

MUMMY'S MASK

A Hot Night at the Tooth & Hookah

PATHFINDER'S JOURNAL: SHADOW OF THE SANDS 1 OF 6

In Varisia, lush fields ripple in the wind like the waves of an emerald sea, but here the grass is as sere as grandfather's glares. The change in climate and geography took some getting used to. I don't know how to find water or predict storms the way I could back home. I can still follow tracks, but the wind in Osirion can scour the deserts flat in minutes. The dry air irritates my nostrils and chaps my lips, but I rather like the heat. Or at least I did until this last week.

I originally headed for Wati in search of supplies, healing, and gossip—the currencies of a Pathfinder. After a few days under the blazing sun, however, I approached with a new sense of urgency.

My first view of the city, from a rise to the north, was spectacular. I'd have appreciated it more if I hadn't been drenched in sticky sweat, with strips of skin peeling off my face. The walls wound like stone rivers, separating the old

city from the new. Low buildings, painted white to reflect heat, clustered along wide avenues. Across their roofs I saw the Grand Mausoleum, the city's temple to the death goddess, and a ruined statue of a sphinx out in the river. From the eastern side of the city rose a hill upon which noble estates sprawled, looking down on the bustling populace.

It was eerie, as I descended, to see the throngs moving through new Wati's streets, arrayed in colorful caftans and buzzing with sound and life, while old Wati remained still and silent as the graveyard it was.

I made straight for the nearest gate and asked a guard where a foreigner might get a cold drink.

"You don't look foreign," he said, studying my dark skin.

"Looks can be deceiving," I said in my broadest Varisian accent.

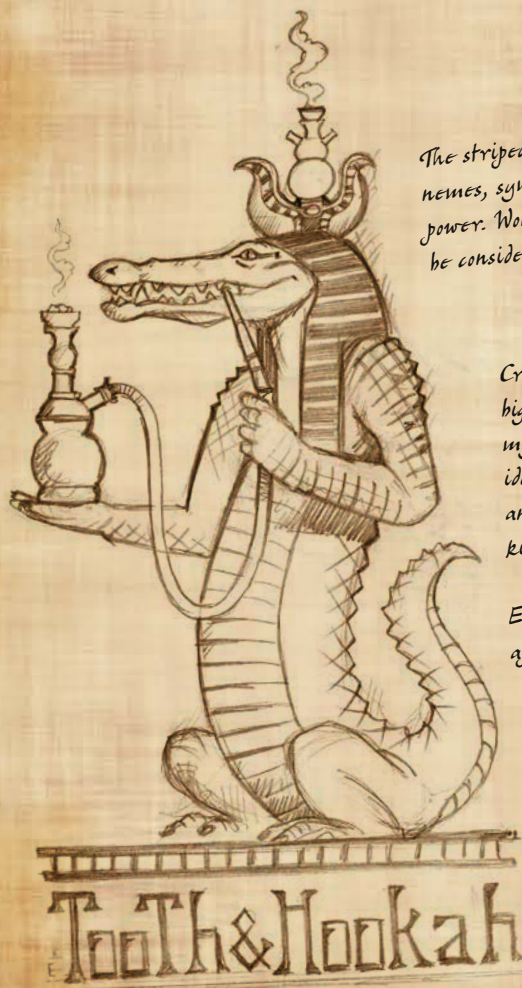
He shrugged and pointed down a sandy avenue. "Try the Tooth & Hookah."

I joined the crowds and moved past inns and houses, markets filled with brass lamps and striped rugs, until I reached a quiet section near the old city wall. Canvas awnings stretched over doorways, casting pools of shade on the avenue. A flag hung from one awning, painted with a grinning green crocodile sinking its teeth into a gold hookah. I pushed through the curtained doorway.

Blessed shade and darkness. I sighed with relief as the mud-brick walls did their job, warding off the sun. The floorboards rasped under my boots, a fine layer of sand covering the floor. I took a moment to scan the room. I'd arrived in Osirion via the city of Sothis, and there I'd stayed in an inn catering to foreigners before commissioning river travel to the south. That had been what I was used to when I thought of inns, and this place certainly was not.

Pillows shaped like crescent moons surrounded low, round tables. Water pipes of dinged and dented brass with painted enamel bases sat in the center of each table. Clay bowls filled with the stubs of unlit candles hung from the ceiling. Filtered light from the curtained doorway left the room dim.

It took me a moment to locate the bar among the many counters crowded against the walls. This inn seemed more a miniature market than a tavern. Old books overflowed on a table next to a counter covered with cheap-looking necklaces, bracelets, and earrings. Wispy scarves embellished with tiny shining coins hung on a rack in a corner. The sight of the scarves, so like the ones worn by ethnic Varisian women, gave me a pang of homesickness. I finally located the bar in the opposite corner: a tall, narrow table, its legs hidden by a cotton skirt patterned with faded yellow palm fronds,



The striped scarf, called a nemes, symbolized pharaonic power. Wonder if this would be considered unpatriotic?

Crocodiles play a big part in Osirian mythology and identity. Dangerous and powerful, they're kings of their domain.

Even tiny ones, apparently.

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its surface covered with colored glass cups, bronze decanters, and an assortment of liquor bottles. A low stone ring at the end of the bar marked an indoor well.

The Tooth & Hookah seemed a popular place. Almost all the tables were occupied, mostly by Garundi I pegged as locals, but a few by foreigners. No one took much notice of me. A haze of smoke hung in the air, and I recognized the spicy scent of shisha tobacco. I made my way through the cloud and leaned against an open spot on the bar. The fresh, mineral smell of a deep well wafted from the corner.

"I've got a powerful thirst and a horrible sunburn," I told the man behind the counter.

He gave a deep chuckle. His strong features were more intimidating than handsome, but I liked the way his close-trimmed hair curled over his brow. "I can help with the first part. For the second, I recommend staying out of the sun and drinking plenty of liquids. Guess I can help there, too."

I grinned and he poured me something out of the ceramic carafe. "Thanks. You got rooms here?"

He gestured to a set of stairs half-hidden behind a screen painted with a camel. The artist's haphazard brushstrokes gave the poor beast a look of permanent indigestion. "Regular rooms cheap, or a suite for more, but that's for groups of travelers. Unless you've got friends on the way?"

"For tonight, a single room will—" I broke off midsentence as I noticed what occupied the well. "Is that...?"

"A crocodile?" The man's dark eyes twinkled. "It's something, anyway. He surfaced one day and seems to like it here. We feed him scraps, but he never seems to get any longer than six inches. Call him Toothy."

"Well that's a first for me, and I've seen a lot."

"Seems like you have." The man glanced down at my bare forearms. The fresh scars still looked raw. "Had some adventure in the desert?"

"You could say that. Ran into some previously deceased individuals out in the sands. They didn't take kindly to my presence. I'm Nenet, by the way."

One eyebrow shot up. "Farhaan. Undead?"

I nodded as I sipped the sharp, clear liquid in my cup. It smelled a bit like roses and a bit like licorice. My sunburn still hurt like hell, but I was starting to care less. "I thought they might be mummies at first. The books I've read made it sound like mummies pop out from around every corner here. But they weren't nearly powerful enough. Gave me a few good scratches, though."

"I wonder why," a soft voice said at my shoulder. I turned my head and saw a Garundi woman watching me with narrowed eyes. She wore loose linen trousers and a sleeveless tunic belted with a colorful sash. I picked out the table she belonged to right away—the two men who sat at it watched our every move, and seemed about as friendly as the zombies in the desert had been. I also picked out the knife hilt jutting from her sash.

"So many possibilities," I answered. "My looks, my personality. Perhaps my manner of dress offended them."

"And perhaps you were disturbing their place of rest. Many have fallen for the lure of hidden wealth only to find that the dead protect their own."

I put all the ice of Irrisen into my voice. "Are you calling me a tomb robber?"

"I'm saying that, despite all appearances, you don't seem to be from around here. Perhaps you're not familiar with our customs." She moved a half-inch closer, a cobra in motion. "Stealing from the dead is a serious crime in Wati."

"I haven't stolen anything from anyone, living or dead. But if you don't back off, I might just disturb the peace."

She let silence stretch to the point where my hand started creeping toward my sword. I didn't relish the idea of drawing a weapon in a crowded inn, but I wanted the blade in reach in case things took a nasty turn.

Then she drew back. "Simply informing you of some dangers not listed in your books."

"Thanks for the warning." I held her gaze until she broke away and moved back to her table.

"Who's she?" I asked, turning back to Farhaan.

He shrugged. "Name's Kema. Comes in from time to time. There's a lot of people in Wati sensitive about tomb robbing."

"Because of the old city? I read a little about it. No one can go in without permission, right?"

Farhaan glanced at my empty cup and refilled it. I snuck a look at Kema out of the corner of my eye. She was ignoring me, talking with her companions in a low voice. My Osiriani is terrible, but even if I'd been as fluent as grandfather, I couldn't have made out the words. Her voice vanished amid the conversations in the bar, the jingle of coins on the serving women's skirts, and the thrumming of a Garundi harp one man had started plucking. I glanced back at Farhaan as he said, "It's... discouraged. Sometimes the priests ask a person to enter the ruins for a specific purpose, and visitors sometimes request permission to leave offerings and pray for their ancestors. Otherwise it remains empty."

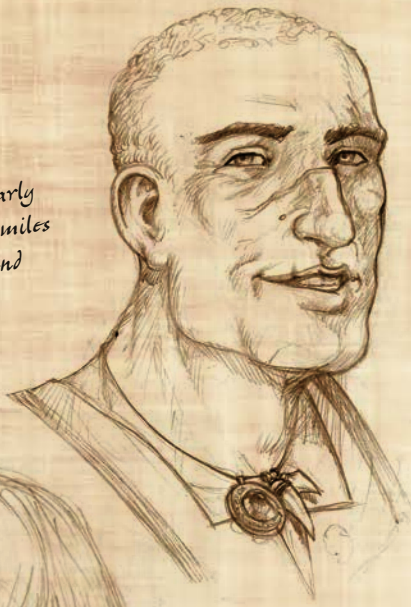
"Well, Kema doesn't need to worry about me. I was out in the desert until I arrived in Wati an hour ago."

"It's not only Wati that people care about. Tombs are seen as sacred places, under the protection of the Lady of Graves." He nodded in the direction of the great temple, as if we could see its looming presence through the walls. "Many in Wati pay homage to Pharasma—though just as many follow different gods."

"Like him?" I nodded slightly in the direction of a figure—a man, I guessed, judging by his build—seated at a table alone. He was dressed in dirty white traveling robes and stared silently at the water pipe in the center of his table. A golden mask covered his face, something like a funerary mask I'd seen in illustrations. The flaking around the edge of the mask revealed it to be gold-painted wood.

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Farhaan: Garundi, early forties, large build, smiles like he means it. Kind of handsome, if you like scars.



Kema: Garundi, early thirties, bad attitude. Stupid haircut.



What's her problem, anyway? The dead are dead. Only their stories live on, thanks to scholars like us.

The man slipped the mouthpiece of the water pipe under the edge of his mask, sending clouds of scented smoke billowing out from around the mask's edges.

"Your guess is as good as mine on that one." Farhaan chuckled. "More faiths than even I can keep track of in this city."

We chatted for a time about the variety of people Farhaan had seen as an innkeeper and I had seen as a traveler. I told him I had come to Osirion to learn about the history of the country—a story close enough to the truth, and one that didn't mention the Pathfinder Society. Farhaan kept the drinks coming and offered me a complimentary plate of olives, cured meat, and spongy bread drizzled with oil. I grew bolder each time my cup was refilled, even feeding Toothy bits of meat with my fingers.

The bard stopped playing to enjoy drinks bought by the inn's patrons, then resumed his strumming. While Farhaan served others, I wandered the edges of the room, looking over the variety of wares and discreetly studying

the patrons. The sun began its descent and the light from the doorway faded. The serving women stood on tiptoe to light the hanging lamps with long tapers.

Back at the bar, I said, "Life seems pretty good here in the—what do you call it? The Broken City?"

"The Half-City," Farhaan corrected me.

"Right. Well, between the olives and the pet crocodiles and the abandoned necropolis, no one could ever be bored here." I lowered my voice. "Especially if someone had an interesting piece of ancient history to research. One that could unlock secrets, and perhaps earn a bit of extra coin. That would add spice to daily life, don't you think?"

Farhaan narrowed his eyes. "Perhaps."

I glanced covertly around the room. No one paid me any attention. Even Kema was watching the bard in the corner. I dipped my hand into a hidden pocket in my tunic and withdrew a battered oval amulet on a copper chain.

I leaned on the bar and smiled, using my body language to give the impression we were still engaged in lighthearted chatter while shading the amulet from view. "What I said before—about the desert zombies—wasn't exactly true."

The smile dropped entirely from Farhaan's face. "What part, exactly?"

"I'm not a tomb robber. I wasn't there to disturb the dead or to make my fortune."

"That amulet says otherwise."

"Come on, Farhaan." I turned the amulet over in my hand. "Does this look like it's worth more than a few coppers?" When Farhaan didn't respond, I closed my fingers over the amulet. "I think it belongs to me."

"Obviously."

"No, I mean I think it legitimately belongs to me—to my family. I'm not here only to research Osirian history. I'm here searching for my ancestors."

Farhaan still looked doubtful. I laid the amulet on the bar, leaning on one elbow while I stirred the long chain with my other hand. "Family records led me to the location of the tomb. It took me a while to find it and longer to dig out the entrance—hence the sunburn—but I finally gained access. The zombies appeared, just like I told you, but I swear by the spiral I left the bodies and their possessions undisturbed. Well, except for this." I threaded my fingers through the chain and lifted the amulet up again, letting the chain slip over my wrist. "I did take this."

Grudgingly, Farhaan asked, "Why'd you take it?"

"Because I think it can lead me to another tomb, a larger one that might contain preserved records about my family's history. I'm looking for someone to translate these markings, and where I come from, bartenders are the best sources of infor—"

"I knew it!" The voice at my elbow made me jump. I cursed silently. Either the alcohol or my own excitement over my discovery had dulled my alertness. That blasted woman.

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“This is a private conversation,” I said, trying to slide the amulet down my sleeve.

Kema wasn't fooled. Her eyes, an unusual light green for a Garundi, flashed in the lamplight. “You're a tomb robber.”

“You're imagining crimes where they don't exist.”

“You walk in here, sunburned and scarred from battle, with an ancient necklace in your pocket, and expect us to believe you didn't unearth that which sleeps beneath the sand?”

She had moved up mere inches from me, her wine-breath warm in my face. My muscles tensed. “Something tells me nothing I say will convince you otherwise, so why don't we take this outside?”

“Huh.” She shook her head. “You must think this is my first time retrieving stolen property. Go outside and give you a chance to run away? Hand it over right now.”

“Stealing stolen property doesn't seem particularly righteous.”

By now, the nearest patrons had realized something was up. Most started putting tables between them and me, but a few leaned in closer, eager for a fight.

Kema sneered at me. “I'll take it to the Grand Mausoleum. The priests there will consecrate the item and return it to the ground.” Behind her, the two men she'd been drinking with moved to either side, forming a looming triangle. I eyed their muscled forms with dismay.

When I didn't answer right away, Kema made to say something else—probably a warning about what Pharama would make of my soul—but before she could get more than a word out, I kned her hard in the stomach. She bent over with a whoosh. I sidestepped her and bolted.

Noise erupted in the room as people shouted and pointed. Those who hadn't noticed the trouble brewing certainly realized it now as I made a dash for the door. One of the muscled men threw an arm into my chest, and I bounced back, losing my balance and toppling over.

I half-turned as I fell, which is all that saved me from breaking my neck on the edge of the well. I bruised my ribs on the stones and my face went under the water. My fingers clutched at the pit's slippery edge as I tried to haul myself up, but my hair had caught on Toothy's rough hide. I managed a half-muttered thanks to the gods that Toothy wasn't aggressive as I unsnagged my locks and staggered to my feet.

In the half a minute I'd been down on the ground, Farhaan had leaped across the bar and blocked my attacker's progress. Kema shouted and one of her drinking companions strode past her. Farhaan swung at him. I took a step to the side and tried once again for the door.

This time I dodged Kema's lunge, kicked her hard in the knee so that her leg buckled, and then ducked under the other man's outstretched arm. I was already a couple steps away when the man caught the back of my collar and threw me to one side. I sprawled atop one of the tables, gasping in pain as my already bruised ribs took another hit.

A hand fastened around my ankle and pulled. I scabbled my nails on the wooden surface but lacked the leverage to fight against my attacker. I grabbed the table's water pipe and twisted around as the man dragged me off the table. With precision borne of many years of practice (albeit with knives, not hookahs), I flung the water pipe at his face.

It shattered on his brow with a smash that seemed to echo even in the din. He stumbled back with a shriek and I sprang to my feet. My breath had returned. I glanced at the bar where the two men still fought. Farhaan caught my eye and gave a nod. Trusting him to deal with his opponent, I tried once more for the door.

Kema had recovered by now as well. She threw herself into my path, a long, curved knife in her hand. Apparently she lacked the reservations I had about drawing a weapon in a crowded room. Nearby patrons scattered, shouting warnings that were lost in the bedlam. People were up all over the room, either heading for the door or jockeying for a better view of my tussle with Kema. She slashed at my face and I hopped back, the blade missing me by an inch.

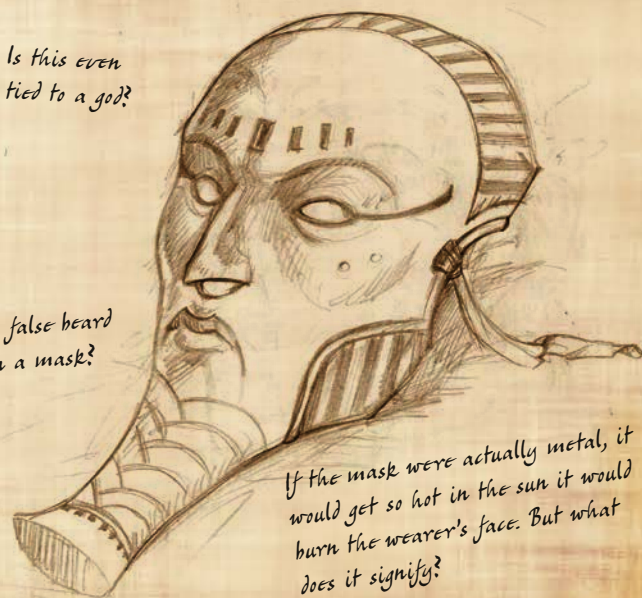
I tried to skip laterally, moving around the edge of the room, but the confounded pillows seemed to be everywhere now and I had to focus on my footing. A server slammed into me as she hastened for the kitchen, and I lost precious seconds trying to fumble my way free. I inadvertently grabbed her scarf as I tried to extricate myself, pulling the winding gauze off her head. She gave an indignant cry before vanishing into the kitchen. I barked my shin against a table and almost went down again as Kema slammed into me from behind.

At least she hadn't stabbed me in the back. Instead, her arm wound around me and pressed the edge of her knife against my throat. I stumbled to an awkward halt,

Is this even tied to a god?

A false beard on a mask?

If the mask were actually metal, it would get so hot in the sun it would burn the wearer's face. But what does it signify?



MUMMY'S MASK



Toothy makes quite the accomplice.

her eight dragging on my back while the knife made a hard line against my windpipe.

"Give me the amulet," she ordered.

I balled up the serving girl's scarf in my hand. With a quick move, I slammed my head back into Kema's face while grabbing the knife blade with the wadded scarf. The blade still cut my fingers, but not deeply, and I heard the satisfying crunch of my opponent's nose. She screamed and stepped back. I spun out to the side, away from her, and crashed into one of the merchant's tables along the wall.

My impact with the table combined with a pillow that somehow wedged itself under my right foot was enough to send me tumbling to the ground once more. I hit the floor in a crash of splintering wood, shattering glass, and jingling trinkets. Groaning, I tried to sit up, but a foot on my shoulder pushed me firmly onto my back. Before I could rise, the foot settled on my chest and leaned into me with considerable strength. I blinked as the figure of Kema's muscular friend swam into view.

I lifted my hands to show surrender, the amulet dangling from my right hand. "Alright! Alright. You can have it. Just don't hurt me."

The man wrenched the necklace from my grasp with more force than was necessary. I winced and tried to sit up as his foot eased off my chest.

"Stop." Kema stood next to her ally. Blood streaked her face and sleeve, and she glowered at me with all the fury of a crusader. "That's twice now you've taken me for a fool."

I doubted anything I could say would make the situation better, so I took grandfather's advice for once and kept my mouth shut. Kema turned to her ally. "Search her. She must have grabbed a cheap necklace from this stand and kept the real one hidden."

Obediently, the muscled man examined my clothes and emptied out my boots. He found the empty hidden pocket

in my tunic and showed it to Kema. I made some cursory protests but knew there was little I could do against their combined strength. The second man had vanished—at least, I couldn't see him anywhere, and I noticed Farhaan had a cut lip and a blackening eye. Farhaan made a move toward me, but I warned him off with my eyes. Kema stared at my empty pocket, brow furrowed. She gestured to the spilled rack of cheap jewelry on the ground. "Take it all. Just scoop the whole thing up."

A nearby patron gave a cry of protest. My limited Osiriani led me to understand that he was the proprietor of the counter I'd just knocked over. Kema dropped a handful of gold into his palm, and that seemed to settle the matter. With a final disdainful look at me, she stalked out with her ally in tow.

Groaning, I climbed to my feet. The inn had mostly emptied by this time. The bard remained, already composing a rhyme about the brief but thrilling battle in the Tooth & Hookah. A few patrons sat on the opposite side of the room, smoking and talking and studiously ignoring us. I pulled on my boots as Farhaan hurried up and put a hand on my shoulder.

"So which was worse," he asked, "the zombies or Kema?"

I grimaced. "At the least the zombies were quiet."

I hobbled over to the bar. Farhaan went to pour me another drink, but I waved it away. "I've had quite enough tonight, thanks."

"Do you remember any of the markings?" Farhaan asked.

I gave him a blank look.

"On the amulet. If you remember them, I know someone who might be able to help identify them. Even without the amulet, you could still find your family's tomb."

I made a show of looking around the room before I smiled at Farhaan. "About the amulet. The one I showed you? Wasn't exactly genuine."

He blinked in surprise. "You mean—you *did* give her a fake one?"

I nodded.

"And the ones she bought?"

"Lovely, I'm sure, but none were the one I found in the desert. You don't think I'd give up my prize so easily, do you?"

"You call this easy?" Farhaan's gesture took in our battered appearances. "So where's the real one?"

I leaned down to the well again and gently unhooked the chain from around Toothy's neck. "He's really good-natured. Didn't even blink when I put it on him. Then again, crocodiles don't blink, do they? At least that's what I've read."

Farhaan laughed softly. "You may not be from around here, but I think you're going to fit in just fine."

"You flatter me." I gave him a mock bow. "Now, what about this friend of yours? I need a little more information before I go stirring up the restless dead once more."

Tooth & Hookah

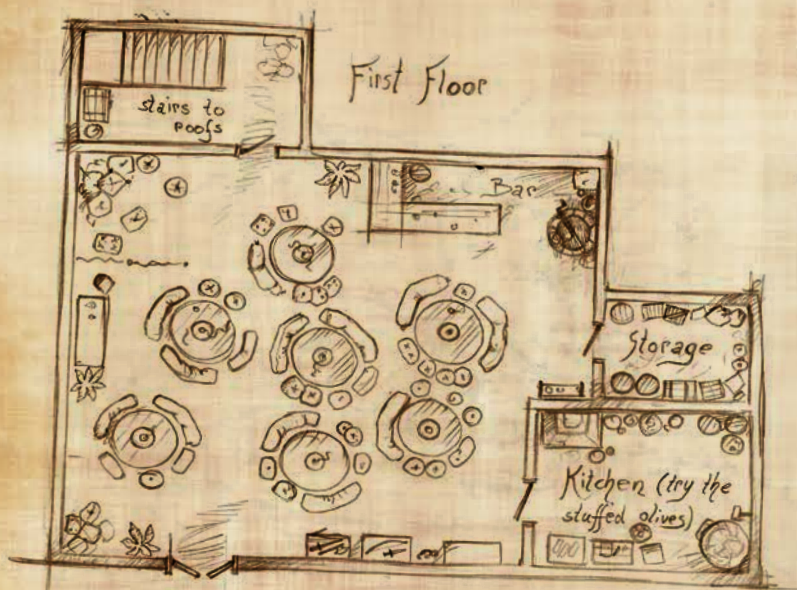
It seems that eight years ago, an explorer and warrior named Farhaan Jebeya entered the necropolis in Wati, with the blessings of the Grand Mausoleum, in order to hunt a powerful necromancer. Though two of his companions died (and one subsequently animated and forced to fight her former friends), Farhaan triumphed with the aid of his compatriots. His reward was enough to allow him to pursue his dream of opening an inn.

Farhaan tells the stories of his adventures easily enough. He shows off the black scar on his left arm that leaves him with a weak grip and intermittent pain—"it aches when it's about to rain" he likes to joke, as rain is a rare occurrence in this land. Yet a shadow always lurks in his eyes. I suspect there are more stories he has yet to tell.

The Tooth & Hookah, Farhaan's inn, is a favorite of locals and visitors alike. The comfortable main room holds a dozen tables, each with its own water pipe. Some of the pipes are antiques handed down in Farhaan's family for generations. Merchants pay a small fee to display their wares on tables around the room, and bards often play in the corner to earn a little coin. The kitchen offers a number of simple but delicious meals. Farhaan serves most common alcohols, mainly a sweetish beer brewed in town, but also keeps some specialty liquors on hand.

Single rooms can be had for 5 sp a night. The Tooth & Hookah also maintains a suite on the roof, of four rooms surrounding a central open-air courtyard that contains a gazing pool and some low couches. The suite can be had for 3 gp a night. I've heard rumors that Farhaan maintains a private lounge for locals and distinguished guests only, but I saw no evidence of one during my stay. I asked Farhaan about it once, and he only chuckled and said the desert has as many rumors as it has grains of sand.

I must also mention the inn's namesake. An interior well provides the inn with fresh water, and apparently one day years ago a miniature crocodile no longer than my arm hopped to the surface of the well, presumably entering via the subterranean aquifer. He seemed content to stay there, and so Farhaan named him "Toothy" and made him a feature of the inn, where he is quite popular with patrons. A little too popular, some nights—Farhaan says he has to constantly be on guard for intoxicated patrons trying to pour their drinks into the well so that "Toothy can have some, too."



The merchants who rent the tables along the walls spend much of their time (and profit) smoking and drinking in the inn. Everybody wins.

The rooms are cold during the day and warm at night. Perfect!

