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opening extract from

Egyptian Chronicles 3: The Sacred Scarab

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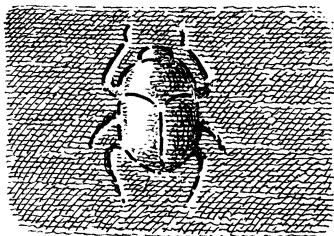
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CHAPTER ONE

Isis put her hands on her hips and stretched. Her muscles ached. In fact, she was weary all over. They'd been rehearsing day in, day out for weeks.

'Everyone ready?' asked Nefert, picking up her lute. 'Don't pull that face, Isis. You know very well how important this is.'

Isis moved into position. 'Sorry, Nefert,' she said. 'I'm just tired.'

'At your age? Nonsense.'

Nefert began plucking the lute's strings. Kia joined in on her flute, while Sheri lifted a lyre. Together the three women played a joyful melody that filled the whole house. Isis made herself concentrate again, watching Nefert carefully. When she saw a raised eyebrow, she skipped into the centre of the room and began to dance, with her partner Mut joining her

from the opposite corner. In time, the two girls swayed their hips and raised their hands high above their heads.

Somebody banged on the front door, and everyone stopped.

'Another interruption!' Nefert snapped. 'Who is it this time?'

'Oh, it'll be the wheat!' exclaimed Sheri. 'It's about time that arrived. Nefert, I'll have to show them the storeroom.' She put down her lyre and hurried out.

Nefert looked cross. 'Come straight back!' she called after her sister. 'We *must* get this right today. We have only five days left.'

Isis and Mut rolled their eyes at each other. As far as they were concerned, the routine was already perfect. But Nefert wouldn't let them stop practising because, for the first time ever, they were going to be part of the Beautiful Festival of the Valley that took place each year. The king himself would accompany the gods of Waset to his great mortuary temple, and Nefert was determined to make an impression.

Mut nudged Isis. 'Let's go and watch the delivery.' She turned to Nefert. 'We're just going to help Sheri, Mother.'

Nefert nodded. 'Make it quick.'



Isis grinned, and the two girls ran downstairs.

'Not there, not there!' Sheri was scolding, as a boy dumped a sack in the doorway. 'Bring it inside. Here.' She beckoned him into the storeroom.

The boy hoisted the heavy linen sack back up on to his shoulder. It was almost as big as he was, and he staggered under its weight. He shuffled in one step at a time and plonked the sack down just as a second delivery boy appeared in the doorway with another.

'This is the last one,' he said.

'Good,' said Sheri. 'Put it over here.'

Isis and Mut squeezed into the store. It smelled good in there – herbs and spices mingled with the earthy smell of grain. There were bags of barley as well as the wheat, fruits and vegetables, and a big pot of honey in one corner.

The boys left, and Mut poked at the sacks. A few grains came through the weave, and she nibbled at them.

'We'll have lovely fresh bread tomorrow, Sheri!'

'If we ever find the time to grind the grain,' said her aunt wryly. 'Come. We must get back to Nefert.'

'Do we have to? Mother's driving us too hard,' moaned Mut.

Sheri smiled gently. 'You can never practise too



hard, Mut. You know that.' And she turned to go back to their practice room.

Mut pouted, making a larger hole in the sack with her finger.

'Come *on!*' whispered Isis, heading after Sheri. She didn't fancy making Nefert any more grumpy than she already was. But she was just climbing the stairs when she heard a loud thump on the mud-brick steps behind her. She spun around. 'Mut!'

Her dance partner was sprawled on the floor, her face twisted in pain, one hand clutching her ankle. 'Ow, ow!' she howled.

Isis rushed to Mut's side. 'What have you done? Let me see!'

Tears began to roll down Mut's cheeks. 'Those stupid delivery boys! They moved the date box and I didn't see it!'

Isis looked and saw the box just below the steps. The boys must have shifted it to make room for the sacks of grain.

Mut sat up, still crying, as Sheri reappeared on the stairs.

'Whatever's going on?' she exclaimed. 'Mut, what happened?'

'I fell,' whimpered Mut. 'I think I've broken my ankle.'



‘Broken!’ Sheri dropped to her knees by Mut’s side. ‘Don’t say that. Let go, let me feel it.’

Mut squealed in pain as Sheri began to feel her way down the injured leg. Nefert and Kia appeared, and watched. No one said anything, but Isis knew only too well what everyone was thinking. This was bad news. *Very bad news.*

‘Try moving it, Mut,’ instructed Sheri.

‘*Ah-ah!* I can’t,’ gasped Mut.

‘Not even a little bit?’

Grimacing, Mut tried again, and Isis saw that her ankle seemed to move slightly. Sheri finished gently feeling it and looked up at the anxious faces around them.

‘I don’t think it’s broken,’ she said. ‘But we should get the doctor to come and check.’

‘But what about the festival routine?’ asked Mut, through her tears. ‘What if I can’t dance?’

Nefert looked away. Isis knew there was no answer to that.

‘Don’t think the worst until it’s happened,’ said Kia briskly. ‘I’ll go and fetch the doctor.’

Mut’s ankle had already swollen to twice its usual size. Isis felt her heart sink. The festival was such a golden opportunity. All sorts of things might come of it – it could bring the troupe work for months, even



years. But if they couldn't provide dancers, their chance would be gone, and it might never again be repeated.

Very carefully, Hopi applied an ointment of mashed onion and salt to the farmer's arm. The man winced as the mash went on, then held his arm stiffly as Hopi wrapped a bandage around it.

'Will I live?' the farmer asked, his voice quaking.

Hopi grinned. 'Oh yes, you'll be fine.' He looked up at Menna. 'Won't he, Menna?'

The old priest of Serqet sighed. 'Yes, yes. This snake is harmless.'

'Harmless? But its teeth sank deep into my arm!' exclaimed the farmer.

'Trust me,' said Menna wearily, 'I see plenty of these bites at harvest time. The snake was hiding in a sheaf of wheat, am I right?'

'Yes, but . . .' The farmer looked dubious. 'You are sure, then?'

'Perfectly sure. Keep the ointment on until tomorrow, then unwrap the bandage. The bite will soon heal.'

The farmer stared at his arm, as though he could scarcely believe his luck. Then he scratched his head with his good arm, and stood up. 'I must pay you,' he said. 'I have brought grain.'



‘Grain is always welcome,’ said Menna. ‘Though the gods know I can’t seem to eat very much these days.’

The farmer indicated the bag that he had by his side. ‘I hope this is enough.’

‘Indeed. May the gods be with you.’

Hopi took in Menna’s tired eyes and hunched shoulders as he showed the farmer out of the house. This was the busiest time of the year, but his tutor was not himself. With every new patient who arrived to receive treatment, he seemed a little more weary, a little more depressed. Hopi knew he was grieving the death of his brother, but it seemed to have affected him very deeply.

Menna returned to the courtyard. ‘I’m afraid there will be no more treatments today,’ he said, wiping his forehead. ‘You may go, Hopi. There is something I must do.’

Hopi scrambled to his feet. ‘Can’t I help you, Menna?’

The old man shook his head. ‘I must visit the family tomb. It is over the river on the west bank.’

This was intriguing news. ‘I could carry your bag,’ Hopi offered.

Menna smiled. ‘I can see you won’t take no for an answer. Very well, Hopi. Thank you. Fetch me my cloak – I may feel a chill on the river.’



Hopi did as his tutor told him, and they were soon making their way through the winding streets of Waset. Menna had a bad back and walked with a stoop, while Hopi had a limp from the day he had been attacked by crocodiles, so they didn't hurry. Hopi wandered along by his tutor's side, thinking. He knew that Menna's brother was lying in the embalmers' workshops, his body slowly drying out in natron salt. That should have been enough to tell him that Menna's family was rich – most people couldn't afford to give their loved ones such special treatment. But Menna had always seemed humble, and his house was not at all grand, so Hopi hadn't given it much thought. This was different – a family tomb on the west bank was impressive.

They reached the riverbank, where a ferry shunted to and fro across the Nile. Hopi helped Menna on board, and they sat waiting for the boat to fill up.

Menna seemed to be thinking, too. He turned to Hopi, placing a hand on his knee. 'I am growing old,' he said quietly. 'It is good that you have come with me.'

'You know I'd do anything to help,' said Hopi.

'Yes,' the old man sighed. 'You're a good apprentice. You have already learned much. But there are some lessons that only the gods can teach.'



Hopi looked at him. 'What sort of lessons?'

Menna shook his head. 'You will learn, Hopi, you will learn. I must ensure that you do, before it is too late. For the time being, it is good that you will see my tomb, for I, too, will lie there one day.'

The ferry started to glide across the Nile. Hopi gazed over the water at the west bank, where the barren mountains of the desert rose up against the blue sky. This was the Kingdom of the Dead, where people were taken to meet the Next World. He was burning with curiosity, and a little fear, too. He didn't like to think of Menna's death, or of anything being *too late*.

The doctor poked and pulled at Mut's leg, pushing her ankle one way and then the other, causing her to shriek with pain. Eventually, he stood up.

'I shall soothe her ankle with balm and wrap it in linen,' he announced. 'But there is nothing else to be done. The gods will heal it.' He rummaged in his bag for some bandages.

'It isn't broken?' asked Mut.

'No,' said the doctor. 'It's a sprain. You must rest it – no walking or running.'

'What about dancing?' breathed Mut.

'Absolutely no dancing.'



Mut started snivelling again, and Isis crouched down to put an arm around her shoulders.

Nefert's forehead was creased with anxiety. 'How soon will it heal?' she asked. 'We have only two dancers. There's no one to replace her, and the festival is in five days. Is it possible that she could take part?'

'Five days?' The doctor looked thoughtful.

Isis held her breath. She hated the thought of dancing alone.

'If she rests completely, it is possible,' said the doctor. He lifted Mut's ankle on to his knee and began wrapping the linen around it. 'But I mean *completely*. She must not walk on it at all.'

So there was hope. 'You'll get better, Mut,' whispered Isis. 'I'm sure you will. And we already know the routine.'

Mut bit her lip, trying to sniff back her tears. She nodded. 'I hope so.'

The doctor finished his bandaging, and Nefert went with him to the door.

'Thank you, doctor,' Isis heard her say. 'It's most important that she recovers quickly.'

Sheri and Isis helped Mut up on to her good leg. With their support, she managed to hop out into the courtyard to sit with Ramose and Kha, her two younger brothers.



‘You can watch us all while we do the rest of the preparations,’ said Sheri. ‘You’ll be better in no time.’

Mut just about managed to smile.

By the time Menna had crossed the fields and passed the royal mortuary temples, he seemed exhausted. Hopi was growing more and more worried about him, and feared that he wouldn’t make it back to Waset.

‘You have to rest,’ he said to his tutor. ‘Tell me where your tomb is, and what needs to be done.’ He guided Menna to a boulder and made him sit down.

‘Don’t worry, I’ll be fine.’ The old man pointed in the direction of the limestone cliffs. ‘Our tomb is small, nestled among the cliffs there. I must check that the seals have not been tampered with, and say some prayers in the chapel. Just give me a moment.’

Hopi waited, feeling disappointed. So he wouldn’t see inside the tomb at all. He had been very near here before, with his younger sister Isis, when the troupe had visited the village of the tomb-builders. Then they had seen inside a plundered royal tomb, but the idea of seeing this one was different. It was still in use, waiting to receive new occupants; one day, Menna himself would lie there.

At last, Menna rose to his feet and began to plod



steadily towards the cemetery. He made his way surely among the chapels – some grand, some modest – until he reached one of the smallest, tucked close to the face of the rocks. They entered. It was peaceful, painted with beautiful scenes of the afterlife, and Menna looked visibly relieved to see the tomb's sealed door.

'It is safe,' he muttered, and heaved a big sigh. 'So this is not the problem.'

Hopi frowned. 'There's a problem? What do you mean?'

Menna put a hand on his shoulder. 'My brother is lying in natron. He will soon be wrapped and placed here. But something is not right. Not right.' He shook his head. 'There will be trouble before his burial is through.'

'How do you know?' Hopi was baffled. He stared around the little chapel. He couldn't see anything wrong.

But the old man was praying, his eyes closed, muttering ancient supplications under his breath. Hopi waited until he finished. When he opened his eyes again, Menna bowed his head.

'When I delivered his body to the embalmers' workshops, I sensed it,' he said, and turned towards the doorway.



Hopi walked silently by Menna's side as they made their way back to the ferry. He knew better than to ask questions; Menna would never explain anything until he was ready. And when they eventually reached Waset once more, the sun was dipping in the west, throwing long shadows along the streets. It was time to go home.

To Hopi's surprise, the house was quiet. He paused in the hallway, listening. He could hear the murmur of adult voices on the first floor: the sisters – Nefert, Sheri, Kia . . . and Paneb, Nefert's husband. Isis and Mut were usually bouncing around, but there was no sign of them. Hopi walked through to the courtyard. The two girls sat there, looking subdued, with Mut's brothers. Isis was stirring a big pot of freshly brewed beer.

'What happened?' demanded Hopi, spotting Mut's leg.

'I tripped,' said Mut miserably. 'The stupid grain delivery boys left a box jutting out in the storeroom.'

'Did the doctor do that?' asked Hopi, nodding at the bandages.

'Yes. He says I have to rest it completely.'

Hopi looked at Isis. He had a good idea how upset she must be. She'd put so much into this festival –



every night she was exhausted from practising. And it would be bad news for the whole family if they couldn't perform.

'I'll ask Menna if there's an ointment we can put on it,' he offered.

Mut pulled a face. 'Yuck!' she exclaimed. 'I don't want a snake-bite potion, Hopi! The doctor said we just have to wait.'

'I was only trying to help,' muttered Hopi. His stomach rumbled. 'Is there anything to eat? Some bread or something?'

Isis shook her head. 'All the bread's gone into the beer. Have a look in the storeroom.'

Hopi nodded glumly. He hadn't expected anything better. With all the preparations for the festival, meal-times had become very erratic. He entered the house again and peered into the storeroom. Bags of grain weren't any use when you were hungry. He opened the box of dates and stuffed one into his mouth. Then he reached for a ripe fig from the fruit store. But, as he did so, he heard a noise. He stood still for a moment, listening. There it was again – someone was knocking on the door. It was an odd time for visitors. Frowning, Hopi went to see who it was.

A gaunt-looking man stood on the street outside. Hopi stared at him. He was dressed in the coarse



linen worn mostly by peasants, and his hands were rough and grimy.

‘Greetings,’ said the man, his voice low and shaky. ‘May the gods be with you. Is this the house of Paneb, son of Amenakht?’

‘Well . . . yes,’ said Hopi. He couldn’t imagine what a peasant wanted with Paneb.

The man shifted from one foot to the other. He cast his eyes to the ground, then looked up at Hopi again. ‘He *is* here?’

‘Yes, he’s here,’ said Hopi. The man was making him uncomfortable. ‘Who should I say you are? I’ll go and get –’

‘No!’ the peasant almost shouted. ‘Wait . . . wait a moment.’ He looked at the ground again, as though composing his thoughts. Then he looked up again with something like determination in his eyes. ‘Please let me come in. I do not wish to greet my cousin on the street.’

‘Cousin!’

‘You may tell Paneb that his cousin Sinuhe needs to speak with him.’

‘Of . . . of course,’ said Hopi hurriedly, taken aback. He opened the door wider. ‘Come and sit in the front room. I’ll fetch him for you.’

Sinuhe stepped inside, his eyes wide and curious,



as though he had never been to the house before. Hopi led him into the room that the family reserved for guests.

‘Wait here,’ he said, and made his way upstairs to the room where the adults were talking.

‘There’s a man here,’ he announced. He looked at Paneb. ‘He says he’s a relative – your cousin Sinuhe.’

Silence fell. The women looked at each other, then at Paneb, their expression stunned. But, if anything, Paneb looked even more surprised.

‘Who is this man?’ Nefert demanded.

‘I . . . I can explain,’ said Paneb. But, as he got to his feet, Hopi saw that his eyes said something else. Perhaps he *could* explain, but he certainly didn’t want to.