Helping your children choose books they will love

I reading

Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

opening extract from

The Death Stalker: The Egyptian Chronicles

written by

Gill Harvey

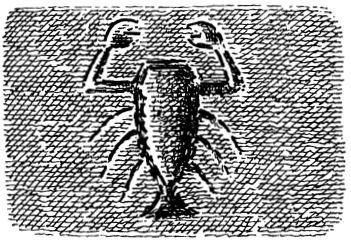
published by

Bloomsbury Publishing

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk



CHAPTER ONE

It was Isis who heard them first.

'Listen!' she said, grabbing Mut's arm.

The two girls sat still as the noise grew closer. Hoof beats and rhythmic tramping, then the blast of a trumpet.

Isis scrambled to her feet. 'Come on!'

'We can't,' protested Mut. 'We have to wait for Mother's washing . . .'

But Isis was already running away from the riverbank and up the street. 'We'll come back afterwards!' she shouted over her shoulder.

She ran on into the town, where the commotion was getting louder. Mut caught up with her and they joined hands, weaving in and out of the crowds that were beginning to gather.

'Is it the king?' called a woman from a doorway.

'No, no,' a man called back. 'It's the army! They're celebrating a victory!'

'Victory! Victory!'

The cry went up along the streets, and Isis felt her pulse quicken with excitement.

She and Mut made their way to the temple that dominated the centre of Waset. Both of them were dancers, small and supple, so it was easy to duck and wriggle their way through the milling people. Isis caught sight of chariot wheels, then peered around a man's shoulder to see ostrich plumes bobbing on horses' heads.

'Nearly there,' she said to Mut, and they dived forward one last time.

The rich, tangy smells of leather and sweat hit her nostrils as they emerged from the edge of the crowd. A row of five chariots clattered towards them, the horses prancing and tossing their heads, the drivers' arms bulging with muscles as they tugged on the reins. Behind each chariot driver stood a proud soldier waving a spear or a bow, encouraging the throng to cheer them on.

One chariot rode slightly in front of the others, and Isis noticed that its soldier was the only one wearing armour. 'We are the fighters of Amun!' he cried. 'He has given us victory again! Praise Amun,

people of Waset!'

'Glory to Amun!' roared the crowd.

The chariots passed by, and behind them came a platoon of infantry – five rows of ten men marching in perfect time, each with a spear in one hand and a shield in the other. Isis saw that some of them had raw-looking cuts on their arms and chests, but they showed no pain on their faces.

'They're so brave,' she whispered in Mut's ear.

Mut nodded, her eyes wide with admiration.

The company had come to a halt, and up ahead, the leader was making an announcement.

'What's he saying?' Mut demanded of no one in particular.

The news filtered along the crowd. 'They've set up camp on the outskirts of Waset,' someone told them. 'They found Libyan marauders in the desert and defeated them, so they have come to give thanks at the temples here.'

Mut gripped Isis's hand more tightly. 'Did you hear that? They're camping here. You know what that means!'

Isis was puzzled. 'What?'

'They'll be looking for entertainment,' said Mut. 'We must tell Father. He could ask if they'd like to see the troupe. Wouldn't it be wonderful to perform

for them?'

'Oh *yes*.' Isis grinned. It was a brilliant idea. 'Let's go and find him right now!'

Hopi heard the troops from further away – a drifting cacophony from the direction of the river as he and his tutor Menna prepared to go out on a visit.

Menna smiled. 'They like nothing better than the adulation of the crowds,' he commented. 'And why not? They have earned it.'

'Who are they?' asked Hopi.

'I heard that it is a company of the division of Amun,' said Menna. 'Just five platoons.' He grasped his walking stick. 'Come.'

Hopi followed Menna along the winding streets, listening to the distant noises. Menna was old and could not walk fast, but somehow the thought of fit, marching soldiers made Hopi all the more conscious of his own limp. It had been over five years since the jaws of a crocodile had inflicted his wounds, and they had healed as well as they ever would. He was lucky to be alive at all, but when he thought of able-bodied men and boys, he felt a pang of envy all the same.

Menna stopped at the door of one of the larger town houses, and knocked.

'My old friend Anty lives here,' he said. 'He is a

wise and well-respected scribe. He has summoned me – to celebrate the return of his son, no doubt.'

Hopi was surprised. He had imagined they were on a mission to treat someone for a snake bite or scorpion sting – that was what they usually did. But now, a servant opened the door and Menna entered. Hopi stepped in after him, noticing at once that this was the house of a wealthy man. It was lofty and spacious; fine murals were painted on the walls, while beautiful carvings and furniture were dotted about the rooms. A middle-aged man appeared from one of them and extended his arms in greeting.

'Menna, may the gods be with you. Life, prosperity, health!' he exclaimed. 'You have not come a moment too soon.'

'Anty.' Menna accepted the man's embrace, then stood back and surveyed his friend's worried expression. 'I had expected a celebration. Is something wrong?'

The scribe wrung his hands. 'I fear so, I fear so. Djeri has returned, sure enough. But he is wounded, Menna. They have brought him here.'

Menna seemed startled. 'He is not with his platoon?'

'No, no. That is why I called for you. Come.'

The two men hurried through the house, still talking.

'But I am not a doctor, Anty,' Menna was protesting.

'I know that, old friend, I know that.' Anty placed a hand on Menna's shoulder. 'The doctors have already been. But you have skills, nonetheless, you have powers, you are a priest . . .'

They entered a cool, dim room at the back of the house. A young man lay there, his eyes closed. Hopi stared. There was a deep gash on the man's shoulder, surrounded by red, swollen flesh. And that was not all. Hopi's eyes travelled down his body to the linen sheet that was draped over his legs. One of them bulged with bandages, but in spite of all the coverings, there was still blood and pus seeping through. Hopi didn't need to see any more to know that these were no minor wounds. This was serious. He was looking at a soldier who was very badly injured.

The company of troops was on the march again. After the first platoon of Egyptian soldiers, there was a platoon of Nubians, all carrying bows with a sheaf of arrows fastened around their waists. Isis found it difficult to tear her eyes away, but she knew they should go and fetch Paneb.

'They'll be marching up to the temples of Ipet-Isut,' she said. 'That's where they'll make their offerings.'

'So Father could try to talk to them on their way back,' agreed Mut. 'Come on, let's go.'

The two girls wove back through the crowds of people, then broke into a run and made for home. Mut's mother, Nefert, was tuning her lute in the courtyard.

'You two are home early!' she commented. 'Where's my washing? Is it finished?'

'We had to come home,' Mut explained breathlessly. 'There's a big group of soldiers in town. Father must speak to them –'

'Soldiers?' Nefert's sister, Sheri, appeared at the courtyard door. 'Where?'

'They're camping just outside town,' said Isis. 'They've won a great victory and so they're here to give thanks to Amun. We *can* go and perform for them, can't we?'

'I don't know about that,' replied Nefert. Isis saw her throw a swift glance at Sheri.

'I'm going to tell Father,' insisted Mut. 'Where is he? Upstairs?'

'Wait –' began Nefert, but Mut was already scampering up the steps.

Isis hesitated, then followed her. 'I'm not sure Nefert wants to perform for the army,' she whispered as they reached the roof.

Mut pulled a face. 'Why ever not? Since all the harvest parties, we've hardly done a thing. We need the work.' She skipped up to her father, Paneb, who was studying a sheet of papyrus in the sun.

'Did I hear you mention work?' he asked, smiling at them.

Mut nodded and poured out the story of the soldiers. 'They'll be coming back through the town soon,' she finished. 'You will go and speak to them, won't you?'

Paneb looked thoughtful. 'Soldiers . . .' he murmured. 'Well, that is certainly worth thinking about. Leave it with me.'

'But you must come *now*!' protested Mut.

'All in good time,' said Paneb. 'As I said, leave it with me.'

Isis felt a little flat. She had been sure that Paneb would rush down to find the soldiers with them. 'We'd better go and get the washing,' she said to Mut.

Mut nodded glumly, and they headed out on to the street once more. The company had moved on now, along the great avenue that led to Ipet-Isut. The two girls made their way back to the place on the riverbank where the laundrymen laboured over their piles of linen.

'Thought we'd lost you!' joked one of the men on seeing Isis and Mut. He pointed at the flat stones where a row of garments was spread out in the sun. 'Yours are almost dry.'

Isis squatted down and watched as the men began sprinkling a fresh batch of wet linen with natron salt.

'I thought Paneb would jump at the idea,' she said.

Mut sat down next to her and sighed. 'It's probably because of Sheri and Kia.'

Isis was puzzled. 'Why because of them?'

'Their husbands.'

Isis was still lost. 'But neither of them has a husband.'

'They don't *now*, silly,' said Mut. 'But they did. They're widows. Their husbands were soldiers. Didn't you know?'

It was news to Isis, but then there were still many things that she didn't know about Mut's family. She and her brother, Hopi, had lived with them for less than a year. 'So what happened to them? Were they killed?'

Mut shrugged. 'Maybe.'

'In a battle?' Isis felt awed.

'I don't know. I've never heard them talk about it.'

The girls lapsed into silence. Isis watched one of the laundrymen *slap-slap* the linen on the rocks to pummel it clean. Another began to fold Nefert's linen

into a neat stack. He divided it into two lots, then each girl balanced a pile on her head to take it home. As they dawdled along in the afternoon sun, Isis listened out for the sound of the soldiers returning, but all was quiet for the time being.

They turned into their own street. Suddenly, Mut leaped forward, almost dropping her load of linen.

'Father!'

Paneb was walking towards them, wearing his best linen kilt.

'Are you going to ask the soldiers after all?' demanded Mut.

Her father smiled. 'Yes. I have discussed it with the rest of the family. We've decided that it may be a good way to make a little extra grain now that the harvest is over.'

Isis felt a thrill of excitement. 'Can we come with you?' she asked.

Paneb looked at the two girls. 'I don't see why not. If anything is going to convince them to employ us, I'm sure you two will!'

The soldier's eyes flickered open. Hopi watched as he took in the faces gathered around him.

'Father,' he murmured.

'I am here, Djeri, my son,' said Anty. 'I have

brought Menna to see you.'

Djeri nodded, then grimaced with pain and closed his eyes again.

'I must show Menna your injuries,' said Anty. 'I know the doctors have already examined you, but Menna has different skills. There may be other treatments that can help you.'

The soldier nodded and levered himself upwards. 'I will bear it as best I can.'

Menna hesitated, then stepped forward and lifted the sheet that covered Djeri's legs to reveal swathes of bloody bandages. Hopi tried to stifle a gasp. The pattern of the bloodstains was horribly familiar: it reminded him of how his own leg had looked, all those years ago.

'What happened?' Hopi blurted out. He knew that, as Menna's apprentice, it was not his place to speak, but he couldn't help himself.

Djeri's eyes swivelled around to meet his. He licked his dry, cracked lips. 'Who are you?' he asked. 'And why do you ask?'

Hopi flushed. 'I am Menna's apprentice,' he replied. 'And I ask because I bear similar wounds myself. They were inflicted in the river, by a crocodile.'

Djeri seemed interested. 'Well, you look alive to me,' he said. 'That's something. But my injuries are

actually rather different. One of those desert barbarians struck me from my chariot –' his left hand drifted up towards the deep gash in his shoulder '– and I fell to the ground. It was the wheels of the chariots behind . . . behind me . . .' He paused, gulping, sweat breaking out on his brow. Slowly, carefully, Menna was unwrapping the bandages, and Hopi knew only too well that the pain must be excruciating. '. . . That . . . that gouged these wounds,' Djeri managed to finish.

He fell silent as Menna teased the linen free. It was encrusted with yellow pus as well as blood, which had stuck the fabric to the skin.

'They should have used more oils,' Menna muttered. He pulled at one of the bandages. 'I am sorry about this, Djeri.'

Djeri closed his eyes again, his forehead creased and his breathing shallow. Hopi could see that the pain was intense. In solidarity, he placed a hand on the soldier's good shoulder.

'He will, of course, receive great honour for his bravery,' said Anty. 'We expect the commander of the company to visit very soon.'

Menna had finished unwrapping the wounds and was gazing at them, deep in thought. They were a gruesome sight and they smelled bad, too.

'Is there anything you can do?' Anty asked him. 'He will live, will he not?'

'My brother, life or death rests in the hands of the gods. You know that.' Menna replied. 'I would have expected better of the army doctors, but I will do all I can. I must return home to fetch some supplies. Leave the bandages unwrapped for now.'

'Thank you. Thank you.' Anty bowed his head. 'We will do anything you say.'

'Then it is time to go.' Menna nodded to Hopi. 'Come, Hopi, we must be on our way.'

Isis and Mut danced around Paneb as they walked to the outskirts of Waset and beyond, into the desert, where the army had set up camp. Smoke from cooking fires rose into the air between the roughly constructed tents. With most of the soldiers in the town, it seemed quite deserted, so Isis thought they would be able to walk straight in. She soon realised she was mistaken. Hidden behind boulders were lookouts, heavily armed with bows and spears. One of them stepped out as they approached.

'Halt!' he cried. 'What is your business here?'

'We are performers,' Paneb told him. 'We have come to see whether the company requires entertainment.'

'Entertainment!' The soldier grinned. 'We've

plenty of prisoners of war to entertain us.'

'With respect, I imagine your commander seeks better entertainment than that,' said Paneb. 'We are one of the most sophisticated music and dance troupes in Waset.'

'Maybe. Anyway, I can't let you in,' said the lookout. 'You'll have to wait here.'

Paneb shrugged. 'Very well.'

They wandered over to a scrubby acacia tree to sit in the shade, and watched as the lookout disappeared behind his boulder once more. A breeze lifted the dusty sand, whirling it in eddies around them. The shadow of the tree grew longer.

'I can hear them,' announced Mut at last.

Isis listened. From the direction of Ipet-Isut came the faint *thump-thump*, *thump-thump* of soldiers' feet. 'Yes, I can, too,' she said.

They waited as the rhythmic thuds grew closer. There was something about them that made Isis quiver, but not with fear, exactly; it was more a sense of awe at something powerful, something much bigger than her – the might of Egypt itself.

The soldiers came into view, tramping out of the town in the same formation as before, a row of chariots riding before each infantry platoon. Isis noticed how each man stared straight ahead of him while

keeping perfect time with the others. And now she could see that the company was bigger than she'd thought. After the first two platoons came two more, then about a hundred prisoners of war, with a final platoon bringing up the rear.

All the prisoners had their hands tied behind their backs. They looked miserable and exhausted. Isis stared at them, taking in their strange, colourful clothing and dark beards.

'Don't Libyans ever shave?' gasped Mut. No Egyptian man would go around looking like that.

'They live in the Red Land, the land of Seth,' said Paneb. 'It's no wonder they look so disorderly.' He took the two girls by the hand, one on either side of him. 'Come. Now is our chance to speak to the commander.'

As Paneb hurried them forward to the front of the company, Isis looked back, fascinated by the prisoners. Many of them were men, but there were some women, too, with long, bedraggled hair, and in the middle of the group were a few girls.

One of the girls caught her eye. She had a thin, narrow face that looked pinched with unhappiness. She noticed Isis staring at her, and her expression changed. Instead of misery, Isis saw a flare of anger and shame.

'Hurry up, Isis,' Paneb chided her.

Isis broke into a jog to match Paneb's stride, but couldn't resist one last glance. The girl's gaze was still fixed on her, but now she was begging, pleading with soulful eyes. Reluctantly, Isis turned away and looked ahead at the row of charioteers. But it felt as though the girl's eyes still followed her long after she had moved on, out of sight.