Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Helping you choose books for children

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

opening extract from

Ramose and the Tomb Robbers

written by

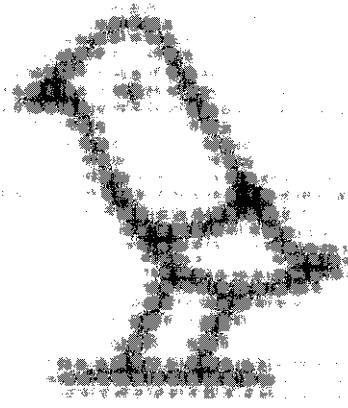
Carole Wilkinson

published by

Catnip

All text is copyright of the author and illustrator

please print off and read at your leisure.



IBIS EGGS AND HONEY CAKES

"I WANT a cat," said Karoya.

"What for?" Ramose was sitting in the garden eating breakfast.

The small square of sunbaked sand at the back of Scribe Paneb's house, where Ramose and Karoya lived, hardly deserved to be called a garden. It was really an outdoor kitchen. The only things growing there were a struggling row

of onions and a few herbs. The rest of the garden was just dry trodden earth. In one corner was the conical oven where Karoya baked bread for the household and the curved stone on which she ground grain every day. That's what Karoya was doing as Ramose watched her. She was on her hands and knees rolling a smooth round stone over the wheat grains that were sprinkled on the curved grinding stone. It was hard work. Karoya sat up on her heels to rest for a moment. She wiped her sweating brow on a fold of the red and green striped length of cloth that she wore draped over her head and massaged her back with her fingertips. Ramose would have liked to help her with her work, but Karoya was a slave. It wouldn't have been right for him to do a slave's work.

"A cat would eat the mice," replied Karoya. "Stop them from ruining the grain."

"You just want a pet," smiled Ramose.

"I do not! It would scare away snakes."

"We've managed without a cat before," said Ramose. "Why do you suddenly need one?"

Karoya went back to her grinding. After a while she spoke again. "It would be nice to have something that is just mine."

It was the first time Ramose had ever heard Karoya wish for anything. She was the property of Pharaoh, taken from her homeland of Kush

and brought to Egypt to work as a slave. She owned nothing but the clothes she wore.

"I suppose Prince Ramose had dozens of cats back at the palace," said Karoya sulkily.

Ramose looked around anxiously. "Sssh. Don't ever call me that. Someone might hear."

"Well did you?"

"There were several cats, yes. But I had a pet monkey."

Karoya didn't look impressed.

"Where I come from there are lots of monkeys. They are a nuisance. They eat the dates and steal food. People chase them away. There are no cats though."

Ramose's monkey had come from Kush as well. Like Karoya, the monkey had been taken from the land of Kush because it suited Pharaoh. The life Ramose had lived as a prince seemed so long ago it was like another lifetime. Actually it wasn't long ago at all. Only eight months earlier his home had been the palace in the city. For all of his eleven years he had lived the pampered life of Pharaoh's son, heir to the throne of Egypt. He had been a different person then, spoilt and thoughtless, taking everything for granted. He'd had no worries—and he certainly hadn't had a slave for a friend. Things had changed since then.

Ramose's tutor, Keneben, and Heria, his beloved nanny, had been sure that Queen Mutnofret was

trying to kill him. She was one of Pharaoh's lesser wives and she wanted her own son to be the next pharaoh. Ramose's two older brothers had already died. Keneben and Heria believed that Mutnofret had killed the older princes. They had begun testing Ramose's food on his pet monkey. Ramose knew nothing about this until the day he'd found his monkey dead.

Keneben and Heria had faked Ramose's death and sent him into hiding for safety. He was now living in secret as an apprentice scribe in the Great Place, the desert valley that his father had chosen as the place for his own tomb and the tombs of all future pharaohs.

At first he'd been comforted to know that he had friends at the palace. Then his nanny had died and Queen Mutnofret had sent Keneben to a foreign land. Ramose was on his own now. Only his sister, Hatshepsut, knew he was still alive and that one day he intended to be pharaoh.

His past and his future both seemed very distant. At the moment Ramose had to deal with his present life. He worked eight-day shifts at the tomb site along with the sculptors, painters and quarry men who were constructing his father's tomb. He had just finished his two-day break and was about to return to the tomb for another shift.

"I better get going," said Ramose finishing the last of his figs.

"I'll see you when I come up to the Great Place," said Karoya. She had to grind grain and do other work at the tomb site.

Ramose walked through the house. The scribe was still eating his breakfast.

"I'll go on ahead, Paneb," Ramose said.

The scribe said something with his mouth full of bread. Ramose didn't understand it, but he nodded anyway. He walked out of the village. His friend Hapu was waiting for him.

"Where's the scribe?" asked Hapu.

"He's still stuffing his face," said Ramose scornfully. "He's too fat and slow. Let him come at his own speed."

The two boys set off together on the dusty path to the Great Place.

Hapu was an apprentice painter at Pharaoh's tomb. He'd only found out a few weeks before that his friend was actually a prince—he was still getting used to the idea.

The construction of Pharaoh's tomb had been going on for three years. The quarry men had painstakingly chiselled out a long sloping shaft that cut deep into the rock of the valley. At the end of the shaft was a burial chamber and storage rooms where the goods for Pharaoh's afterlife would be stored. Everything Pharaoh needed would be packed into those rooms. There would be furniture, chariots, fine clothing and

games. And of course rich and beautiful crowns, collars and armbands, so that he could live in the afterlife as he had in the world. The tomb was nearly finished.

When they reached the tomb, Hapu immediately disappeared into its depths to start work. He was painting the borders of the scenes painted on the tomb walls—which was all an apprentice was permitted to do. Ramose walked over to the store room where he collected an oil lamp and a fresh ink block. Outside the tomb entrance was a pile of stone flakes that the quarry men had chipped from the inside of the tomb. Ramose used the stone flakes to write on, as papyrus was too expensive for these daily tasks. The pile of stone flakes was just one of several piles and was higher than his head. He would never run out of writing materials. Only Paneb's monthly reports to the vizier were written on papyrus. Ramose selected a thin piece of stone about the size of his hand. He would use it for his first task of the day, making a list of all the men who had reported for work.

He lit his lamp, took a deep breath and started to walk down the dark shaft. Ramose didn't like being underground. He felt okay in the shaft, where he could see the square of light which was the tomb entrance. When he had to go into the burial chamber, though, he always

felt a wave of panic and imagined that the tons of rock above his head were about to fall in on top of him, burying him alive. He turned round to look back at the tomb entrance. He was all right.

There were other lamps at intervals down the shaft and, about halfway down, there was a larger pool of light. A team of sculptors was carving the walls of the shaft. They were carefully chipping away the soft rock with copper chisels, following the rough drawings sketched on the surface by outliners.

Ramose stopped to write a list of the sculptors' names on his stone flake. He took a reed pen from his pen box. He chewed on the end to make sure that it had a nice soft brush and dipped it in the small container of water that he carried. Then he rubbed the pen onto the new block of black ink which he'd set into his palette. He wrote down the sculptors' names in his untidy handwriting.

"Be careful down there, Ramose," said one of the sculptors. "You never know when the ceiling might collapse and bring the whole mountain down on your head."

The sculptors all laughed. They thought it was very amusing that a tomb worker was afraid of enclosed spaces. Ramose was used to their jokes. He continued on down the tomb shaft.

Next was a group of painters who were bringing the sculptures to life with their bright colours. Ramose noted down their names as well.

At the bottom of the shaft was a chamber with the ceiling covered in yellow stars. Painters were working on the walls, painting prayers asking the gods to help Pharaoh journey safely through the underworld. Ramose turned to look back up the shaft. The square of light that was the tomb entrance looked small enough to fit in his hand. He took another deep breath and turned away from the light and descended the steps to the burial chamber. As quickly as he could, he noted down the tomb workers who were working in there, including Hapu, and then hurried out, back to where he could see the square of daylight again.

Ramose spent the morning checking all the painted texts to make sure that the painters had copied them correctly.

"I think I'll have my meal here in the tomb today," said Paneb at midday.

Paneb avoided walking up and down the tomb shaft as much as possible.

"Bring me down some food, Ramose."

Ramose didn't argue. When he'd first come to work in the tomb the muscles in his legs had been painfully sore. Now he'd walked up and down the

steep slope of the tomb shaft so many times that he hardly noticed it. The muscles in his legs had grown strong.

"What's the special occasion?" Ramose asked the cook when he returned from delivering the scribe's food and could finally attend to his own meal. He looked hungrily at the unusually lavish spread of food.

"It's the feast day of Bastet, the cat goddess," said the cook, who used to be a sculptor until he'd lost two fingers when part of a tomb had collapsed. "No one celebrates it down here in the south, but in the Delta where I come from there's a big festival. I like to make something special for the goddess on her day."

Ramose helped himself to the food that was spread out for the workers' midday meal. He heaped freshly cooked lamb, bean stew and boiled eggs into his bowl.

"Pity it's not Bastet's feast day every day," he said. He felt something soft and warm brushing around his legs. A sleek, sandy-coloured creature with eyes the colour of greenstone was wrapping itself around Ramose's legs. It was the cook's cat. It had a gold earring in one delicately pointed ear. On a leather string around its neck was a small ceramic square with a Horus eye painted on it. This was to protect the animal from danger. The cat was miaowing loudly.

"Mery likes lamb," said the cook, smiling at his pampered pet. "She wouldn't mind if you shared a bit with her."

"I like lamb too," said Ramose, thinking that the cook's cat looked well-fed enough.

Hapu was piling a second helping into his own bowl. He couldn't help staring at the way the cook managed to do things with his three-fingered hand.

"What are these?" Ramose asked pointing to a pile of sticky balls on a platter, hoping the man hadn't seen Hapu staring.

"They're fig and nut cakes," the cook replied. "Rolled in honey. And there won't be enough for all the workers if your friend takes so many."

Hapu put two of the sticky balls back on the platter and licked his fingers. He and Ramose walked back to their hut and sat down to eat. The hut was nothing more than a pile of rocks roofed over with a few palm fronds, but it was the boys' home while they were in the Great Place. Ramose picked up one of the large eggs.

"I haven't eaten an ibis egg since I was at—"

Hapu dug him in the ribs. "Samut's over there," he whispered. "Watch what you're saying."

Ramose glanced over his shoulder. The foreman of the tomb was talking to another tomb worker. Ramose was normally more careful. He peeled his egg and bit into it.

"Save one of your cakes for Karoya," Ramose said. "I'd like to take some home for her."

Hapu looked at his friend. "Why should I give my food to her?"

"She probably hasn't tasted anything like them," said Ramose.

The cat came and sat next to Ramose watching very closely as he ate his food. It miaowed again. It wasn't a polite request, it was a demand. Ramose gave it a piece of meat to keep it quiet. The cat ate it delicately.

"Karoya would like a cat like this," he said.

"I've never met anyone so concerned about a slave," grumbled Hapu pushing one of the sweet cakes to the side of his bowl.

"I feel responsible for her. If my father's army hadn't captured her, she'd still be living in freedom with her family in Kush."

"Pharaoh's army has captured thousands of slaves. What difference does it make if one of them is a little happier than the rest?"

"It makes a difference to me," replied Ramose, then he lowered his voice. "When I become pharaoh, the first thing I will do is free her."

"What about the other thousands of slaves?" asked Hapu eating his last fig cake.

Ramose thought for a moment. It would be hard being pharaoh, there would be so many difficult decisions to make.

"I'll free them all," he replied.
"And who will grind the grain?" asked Hapu.
"I'll let the vizier worry about that."