

CHAPTER 1

The Unpharaoh in Chains

“**M**y nasty, scheming, stinking, book-reading, spiky-haired nephew is dead!” hissed the ancient sorceress. “Dead and gone an entire month. These should be the happiest days I ever spent! Yet where am I? Where am I, Cainus, you hopeless hound?”

“Er, dead and gone too?” ventured the terrified jackal.

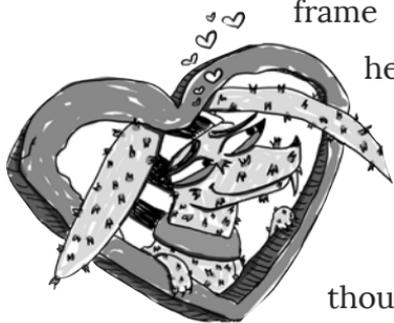
“Precisely! I’m dead and gone, when I should be alive and . . . what’s the word? . . . not gone!”

Cainus the Jackal dropped to his patchy haunches and peered up at the vast magic wall.

Across its ancient surface, the enormous face of his mistress fumed from the Afterworld. The wall was missing one brick, leaving a dark rectangle where the Unpharaoh's right eye should be. It made her serpent-like appearance all the more unsettling.



Last week, Cainus had fashioned a small stone frame near the wall, shaped like a heart. That way he could speak to the Unpharaoh while poking his head through the frame, looking adorable. (Or so he thought – sadly, the frame folded his pointy ears forwards, so he actually looked absurd.)



“Fear not, Your Deadness,” Cainus said. “The gods may have blocked your spells, but I am doing everything in my power to bring you back to Mumphis. My plan to build a living statue of you out of dead mice wasn’t a bad one!”

“No, it wasn’t bad – it was woeful. You lacked the

magic powers to bring my spirit into the mouse statue anyway. And now you're keeping the horrid thing as furniture!"

"It's a priceless sculpture," Cainus whined defensively, glancing at the statue he'd made of the Unpharaoh. It looked nothing like her, other than being twisted and grey. (And made of mice, which Cainus suspected the Unpharaoh was, at least partly.)

"Your other attempts were equally priceless," the crone mocked. "Like that time you were stupid enough to ask the gods to bring me back, and Ra turned your pointy head into a coconut."

"That was a difficult week," Cainus admitted. "Thank Ra the spell wore off."

The Unpharaoh wriggled about, making her chains rattle.

CLANG-A-CLANK!

The chains were new. Osiris, boss of the gods, had punished the Unpharaoh after her failed plot to trap Bab Sharkey in the Spongy Void. He had hauled her from the lake of flowers, wound twenty

iron chains around her body, and strung her high up one of the Afterworld's palm trees. This kept her in plain sight of everyone, so she couldn't cause further havoc.



But Osiris had made one mistake. The Unpharaoh's magic wall still sat at the bottom of the lake, so Osiris had assumed it wasn't a problem. But the Unpharaoh had managed to chip out a tiny fragment of it with a vicious fingernail, moments before Osiris had seized her.

Now she could peer down at her chained hands and chat to Cainus just as before, though he appeared very small on the tiny chip. She could even snort miniature fireballs at him, if she aimed her nostrils very carefully.

"However, Cainus," she whispered to the chip, "I have an idea. The Pharaoh's Beard."

BUZZ! BUZZ-BIZZ-BOZZZZ!

A busy beetle buzzed up to the Unpharaoh's face. "Talking to yourself again, you selfish



grumpy-bottom-lady?” he asked in a French accent.

Some Pharaohs giggled at this, watching on as they lounged by the pool.

“Yes, Binky,” the Unpharaoh snarled back. “It’s the only interesting conversation to be had around here.”

“Pah!” spat Binky. He’d been one of Bab Sharkey’s Animal Mummy friends until the Unpharaoh’s giant Moth Mummy had killed him. He had nothing but contempt for the Unpharaoh. “You know nothing of conversation, as you have not been to France. Their fine artworks and complicated croissants are the only subjects worthy of discussion!”

Binky buzzed off in a huff, and the Unpharaoh turned her attention back to the chip. “The Pharaoh’s Beard, Cainus,” she repeated. “It is the only thing powerful enough to bring me back. You do remember it, I assume? The priceless Beard that you stupidly left in the Spongy Void?!”

“I am searching everywhere, Your Terrificness!”

Cainus assured her. “I return daily to the Great Pyramid at Giza, but the Beard is nowhere to be found. I have even searched in the vast city of Cairo. I thought someone may have put it in the great museum there, among the mummies of the Pharaohs. But there is no sign of it. Rest assured, however, I shall search until my pointy ears drop off!” His silky voice warbled with fear.

The Unpharaoh narrowed her serpent eyes. “It does not matter,” she said quietly.

“I will do anything, Your Gorgeousness,” he vowed. “I will upend Cairo. I will scour the deserts. I will smash open every grain of sand in Egypt. Although grains of sand are very small, I suppose, so I doubt I’ll find the Beard in one of those. Coconuts, perhaps? You mentioned coconuts – maybe it’s hidden in a coconut. I swear, I shall search every last coconut. No coconut is safe from Cainus the Jackal!”

In his terror, he was blathering. “Please don’t be angry with me,” he went on, “please don’t burn my precious – wait, what did you say?”

“I said it does not matter, Cainus.”

Cainus’s tongue flopped so far out of his mouth, it slapped on the tomb floor. “It doesn’t?” he spluttered.

“Do you remember how you first brought my spirit back to Mumphis, you clueless puppy?”

Cainus peered at the ceiling, straining to recall.

“I remember,” the Unpharaoh said. “The Smoothie of Immortality. You stole a single hair from the Pharaoh’s Beard to make it. And beneath the Pyramid of Mumphis, you poured it into the mouth of my mummified body.”

“Ah yes!” said Cainus. “Happy days, weren’t they? But to make another smoothie, I’d need another hair from the Pharaoh’s Beard. Which, if I’m following this conversation correctly, is hiding inside a coconut.”

“It is not in a coconut, Cainus!” the Unpharaoh snapped. Then her face crinkled into a sickening grin. Cainus could hear her leathery skin creak.

“The Beard is gone forever,” she croaked, “but another ancient relic is not. My *mummy*! You know

from your spying that Bab Sharkey left it in my tomb. And what do you think is inside the belly of that mummy?"

Cainus clutched the stone heart frame with his paws. "You don't mean . . . the Smoothie of Immortality?"

"Most of its ingredients would have perished, of course. The natron and resin must have oozed out long ago. Even the lollipops would have rotted by now. But one magical ingredient is so powerful, it might perhaps remain."

Cainus's body stiffened as he realised. "The hair," he choked. "The spare hair from the Pharaoh's Beard."

"And this time, when I return, I won't just be taking over my little city. I hear so much of the world beyond Mumphis, and those stories have given me a hunger. Cairo. France. Hoo-haacchhh, I shall become Pharaoh . . . of the *entire world!*"