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The Egyptian Chronicles: The Horned Viper

written by

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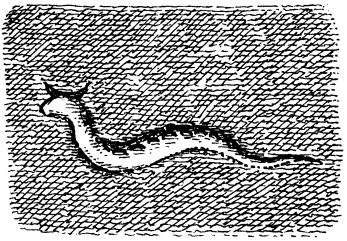
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CHAPTER ONE

'I'm afraid that will be quite impossible,' said Paneb. 'We have two young children. It would be very difficult to take them on such a trip.'

'Ah, now that's a shame. A real shame.' The visitor stroked his chin. 'I'd heard that you are the best dance and music troupe in Waset. I only employ the best. And I pay the best prices.'

Isis sat quietly in the corner, holding her breath. What would Paneb say now? The visitor wanted to take the troupe upriver on his new boat, but she really hoped Paneb would say no. She *really* didn't want to go. The River Nile filled her with terror.

Paneb exchanged glances with his wife Nefert, then smiled politely. 'I'm glad you've heard good things about us,' he said. 'If we could stay here in Waset, we would say yes at once. But a long trip like

that . . .' He shook his head. 'It can't be done. I'm sorry.'

A flicker of annoyance passed over the visitor's face. He was a big, fat man. Isis guessed that he was very rich. His clothes and wig were of the finest quality, and the room was full of his heavy perfume. A tall, strong fan-bearer stood just behind him, gently waving an ostrich-feather fan. The man seemed to be thinking.

'I don't need the whole troupe,' he said. 'You have a number of musicians.' He nodded at Sheri and Kia, Nefert's widowed sisters. 'And you have two dancers.' He smiled at Isis and her dance partner, Mut.

Isis lowered her gaze in despair. *No. Not us. Anyone but us*, she thought.

'Two musicians, two dancers,' continued the man. 'That would be perfect! Your dancers are beautiful. I will pay double your usual price. And, of course, their passage back to Waset from Djeba.'

Silence fell. Isis could see what Paneb and Nefert were thinking. It was too good to refuse.

'Well . . .' began Paneb. Isis caught his eye, pleading with him to say no. He looked troubled. 'That is a very attractive offer. But there is another problem.'

The man raised an eyebrow. 'Yes? Tell me. I'm sure there's nothing I can't resolve.'

'One of our dancers is afraid of the river. Her parents were taken to the Next World by crocodiles, you see.'

The man looked from Isis to Mut and back again. Isis swallowed in fear as the man sized her up.

'Does he mean you, little one?' he asked, his voice surprisingly gentle.

Isis nodded. The man stepped towards her. He placed a hand on her head and gazed deep into her eyes.

'What is your name?' he asked.

'Isis.' It came out in a whisper.

'Isis . . . the greatest goddess of them all,' he murmured. 'Well, Isis, I hate to hear of anyone living in fear. We must seek the blessing of the gods so that you are freed of it.' He smiled, and cupped her face in his hands. 'Believe me. You will be safe on my boat.'

Isis looked up at him, entranced by the power he seemed to exude. To her surprise, she felt her fear melting away.

'The only question is this: whose blessing must we seek?' continued the man.

Isis thought about it. There was Hapi, the god of the Nile itself, who brought the blessing of the annual flood. But Sobek, the crocodile god, was the one she feared most.

'Sobek,' she managed to say.

'Very well. Then we shall offer a couple of nice fat lambs to Sobek. And may his protection be upon us all.'

Isis stared in disbelief. Two whole lambs! This man really *was* rich . . . he could do anything he wanted! She felt almost dizzy. Then, suddenly, she came to her senses. She never went anywhere without her brother Hopi.

'But I can't go unless Hopi comes, too,' she blurted out.

The man looked at her in surprise. 'And who is Hopi?'

'He's my brother,' Isis said, and pointed to where the slight form of Hopi stood near the doorway, a deep frown on his face.

Hopi limped along the streets of Waset, feeling fed up. A trip to Djeba was the last thing he wanted to do, especially with that man Hat-Neb and his fan-bearer. He didn't like the look of either of them. But he didn't want Isis to go on her own, either. His sister had been terrified of the river ever since that day five years ago, when crocodiles had killed their parents. They had almost killed Hopi, too.

He turned down a little side street and knocked on

a door. After a moment, a wizened old man peered out of the whitewashed house.

'Good afternoon, Menna. May the gods be with you,' Hopi greeted him.

'Hopi. May the gods be with you, too. Come in.' Menna opened the door wider and Hopi stepped inside. The old priest led the way through to a courtyard at the back.

'Sit down, sit down,' said Menna, waving his hand at some mats in the shade. 'Now, what have you brought today?'

Hopi usually arrived with a snake or scorpion that he had caught, but today he shook his head. 'Nothing but bad news.'

'Bad news! Why, what has happened? Is someone sick?'

'Oh, not that bad.' Hopi felt slightly ashamed. 'I have to go on a trip, Menna. A rich overseer has a new boat, and he's hired some of the troupe to entertain him while he travels back to the temple he's working on at Djeba. So I have to accompany Isis.'

'And what's so terrible about that?'

'I am learning so much from you. I would rather stay here.'

Menna smiled. 'I am not the only source of knowledge, Hopi,' he said. 'It is good to travel. Don't rely

only on an old man like me.'

Hopi tried to feel less dejected, but it was difficult. Becoming Menna's apprentice had changed his life. It had given him a future. There weren't many jobs that a cripple could do, especially a cripple with little learning. But now he knew that one day he would become a priest of Serqet, with the authority to treat the bites and stings of dangerous snakes and scorpions.

'I suppose you're right,' he said reluctantly.

'Of course I am,' said Menna. 'When do you leave?'

'Tomorrow, I think.'

'Then what are you doing here?' exclaimed the old man. 'Go, Hopi! Make your preparations. Enjoy yourself. When you return, you can come and tell me what you have learned. You might even be able to teach me something.'

'Impossible,' said Hopi, smiling a little. 'Very well, Menna. I will do as you say.'

The old man ushered him out on to the street. Hopi said his farewells and began to walk home. Then he changed his mind. If he was going to embark on this journey, he wanted to take a look at the boat that would carry him.

The riverbank at Waset was busy. Fishing boats dotted the shore; the wooden ferry that carried

people over to the west bank was just coming in. In one section of the harbour, there was a little line of pleasure boats owned by the rich men of the town. Among them was one that Hopi had never seen before. It was shaped in a curve, with the prow and stern both high out of the water. Two big rudder-paddles dug into the water at the stern, and strong square sails were furled on its masts. In the middle there was an ornate cabin to provide shelter from the sun, and at the prow there was another open-sided shelter for passengers to sit in.

Hopi stared at it. This boat was bigger and more beautiful than any of the others. For the first time, he began to feel that the trip wouldn't be too bad after all. There were men on board, and he watched as one of them climbed down a little ladder to the shore.

'Is this the boat of Hat-Neb?' Hopi asked, as the man passed by.

'Why, what do you know about it?' asked the man sourly.

'If it is, I'm coming on board tomorrow,' said Hopi.

The man narrowed his eyes. 'Are you indeed? And who are you?'

Hopi explained about the dance troupe. 'I'm Hopi, the brother of one of the dancers, and a trainee priest of Serqet,' he finished.

'A priest of Serqet? You deal with snakes and scorpions?'

'That's right,' said Hopi. 'I'm the apprentice of Menna, the greatest priest in the whole of Waset.'

'Is that so?' said the man, and Hopi saw that he was impressed. 'In that case, I'm sure there are many things we can teach each other. I am Tutmose, one of the doctors of the royal court.'

Hopi's heart gave a leap. A royal doctor! Menna had been right. Perhaps he would learn many things on this trip. He smiled. 'That is good news, sir.'

'Indeed.' Tutmose nodded briskly. 'I shall look forward to spending many hours with you.'

'Thank you, sir.' Hopi felt overwhelmed.

Tutmose patted him on the shoulder, then hurried on into the streets of Waset. Hopi watched him go, feeling ten times lighter. Things were definitely looking up.

The chief priest raised his knife, and Isis saw the flash of the blade in the sunlight. He brought it down and with one clean, smooth movement, he slit the lamb's throat. There was a brief gurgling, rasping sound as the creature sank to the ground and kicked its legs in its dying throes. Then it was still. Isis felt sick. But as the priest carried out the ritual on the second lamb,

she calmed down. It was all so quick, and there was surprisingly little blood.

'All over.' Hat-Neb smiled at Isis.

Isis smiled back at him, full of gratitude. Hat-Neb was a man of his word, and had wasted no time in buying the two lambs he had promised to sacrifice. There was no major temple to the god Sobek in Waset, but there was a little shrine on the outskirts of the town, close to the river. With Mut and Hopi, Sheri and Kia, Isis had accompanied Hat-Neb and his fan-bearer to the site of the shrine, where they were watching at a distance. Two whole lambs for her sake! She felt like a princess.

Three other priests set to work on the lamb carcasses, expertly carving them up.

'Come. We can go to the pool now,' said Hat-Neb.

He began to walk slowly around the shrine with his fan-bearer one pace behind him. The group followed as Hat-Neb led them along a little path shaded with date palms. Ahead, Isis caught a glimpse of shimmering water, and her heart thudded with fear.

The sacred pool was muddy, its banks a tangle of reeds. The surface of the water was calm, with just a tiny ripple drifting across it when the breeze blew. Isis looked around anxiously for Hopi, but he had turned away and was staring out towards the river.

Why does he still look so cross? Isis wondered.

But now the priests were coming. The chief priest walked ahead, while the three others followed, carrying platters of meat on their heads and chanting prayers.

Hat-Neb drew Isis to his side. 'Stay close to me,' he instructed her. 'I'll keep you perfectly safe.'

Isis did as he said. With Hat-Neb's arm around her shoulder and the big fan-bearer just behind, she felt secure – which was just as well, because the surface of the pond was no longer still. Two sets of nostrils appeared, poking out of the water. They were followed by four golden eyes and huge log-like bodies. Isis felt her knees tremble.

The priests stood in a row and lifted the platters from their heads. The chief priest took a chunk of meat. The water in the pond was beginning to churn, and now two enormous heads rose out of it, their jaws opening to reveal rows of terrifying teeth.

Isis screamed. She couldn't help it. Hat-Neb's hand gripped her shoulder, and she gulped for air. Then she put her hands up to her face and peeped at the scene through her fingers. The chief priest threw the chunk of meat, and the jaws opened even wider. Tails thrashed the water as the first crocodile caught the meat and tossed it into its mouth with a few powerful

snaps. The priest reached for more meat and threw it to the other crocodile, then kept on throwing until the platters were empty.

The priests resumed their chanting. Solemnly, they turned away from the pond and passed the spectators to walk slowly back towards the shrine. Isis knew they had to complete the ritual inside, away from public eyes. They would have saved some of the meat to present to the statue of the god, before sharing it among themselves.

The crocodiles were sinking back into the water. Soon, Isis could see nothing but nostrils and the ridges along their backs. Then the sacred pond was still again.

'There. Sobek is pleased,' murmured Hat-Neb. 'We have his blessing, little Isis.'

Isis let her hands slip down from her face, and took a deep breath. She had not been so close to crocodiles since the day her parents had died. But she had survived. She stared at the still water, and realised that her knees had stopped trembling.

Hopi trailed after the group as it headed back towards the shrine, dragging his feet. The whole event had upset him deeply, and he wasn't even sure why. Of course he was happy for Isis to overcome her

fear of crocodiles – if, indeed, the sacrifice had worked. But he hated it being because of Hat-Neb. That was all wrong – just because he was rich, and could afford to squander his wealth on lambs like that . . .

Not squander, he told himself. If it had helped Isis, then it wasn't squandering. But all the same, Hopi resented it. Their father's last words had seared themselves on to his mind: *Look after Isis* . . . And Hopi had hoped to do just that. He'd hoped that one day, *he* would be the one to help Isis conquer her fears. And now this man Hat-Neb had swept into their lives and tucked his sister under his own big, fat arm.

What was worse, Hat-Neb seemed to have taken a dislike to Hopi. As they had approached the shrine, Hopi had heard him mutter into his fan-bearer's ear.

'Keep an eye on that boy,' he'd said.

So he, Hopi, was *that boy*. The fan-bearer had taken his master's word seriously. It wasn't just *an eye* that he was keeping on Hopi – he seemed to have at least four of them. Hopi felt watched the whole time, and he hated it. It gave him the creeps.

Isis looked up at the beautiful boat. This was not a fragile craft made of papyrus, or even a wobbly ferry. It was a big, solid boat that sat high out of the water.

'You will be safe, Isis.' It was Sheri who spoke. She pointed up at the boat's cabin. 'Look. Hat-Neb is waiting for us. Come.'

Isis gazed up at the cabin. Hat-Neb was holding something in his arms, something small and furry. It was a cat. The sight of the little creature gave a final boost to her courage. Hat-Neb had done so much to help her, and it filled her with gladness to see him holding and stroking a cat. She took Sheri's hand on her left and Kia's hand on her right, and walked up to the boat's ladder. Bravely, without looking down, she clambered up to the deck.

'Welcome aboard!' Hat-Neb greeted her. 'And meet Killer, my most prized hunting cat.'

Killer was a sleek tabby with clear green eyes. Tentatively, Isis reached out to stroke and tickle him behind the ears, and he purred gratefully.

She smiled. 'We'll be friends,' she said.

'Better than that,' said Hat-Neb. 'We shall take him hunting, and you will see him track down the birds in the marshes.'

Isis had heard many tales of hunting in the marshes and the cleverness of the hunting cats. But she had never actually seen it for herself.

'May I hold him?' she asked.

Hat-Neb placed the cat in her arms. Killer wriggled

at first, but Isis held him firmly and carried on stroking him until he relaxed. Together they watched as Mut came aboard, followed by their luggage – Sheri and Kia's lyres, lutes and flutes, along with their wigs, gowns and make-up, plus mats and covers for the cool nights that they would spend along the riverbank. She buried her cheek in Killer's soft fur. In spite of everything, the trip would be a success.

But for Hopi, the trip had not yet begun. He was still ten paces away from the boat, out of sight of the deck, with the fan-bearer leaning over him.

'Empty it. Everything,' ordered the fan-bearer. He was Nubian, with a heavy southern accent.

Silently, Hopi took the last items out of his linen bag, then shook it upside down to show that there was nothing left. The fan-bearer fingered his belongings, examining each of them closely.

'What is this?' The man held up a flat piece of limestone with hieroglyphs scribbled over it.

'What d'you think it is?' asked Hopi impatiently. It was perfectly obvious.

The man towered over Hopi menacingly. 'It is a rock. A rock is dangerous,' he said.

Hopi refused to be intimidated. 'Can't you see it's for writing on?'

'All I see is that it is dangerous,' repeated the fan-bearer. 'This does not come on the boat.' And he threw the ostracon into a pile of dried-out palm fronds along the shore.

'Hey!' Hopi was furious, but the fan-bearer ignored him, and bent down to sift through the rest of Hopi's belongings.

'This,' said the man, picking up a papyrus basket. He pulled off the closely fitting lid, and peered inside. The basket was empty. 'Why you need this?'

Hopi was silent. The basket was one of his most treasured possessions, for he used it to house any snakes or scorpions that he caught. But he knew he mustn't say so.

'Well?' The fan-bearer was staring at him.

'It's my basket,' muttered Hopi.

'I see it is basket.'

'I . . . I put flowers in it. Flowers, reeds – stuff from the fields.' Hopi met the fan-bearer's gaze defiantly.

The man shrugged and gave a pitying smile. He put the basket down. It was the last item, and he waved his arm, indicating that Hopi could repack his linen bag. But then he caught sight of the stick in Hopi's right hand.

'Stick. This is dangerous,' he exclaimed, and reached out for it.

'No!' Hopi snatched it out of his way. 'I need it.'

'This is boat trip. No need for stick,' scoffed the fan-bearer.

But Hopi was determined. The stick had a fork at one end, which was essential for catching and handling snakes. He wasn't going anywhere without it. He thought quickly, then pointed down at his leg with its deep, jagged scars.

'Look at my leg. I can't manage without my stick,' he insisted. The row of crocodile scars was impressive.

The fan-bearer narrowed his eyes, then nodded. 'You pack your bag. Hurry. We are very soon leaving.'

Hopi bent to do as he said, placing his belongings one by one into his bag. He kept his features still, so that the fan-bearer could not see what he was feeling. But in his heart a cold fury was building.