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Egyptian Chronicles 1: The Spitting Cobra

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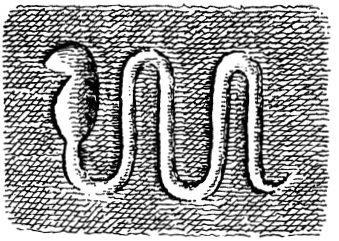
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CHAPTER ONE

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 all 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, it 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 *hesyu*, 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 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 in 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. They 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's 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.'