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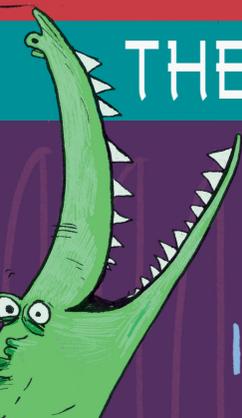
THE MIGHTY

THE CROCODILE CAPER

EDGAR-NOMINATED AUTHOR OF RA THE MIGHTY: CAT DETECTIVE

A.B. GREENFIELD

ILLUSTRATED BY SARAH HORNE



Ra
the
Mighty

THE CROCODILE
CAPER

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BY

A. B. Greenfield

ILLUSTRATED BY

Sarah Horne

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*For Milo and Gideon,
mighty readers and brothers*
—A.B.G.





CHAPTER 1



A Nile Cruise

I am Ra the Mighty, Pharaoh's Cat, Lord of the Powerful Paw. Everyone knows I'm special. That's why they bring me offerings. And by offerings, I mean snacks—the best in all of Egypt.

"I can't wait." I pranced onto the royal barge. It was anchored at the palace docks, ready for my voyage down the Nile with Pharaoh. "I hear they've stewed an oxtail just for me."

"Oxtail? Seriously?" said a tiny voice between my ears. It came from my best buddy, Khepri. He's a scarab beetle, and he likes to perch there. "I don't know how you can eat that stuff. Give me dung balls any day."



I sighed. Like most scarab beetles, Khepri lives for dung. (Disgusting, I know. Don't think I haven't told him.) "Keep it to yourself, buddy."

"I hope they have some ox dung for me," he murmured. "Though I'll settle for horse."

"Khepri, please!" I stretched out in a sunny spot on the deck. "You're spoiling my appetite."

"Is that even possible?" a mild voice asked. Turning my head, I saw my friend Miu, the kitchen cat. She was gliding out of the cook's quarters.

"Miu, did they bring my oxtail on board?" I asked.

"And is there any ox dung?" Khepri chirped.

"I have no idea," Miu said briskly as sailors tramped past us. "But there's something going on, you two. A change in plans. I heard the cook grumbling, but he didn't say much. We should find out what's happening."

"Ra, did you hear that?" Khepri leaped down to the gleaming deck. "It's a mystery!"

"Make it go away." I rolled over, narrowly

avoiding more sailors. "I mean, I know we're Great Detectives—"

"The Greatest," Khepri put in modestly.

"—but we've already solved two mysteries, and I think that's enough for anyone." I closed my eyes to block the sun's glare. "Anyway, this is supposed to be a pleasure cruise. The next few days are for snacking and sleeping."

"I wouldn't bet on it," Miu said. "I saw Kiya headed this way."

"What?!" I flipped over in shock. "Pharaoh said she was going in the other boat—"

"I think she wants to visit you before we sail," Miu told me.

"I'm getting off!" I shrieked. I darted forward, then froze. Kiya was coming on board with scraps of linen in her hands.

"Don't be silly, Ra," Miu scolded me. "She's Pharaoh's daughter. She's part of your family. And she's only six years old. What is there to be so scared of?"

"You don't understand, Miu," I yowled in despair. "*It's dress-up time!*"

Pounce! Kiya grabbed me around the belly and scooped me up.

"Hi, Ra-baby!" she cooed.

Ra-baby. Of all the silly, goopy names . . .

"It's Ra the Mighty," I meowed. "Lord of the Powerful Paw."

But she didn't understand me. No surprises there. Humans never do, even the small ones.

"Come on, Ra-baby." She lugged me over to the shade in front of Pharaoh's decktop cabin, built to protect him from the relentless sun. "I've found you some great new clothes."

Let me set the record straight, in case you're like Kiya and you have some funny ideas about felines. *Cats don't wear clothes*.

Okay, okay. They wear a little jewelry sometimes. I admit I'm quite attached to the bead necklace Pharaoh gave me when I was a kitten. But clothes?

Never.

Ever.

Try telling that to Kiya, though. "Ra-baby, how about we put on your head scarf first?"

Head scarf?

"You're going to look so cute with your ears tucked under it!" Kiya chortled.

"Did you hear that?" I yowled to Khepri and Miu. "Get me out of here!"

I squirmed and clawed at the linen.

"Ra, be careful!" Miu warned me. "You don't want to hurt her. Remember, you're one of Bastet's own, sworn to protect children. Especially the children of your very own family."

With her torn ear and grizzled coat, Miu looks like a tough customer, but her heart's as soft as they come. And she was right. I'm one of Bastet's own. All cats are, but me more than most, since I'm one of the great cat goddess's direct descendants.

Still, it took me a moment to remember my royal duty and retract my claws.

"Silly Ra-baby." Kiya smooched me. "Now let's put on your veil."

No claws, I told myself. No claws, no teeth, no claws, no teeth—

"KIYA!" a voice boomed. A voice that made me pull my claws in as far as they could go. A voice that made Kiya jump.

I twisted my head back, and there he was,

standing on the deck: the Ruler of Rulers,
the Lord of the Two Lands, the High Priest
of Every Temple.

Also known as Pharaoh, Kiya's father.

He was my human. And the moment I
saw him, I knew something was wrong.



Ra-baby

"Kiya, what are you doing to poor Ra?" Pharaoh demanded.

"I'm dressing him up, Daddy!" Kiya held me so her father could see.

"Well, I don't think he likes it, Kiya."

"Sure he does, Daddy. He's my Ra-baby."

I twisted in her hands and bolted down the deck, leaving the head scarf behind. She gathered the linens and started to stalk me. "Here, Ra-baby! Come and play!"

No way. I leaped onto the roof of Pharaoh's royal cabin.

"Leave Ra alone, Kiya, and come here. I have news for you." Pharaoh motioned to a tall boy behind him. "And for Dedi, too."

Maybe you've heard of Ramses De-

dumose, Pharaoh's oldest son and heir? We call him Dedi, and he's the Great Son, the crown prince. Not that he looked too princely that morning. He was just a twelve-year-old boy with long, skinny legs and a thoughtful expression in his eyes. Still, I was fond of him. He had a real talent for mischief, like his sister, but fortunately he had a smidgen more sense. For one thing, he had never tried to dress me up.



Kiya skipped over to Pharaoh. "What is it, Daddy?"

"I have to stay here in Thebes for a few more days," Pharaoh said. "Something has come up."

"Daddy, no!" Kiya cried. Dedi looked disappointed. But not as disappointed as I was. *What about my oxtail?*

"Never mind," Pharaoh told his children. "There's no reason why you two shouldn't sail today. The festival is over, and your royal mother will be longing to see you."

Well, that would put plenty of distance between me and Kiya. I stifled a yowl of delight.

Pharaoh added gravely, "Besides, Thebes isn't the best place for you to be right now, under the circumstances."

I couldn't agree more: Thebes was definitely not a good place for Kiya to be. Not while I was in it, anyway.

"What circumstances?" Dedi asked. "What's going on?"

"Nothing for you to worry about," Pharaoh said. "The point is that you will set out today. Lady Satiah has invited you to spend the night at her palace on the Nile."

"Lady Satiah?" Dedi wrinkled his nose.

I wrinkled my nose, too. Despite her beauty, Lady Satiah isn't the kind of person

who warms anyone's heart, including mine. I don't think she even warms Pharaoh's heart, although she's one of his wives. His father set up the marriage as a favor to one of Egypt's most powerful lords. Like most political matches, it didn't work out. Pharaoh and Lady Satiah haven't lived together for years.

After Lady Satiah had her royal son, Ahmose, she went to live in one of the more remote palaces. The Great Wife insisted on that. As everyone in Egypt knows, the Great Wife is Pharaoh's *real* wife: the partner of his heart and the mother of almost all of his children, including Dedi and Kiya. (Plus she's fond of cats—especially me.)

"We can't stay with Lady Satiah!" Kiya cried. "She hates us."

"Don't be ridiculous," Pharaoh said patiently. "Lady Satiah does not hate you."

"Yes, she does," Kiya insisted. "She's awful."

Pharaoh frowned—a sight that made even Kiya go quiet. "Lady Satiah is a noble and gracious lady. If she was strict

with you two last year, it was because you deserved it. Have you forgotten that you stuck a lizard in her bed?"

Kiya and Dedi exchanged a joyous look.

"Oh, we remember," Dedi said.

"We did it because she was so horrible," Kiya explained. "She was horrible first. She—"

"I don't want to hear any more," Pharaoh said, his voice a low rumble of thunder. "Lady Satiah is one of my wives, and she deserves your respect. That is final. Understood?"

Dedi bowed his head. "Yes, Dad."

Kiya pouted at first, but when Pharaoh's frown deepened she gave in. "Yes, Daddy."

"Very good." Pharaoh put his arms around them both. "Judging from her letter, she is eager to see you. If you mind your manners, all will be well."

"Can't you come with us?" Kiya pleaded.

"I wish I could," Pharaoh told her. "But never fear, you'll have plenty of company."

I listened with half an ear as he explained who was going: Kiya's nursemaid,

four of Pharaoh's guards, and a whole boatload of sailors. They were also taking a cook, but that didn't bother me. Pharaoh has dozens of cooks, so there would be plenty of them left to make my snacks here in Thebes while I waited for Pharaoh to finish his business.

"You will also travel with Ra the Mighty," Pharaoh told the children. "He is a favorite of the gods, and he will keep you safe."

What?! My ears swiveled, and I lost my balance. I fell from the cabin roof.

Pharaoh, Dedi, and Kiya turned around as I landed feetfirst.

"Silly Ra-baby," Kiya said fondly, coming up to me. "Isn't it great that you're coming with us? We can play dress-up all day!"

"Noooooooooooooooooo!" I yowled.

"Ah!" Pharaoh said, looking pleased. "That's the sound he makes when he's warding off intruders. He's trying to protect you already." Bending down to rub the fur between my ears, he added, "I know I can trust you, Ra. Do what you must to keep my children from harm."

Never let it be said that Pharaoh's Cat doesn't know his duty. If Pharaoh was ordering me to protect his children, then protect them I would. But as Kiya grinned down at me, I only had one thought:

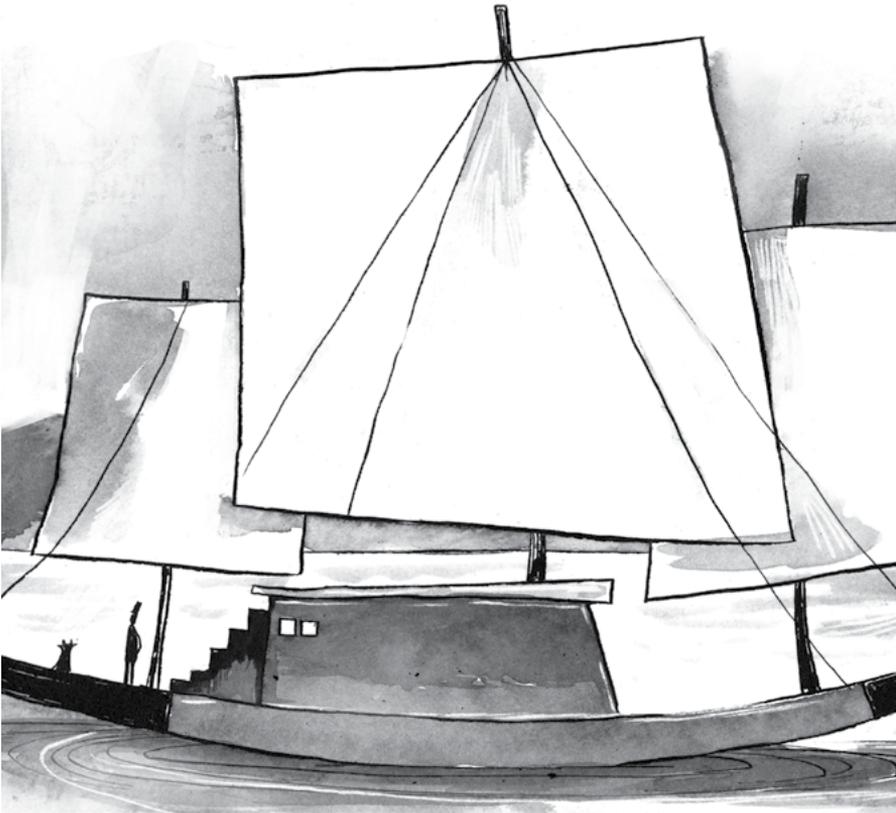
Who was going to protect *me*?



CHAPTER 3



Danger, Ahoy!



Have you ever cruised down the Nile? If not, I'll let you in on a secret—a royal barge is the way to go. Pharaoh has several at his disposal. Built of pricy cedar from Lebanon, they're fitted out with top-grade quarters for the family (and for Pharaoh's Cat).

We set off at noon, and I claimed my usual nook near the bow, where I could enjoy the cool river breezes.

"Wow," Khepri said from the top of my head. "Look at that view!"

As we slipped away from Thebes, the great temple shone like polished ivory in the noonday sun. A light breeze made the water sparkle like jewels. Perfect napping conditions!



Miu trotted over to me. "Dedi is talking with the captain, but I think you'd better keep an eye on Kiya, Ra. She's checking out every inch of this ship, and the sailors aren't happy about it."

"Oh, let her explore," I said airily. "If the sailors are unhappy, that's their problem."

Miu wasn't looking too happy herself. "But—"

"Look!" I meowed in delight. "Here come the snacks!"

Sure enough, the cook was headed our way. He set a platter in front of me and headed back to the kitchen.

"Oxtail!" I licked my chops in approval. "Miu, there's some for you, too."

"There's no dung," Khepri said sadly.

"I smelled something stinky on a sailor's sandals," Miu told him.

Khepri brightened. "Thanks!" He scuttled off happily.

Normally, snack time is my favorite time of the day. I love that it comes around so often. But as I chomped on my oxtail, Kiya crept past a knot of sailors so she could watch me. It made me nervous.

After I lapped up the last trace of sauce, I said to Miu, "You know what? It's been a long day already, and I could use a nap. I think I'll go lie down for a while."

"No napping, Ra," Miu said sternly. "You've got to look after the children. Kiya especially."

"I thought maybe you could do that, Miu. You're so good with kids."

Miu didn't budge. "Ra, these are Pharaoh's kids, and you're Pharaoh's Cat. It's your duty to look after them."

"But think how nice you'd look in a head scarf," I pleaded.

I was still pleading when Kiya pounced. "Ra-baby! Time to play dress-up! Here we go." She whipped out a piece of linen and tugged it over my head. "That's your tunic. Now let's wrap you up."

I was too startled to meow, but I heard a tiny giggle and looked up. Khepri was watching, with Miu right behind him, a tiny cat grin on her face.

"You look quite fetching, Ra," she purred.

"Actually, he looks like a mummy," Khepri said. "Only with more fur."

I looked down. I *did* look like a mummy. I twisted, trying to free myself. And when Kiya draped me in yet more linen, I showed my teeth.

“Ra!” Miu sounded shocked. “Calm down. She’s being quite gentle, for a six-year-old. And it’s not the end of the world to play dress-up.”

“It isn’t for us, anyway,” Khepri put in. “It’s fun to watch.”

Miu gave him a cat wink. “So it is.”

“Sweet Ra-baby.” Kiya smooched the top of my head. “Now be a good kitty and let me put on your loincloth.”

A loincloth?

“Okay. That’s it. I’m done!” With a thrust of my powerful paws, I broke free. Darting past Dedi, who was striding toward Kiya, I climbed straight up the mast, shedding linen as I went.

“Ra-baby, come back!” Kiya wailed.

“Never!” I cried.

“You don’t have to be a pharaoh, Ra-baby.” Kiya waggled a tiny veil in the breeze. “You can be a high priestess instead.”

I didn’t dignify that with a response.

"I'll give you seconds of stewed oxtail," Kiya wheedled. "And all my snacks."

I was tempted, but only for a second. There are some sacrifices I'm not prepared to make, not even for snacks.

"I'm coming after you!" Kiya lunged for the mast.

I scrambled up a little higher, but there was no need. Dedi pried his sister away. "Kiya, stop it. If you want to be friends with Ra, that's not the way. Leave him alone for a while, and come and play Twenty Squares with me."

Kiya pouted, but the promise of a board game with her brother won her over. After that, I lost track of time. For hours, I hung out on the mast, curled tight against a rolled-up sail. I heard fishermen shouting as they paddled out of our way, and flocks of geese honking as they rose from the reedy shore. But mostly it was quiet. Lulled by the bobbing of the ship, I lounged in blissful, uninterrupted peace.

After a long while, I heard a familiar click by my ear.

"I can't believe you're up here." Khepri

clambered onto the mast, breathless from climbing so high. "You're supposed to be guarding Pharaoh's kids."

"I can guard them from here," I told him. "In fact, this is the perfect place to do it. Up here, I can see everything."

It was true. From my lofty perch, I could look down at Kiya and Dedi and the entire barge. And my view didn't end there. Gazing out to the horizon, I could see the Nile coiling through the desert like a long, swollen snake. Thanks to Pharaoh's expertly performed rites, the gods had blessed Egypt with the best floods in living memory. The river was growing wider almost by the hour.

"See the small figure down on the front deck?" I said to Khepri. "The one bouncing up and down? That's Kiya, bugging her brother—"

"Why do people say *bug* when they mean *annoy*?" Khepri wanted to know. "Bugs are nice!"

"It's just an expression," I said.

"It's not a very good one," he said as he climbed onto my paw.

"Khepri, my point is that if you look down, you'll see—"

"I can't." Khepri closed his eyes and nestled closer to me.

"What do you mean, you can't?"

"I'm scared of heights," Khepri admitted. "Especially on boats. I get seasick."

"Then what are you doing up here?" I asked.

"I was worried about you."

You know, bugs actually *are* nice. Khepri is, anyway. "I'm fine," I told him. "But thanks for the concern, my friend. Want to hop on my back?"

"Er . . . you won't make any sudden moves, will you?"

"I'll be steady as a rock," I promised.

After Khepri got himself settled, he added, "I'm also worried about what kept Pharaoh in Thebes. He just said *something has come up*."

"Oh, stuff is always coming up for Pharaoh." I yawned. "Some priest probably wants to drone on about next year's festival plans. Or maybe a vizier has another dull report to make. People are always boring

the sandals off Pharaoh." Not for the first time, I thought how much better it was to be Pharaoh's Cat.

"It's strange that he didn't say what was wrong," Khepri persisted.

"Who says anything's wrong?"

"Don't you remember? Pharaoh said he didn't think Thebes was the best place for the children to be right now."

"Probably because they would interrupt him," I said.

"Or maybe he thought Thebes wasn't safe," Khepri suggested. "He seemed awfully worried about them not coming to harm."

I felt a twitch of uneasiness but refused to give in to it. "You're letting your imagination run away with you."

"But Great Detectives need imagination," Khepri argued. "It's how we solve mysteries. Like this one."

"There is no mystery," I told him. "Pharaoh is fine. If anyone's in danger today, it's me—from Kiya." I turned my head into the wind and added happily, "Though not while I'm up here."

"You won't be for much longer," Khepri said. "Miu said to warn you we'll be arriving at Lady Satiah's soon."

"Why didn't Miu come up here to tell me herself?" I asked. "She's not afraid of heights." Miu isn't afraid of much.

"She says somebody has to look after the children." Khepri paused. "To be honest, Ra, she's not too pleased with you right now. You left Kiya and Dedi to fend for themselves."

"I'm still guarding them," I huffed. "Just... from a distance."

"A really long distance," Khepri said.

There are plenty of servants around to look after them," I pointed out. "And anyway, Miu ought to understand that everyone needs some time to unwind. Especially me. It's not like I'm cut out for this role. I'm Ra the Mighty, Pharaoh's Cat, Lord of the Powerful Paw. I'm not Ra the Mighty, Royal Babysitter."

"It was funny watching Kiya dress you up." On my back, Khepri giggled. "I loved the mummy look."

"It's not so great from the inside," I told him.

Below us, at the captain's command, the crew bent to their oars. I looked down-river. Green shores hugged the river close, then yielded to the vast, bleached sands of the desert, glowing in the late afternoon sun. At the next bend in the river, you could see the palace, so close to the Nile that it seemed to be floating. Behind high walls and a moat, its smooth, whitewashed buildings gleamed like pearls.

Connected to the palace by a bridge, an immense stone landing jutted out into the Nile, with piers extending from it like teeth. Boats of all sizes were tied up and anchored there.

"I guess that's where we're meant to dock," Khepri said. "But why are there so many loose logs in the water?"

"Maybe a pier fell apart in the flood-waters," I said.

"Meeeeeeeeooooooooooooow!" Miu was climbing toward us, a head scarf tied around her neck. "Ra! Khepri! Where are you? We're almost at the palace docks, and there are crocodiles *everywhere*."

Alarmed, I took another look at those logs

floating near the palace. Now that we were closer, I could see they had scaly skin. And tails. And teeth.

"Crocodiles!" Khepri gulped. "Dozens and dozens of them!"

"Now, don't get worried," I told him. "Crocodiles may look fierce, but they're animals just like us."

"Only with more teeth," Khepri said.

"Er . . . yes. I wonder if those rumors about their blood sacrifices are true?"

"Blood sacrifices?" Khepri said in a tiny voice.

"Nobody knows the details because nobody wants to ask. But you know what they call their god Sobek, don't you? *Pointed of Teeth.*"

"Ra, this isn't making me feel better," Khepri said.

"I told you, there's no need to worry," I reassured him. "This is as close as you'll ever get to them. Once we're inside the palace, they can't touch us."

"You two need to come down," Miu called up to us. "I can't look after both children at once, and if Kiya falls in—"

Yikes! What would Pharaoh say if Kiya became crocodile food?

“We’re coming!” I shouted. “Hang on tight, Khepri.”

Pharaoh’s Cat is an ace at climbing things, but getting down? Well, that’s trickier, even for a cat with powerful paws. Going straight down the mast didn’t appeal to me, so I used the ropes instead. I was nearly back on deck when my forepaw skidded forward.

“Watch your step!” Miu called up to me.

I was about to tell her that Pharaoh’s Cat doesn’t need to watch his step—he’s naturally graceful—when my other forepaw slipped. My head went swinging over the water, with Khepri clinging to my ear.

A rumple-backed crocodile leaped for us, rising almost straight out of the river.

“Nooooooooooooo!” Khepri and I shrieked.

How could a reptile jump so high? Its mouth snapped open, revealing a full set of white choppers.

Pointed of Teeth, I thought dizzily.

It was crocodile snack time. And we were on the menu.