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opening extract from

Eye of the Sun

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CHAPTER ONE

THE MARKET

Thebes is the colour of chalk. A mixture of sand swirling up from the desert and dust billowing down from the ancient limestone mountains. It sifts down over the city like the finest of bread flours. And this morning, hordes of people with handcarts and donkeys pushing their way through the narrow streets kicked up enough dust to choke us all.

Despite this, a shiver of anticipation ran through me. It was rumoured this would be the best market ever. Traders had arrived from far-off Syria, bringing with them exotic oils, woven cloths, spices and nuggets of precious desert stone said to be as large as duck eggs. Could there be *anything* as exciting as a foreign market?

But the morning had started off badly. On the west bank there'd been no ferryman to take us across the Great River. Crowds had grown with children squalling and mothers scolding, as people from the workers' village gathered. When a boat finally came, the crush was so great that an old woman had fallen from the quayside and disappeared under the water.

'Oi! She's not coming up! Quickly, do something!'

'A crocodile's got her!'

'If a crocodile's got her, *you* won't be coming back either,' someone warned a boy who stood teetering on the edge of the ferry, ready to jump in after her.

He dived in all the same and came up dragging the gasping woman. They were hauled back onto the ferry and people laughed and teased the old woman as they picked off strands of waterweed from her hair and dripping tunic.

All this had taken time. Eventually when we got to the east bank, I was carried along by a surge of people like debris being swept down by a great flood. Men, women, large and small, old and young, all mingled with loud shrieks and yelps ringing out as carts were overturned, or a child fell to the ground, or a dog was trodden underfoot. And in the midst of this some geese had escaped their cage and were honking and hissing and snapping at passing feet.

A pestilence of flies! And now my tunic hem was dragging in the dirt and through some fresh donkey droppings as well.

There was a loud curse behind me. 'Oi! Mind where you're going, stupid girl!'

I barely had time to save myself from falling under the wheels of a woman's handcart piled high with onions and leeks, when someone held out a hand to steady me.

'Watch out! They'll flatten you as quickly as oxen trampling through a barley field,' he shouted above the noise of the honking geese. 'Here, come to the side of the road. You're limping.'

I glanced at the boy as he bent to examine my foot. He looked familiar.

‘Your sandals are ridiculous with their upturned tips! No wonder you tripped! You should be wearing strong leather sandals on market day!’ He pressed around my ankle.

‘Ouch! That hurt!’ I snapped at him.

‘It’s only twisted. But it needs to be bound.’

I pulled away and tried to stand. ‘I’m fine, thank you!’

‘You’re not! Sit down again. I’ll bind it for you.’

I looked back at him. A handsome boy. Long, dark eyelashes. Smooth, freshly-shaven cheeks. No formal wig. His hair falling in damp tendrils against his neck. ‘Aren’t you the boy who saved the old woman?’

He caught my glance and shrugged. ‘Saving old ladies or princesses, it’s all the same to me!’

‘Princesses?’

He raised a dark eyebrow and grinned at me. ‘Your rough cloak doesn’t fool me. I can see by the fine linen of your tunic that you’re no country girl come into town on market day. You don’t belong here, do you?’

I glanced quickly over my shoulder in case anyone had overheard.

‘Don’t look so dismayed. Your secret won’t be told. It’s safe with me.’

‘I’m ...’ But he’d taken my words away. I brushed his hand from my foot and stood up quickly. He jumped up just as abruptly and pulled me against his chest.

‘What ...?’ I gave him a sharp shove with my elbow. ‘What do you think you’re doing? Let go of me!’

‘I will, as soon as that donkey has passed. You almost got yourself knocked down again. Now sit calmly while I bandage your foot.’ Then he grinned up at me. ‘I know what I’m doing. This isn’t the first time I’ve done this. Trust me.’

He drew a dagger from his girdle, stuck its point into the linen of his tunic and deftly tore a strip from the hem. Then he began winding the strip firmly under my foot and around my ankle. I eyed him as he worked. His hands were quick and seemed practised at bandaging. His forearms were criss-crossed with hieroglyphs of pale scars and the fingers of his right hand looked as if they’d once been badly broken. I guessed he was about the age my brother would have been. About sixteen or seventeen.

He glanced up and caught me examining him. I felt my face grow hot. He smiled back at me with perfect even teeth. He was truly handsome.

‘You’re not from Thebes, are you?’

‘How do you know?’

‘The stupid upturned sandals. The braided style of your wig. Are you Syrian? Perhaps from Tyre, or Byblos, or even Kadesh?’

I shook my head.

‘You’re not Nubian.’

I shook my head again.

‘From where, then?’

‘You ask too many questions.’

He laughed and released my foot and stood up quickly. ‘There. The way is clear now.’ He bowed slightly, as if giving me permission to leave.

‘Clear?’ I turned to look at the people brushing past us, wishing another trail of donkeys could delay me. ‘I’m from Mitanni. The people here call it Naharin. But I prefer its proper name.’

‘Naharin? That far? So you *are* a princess! A princess sent from Naharin to Thebes as a gift to the King.’

‘I’m *not* a princess!’

‘But you *are* from the Palace?’

I glanced sharply at him. ‘What makes you say that?’

‘Why else are you wearing a peasant’s wrap over a fine linen tunic? You’ve sneaked out and you don’t want anyone to recognise you. But mysterious girls with cats tattooed on their shoulders are easy to recognise.’

‘Cats?’ I’d forgotten the tattoo of the cat on my shoulder and snatched at my cloak so that it covered the mark. A blush crept up my neck. He was smiling. This boy was a flirt. Yet even though I knew he was flirting, I was still charmed.

‘I have to hurry,’ I said quickly.

‘Go then, Little Cat Girl.’

‘That’s not my proper name.’

He smiled and held my eyes with his direct look. ‘To name something is to know it. But beware of carts and donkeys!’

And boys with dark, flirting eyes, I almost threw back at him. But he turned before I could say anything and slipped into the crowd and disappeared.

My sandals were nowhere to be seen. Standing barefoot in the dust, I really *did* feel like a proper country girl. A pestilence of flies! I’d have to walk barefoot through the muck and my ankle would slow me down. The sun was stinging hot. And now I was late. And Kiya would be impatient for her perfect length of cloth.

‘Fine linen, woven with gold thread, with tasselled edges and a pattern of turquoise beads caught into it.’

‘How can you be sure I’ll find such a cloth?’

‘The traders are from Syria. Everything at the market will be wonderful.’ She had sighed heavily. ‘I wish I could go with you.’

‘But you can’t and that’s that! It’s too dangerous.’

‘Please, Ta-Miu,’ she had begged.

But all her flouncing and flopping about on her bed hadn’t convinced me. I couldn’t risk it. Kiya was too impulsive. She’d draw attention to us.

‘I promise to behave.’

But when she saw nothing would make me change my mind, she pouted and said, ‘Bring woollen cloth as well.’

‘*Wool?* This isn’t the Khabur Mountains, Kiya. We don’t need wool here.’

‘It’s not the cloth I need! But the comfort of it. I miss the feel of it beneath my fingers. Four years in Thebes hasn’t cured me of longing for things that remind me of home.’

I sighed. Sometimes Kiya – Princess Tadukhepa to others, but Kiya always to me – seemed still such a child. How would she ever cope with her position as wife to the new king?

By the time I eventually reached the market, it was seething with people. Over the stench of donkey droppings came aromas of sizzling goat meat and perfumed wafts of cinnamon, caraway, coriander, saffron, mint, thyme and every other conceivable herb and spice. Hawks whirled overhead trying to snap up entrails and were shooed off by angry stall-holders. Their screeches added confusion to the sound of foreign tongues, donkeys braying, voices arguing over goods and volleys of slaps and curses coming from every direction as tempers flew and the day grew more and more stifling.

I strained to see through the crowds and kept a lookout for the boy. In the noise and riff-raff of people pushing me this way and that, it was all I could do to edge my way forward, cursing myself for not even asking his name. He had come close to guessing mine. Little Cat Girl, he'd called me. But in a city as large as Thebes I'd probably never lay eyes on him again. And who was to say he was even Theban? He might merely be passing through for the market and by tomorrow be gone and on his way to another place.

Eventually I came to a stall piled high with woven fabric and trimmings. I rifled through them and when I saw a cloth I thought would make Kiya happy, - bargained as hard as I could, shrugging off others who tried to grasp it from me. Eventually a small sachet of ten carnelians tipped into the trader's hand did the trick. With the cloth firmly bundled under my arm, I shouldered my way through the crowds and came to a space where I could right my clothing and breathe freely again.

The cloth was woven with a pattern of fine red thread and hung with tassels but had no beads of turquoise or gold. Not exactly what Kiya had described but no matter. Perhaps I could sew on some beads. I knew what was behind her wanting something unusual and exotic for the banquet. At this first proper gathering of all the Royal Wives since Nefertiti's marriage to Amenhotep the Younger, Kiya, being the very youngest of all his wives, needed to make an impression.

Suddenly someone grabbed me around the waist and held a hand over my mouth. I felt hot breath at my ear and a whisper. 'It's only me!' He released me slowly and as I spun around I found myself looking straight into the dark-haired boy's eyes.

'Are you following me?' I snapped.

'Only for your protection.'

'Well, *don't*! I don't need your protection! I've travelled across the deserts of Syria on my own.'

He smiled knowingly. 'Not entirely on your own. Weren't you accompanied by hordes of fierce horsemen as protectors?'

I looked over my shoulder. 'Keep your voice down!' I urged.

‘In this hubbub no one will hear us. Here, these are yours.’ He held up my sandals with a smile that seemed to mock the upturned toe. ‘I found them alongside the road. Come. I know a place where we can get something to drink.’ He gripped my arm and guided me firmly down a tangle of narrow streets to a small alleyway where there were fewer people. At the bottom of the narrow space I could see a glint of green as the river flowed by. An old man was sitting in a dark doorway. The boy handed him a bag of dates. In return the man poured out two horn cupfuls of pomegranate juice and pushed two honey cakes towards us.

The juice was slightly bitter but cool. I hadn’t realised how thirsty I was. The boy drank quickly which left him with a pink moustache. It was difficult not to smile. ‘I can’t stay long. Tadukhepa is waiting.’

‘Tadukhepa?’

‘Princess Tadukhepa ... my mistress.’ I wiped the crumbs of honey cake from my lips. ‘Although she’s really three years younger than I.’

‘The *real* princess!’ His eyes glinted in the shadowy light. ‘So I was right! You travelled from Naharin with a princess. You *did* have fierce horsemen as your protectors, the finest and most valiant of horsemen, famous for the way they train horses. Even the Hittites are jealous of them. And now you live at the Palace here in Thebes.’

‘Are you asking or telling?’

‘You don’t have to be secretive. I can keep secrets.’

‘Perhaps another time. I must hurry now.’

‘Meet me again. Here tomorrow at the same time?’

Hmm? No please, or will you, from this boy. But I liked his charm. I shrugged. ‘Perhaps.’

‘Perhaps is good enough! Hurry then, before you’re missed. You’ve a banquet to attend.’

I gave him a sharp glance. ‘How do you know?’

He smiled. ‘In Thebes, it’s not only dust that fills the air.’

I took the less crowded route back to the river. Next to the new Southern Opet Temple a smell of myrrh drifted out into the air. In the sunlight that slanted through the columns into the forecourt, I caught sight of priests making offerings before the altars. As they swung their censers, their mumbled intonations echoed against the shining blocks of stone and the newly-carved, tall papyrus-shaped columns. With the Temple so recently built, I knew they needed to make sure the gods were happy and would keep the harmony and order of the world.

Apart from the priests, there was no one else in sight. Not even the urchin boys who usually hung about pelting each other with pebbles and pestering people for a loaf or two of bread. Or even the temple-cleaning women.

I hurried as quickly as my ankle would allow down the avenue of sphinxes guarding the east and the west horizons that led from the Southern Opet Temple to the Temple of Amun. Along the way, I stopped to touch the seventeenth lioness facing east, the one I always touched, with the strange expression that

made her look wiser than the rest. Her body was warm under my hand. So much power trapped in her stone-lion muscles.

Then I hurried along through the dark bands of shadow cast by their bodies across the paved avenue. As I passed from shadow to sunlight, it felt as if I was zithering over the strings of a giant lyre. I seemed to catch some inaudible vibration floating upwards. My feet were light as air. My heart sang.

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