Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Helping you choose books for children

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

Opening extract from

Eye of the Moon

Written by

Dianne Hofmeyr

Published by

Simon and Schuster

All text is copyright of the author and illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

MOON. RULER OF THE STARS. PROTECTOR OF WOMEN. EYE OF WISDOM, TRUTH AND SECRETS ...

Without two fingers, it's hard to grip a reed stylus. So I write this story with difficulty, sitting on the bank of the Great River far from the city of Thebes. Perhaps in time to come the words will be carved more accurately in stone and the truth known to all. Poison, slavery and murder – all are part of this story.

I am Isikara, daughter of the Priest and Embalmer at the Temple of the Crocodile God, Sobek. But first I should explain my injury.

The first two fingers are the bow fingers. Until my right hand was forced open against the ground, a cleaver raised and both fingers sliced through, I had not understood their importance. They are the ones

that pluck the gut and send the arrow with purpose. Strength is crucial in pulling back the bowstring. But it's the final release of these fingers that controls the arrow and sets it on its path. Right to the heart of the enemy.

What better way to maim a bowman, than to take away the bow fingers?

Of the two of us, Anoukhet was the better marksman. She pulled the arrow back with the strength of someone twice her size and sent it on its way with the true eye of a hunter. Deadly accurate!

Side by side we stood. Side by side we were captured. Sisters in combat. But that's behind us now. I've put aside my arrow and bow and changed my boy's tunic for a robe more suited to a girl. Anoukhet has too. Yet a girl's robe doesn't prevent her from fieriness. And we both still carry daggers in our belts.

It might seem strange that a girl writes of plotting and warfare. But there are many things both strange and unusual ahead. Not least that I should be *able* to write. Few girls are scribes. But my father taught me well. Not only the art of forming words on papyrus with a reed stylus but also the art of writing in the new, flowing, hieratic, cursive style. It's quicker than hieroglyph and suits my impatience.

There's much to tell. My words flow fast ahead of me now and my reed blots the sooty ink and leaves behind dark smudges on the papyrus. The story grows so fast, that should I not be able to find enough soot and sap to mix more ink, I would write it in blood . . . even my own.



CHAPTER ONE

THE GREAT CROCODILE GOD . . . SOBEK

There was a moment of absolute stillness just before my brother screamed. The sound tore through me. I can still hear it – the worst scream I've ever heard.

I ran down the path to the crocodile pit. He was clinging to the edge of the stone wall. A crocodile had hold of his arm and was wrenching and tossing its head, in a fury of movement and sound. Inside the pit, the other crocodiles were leaping and thrashing and snapping in their eagerness to get at him as well.

'Get the stick! The stick, Kara! Do something!' Katep bellowed. His eyes were glazed with terror.

I searched frantically. The forked crocodile stick that usually stood next to the wall wasn't there.

Nothing was in its place. I had no weapon. Not even a branch to shove between the iron grip of the beast's jaws, or poke at its eyes, or beat across its head.

I stood paralysed. I knew a crocodile's brutality. The sudden lashing out at an unsuspecting victim. The way they tossed their victims before dragging them below the water. One final thrust of its tail, one quick arch of its body, and it would throw my brother Katep high into the air and then catch him again in a stronger, more *fatal* grip. It would be too late then.

I spun around frantically and grabbed whatever I could. Sand and more sand. And flung it as hard as I could at those reptile eyes. Again and again, I sent a hailstorm of sand into the air.

Suddenly, with a wild angry snort, it shook its head viciously. Then lost its grip on my brother and sunk back below the wall into the pit. Katep fell limp to the ground at my feet, blood streaming from a limb so torn it no longer had the appearance of an arm.

There was so much blood I thought he would die. How could anyone live when there was so much blood everywhere?

But he didn't die.

*

The crocodiles were kept for sacrifice. Katep was responsible for feeding and caring for them. My father, High Priest at the Temple, makes sacred offerings of them to appease the Crocodile God, Sobek. At certain times of the moon the crocodiles are ritually washed, one is chosen, killed, and then embalmed.

My work is to help with embalming. To mix the resins and prepare the linen mummy wraps. Crocodiles are cumbersome and difficult to wrap. A method has to be followed so that the bindings cross over one another and make a woven pattern. Afterwards eyes and teeth are painted on the mummy.

That's the part I enjoy most – painting the ferocious eyes and terrible teeth. But I can never manage to make them as frightening in death as they are in life.

The mummified crocodiles are placed in special sacred vaults below the Temple to keep Sobek company. Row upon row of them lined up on the stone shelves like so many loaves of bread. Food for the gods.

But now, since Katep's accident, the job of caring for the crocodiles has fallen to me.

Katep's wound has healed to an angry stump but the healing of his heart has taken longer. He is restless,

without direction, and refuses to speak of it. The accident has left him silent and resentful, with a burning anger that finds no outlet in action. Katep was a hunter. He could bring down wildfowl with the flick of his throwstick and stop any hare in mid-spring with his arrow. Without being able to hunt, Katep is no longer Katep.

'I'm leaving!' he announces one morning.

'Why?'

He shrugs impatiently. 'I have no place here. *Everything* I do requires the skill of both hands. I feel trapped. Helpless. I *have* to leave.'

I stare back at him. He knows I know that he is looking for the impossible. 'Where will you go?'

'I'm not sure.'

'So?'

He shrugs again. It seems his shoulders have forgotten there is only one arm to move.

'Perhaps to the desert camps of the camel-dealers in the Sudan. Or to the gold and amethyst workings in Nubia. Or the turquoise workings of Sinai.'

I eye him. He might as well have said he is leaving this earth and going into the Underworld.

'So far?' is all I say. His silence tells me he knows I'm really saying, How will you manage with only the

stump of an arm? 'I'll never see you again. Nubia and the Sudan and Sinai are all far beyond Egypt's borders. They're our *enemies*!'

He gives a fleeting smile, his face handsome, despite his anger. 'Egypt's enemies, not mine, Kara!' Then he shakes his head. 'I *can't* stay here. I don't want to be a priest or a stonemason as Father wants me to be.'

I kick the sand with my bare foot. 'Why not?' I ask, even though I understand his anger and frustration. Understand his determination to leave. I know he *will* go . . . *has* to go . . . no matter how much I plead.

He brandishes the stump of his arm. Beats the air with it. 'Have you heard of a stonemason cutting stone with something like this?'

The scars on the stump are still raw and red. Dreadful to look at. But at the same time, fascinating. I know each scar as well as the moles on my arm. I've cleaned them, smeared the wounds with unguents and bound them daily, ever since that day I had to hold him down while my father injected the arm with scorpion venom to numb it and cut away the shreds of flesh before stitching the skin together.

Now the scars make hieroglyphs across his flesh and tell their own story. I know Katep cannot bear to look at them. It's a burden for him to carry this stump

around. No wonder he wants to shrink from it and run away. It's not me, or Father, that he's running from. It's his arm.

I know this in my head but my heart makes me speak out differently.

'Don't go! Please don't go! You can't go! You said we'd go away *together* one day. We made plans. Remember? In the fork of the mimosa tree, the day we watched the crocodiles laying eggs in the sand.'

He gives me a withering look. 'We were children then.'

I flick the side plaits of my wig back from my face and squint at him. Feel like a chastised child. 'Is that *all* your promise counts for?'

We had pricked our thumbs with mimosa thorns. I had put my thumb against his and mingled our blood. It was a blood vow. There hadn't been a need. Our blood is already bonded. We share the same thoughts and feel things in common. Between us there is a thread as fine and silvery as a spider's web. Invisible but just as strong. It is difficult to snap.

'Half the boat belongs to me!' is all I say. But he knows I'm thinking, Who will catch fish with me now? Or trap and roast frogs? Or dare me to walk along the wall of the crocodile pit?

He stares back at me. He has read my thoughts. 'Promise not to walk on the crocodile wall.'

I pull a face at him. 'Hah! You never worried about anything dangerous before! *You* were the one who dared me to enter the labyrinth the first time!'

'That was different. There were two of us. And don't go in there either, Isikara!'

Why is he calling me Isikara, instead of Kara? Already I am no longer his sister. I give him a hot look from between the strands of my hair. 'Don't leave me!'

'Then join me.'

I shake my head. 'By the white feather of Truth, you know I can't! I *cannot* break the vow I made to Mother on her death pallet. I promised I'd care for Father. Weave the linen. Be his Temple assistant. Help boil the resins for embalming. Look after his embalming tools.' I kick the sand again and swallow hard, fighting my tears with anger. 'Now I have to look after the crocodiles as well!'

'Don't trust them even if they look half asleep.'

'Hah! I don't need your advice!' I squint through the sunlight at him, daring him to change his mind.

'Kara, don't be so cross.' For a moment he forgets his own anger and grabs me around the neck with his

good arm. I sense the other arm wanting to hold me as well. But the stump flounders, directionless in the air. Instead he puts on a deep, fierce voice, 'I am Sobek! I seize like a ravening beast!'

'Stop it! Don't mock Sobek!' I push him away so he won't see my tears. My hand flies to the moonstone amulet at my neck. Quickly I draw the Eye of Horus in the sand with my big toe to ward off the evil eye and keep Katep protected.

The morning he sails, I hand him a small linen bag to hang around his neck. Inside are the bodies of a dried lizard and a frog, and a lock of our mother's hair as well to keep him safe. I give him a sack of pomegranates and some shelled beans and two loaves with some potted meat of wildfowl. I had killed the bird myself with my throwstick. Then I hand him a small amulet of blue glass I'd bartered for in the marketplace.

'It's a scorpion. To ward off evil. Watch out for scorpions under the rocks of Sinai.'

'In Sinai, there are men employed as scorpion charmers.'

I eye him. He hasn't left yet, but already he knows things I don't know and something jabs at my heart

as sharp as the sting of a scorpion. 'But what if their charm doesn't work?'

He laughs. 'Stop worrying! The Scorpion Goddess, Seqet, will protect me!'

Then he sails down the silver ribbon of water that joins the Great River. I run along the mud bank trying to keep up with his boat. Perhaps I hope the burden of me running alongside will drag him back, like an anchor to the shore. But no – his boat travels lightly forward and my feet remain stuck to the bank.

'I'll never see you again!' I call after him. And say a quick, silent prayer to Hathor to beg that it won't be true.

'Of course you will.'

'Send me signs that you are safe. Sing songs and say incantations to keep the crocodiles and hippopotami away from the boat. Have you remembered your spear and your throwstick?'

To all this he nods and smiles back at me.

'And beware of crocodiles. If the boat lodges in reeds don't climb out into the water. Even if it is only up to your ankles!'

He laughs. 'Must I remain inside the boat for the rest of my life?'

'Just be careful, Katep!'

'Don't worry, I won't be caught again. I've already given Sobek my offering.' He grins. Then he tucks the sail rope under his chin so he can raise his left arm in a salute. He gives me a last look. Then he turns his back and begins paddling with his one good arm.

When I can't keep up with him any longer, I stand and watch his reed boat beat against the wind and the choppy waves. I touch the smooth cool moonstone of my amulet once more and feel for the knots on my plaited reed bracelet and call upon all that is evil to remain tied up and out of his reach.

I watch his back and the sail grow smaller and smaller until it is nothing but a moth skimming across the water to an unknown place. I blink and narrow my eyes against the breeze to prevent moisture being squeezed from them. A lump rises up in my throat like a bloated, angry toad.

It's said those who sail the Great River either look forward or look back. That morning when Katep left, he stood stiff-backed to everything he had left behind. I stared after him, willing him to turn around. But he didn't! Not once!

With that sail went my heart. I never thought Katep would take the boat and go without me. I stared after him and wished my own life would change. But

wishing is dangerous. Wishes have a way of coming back to you.

The next morning I dragged a slaughtered goat by its horns to the crocodile pit. It was heavier than I thought and I cursed Katep for leaving me to do his work.

I could see by the swollen udder it was a she-goat. The goat's kid would be searching between the other goats now. Nosing for the full udder of its mother. But my father only believed in sacrificing she-goats to the crocodiles. Male goats were too precious, he said. They carried the seed of the future herd.

What about she-goats? Weren't they the true future of the herd? But my father was impatient with me and Katep's leaving made him more impatient than usual.

The goat was limp and heavy. My father had slit her throat and flies were already buzzing around the gash. The track left in the sand by her dragging hooves and body was spattered with drops of blood that glistened like red garnets. I was glad she was already dead. Offerings are usually made alive. But with Katep gone, I had begged my father to kill the goat first so I wouldn't have to listen to her bleating.

The nearer I got to the pit, the more my feet dragged and the tighter I clutched the forked stick.

The crocodiles were moving restlessly in their pit as they sensed the scent of the she-goat's blood and the warm, sweet smell of her milk. I heard their angry hisses and their tails hitting against the stone, and the sound of jaws snapping and clashing as they lashed at each other.

'Be careful of their tails!' Katep had warned.

I didn't need his reminder.

My father was distraught the morning he discovered Katep's empty bed. 'Why did he leave without bidding farewell? There was no need for him to go. He could've stayed and learned my profession. Assisted me in the Temple. Learned the art of embalming from me.'

I gave my father a dark look. 'Is my work not good enough? Am I not your assistant? Katep was never interested in learning to embalm. Besides, it's not his fault he had to leave. It's the fault of a crocodile!'

'Hush! Hold your tongue! To be chosen by the most sacred crocodile, Sobek, is the greatest honour.'

'I'd rather die without honour,' I snapped.

He shook his head. 'Kara! Kara! You're too

headstrong. It'll get you into trouble. You need a mother to groom you in ways suitable for women. You've too much to say for yourself. You must learn not to speak out. To think before you speak.'

'But—!'

'Enough!'

The day Katep lost his arm, my father inscribed above the portal of the crocodile pit: *To be devoured by the Crocodile God, Sobek, is to be possessed for ever by Divinity.*

But the words were more solace to my father than to Katep.

Now, as I passed under these words, shivery bumps came up on my arms. I had no desire to be eaten by a crocodile.

I understood my father's anger and hurt that Katep had left without saying farewell. We both missed him more than we could say. The house was quieter with him gone. When he left, something left with him. Our meals were taken in silence opposite his empty place, each with our thoughts far away.

Mine ran on to things other than the daily drudge of cooking, weaving linen, and feeding, watering and caring for crocodiles. They were wild and free. They

were with Katep – with what he might be doing, and the river he was exploring, and the new things he would discover without me.

Suddenly, as I stood ready to heave the goat into the pit, I realised that with his going, Katep had snapped the thread between us – the thread that I'd thought could never be broken.



CHAPTER TWO

DAZZLING ATEN

I woke long before the water of the Great River stole blue from the sky. On the roof terrace, the stars were turning pale in the east. The chilly air brought goosebumps to my arms as I touched the moonstone of the amulet at my throat – three times for good luck – then felt for the seven knots tied in my plaited papyrus bangle and whispered the prayers that would invoke each knot to tie up any evil that might be lurking. My hands moved from amulet to knots without thinking. They were rituals done as easily as breathing or brushing a fly from my face.

The embers in the clay oven were still warm enough

to stir into life. I lay down two loaves that had been proving overnight and dragged the embers around them. Soon there was a smell of warm barley dough in the air. Then I crept downstairs, past my father's sleeping chamber and Katep's empty corner and stepped outside into the courtyard that was still shadowy and silent. Even the fish in the reflecting pool still slept. The air was heavy with the perfume of figs and ripening dates as I swept the entrance with a mimosa branch to ward off plagues from entering our home that day.

I took two leather buckets and strode down to the river to fetch my father's bathing water. The water-buffalo were moving restlessly in their byre, pushing and nosing each other in their eagerness to get at the fresh clumps of grass on the sedge islands. Their horns stood out like dark lyres against the pale sky.

Some mornings a warm desert wind played music on those lyres. A strange, enchanting song that came from a far-distant place. A sound that made my feet want to dance and swirl away over the sand dunes. Today there was no wind. Just the early chill that made the skin of the buckets stiff as I carried them down to the river's edge.

The floods were coming. Every day the water was pushing higher and the small islands were disappearing. Thoth, the God of Wisdom and Truth, was weighing sunshine and darkness. Soon the day would come when they would balance equally on his scales, and then sunshine would tip heavier.

Each morning as the light crept in from the east, I watched for a tiny sliver of the first moon. This morning it was floating just above the edge of the earth. A transparent shaving, as fine as a single thread of spun flax. I touched the moonstone amulet and invoked Hathor, Goddess of the Moon, Protector of Women, to protect me.

The first moon marked the day of Ritual, when the crocodiles were brought down to the stone pool in the river to be cleansed of evil. Today one would be selected as a sacrifice to Sobek and would be prevented from returning along the passageway that led back to the pit.

The water was smooth, silent and cold around my ankles. I watched for bubbles to make sure no wild river crocodile was lurking below the surface, and then I checked the stone wall of the pool for gaps. It was a bad omen to allow a sacred crocodile to escape.

But it was still too early to slide back the stone that opened the passageway. The crocodiles in the pit wouldn't stir themselves until they had been warmed by the sun. I'd purposely not fed them since giving them the she-goat. Getting them down to the water was easy. Getting them back to the pit was difficult. The village children had to bang cymbals and beat sticks against the walls to urge them on.

'Remember to leave a slaughtered goat in the pit,' Katep had instructed. 'One that's just beginning to rot! The smell of rotting meat brings them out of the water, like flies to a dung-heap!'

Now the sweet perfume of lotus lilies drifted across the water. The sun was just rising and drawing up the buds from beneath the water. As their blue petals opened to reveal a brilliant golden heart, it was like the sky being greeted by the sun. Each evening the lilies closed again and sank back into the dark water, trapping the scent of the golden heart between their petals.

I was first at the river. None of the other village girls had arrived yet. We teased that whoever was early enough would be greeted by the most handsome God of all – Nefertem, God of the Blue Lotus and God of the Sunrise, who brought the sun into the

sky. He would rise from the river with a lotus on his head and carry the girl away on a body as powerful as a lion's.

We all longed to be the one chosen, but however early I came, I never saw him.

I filled my buckets and picked three lilies to perfume my father's bathing water, then squeezed the water from the edge of my wrap and turned to walk back. There was a smell of wood-smoke now and I could hear babies crying and dogs yapping and squabbling over bones at the rubbish heaps, and women singing as they went down the pathways to work on the land.

Suddenly there was a shout. I looked back. My breath caught as I saw a huge boat floating silently across the water. It was not the usual barge that collected tithes for the Temple granaries – the one that came piled with sacks of grain for my father to store so he could feed the villagers in times of poor crops. Nor was it the barge that brought jars of oil or bolts of linen for the Temple storerooms.

This boat seemed to have risen straight from the depths of the river, like a strange, exotic water lily, unfurling as the warmth of the sun touched its bud. Sunlight on its gold embellishments dazzled

the eye. Every part of its wooden hull was carved and covered with patterns in bright carnelian, turquoise and brilliant blue. It slid forward as if propelled by some inner force, glistening and glinting in the early river mist like an apparition.

It was Ra's golden boat, come straight from the Underworld.

Then I heard the beat of oars against the water. And against the sun I saw the outline of men and the sprays of water-beads being flung like jewels from their paddles. It was a real boat with real oarsmen and a huge dark red sail embellished with the Double Crown of Egypt. As it came closer I saw the Eye of Horus decorating its bow and the name, *Dazzling Aten*, written in hieratic script along its side.

Queen Tiy's barge.

I held my breath, expecting to catch sight of her on the golden throne under the red canopy with the wings of her vulture crown sweeping the air. Why was she on the river so early? But as the barge came closer, I saw a man was sitting there. By his elaborate dress and crown and spangled leopard skin, I knew he was the Highest of High Priests, Wosret – the Most Powerful One.

The barge came straight towards the Temple jetty,

now lined with squabbling village boys reaching out to catch the ropes. In the prow stood the captain, bare-chested, wearing only a short linen wrap. A gingery beard jutted from his face like a tangled bush and met with a nest of hairy growth on his chest. He wore no wig and his equally matted red hair fell to his shoulders like a wild cloak and was tied at his forehead with a white band.

Then I noticed the men were *all* wearing the same headbands. The white headband of mourning.

Who had died? I whispered a quick prayer to Hathor – not only Goddess of the Moon, but also Goddess who carries the souls of the dead to the West.

Servants stepped off the boat and beat cymbals to ward off evil spirits ahead of the Highest of High Priests as he was carried ashore in a golden sedan chair, encrusted with lapis lazuli and turquoise and jewels of rainbow hue. The sand in his pathway was swept with a date-palm leaf and sprinkled with precious oils as he was set down.

My father came rushing down the path, already dressed in his Temple clothes, a broad gold band around his neck and the gold crocodile bracelets clasping his upper arms. I was pleased I had pleated

the linen of his tunic properly and left it under a heavy board to flatten overnight.

He rushed forward and bowed. 'My Lord, Wosret. Most Powerful One!'

The Highest of High Priests held up his hand and the crowd fell silent. His high cheekbones and strong nose with flaring nostrils gave his face the appearance of carved wood rather than flesh. And his eyes under the dark-lined eyebrows looked as if they had been replaced with glass. Black obsidian set in a statue's face. Lifeless, lizard eyes.

'Henuka. As Her Majesty, Queen Tiy's, trusted Priest and Embalmer at the Temple of Sobek, I've come to fetch you for a special embalming.'

My father bowed. 'It must be someone of great importance for you to have come personally, my Lord.'

Wosret's eyes gave nothing away. 'This I cannot announce.'

'My daughter Isikara is my helper. If the embalming is of great importance I'll need her assistance.'

Wosret's eyes flicked coldly in my direction but moved quickly away again. Despite the sun on my back, I felt a small shiver run through me.

'Then let her hurry. The weather is warm. We

mustn't delay. The bodies will not last.' He snapped his fingers at his servants and they stooped to lift his chair onto their shoulders once again.

'Bodies . . .?' I wanted to ask more, but my father's look silenced me.

'Kara, collect my instruments and resins of myrrh, hekenu and nesmen, bark of cinnamon and the cloves and oils that will be needed. And bring the Book of Temple Inscriptions. Then tie and seal the chest with clay so no one will meddle with it. And pack the ceremonial wig box and my pleated linen garments. Be ready to leave immediately.'

I squinted back at him. 'What about the crocodiles? The first moon appeared this morning before sunrise. It's the day of Ritual and offering to Sobek.'

My father shook his head. 'That must wait. The Highest of High Priests' demands come first. We must attend the embalming and ensure whoever has died has a safe passage to the Underworld.'

'Can it be Queen Tiy?'

'Sssh! Kara! Hold your tongue!'

I slid a quick look at the barge with its gleaming embellishments. 'But it's her boat.'

'What of it?'

'Why is *he* using her boat?'

'Tckk! You ask too many questions! Fetch my things. Be prepared to leave immediately. But change into a clean tunic first and wash the mud from your feet.'

I tossed my head. 'I can't help the mud! I've been checking the crocodile pool.'

He sighed deeply. 'How I wish your mother were here to show you how to behave! Tidy yourself now, collect my implements and remember – only speak when you're spoken to. Be quiet otherwise. Stand up straight. Keep your head bowed. Don't shrug your shoulders or toss your head if you don't agree with what's said. The Highest of High Priests, Wosret, is truly the Most Powerful One. Don't be impulsive and say the first thing that comes into your head! Bite back your tongue!'

These words still draw a bitter sigh from me now as I write them. If only I hadn't spoken so unwisely. If only I had heeded what he said!