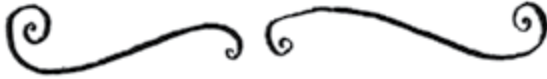


Ra
the
Mighty

CAT DETECTIVE




Ra the Mighty

— CAT —
DETECTIVE

BY
A. B. Greenfield

ILLUSTRATED BY
Sarah Horne

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*For Tessa,
who knows the right way
to address a cat
—A. B. G.*

Invasion

When my adventures began, crime was the last thing on my mind. Stretched out by Pharaoh's pool in the hot Egyptian sun, I was doing what I do best—absolutely nothing at all.

"Ra, you are the laziest creature I know," my friend Khepri said.

I ignored him. Khepri's a scarab beetle, so he's only about the size of my paw, and his voice is tiny. But when he crept closer to my ear and said it again, I yawned and half-opened my eyes.

"Lazy? Me?" I blinked. "Never, Khepri. I make the most of every hour."

"But you haven't moved a whisker all day," Khepri protested.



"That's the beauty of it, Khepri. I don't *need* to move. I'm already in the best place possible." I glanced over his shiny black wings and admired the calm water in the pool. "It's sunny, and it's peaceful. Even better, the people here treat me like a god. Believe me, I'm making the most of *that*."

Khepri flashed his wings. "Well, people think highly of me, too. There isn't a mummy in Egypt that doesn't have a scarab am-

ulet over its heart. But I don't let that go to my head, Ra. I keep busy."

"Let me guess." I wrinkled my nose. "You've been rolling dung balls again."

"I have indeed." Khepri rubbed his forelegs. "First thing this morning, I started over by the stables—"

"I don't want to know the details, Khepri." Scarab beetles love dung, but Khepri loves it more than most. I tried to cover my ears with my paws, but it was no use.

"And you wouldn't believe how much dung I found there," Khepri went on. "Piles of it—"

"Stop," I moaned.

He did, but not because of me. A serving boy strode up with a midmorning snack. Khepri had to scurry back to avoid being stepped on.

With a deep bow, the boy set my plate down in front of me. I gave him a gracious nod, but I waited until he left before I nibbled at the offerings. Letting the humans watch you eat is always a mistake. It's hard to look like a god when you're wolfing down antelope stew.

I didn't mind Khepri seeing me, though. Compared with his meals, mine are classy in the extreme. After I had polished off all the morsels on my plate—not only antelope stew, but some tidbits of spiced ibex—I rolled onto my back with a happy sigh. “Delicious. I tell you, Khepri, the cooks here get better every day.”

“And now what?” Khepri said. “You’re going to lie around waiting for the next meal?”

“And what’s wrong with that?”

“Ra, you need to get out more. I’ve known mummies with more interesting lives.”

What kind of comparison was that? “Mummies don’t eat,” I pointed out. “Or sleep.”

“There’s more to life than eating and sleeping,” Khepri said. “Not that anyone would know it, the way you act. Even when Pharaoh took you to Thebes last month, you didn’t lift a paw. His servants carried you straight from this pool to the sunny deck of the ship. And then they carried you back.”

I nuzzled my paws. “So what if they did?”

Khepri sighed. “Don’t you get bored, Ra?”

“How can I be bored when there are snacks?” I said reasonably.

“You’re hopeless,” Khepri told me. “You’ve got less get-up-and-go than one of Pharaoh’s wigs.”

I rolled over and licked the last bit of gravy off the plate. Khepri could say what he liked, but I had plenty of get-up-and-go when I wanted to. I just didn’t want to very often.

A few years ago, when Pharaoh was just a prince, it was different. I used to roam around then. But now I wasn’t an ordinary palace cat. I was *Pharaoh’s Cat*, and there was no need to gad about. Everything I wanted was right here.

And of course I didn’t get bored.

Well, not very often, anyway. Only when my snack was done and it was hours and hours until the next one would arrive.

Like right now.

Not that I was going to mention it to Khepri. After all, I counted myself lucky I didn’t have all the claims on my time that Pharaoh did—so many ambassadors to receive, so many rites to perform, and so much

to live up to as he followed in his father's footsteps. None of that for me! As Pharaoh's Cat, my life was easier than ever. If I was a teensy bit bored sometimes, so what?

Anyway, if I complained, Khepri would invite me to roll dung balls with him. He doesn't seem to appreciate the dignity of my position.

Now that I'm Pharaoh's Cat, I live an exalted life, just as Pharaoh himself does. Everyone else in Egypt understands that. They generally show their respect; they keep their distance. But not Khepri.

Really, sometimes I don't know why I put up with him.

"Ra, it's not good for you to lie around all day like this," Khepri said now. "You need another interest in life."

"No, Khepri." I slouched back down beside the pool, rubbing one cheek against the tiles. "What I need is a nap."

Khepri drummed his forelegs in a marching beat. "You've slept plenty already. Let's get you moving."

"We can talk about it after my nap," I mumbled.

"Hey!" Khepri stopped drumming. "What was that?"

"I said—"

"Not you." Khepri hopped around and faced the high wall at the far end of the courtyard. "Over there. That scratching sound."

As I turned my head to listen, a cat popped over the wall.

I sat up.

Cats may be gods in Egypt, but I'd be the first to tell you that not all of us look the part. This one was a mess—young and scrawny with bedraggled fur and a torn ear. Definitely not the kind of cat who belonged in the palace, let alone in Pharaoh's private quarters.

"Hey, there!" Panting, she scabbled over to me.

I drew myself up higher. *Hey, there?* What kind of greeting was that for Ra the Mighty, Lord of the Powerful Paw, direct descendant of the cat goddess Bastet and the great sun god Ra himself?

I flicked my right ear. "Excuse me? Have we met?"



You're one of Bastet's own. We're supposed to protect the weak, remember? And there's a child here who needs our help."

"A child?" Khepri cut in. "Who?"

"No," she said. "I'm Miu. I live by the kitchens. And I need your help."

Help sounded an awful lot like *work*. And why should I work for a creature who didn't even know the polite way to approach Pharaoh's Cat? I stretched myself out by the water. "Sorry. I'm busy."

The youngster leaped over me and lowered her face down to mine. "You don't look busy to me."

The nerve! Didn't she understand she needed to treat Pharaoh's Cat with respect? I put out a paw to ward her off. "Well, I am. Very, very busy. Good-bye."

She didn't back away. "But you're a cat.

Pampered

Miu looked startled. Evidently she hadn't noticed Khepri before. (A serious oversight, if you ask me. When you're a cat, observation is everything.)

"That's Khepri," I said.

"Pleased to meet you," Khepri said.

Miu bobbed her head at him. "Likewise."

After her rudeness to me, she was being friendly to a beetle? It made no sense. I closed my eyes, wishing she'd just go away.

But instead of leaving, she kept talking to Khepri. "The child's name is Tedimut. She works for Pharaoh's Great Wife, and she's been accused of stealing an amulet. But she didn't do it."

I opened one eye. "How do you know she didn't?"

"She wouldn't," Miu said. "She's the niece of my human, the cook Sebni, and I've known her since she was a baby. She's honest as can be, and she's very kindhearted. Before she started to serve the Great Wife, she worked in the kitchens, and she always did her best to look after us cats. Once, when I was a kitten, I got trapped in a storeroom, and she's the one who found me."

Khepri clicked in sympathy. "And now she's in trouble? Poor girl."

"No one knows what's become of her," Miu said. "Pharaoh's guards think she escaped the palace this morning, and they're searching the town. But I think maybe she's still here. I'm worried maybe the real thief hurt her, or tied her up somewhere." Miu turned to me. "I don't know these rooms. You do. You need to help me find her."

She wanted me to search through all the nooks and crannies of the palace for a child—a child who might not even be there? "I don't think so."

She meowed in protest. "But you're sworn to protect children—"

"I'm sworn to protect the children of my family," I said firmly. "That would be Pharaoh's family—his three sons and two daughters. They're all fine. The rest of the world is not my problem."

"I see." From underneath that torn ear of hers, Miu peered at me with disdain. "So it's true what they say—you really are a pampered nincompoop. You're too vain to lift so much as one paw for anyone else."

Nincompoop? Vain? I bristled at her, outraged.

"It isn't so much that he's vain," Khepri told her. "It's mostly that he's lazy."

"Khepri, whose side are you on?" I said. "No, don't answer that." I turned to Miu. "You can have a look around if you want to. I'm not stopping you. But leave me out of it. I don't waste time on things that aren't my problem." I turned away from her and started cleaning myself, to show her that the conversation was over.

Khepri gave me his most disapproving click. "Ra, you need to reconsider."

I shook my head.

"Never mind," Miu said behind us. "He's probably too slow and flabby to help me anyway. I'm better off going ahead on my own."

Well, that settled it. She wasn't getting any help from me.

Not that she was waiting for it. She was already halfway to the nearest doorway.

"No!" Khepri cried. "Not that way!"

His voice wasn't loud enough to carry far. Miu kept going.

Khepri turned to me. "Ra, you have to stop her."

"Maybe I'm too slow and flabby for that."

Khepri clicked his wings fiercely and jumped onto my head.

"Ouch!" I swatted at him, but scarab beetles are good at sticking tight.

Grabbing hold of the fur right next to my ear, Khepri whispered, "Ra, if you don't help her, do you know what I'll do? I'll stick dung in your snacks."

I sat bolt upright, my ears flattening in alarm. "You wouldn't!" I gasped. "Dung in my snacks?"



"Every day for a whole week," he chirped.
"Your choice."

It wasn't much of one.

"All right," I said grudgingly. "Since you insist."

Let me make one point clear: I may lie around all day, but I'm not slow on my feet. When I want to run, I'm as fast as one of Pharaoh's chariots. Anyone in the palace will tell you that—especially any rat that dares to show its face. I intercepted Miu just before she reached the doorway.

"I wouldn't go in there if I were you," I said.

Miu tried to push past me. "I'm not listening to you anymore."

I blocked her. "You should. Keep going that way, and you'll land straight in front of Pharaoh's hunting dogs."

Miu leaped back. "Hunting dogs?"

"They're used to me, but they're deadly to strangers. Make the wrong move, and they'll eat you alive."

"Oh, dear." Miu's tail whipped around anxiously. "What am I going to do?"

"You're going to let us guide you around," Khepri said.

"What's this?" I hissed under my breath.
"That wasn't part of our bargain."

"Oh, yes, it was," Khepri whispered, still holding on to the fur by my ear.

I tried to swat him off my head again and missed.

"I'd take you myself," Khepri explained to Miu, "but I don't know where everything is. I mostly stay outside, you see. There's more dung out here. But Ra knows everything about this palace. Don't you, Ra?"

"I might have forgotten," I said. "Being so pampered and all."

"Not just one week of dung," Khepri whispered in my ear. "Two."

"All right, all right," I said. "I'll show her around."

If it was the only way to save my snacks, I supposed I could take Miu through a couple of rooms. Maybe then Khepri would be reasonable. Even better, maybe Miu would decide to run ahead on her own.

The hold on my ear relaxed. "He's really a very decent creature at heart," Khepri said to Miu.

"A quick tour," I warned them. "That's all I'm promising."

"Fine with me," Miu said. "I'm in a hurry."

"Then let's get going." The sooner this was over, the better.

I led Miu across the courtyard to another, safer doorway. With Khepri still riding between my ears, we trotted into the palace.



Beloved One

"Stay out of sight," I whispered to Miu as we slinked through the entranceway. "If the humans get a good look at you, they'll know you don't belong here. Not with that torn ear of yours."

Miu nodded and crouched even lower. I had to admit she was good at blending in. If you were a human you probably wouldn't even notice she was there. As we crept forward, I studied her, trying to figure out how she did it.

Maybe I studied a little too hard. I missed the footsteps coming our way.

"Ra, watch out!" Khepri warned. His legs tickled my fur as he slid down and hid under my belly.