't have picked a worse combination. Why couldn't Mut stay with her aunts instead? Now there was bound to be trouble. She sneaked a glance at Mut, and saw that she was looking miserable, too. But neither of them had any choice in the matter.

A girl peered out of the red door. She was pretty, slightly plump and her skin had the sheen of someone who used expensive oils on it every day. She greeted the crowd with a big smile, and Isis liked her at once.

'Are these our guests?' the girl asked. 'How exciting! I'm Heria. Come in!'

Isis, Hopi and Mut followed Heria into the little house. Isis gazed around in amazement. The house might be small, but the walls were painted with exquisite murals, and the furniture was all of the highest quality. Of course. It made sense. The village was home to some of the best craftsmen in the whole of Egypt, so their houses were bound to be special.

Heria led them to a small back room lined with reed mats and low, simple beds. 'We're all going to sleep in here,' she said. She looked at the three of them in turn. 'You're so alike. You must be sisters,' she said, looking from Isis to Mut.

'We're not,' said Mut at once. 'We're only dance partners. I'm Mut.' And she gave Heria a dazzling smile.

Mut looked lovely when she smiled. Heria smiled back, enchanted, and all at once Isis saw an answer to her problem – at least for the next few days. Mut and Heria could become friends! Then Mut would be happier and, for once, Isis and Hopi could spend time together in peace.

Hopi was at a loose end. Mut and Isis had gone to see where they would be performing that evening and Heria was preparing food for her father's return from the kings' tombs. He wandered out on to the main street and looked around. The village nestled between a hill on one side and the mountain on the other, its lower slopes dotted with little chapels and the dark entrances to the villagers' tombs.

Hopi walked up the street, looking for some way up on to the mountain. Women stared at him from their doorways, and young children ran behind him, calling out. Hopi was used to being followed, so he spun round and pulled a face, waving his arms. The children ran away at once, shrieking and laughing in terror.

Beyond the cemetery, Hopi could just see a track leading up on to the cliffs. The limestone rock faces were perfect hiding places for lizards and scorpions – and snakes, of course. It would be good to spend a few hours up there. He found a side street that led him to an unguarded gateway and climbed up slowly, nursing his leg, which was sore after the morning's long walk.

In the heat of the afternoon, the chapel courtyards were deserted. Voices from the village drifted up, but around the tombs Hopi was aware of a strange stillness. He wiped the sweat from his forehead, trying to ignore the feeling that was creeping over him. He couldn't say why, but he was sure he was being watched.

He began to walk faster and suddenly came across the cliff path winding its way up the mountainside. Slowly, carefully, he followed it.

He didn't get far.

'Hey!' called a voice, somewhere nearby.

Hopi spun round, his heart thumping. There was no one there. He stood still for a moment surveying the view below. Still nothing. Nervously, he began climbing again.

'Where are you going?' The voice was loud and clear this time.

Hopi stopped. 'Where are you?' he called.

For a few seconds, nothing happened. Then, from behind some rugged boulders, a young man stepped out.

'Who gave you permission to climb this pathway?' he asked gruffly.

Hopi shook his head. 'No one.'

The young man stared at him. 'So how did you get past the Medjay guards?'

'There weren't any,' said Hopi. 'I came through that gateway there.' And he pointed down at the cemetery gate.

'You were in the village already?'

'Yes. I've come with the music and dance troupe from Waset.'

'Ah, I see!' The young man's expression cleared. 'Well, I'm surprised no one warned you. You're not supposed to wander around up here – it's out of bounds to strangers. This path leads to the Green Place, where the kings are buried.'

'I'm sorry. I'll go back down, I was only looking for snakes and scorpions . . .'

The young man examined Hopi more closely. 'Really? What do you know about snakes and scorpions?'

Hopi shrugged. 'Well, quite a lot, I suppose.'

'You've been trained?'

'No, no – I've just taught myself.'

The man stroked his chin, looking thoughtful. Then a mysterious glint appeared in his eyes. 'Strange,' he muttered. 'This could be . . .'

'Could be what?' Hopi was curious.

The man shook his head. 'Oh, nothing. Let me introduce myself. My name's Seti. I'm a painter up at the tombs – I've just finished my apprenticeship. I'll show you a bit more of the mountain, if you like.'

Hopi nodded. 'I'm Hopi. Thank you. I'd like that.'

Seti smiled, then turned and began to climb energetically. Hopi struggled to keep up, cursing his injury. Seti looked back and waited for him. 'Sorry,' he said, nodding at Hopi's leg, then continued more slowly, taking a side path that led around to the left, out of sight of the village. Perching himself on a ledge, Seti patted the space next to him. Hopi sat down, and rested his elbows on his knees to get his breath back.

Seti was quiet for a few moments. Then he spoke, just one word. 'Meretseger,' he said.

The word meant *she who loves silence*.

Hopi frowned. 'Who's she?'

'You don't know of her?'

Hopi shook his head.

Seti gestured up at the mountainside behind them. 'This is her home,' he said. 'She is the cobra goddess of the mountain. She has many names, but Meretseger is the most powerful. Sometimes v

call her after her home: the Peak of the West.'

Hopi was astonished. The only cobra goddess he had ever heard of was Renenutet, the goddess of the harvest. 'We don't worship her in Waset,' he said.

'No. There's no reason why you should. But if you know so much about snakes, perhaps you could help me meet her.'

'You wish to hunt out cobras? But why?' Hopi was puzzled. 'Doesn't Meretseger have a shrine or temple where you can worship her?'

'Yes, yes. It's over there.' Seti nodded towards the south. 'I make offerings there every week. But that's not enough.' He studied his hands, and seemed to be trying to decide what to say. 'I need to see her for myself. I need to know . . . I am seeking an answer . . .'

Hopi was intrigued. 'An answer to what?'

Seti hesitated. He looked out over the view, a frown on his face. Then he turned to Hopi and spoke in a low, confidential tone. 'You are younger than I,' he said. 'But I see from your leg that life's troubles have already touched you.'

'Indeed they have,' agreed Hopi, with feeling.

'And perhaps some of the gods seem more important than others,' suggested Seti. 'Some bring blessings, while others bring pain.'

Hopi nodded. 'The god Sobek has brought me both,' he said, for the crocodile god had taken much away from him, but had also given him his unusual gift.

'Then you understand,' said Seti, relief in his voice. 'Now, if I tell you that a crisis has brought me to seek out Meretseger, you will accept what I say.'

Hopi thought about it. He had great respect for all the gods, and Seti's words were still a little confusing. 'The cobra is a powerful snake. This must be a powerful goddess. I would not want to attract her attention without good reason.'

His words seemed to trouble Seti. 'No, no, you wouldn't,' he agreed, fear clouding his face. 'She is terrible when she's angry. And . . . and that's what I need to know – if she is truly angry.'

'If she is angry? With who? You?'

Seti looked uneasy. 'I can't tell you that,' he said. He sighed, a little wearily, and stood up. 'All I can say is that I feel that she has sent you. So will you help me, or not?'

Mut was helping Heria with her make-up, patting red ochre powder on to her cheeks.

'Not too much!' exclaimed Heria. She grabbed her polished bronze mirror and peered at her reflection. Mut had already finished her eyes, which were surrounded with dramatic black eyeliner and a touch of green malachite paint.

'You look beautiful,' declared Mut. 'Doesn't she, Isis?'

Isis nodded and smiled. 'Lovely,' she agreed. She was watching Mut in surprise. She couldn't remember the last time her dance partner had seemed so happy. Mut was fussing around Heria, dabbing at her cheeks and then her lips with the red ochre, her face alight with friendliness.

'I wish I had a sister,' said Heria wistfully. 'You two must do each other's make-up all the time.'

Mut's smile disappeared. 'I told you,' she said sharply. 'We're not sisters. We're just dance partners.'

A flicker of surprise crossed Heria's face. 'Yes, but . . . you live together, don't you?'

Mut pursed her lips. 'We haven't for long. And anyway, Isis has Hopi,' she said.

‘Mut!’ Isis couldn’t keep quiet any longer. ‘What’s Hopi got to do with it? He doesn’t do my make up, does he?’

‘So *do* you do it for each other?’ Heria looked at Isis, clearly puzzled.

‘Of course we do,’ said Isis.

Mut went very quiet. All her good humour had vanished, and there was an awkward silence. The Mut reached for the wig that lay by Heria’s side. ‘It’s time to put your wig on,’ she said.

Quietly, Isis slipped out of the room. *Leave them to it*, she thought, and went out to the courtyard to find a beaker of water. As she did so, there was a soft knock on the front door. She went to open it, and found a boy of about Hopi’s age.

He grinned at her. ‘Is Mut there?’ he asked. ‘Nefert’s sent me.’

‘Yes,’ said Isis, letting him in. ‘She’s in the back room with Heria.’

The boy obviously knew where he was going. Isis trailed after him as he walked straight through the house.

‘Hello, Heria,’ he greeted her. ‘Nefert’s sent me to get Mut. She wants her to help her get ready for the party.’

Heria smiled at Mut. ‘Looks like you’ve finished just in time,’ she said.

Mut looked disappointed, and Isis could guess why. Helping Nefert meant leaving her new-found friend – and more than that, it meant leaving her alone with Isis. Mut fiddled with the beads of Heria’s wig for a moment, her face averted. Then she followed the boy out without a word.

When the front door had closed, Heria turned to Isis, playing with the ends of her wig. ‘Is Mut always like that?’ she asked bluntly.

‘Like what?’

Heria hesitated. ‘Well . . . she wasn’t very nice to you.’

Isis felt embarrassed. ‘Oh, Mut’s just in a bad mood,’ she said. ‘We had an argument yesterday.’

‘That’s a shame,’ said Heria. She looked sad. ‘I’d love to live with someone my own age. I’ve got friends, of course, but it’s not the same.’

Isis was suddenly aware of how quiet the little house was. It was unusual for an Egyptian household. Isis thought of their street in Waset, and how all the houses buzzed with people. But here there was no one around apart from Heria’s father Khonsu, who had come back from the tombs and fallen asleep in the front room.

‘Who *does* live here?’ she asked. ‘Just the two of you?’

Heria nodded. She stood up and straightened the beautiful black wig. Some of the hairs at the back were tangled, and Isis went to tease them out for her.

‘And Father’s so busy at the moment. He’s up at the tombs most of the time, but even when he’s here, he’s stuck in secret meetings in the front room.’

‘Secret meetings? That sounds exciting,’ said Isis.

‘Huh. Not really. He doesn’t tell me what they’re about.’ Then Heria lowered her voice. ‘Though sometimes I overhear things.’

‘What kind of things?’

‘Well . . .’ Heria hesitated. ‘Didn’t you think it was odd that you and your family were invited here?’

Isis frowned and shook her head. The dance troupe got invitations to all sorts of places; this one didn’t seem any different. ‘Why? Don’t you invite people usually?’

‘No. We have our own musicians.’

‘So what’s happened to them?’

Heria sighed. ‘Well . . . one of the families is sick. And one of the other dancers, Tiya, has broken her arm.’ Suddenly, her voice wobbled. ‘Tiya’s my best friend. Her arm might never be the same again, and no one will want to watch a dancer with a crooked arm.’

Straight away, Isis thought of Hopi’s injured leg, and her heart flooded with sympathy. She put her hand on Heria’s shoulder.

‘That’s not even the worst of it,’ Heria carried on. ‘I know that Father’s having people watched. It’s awful. I know lots of families are being spied on, and I can’t say a word.’

‘Spied on!’ exclaimed Isis. ‘But why?’

‘I wish I knew,’ said Heria. She wiped away a tear that had trickled down her cheek. ‘Now I’ve smudged my make-up, haven’t I?’

Isis smiled. ‘I’ll soon fix it for you.’ She bent down and picked up a piece of soft linen that Heria kept with her make-up pots. She moistened it, then began dabbing around Heria’s eyes.

‘You and Mut are both so lovely,’ said Heria gratefully. ‘I’m glad you’re here.’

Isis felt awkward and ashamed. ‘I’m always fighting with Mut,’ she confessed. ‘She doesn’t like Hopi, that’s the trouble. But I have to be nice to her now, whatever she says. Hopi thinks that if I’m not careful, we’ll get thrown out of the troupe.’

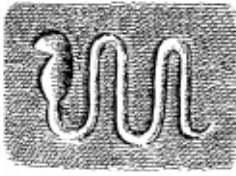
Heria’s eyes widened in shock. ‘But . . . they’re your family!’ she exclaimed.

‘Not really.’ Isis explained about her parents, her uncle and how she had been taken in as a dance partner for Mut. ‘We haven’t lived with them for long,’ she said. ‘And Hopi can’t work, so they just keep him for my sake. Now Nefert’s getting angry because Mut and I don’t get on.’

‘But where would you go?’

It was a question that Isis had been avoiding. She hadn’t wanted to face up to Hopi’s warning. It hadn’t seemed real, until now.

‘I think we might have relatives, somewhere,’ she said, uncertainly. ‘But not in Waset.’



CHAPTER THREE

The house of Nakht was packed, and the inner room was hot. Very hot. Lamplight flickered around the walls, creating deep, twisting shadows that leaped and cavorted in time with the music. Nefert, She and Kia were playing their instruments faster and faster, while Paneb beat out the rhythm with a pair of clappers. Mut and Isis gyrated and swayed to the music, their bodies shining with fragrant oil.

The room was crowded with people. Men holding beakers of wine stood cheering and clapping. Women sat along one wall dressed in their finest linen and jewellery – beautiful beaded collars and gold bangles that glinted in the lamplight. Perfume cones sat on top of their wigs, slowly melting and filling the room with rich, sweet scent.

‘More space! More space!’ Paneb cried. ‘Make room for our dancers!’

The partygoers squeezed tighter together, laughing, to create an open area in the centre of the room. Mut and Isis whirled into it together, perfectly in time. They gave each other a little nod and flipped their bodies forward into a front-flip. Then, without pausing, they flipped themselves backwards in the tiny space, gaining a roar of applause.

‘Again!’ called the men.

The girls did as the men asked, then carried on with their dance. Their arms in the air, they swung their hips in time to the music, then started taking rhythmic little steps, first in one direction, then the other. Isis knew this part of their routine so well that she could allow her glance to wander around the room. Some of the women had drunk too much wine, and were giggling together in a corner. Many of the men had started leaning against the walls a little heavily. By the doorway stood Hopi, alone.

In between her twists and turns, Isis noticed someone appear by Hopi’s side: a middle-aged man wearing a neat, well-made wig and fine jewellery. Hopi looked surprised as the man started talking to him. Isis saw him shaking his head, his face concerned. What was going on?

She had to carry on dancing. They were reaching a more difficult section of their routine, and she needed to concentrate. But now the man was placing a heavy hand on Hopi’s shoulder . . .

Isis wished they could dance in that direction. She craned her neck, distracted. Before she knew it, she was out of time. She did a somersault well after Mut, and landed awkwardly, almost falling over. Mut glared at her, furious. She could tell what her dance partner meant: *What do you think you’re doing?*

Isis felt her cheeks grow hot, hoping desperately that Nefert and Paneb hadn’t noticed. Arguing with Mut was one thing. Making mistakes when she was dancing was quite another. The troupe prided itself on giving a perfect performance every time – its reputation depended upon it. Losing concentration like that . . . Isis was furious with herself. It was unforgivable.

‘Come with me.’

The man steered Hopi out of the main room. Hopi looked over his shoulder, hoping to see someone familiar, but the whole family was performing, and he hadn't seen Seti since they'd parted the afternoon. The man dug his fingers a little deeper into Hopi's shoulder. There was no choice. This man had an air of authority, something powerful that was slightly frightening. Obediently, Hopi accompanied him out into the cool night air.

In the moonlight, the man's eyes searched Hopi's face from beneath dark eyebrows. 'It worries me when I see young people dabbling in things that they do not understand,' he said.

Hopi was baffled. 'Are you speaking to the right person, sir?' he asked. 'I only arrived this morning. I'm not dabbling in anything.'

'Oh, I'm addressing the right person, there's no doubt about that.'

Hopi began to feel very uncomfortable. The man's eyes seemed to be boring straight through him.

'Well . . . the only thing I've done is look for snakes,' he said. 'I know I shouldn't have been on the cliff path, but I meant no harm.'

'I know what you were doing,' said the man. 'What's unfortunate is that you yourself do not. There is powerful magic at work in this village, boy.'

Hopi was beginning to feel scared. 'What kind of magic, sir?' he asked.

The man placed a hand on his shoulder once more. 'You do not belong here,' he said. 'The secrets of this village have nothing to do with you. Try to remember that.'

'Yes, but –'

'Don't ask questions. Do not follow strangers who may lead you into trouble. And, above all, fear and respect the magic that surrounds us here. You are not in Waset now, but treading in the Kingdom of the Dead, where the greatest of our kings find access to the Next World. This mountain . . .' he said, waving a hand towards the dark rocky bulk behind them, 'is a sacred place.'

Hopi realised that his mouth had gone dry. The only stranger he had followed was Seti, who was much older than himself. How could that get him into trouble? It wasn't even as though they'd found any snakes – they'd hunted all afternoon without any luck. He licked his lips, and found nothing to say.

The man directed him back into the party. 'I see you've understood me well enough. Now go and enjoy yourself. Drink wine, and watch your sister perform.'

The mention of Isis gave Hopi a little courage. 'Who are you?' he managed to ask.

'I am Rahotep,' the man answered. 'I hope you will remember my name.'

Hopi nodded. 'I will, sir.'

'Good. Now go.'

Hopi was only too glad to obey. He stepped back towards the house of Nakht, but in the darkness a rut in the street made him stumble. His weak leg collapsed beneath him and, with a cry, he fell to the ground.

For a second, he was winded. Then he felt Rahotep's hand on his arm. 'Are you hurt?' asked the man.

Hopi sat up slowly, brushing himself down. He winced as he moved his bad leg, but could tell that he had not done any real harm.

'No . . . no. I'm all right.' He reached for his linen bag, which had flown off his shoulder. Some of its contents had spilled on the ground, and Rahotep helped him gather them up: some pottery ostraca on which Hopi sometimes doodled, and the lid of his papyrus basket. He took them and put them back

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