Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Helping you choose books for children

0-5 5-7 7-9 9-12 12+

opening extract from

Ramose: Sting of the Scorpion

written by

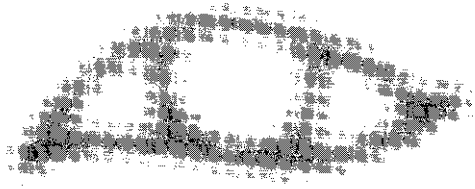
Carole Wilkinson

published by

Catnip

All text is copyright of the author and illustrator

please print off and read at your leisure.



NIGHT IN THE DESERT

"POOR MERY is hungry," said Karoya, stroking her cat. She threw the last pat of donkey dung on the spluttering fire. "She shouldn't be cold as well." The sandy-coloured cat sat as close to the flames as she could without burning her fur.

"We're all hungry," said Hapu grumpily. "But you're more concerned about that cat than us."

"We chose to be here. She didn't," said Karoya.

"Well, if we were travelling along the river we wouldn't be hungry," grumbled Hapu. "We could fish every day."

Ramose's stomach growled. Like the others he had eaten nothing but stale bread and dried figs for the last three days.

"We can't go back to the river, Hapu," said Ramose. "It's too dangerous."

Three days earlier, Ramose had seen men searching the riverbank. He was sure it was the vizier's men looking for them.

"We crossed over the river so that they couldn't find us," complained Hapu. "I don't see why we have to travel in the desert as well."

Ramose had insisted that they leave the fertile Nile Valley and walk parallel to the river but out of sight of the fertile land.

"We attract too much attention," Ramose said. "In Egypt everyone has a job to do, a place to be. Three young people shouldn't be wandering around the country by themselves."

Hapu grunted. He knew Ramose was right.

Ramose stared moodily into the fire. The flames were dying. A handful of reeds and a pat of donkey dung didn't burn for long. He saw a slight movement out of the corner of his eye. As he watched, a pale, creamy coloured scorpion crawled out from under a rock. It was big—more

than a palm-width long. It climbed onto the rock and raised its pincers. Its tail curled menacingly above it. Ramose was about to reach out and squash it with his sandal. Then he realised that the creature was warming itself by the fire just as they were. He left it alone.

It was a strange situation for a prince to be in, travelling on foot, hiding in the desert, living like a barbarian. There was a reason why he was doing it though—a good reason. He was going back to the royal palace at Thebes. He had to let his father know that he was still alive. Then he would reclaim his place as Pharaoh's elder son and heir to the throne of Egypt.

It was over a year since one of his father's lesser wives had tried to poison him so that her own son, Tuthmosis, could become pharaoh. Ramose's tutor and nanny had saved him by pretending that he had died. They had hidden him in the tomb makers' village where he lived, as a scribe, for many months.

Karoya was roasting a snake over the tiny fire. That was to be their evening meal.

"I don't see why anybody would choose to live out here," grumbled Hapu. "Why didn't your people live in villages?" he asked Karoya. "Were they running away from someone?"

"No," said Karoya indignantly. "It was the life they chose."

Karoya was the only one who liked travelling close to the desert. It reminded her of her home in Kush, a desert country to the south of Egypt, which had been conquered during Pharaoh's last military campaign.

"But how did you survive?"

"My people knew the desert as well as Egyptians know the river. We kept herds of cattle. We were always moving, seeking grass for the cattle to eat. It was a good life."

Karoya was speaking as if her people didn't exist any more. Ramose knew that she had been captured by his father's army and forced to become a slave. He had never asked her what had happened to her family. He was afraid that the answer would make him ashamed of being Egyptian.

Karoya handed them each a piece of the snake and a gourd of water.

"It's like eating leather," grumbled Hapu, spitting out bits of snakeskin.

The snake was tough and tasteless, but Ramose didn't complain.

He glanced over at the black-skinned slave girl sitting next to him. Without Karoya's knowledge of the desert, Ramose knew they would have died of hunger. Their food supplies had been scanty, but what little they had, Karoya found. She had killed the snake. She had trapped a bird. She

organised night-time trips back into the fringes of the cultivated land to collect water, grain and vegetables. Ramose didn't like adding to his crimes by stealing from people's fields and orchards. But they had no choice. He hoped Maat, the goddess of justice, would understand. He promised himself he would make an offering to her as soon as he could.

Hapu didn't know anything about the desert, but he was a loyal friend and good company. He told stories as they walked. Even when Ramose was feeling like he'd never achieve his goal, Hapu could always make him smile. Without his friends, Ramose may well have given up in despair.

"It's your turn to go and get water," Karoya said to Ramose.

Ramose nodded. He no longer thought it strange that a prince should do as a slave girl told him. Back in the palace, servants weren't even allowed to look him in the eye, let alone tell him what to do.

He took the water-skin and walked towards the fertile land. Thoth, the moon god, hadn't risen yet, but Ramose used the stars to guide him. It took him an hour to reach the first fields of the cultivated land. He found an irrigation canal surrounding a field of beans. He filled the water-skin and picked some beans as well.

By the time he got back to the camp, his friends were asleep. They had arranged their reed mats around the little fireplace—even though the fire had gone out. Karoya was wrapped in the length of faded cloth that she wore over her head. She was curled around Mery for extra warmth. Hapu only had a coarse linen shirt. Ramose wrapped himself in the woollen cloak that had been with him ever since he left the palace. It wasn't enough to keep out the cold of the desert night.

Two hours later, Ramose was still awake. The sand was as hard as a block of stone. He turned onto his back and stared up at the night sky. The stars in their millions twinkled above him.

In his head, Ramose ran through the events of the past weeks again and again. If he'd done things differently they wouldn't be in such a miserable state. A month ago, a high priest had accused them of being tomb robbers and tried to arrest them. They could easily have been imprisoned in Memphis. They'd had a narrow escape.

A wave of shame and anger crept over Ramose. The truth was, he was a tomb robber. He had stolen gold and jewels from Pharaoh Senusret's pyramid. It was the worst crime in Egypt and he was guilty of it. It hadn't been Ramose's choice, though. A gang of tomb robbers had kidnapped him and they had forced him to crawl into the

heart of the pyramid and steal the gold and jewels from the tomb. Hapu had fallen into their clutches as well. The two boys had been abandoned, trapped underground. Mery had saved them. The cat had led them out of the tomb.

He was sure Vizier Wersu was pursuing them because they were tomb robbers. The vizier didn't know it was Ramose who had robbed the tomb. He, like everyone else, thought that Ramose was dead. That was the way Ramose wanted it to stay.

Ramose removed a sharp stone from under his back. He sighed and turned on his other side. He felt something prick his leg. He shifted again with annoyance. Would he ever get to sleep?

As he lay there, a swarm of mosquitoes suddenly attacked him. He couldn't see them, but he could feel them biting him all over. Then a tall, thin man with a face like a crocodile appeared from nowhere. He had his long, white robes draped over one arm as he walked. Even in the darkness, Ramose knew who it was. It was Vizier Wersu. He was holding a bronze statue of Seth in the form of a strange animal with square ears, a pointed snout and a forked tail. Seth was the god of chaos and confusion who had killed his own brother, Osiris, and gouged out the eye of his nephew, Horus, god of the sky.

Seth was an ugly-looking god, but the statue was a beautiful thing. Ramose thought about the

cost of such a large bronze statue. It was probably enough to feed three families for a year. He wondered why anyone would want to worship such an unpleasant god. He admired the delicately carved hippopotamuses around the base. It's strange how you can see so much detail in dreams, thought Ramose. And odd how you can feel as well as see. He scratched furiously at the itchy bites all over his body.

The vizier had an evil look in his eye. He took hold of the feet of Seth with both hands and swung the statue as if it were a weapon. It was a weapon. He swung the heavy bronze statue again, aiming it right at Ramose. Ramose rolled out of the way and the statue dug into the sand, narrowly missing his head. He was surprised at the skinny vizier's strength. The vizier raised the statue above his head. Ramose tried to roll out of the way, but he caught his foot in his bag. Vizier Wersu brought down the statue hard on his right leg. It hurt. Ramose cried out in pain.

Then Ramose saw that in his other hand, the vizier held a large fig, the biggest fig Ramose had ever seen. Wersu was trying to force it into Ramose's mouth. Ramose tried to stop him, but he couldn't move because his leg was hurting and his body was itching from the mosquito bites. Wersu hit his leg again with the bronze statue. The pain was terrible. Ramose opened his mouth

to scream and the vizier prised open Ramose's jaws and forced the fig in. The huge fruit wedged in his mouth so that he could neither spit it out nor swallow it.

It was cold, so cold. Ramose shivered and shivered and couldn't stop. He felt sick. This is a dream, he told himself. All I have to do is wake up. His eyes were wide open but he couldn't wake up.

The moon god, Thoth, finally climbed into the sky. Ramose was pleased to see the bright disc of the moon. Thoth was also the ibis-headed god of writing, worshipped by scribes. Thoth was only there for a moment before the black sky turned dark orange. The first rays of the sun were appearing over the horizon. Before long the sky was light and the moon faded until it was like a ghost of itself in the morning sky.

Karoya awoke and sat up. Hapu stirred in his sleep. Ramose realised with a jolt that he wasn't dreaming. He was awake. The pain in his leg from Wersu's blow was unbearable. The itching hadn't gone away. And try as he might, he could not swallow the fig jammed into his mouth. He tried to speak to Karoya, but he could only make a terrible animal noise.

Karoya knelt down at his side. Her forehead was creased with concern. She seemed to be shuddering and quivering from side to side. Then

Ramose realised that it was him that was moving. He was shivering violently and couldn't stop.

"Hapu," said Karoya. "Quick, get the water."

Hapu sat up sleepily. As soon as he saw Ramose he jumped to his feet.

"What's happened to him?"

"I don't know, but he needs water. His tongue is so swollen, it looks like he might choke."

What's wrong with me? Ramose wanted to ask as he gulped the water, but he couldn't. He had never felt so sick. He was sweating as if he were lying out in the midday sun, but the sun's rays hadn't yet reached their camp. He couldn't breathe properly. He sucked in gulps of air. His heart was pounding. Karoya was swimming blurredly in front of him.

Ramose felt her hands as she searched his body for signs of injury or illness. She touched his right leg and he cried out in pain.

"Here," said Karoya. "Look. Something has bitten him."

Karoya pulled the cloak away from him. Ramose raised his heavy head and glimpsed his lower leg, which was swollen to the size of a melon. He might have imagined the vizier hitting him with a statue, but the pain was real.

Karoya suddenly snatched up her grinding stone. Ramose flinched as she held it above her

head ready to hurl at him. He tried to cry out again. Not you, Karoya. You haven't turned against me, have you? No sound came out, but saliva dribbled from his mouth as if he were a baby. He felt a rush of air as the stone narrowly missed his leg and dug into the sand next to him. What is happening? he wanted to ask. Ramose felt his eyelids droop. His life was in danger, he didn't know what was real and what wasn't, but all he wanted to do was sleep. Karoya knelt down and picked up something very cautiously between her fingers. Ramose's vision was blurry, but he could make out what it was. It was a dead scorpion.