

## Chapter one

My father died six years ago, when I was just six years old. The pyramid of Djedefre killed him.

My name is Nebka and I work for my Uncle Minkaf, my father's brother, in his fields and tending his goats. My uncle does not think of me as his labourer, he says that we are family and it is the duty of everyone in a family to work the land together. Uncle Minkaf says that all children have to learn the skills needed for them to work the land when they are grown. All I know is that other children don't seem to work as hard as I do, especially during the long days of summer, or to have such a miserable life at home. My uncle says that is how life is, that we have to work hard during all the hours of daylight to grow and bring in the food, and in summertime those hours are long.

My Aunt Ipwet is a hard woman, too. But then I suppose that is because she comes from people that work the land, and all landworkers are hard people. Except my father. My father was called Merire and he was gentle and kind. He played with me when he could, after he'd finished work. He used to take me with him to the fields and let me run around. Even though he had to work he found time to talk to me and take breaks with me.

Uncle Minkaf doesn't talk to me when we are in the fields, and there is certainly no time to do anything other than work. Play is not allowed. Uncle Minkaf says that being idle is a sin, because when you are not working you are not helping the household to build up its store of food.

It is true that my uncle's fields produce more food than my father's did, because my father wanted to spend time with me, and with my mother when she was alive.

I don't remember my mother much. She died when I was small, about three years old. She died giving birth to my brother. He died at the same time.

I think that is why my father chose to play with me rather than working the whole day. He said to me once that our time is very precious, and we should make sure we spend it doing what is important to us, to get the best of every day.

I miss my father more than I can say, especially when a day has been very hard and my uncle or my aunt have been particularly harsh with me. I wish that he had never died.

I said that the pyramid of Djedefre killed him. Well, he was working on building the pyramid, moving the big cut blocks of stones into place, when one of the blocks fell and crushed him. The big blocks of stone for the pyramid weigh many tons.

I was told that the wooden sledge on which the block was being dragged collapsed as it

was going up a ramp, and the block fell back down the slope on to my father. My uncle says he was killed instantly and did not suffer, but I overheard one of our neighbours who was working on that pyramid at the same time, tell someone that after the stone crushed my father it took him two days to die.

It is a tradition that when the great River Nile floods and the land is underwater, most of the farmers and field hands go and work as labourers on the pyramids, hauling the massive blocks from the quarry to the pyramid site under the direction of the engineers.

Then, about three months later, when the flood waters begin to go down, they leave the pyramid site and return to their fields. The soil is wet enough for them to sow their seeds and they cast them on to the wet ground as they walk. The waters of the Nile have also brought good things for the soil, which help the seeds grow and turn into wheat or other foods. Then, the following year, after the harvest the Nile begins to flood again, and the whole cycle starts again.

They are well rewarded for their work as labourers at the pyramids. The grain they bring back can help them through the hard times when the crops do not yield as much as they should.

I have never seen a pyramid, nor one being built. I have barely been anywhere except my father's land, and then my uncle's.

It had been a day when I had been spared work in the fields because my aunt needed me to work about the house, even though she complained all the time about how clumsy and useless I was. This time she wanted me to grind wheat and barley into flour so that she could bake bread. The wheat flour was for bread for us to eat, and the barley flour was to make bread that would be turned into beer for us to drink. Usually this work is done by girls, but my uncle and aunt have no children of their own, and so I am their son and daughter, doing all the work in the house and fields that they do not want to do. I often wish they had children of their own – then I wouldn't have to work so hard. Also, I wouldn't be so lonely. I long for the company of other children, but I only see them when people visit us. The problem is that my uncle discourages visitors. He believes they take up too much time – time that should be spent working.

As the daylight drew to a close, and I had finished the household chores, my uncle returned from the fields.

"I have been walking the fields and checking the irrigation channels," he informed us. "I met Ini, who was also walking his." Ini was our neighbour whose fields were next to ours. "Word has come from the officials that the Nile is preparing to flood. All the signs point to it. The Dog Star is in the right place in the sky. It is time for me to go and work on the new pyramid that is being built at Giza. And this time I shall take Nebka with me."

I looked at him, shocked.

"Me?" I said. "Go to the pyramids?"

He nodded.

"Yes," he said. "You are twelve years old. You are strong enough."

"Isn't it enough that I break my back for you here?" I retorted angrily. "You want to kill me off at the pyramid!"

My uncle scowled, strode over to me, and slapped me hard on the side of the head. It hurt and made my head ring. I stumbled back and trod on a platter, sending it spinning across the floor.

"You clumsy oaf!" roared my aunt.

"You will not talk to me that way!" snapped my uncle at me, ignoring my aunt. "I have fed you and given you shelter ever since we took you in. I have provided for you. I could have left you to fend for yourself, begging for scraps from strangers!"

I stood up and glared at him. My uncle was very strong. I would be no match for him if it came to a fight between us.

"You will come with me to Giza and you will work on the pyramid. You will not only learn useful skills, but also you will feel the glory of creating a pyramid for our king. There is no greater honour than that!"

"I will not work for the one who killed my father!" I shouted back at him. "I would rather die!"

"I've always said you've been too soft with him!" spat my aunt. "He has become defiant! You should have whipped him more!"

My uncle stood still, glaring at me, and for a moment I thought he was going to hurl himself at me and beat me. But instead he just fixed me with his angry stare.

"Pack food for the journey," he said to my aunt. "The day after tomorrow, Nebka and I set out for Giza."