

MUMMY'S MASK

Sleeping with the Dead

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Obtaining a translation isn't the easiest task in Wati. Scholars by the score work out of libraries and temples, to be sure, but reputable translators always want to know *where* you got whatever it is you need translated. The taboo against grave robbing runs strong, and scholars are conscientious about obeying the law. Disreputable translators are always available, of course, but their translations are suspect at best, and I needed to be certain about this one.

With Farhaan's help, I met with a middle-aged woman with an interest in ancient hieroglyphs and a willingness to believe my story about where I got the amulet. I killed time in her dimly lit shop, examining bits of pottery and scroll fragments on display, while she worked. She studied my amulet for close to an hour before she fixed me with a stare and announced in accented Taldane, "This is not words."

"I'm sorry?"

She tapped the amulet with one long nail. "No words here."

My heart sank. "The glyphs don't mean anything?"

Another tap. "Not words. Map."

Excitement leapt up in me like a flame. I leaned eagerly over the table and watched as she traced the glyphs onto a larger parchment, stretched out in such a fashion that I could clearly see what she saw. When she tilted the amulet away from her, the lines of the glyphs ran together until they formed a miniature map. The markings were so tiny, so fine, that I would never have seen the way they fit together on their own. I paid the translator her fee (steep, but worth it) and left with the amulet safe in my hidden pocket and the "translation" clutched tightly in my hand.

Ancestry meant everything to my grandfather, and his detailed records on our family tree had led me to Wati in the first place. I had no doubt that the map on the amulet indicated a location within the necropolis. But where, precisely? In my rented room at the Tooth and Hookah, I obsessed over the map. An irregular T seemed to indicate a junction of streets (or alleys) and the tiny owl glyph must mark the tomb I sought. I knew that owls often signified wisdom—discovery—in ancient Osirian writings. Across from the owl, an image of three stacked blocks stymied me until I realized they represented a three-story building. That would narrow my search considerably.

The next step was to apply at the Grand Mausoleum for permission to enter the necropolis. I'd make my case, pay a small fee, and then wait several days until the priests made their decision.

Or—

Or I could strap on my sand-scoured leather breastplate, secure my daggers in their sheaths, wrap my head in a linen scarf to hide my face, and hop the wall. I didn't know how much time I had to find what I was looking for; grandfather's condition wasn't improving when I left Varisia. I didn't want to waste precious days sitting around waiting for a religious official to approve my request.

I waited until the worst heat of the afternoon was past and the sun began its descent. That would give me perhaps two hours of daylight to inspect the necropolis. I didn't want to risk drawing the attention of city guards by carrying around a torch in the dark. And I'd tangled with undead before—I didn't relish the thought of poking around graveyards in the dead of night.

Despite the laws regulating entry, the necropolis is simply too big for guards to bar entry at every point. Instead, some stand watch at the gates while others makes regular circuits around the perimeter. The gates open to the public only once a year, during the Day of Bones festival when the priests of Pharamasma reconsecrate the area. I found a quiet spot to wait and watch, and after the patrol had passed, I darted out and scrambled up the wall. The clay blocks were warm under the rough skin of my hands. I rolled over the top of the wall and dropped down into a crouch.

A withered body lay in the sand next to me, one hand stretched toward me. I stifled a scream and stumbled to the side. My dagger leaped into my hand. I realized quickly that the corpse was inanimate, but my heart still pounded like a drum. I forced myself to relax but kept my dagger out as I shuffled forward and toed the body with my boot.

Only a few desiccated sinews held the body intact. Whoever this was, he'd been dead for ages. Sand covered his legs and his torso curved in, making a comma of the body. No obvious wounds marred his form. I glanced around but saw nothing but silent streets and buildings around me.

"Creepy," I muttered, then sheathed my dagger. I left the body behind and began my search, but a cloud of unease hung over me. The bodies here were supposed to be properly interred. How had this one gotten out?

Sand blew over the streets, and even with the living city only a few yards away on the other side of the wall, I felt oddly isolated. The buildings lining the street had that eerie air about them that comes from being abandoned for so long. Their windows gaped black, unshielded by shutters or curtains. Doorways stood open like toothless maws. No footsteps marred the sandy avenues. In the distance I thought I heard the sound of chanting—pilgrims or priests

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conducting sanctioned rituals within the necropolis. Other than that, the Half-City was as silent as its residents.

I stole through the streets, gooseflesh creeping on my arms despite the heat. My unease grew as I searched for the intersection depicted on my map. The city smelled of dry decay, like bones left out in the sun. The scents of living bodies, of cooking and sweat and animals, were absent. I felt a strange energy on my skin, a feeling I used to get back home before summer storms, but whenever I looked up all I saw was darkening sky stained orange by the setting sun, with a strange desert haze that further strained my nerves.

My search went quickly. I passed down street after street, scanning the faces of buildings. I scaled a mausoleum once or twice to gain a rooftop view, but while three-story structures proved relatively easy to find, none had anything but height to recommend themselves.

Nightfall crept closer. I'd hoped to find the tomb tonight, but failing that, at least I had worked through a sizeable portion of the area. Tomorrow for sure, I told myself.

The far-off chants of the faithful had died out, and I was thinking of heading back to the Tooth & Hookah when I heard a strange sound. A low rumbling resonated in the air, like thunder, but constant and distant. It reminded me of a description I'd once read of a fellow Pathfinder's experience in the Mwangi Expanse. She'd written of a great stampede, a herd of elephants charging across the plain and shaking the earth. I crouched and rested a hand on the sandy street, but felt no tremors.

The noise grew louder. I glanced around and saw a stone tower made for storing water about halfway down the street. I sprinted over and started up the tower's side. The structure was a tall rectangle with smooth sides and a lip around the bottom where the water was meant to leak out and fill a trough. I'd seen similar, functioning towers in the living half of Wati. This one was bone dry, and the ladder used to access the top and refill the tower was missing. Cracks in the stone face and the crumbling stone gave me purchase enough to climb.

The sky had grown dark in the time it took me to run down the street and climb the water tower. I knew it was close to sunset, but I'd thought I had more time. I straightened on the stone lid of the tower and turned, searching for the source of the noise.

I saw it instantly.

A wall of sand rushed toward Wati, towering hundreds of feet high and moving like a tidal wave. Spirals of dust curled off the top of the sand wave. The whole wall billowed as it moved, like the sails of a mighty ship driving inexorably toward the city. I cried out reflexively, but the sound was lost in the roar of the storm. I glanced at the living city and saw it was as silent as its twin, the streets emptied of people.

I cursed as I clambered back down to street level. Back home I'd have recognized the signs of an approaching

storm or a radical shift in the weather. Here I'd misread obvious tells of coming disaster, attributing my unease, the strange stillness in the air, and the haze in the sky to superstitious omens. Judging by the speed of that sand wall, I had only minutes to find shelter—not nearly enough time to make it out of the necropolis.

I started to sprint away from the tower, but made it only a few steps before I stopped short. I whirled on one toe, boot grinding into the sand, and stared at the tower with new eyes. In my haste I hadn't examined the structure fully, but now I took note of its design. It would have been too difficult for the builders to quarry a single piece of stone the proper size. Instead they constructed the tower in multiple levels. Three square blocks, each one eight feet across, sat stacked atop the base.

To the north, the street veered off in an irregular T-junction. I looked across from the water tower. A squat stone building stood there, its door closed, a dust-obscured sigil carved over the entrance.

I hurried to the building. Standing on tiptoe, I was able to brush some of the grime away from the engraving.

An owl stared down at me, stone wings folded at its sides.

And here I thought the three stacked blocks were just symbolic...



The cistern inside this building was once filled by rain collected in the roof's gutters, which was stored and allowed to flow out into the basins in times of need.

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The roar of the sandstorm seemed loud as a dragon now. The sky was almost pitch black, and a wind had risen, kicking sand into my face. I pushed on the stone door until it groaned inward, then squirmed through the small opening and pushed it back into place. A final swirl of sand rushed in, and then the door sank into place, locking me in darkness.

The thick stone walls of the building muffled the sound of the storm, but I could hear the rumble outside. I had no idea how long sandstorms lasted, but it had moved so rapidly I hoped it would be over soon. The air inside the room was old but breathable, smelling faintly of decay and dust. I shrugged off my pack and fumbled inside for a flameless torch. I cracked the slender cylinder over my knee to activate its alchemical contents and looked around as its golden glow suffused the room.

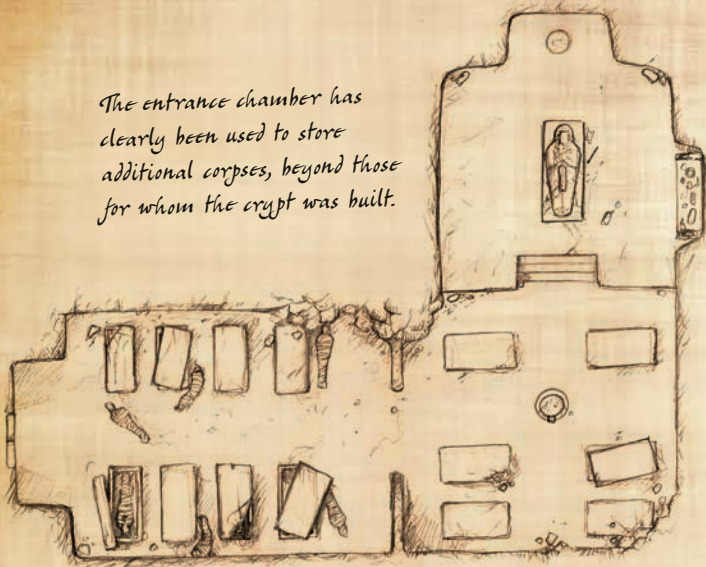
Twin rows of sarcophagi stretched before me. No scrollwork or engraved figures decorated the coffins; these were of simple design. Between and behind the sarcophagi, individual bodies lay on the ground. The bodies had been tightly wrapped in binding cloth at the time of their interment, but both bodies and bindings had decayed over time, despite the dry air and preservative unguents. Shreds of cloth lay in tatters around the parched and twisted dead. A shiver crawled up my spine.

Almost five hundred years after the plague that devastated Wati, the priests of Pharasma entered the city. Led by Nefru Shepses, the priests spent three decades putting to rest what remains they could find. The desert air had preserved much of the horror. Homes became sepulchers. Family tombs became communal mausoleums. The priests had no way of identifying every single body, tracing lineages, or ensuring family rested with family. Even though I was certain this was the tomb of my ancestors, not all the remains within were of family.

I slipped my pack back on and looked around the tomb, breathing in the still air. The steady light from my alchemical torch illuminated carved scenes and rows of hieroglyphs along the walls. My pulse quickened. This was what I'd come to find: information on my family's history. On one ancestor in particular.

I spent a few minutes examining the hieroglyphs and getting a sense of their meaning, doing my best to ignore the bodies all around me. I quickly became used to their smell—dust and old leather. I had parchment and charcoal in my pack to make rubbings of the engravings, but the ones in this room held little interest to me: scenes of fisherfolk, builders, and farmers on river banks. As I moved deeper inside, the roar of the sandstorm thrummed through the walls. The tomb was a large, well-constructed edifice,

The entrance chamber has clearly been used to store additional corpses, beyond those for whom the crypt was built.



Like many tombs, this one has several distinct chambers: an exclusive one for the tomb's chief occupant, a secondary room for important family members, and the entrance chamber for any lesser family, servants, and general hangers-on.

The shrine to Pharasma at the tomb's northern end is vital to the soul's transition into the afterlife.

The owl represents wisdom in Osirian symbology. Clearly, the figures represented at the top were leaders and officials revered for their wisdom.



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and as I moved into the next room I saw a different frieze accompanied by hieroglyphs. I ran my hand below them, brushing my fingers against the ancient bricks. These showed individuals in positions of power, holding scrolls and scepters and standing on rises above groups of others.

I rounded a corner and saw a long chamber sunken a half-step into the ground. A single sarcophagus stood in the center of the room. At least twice as deep as the others and ten feet long, it was covered with engravings and scrollwork and the carved figure of a man in repose. The light flashed against a glyph on the far wall. Golden gleams lit up the dark. My breath caught in my throat as I saw a figure of gold in relief on the wall, presiding over this room for all eternity.

Gold. A pharaoh's color.

A sudden rise of moaning wind sounded from the entryway. I froze for an instant; could the door have opened somehow? The thought of wind strong enough to tear open a heavy stone door froze my blood. I hurried back to the entrance, already planning how I would use the sarcophagi to barricade the door.

I stumbled to a halt in the main chamber. The door stood firmly shut. The moaning came not from the wind, but from the dead scattered around the room.

They were waking.

I drew my dagger and spun first one way, then another, trying to remain calm as the bodies rose all around me. In the desert I'd fought off two undead creatures and managed to triumph, but there were at least a dozen here. I hoped like hell that none of them were true mummies.

Leathery skin stretched over brittle bones. Long strips of cloth hung from shrunken limbs as the corpses staggered to their feet. Their eyes glowed red, twenty-four burning coals in the shadows. From my research, I knew that true mummies could send one screaming mad with fear and spread a hideous wasting disease with but a scratch. Panic hammered in my throat, and my trembling hand made my light jitter on the walls, but I didn't feel any overwhelming supernatural fear. Only ordinary, completely understandable terror.

A zombie rose only a foot away from me. I swiveled and drove my dagger at its skull. The blade spiked through the thing's head with a soft pop. I jerked the enchanted blade free and the zombie collapsed backward, the red light fading from its eyes. Shuffling steps advanced. I spun back to face the room and skipped to the left, hopping over the recently felled body.

My quick action had taken out the first zombie in a single blow, but I doubted I'd be so lucky again. I put my back to the wall and held the flameless torch out. Two more zombies reached for me. I slashed at one, and it stumbled back a single step. The other swung at me. I swayed out of its reach, stabbing quickly in return. I tore strips of flesh off its arms, and a fetid stench rose from the wound.

The zombies lunged for me again. I ducked under their grasping arms and somersaulted between them. My shoulder bruised on the edge of a sarcophagus as I came upright. A veritable wall of zombies surged toward me, as implacable as the sandstorm raging outside. I spun in place and jammed my dagger into the spine of the injured zombie. It moaned and slowly collapsed to the sandy floor. I wrenched my dagger free and scrambled atop the sarcophagus.

A noose of undead tightened around me. A zombie came in range and I kicked out, connecting with its jaw. The bone cracked and splintered. The foul creature staggered backward, jowl dangling from its face by a few fragile threads of tendon. Another corpse surged into its place. I kicked and stabbed.

My heart seemed about to beat right out of my chest, and my mouth was dry as sand. I couldn't keep the zombies at bay much longer. One zombie crawled onto the sarcophagus lid and I kicked it square in the chest. Even as it toppled, another began a clumsy ascent. I couldn't stay here.

I took a running start down the lid, holding out as long as I could before I leapt over the mass. I hit the ground hard, my teeth jarring together, and my ankle almost turned. A chorus of moans rose from the zombies. I veered right and tore down the length of the tomb, deeper into the shadows. The one good thing about zombies was that they moved slowly. I prayed to Desna to give me wings.

I spun around the corner so fast I almost lost my footing on the sandy floor. My boots skidded and I windmilled my arms for balance, then sprinted straight for the big sarcophagus and threw myself at the lid, dagger and torch both clattering to the floor.

The ornate engravings on the surfaces of royal sarcophagi show the importance of the figure within, but they also contain hidden handholds to allow workers to more easily move the lids. I scabbled desperately across the slab, training all my focus on the grooves and scrollwork in search of anything that would give me leverage. I found one handhold hidden along the side of the carved figure right away—I took distant note of his appearance, a proud-featured Garundi man—but the other handhold eluded me and zombies poured down the hallway. Finally I grabbed the nose of the figure (silently apologizing to the spirit of my ancestor) and heaved on the lid.

The slab ground—painfully, slowly—to the side. With adrenaline-fueled strength I shoved on the slab again. It slid another foot, releasing a puff of dust and a strong smell of decay. I'd made a triangular opening just big enough to squeeze through. The zombies spilled into the room just as I dove headfirst over the side and slithered into the coffin.

There was no way I could slide the slab back in place by brute strength, but in this position I had leverage. I wriggled farther down into the coffin, through splintered bones and decaying cloth. My skin crawled and I forced

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myself not to think about what exactly I was sliding against. Rolling onto my back, I pulled my knees up to my chest, tucked my boots against the roof, and pushed up. My legs had just enough power to swing the lid back a foot.

I lay still, soaked through with sweat and trying to breathe quietly, though my lungs ached. I heard the zombies milling around outside the sarcophagus and prayed they were as mindless as they appeared. If they organized and pushed together, they could have easily moved the lid. But they lacked the ability to reason, and so were reduced to groaning and slamming their fists futilely on the stone.

A bit of light from my discarded torch made its way through the small opening left between the lid and the side of the sarcophagus. I contorted until I could get my pack off and lie more comfortably on my back. Shattered bones still poked into my skin, and I offered up another prayer of thanks that my ancient ancestor wasn't also awake.

I'd taken a big risk locking myself in here, but focusing on a bit of knowledge kept me from panicking. First was the timing of the zombies' animation. They hadn't risen when I entered the room, so I hadn't triggered them. The sandstorm also didn't seem to be the cause, as it had been storming while I first explored, and the bodies had lain peacefully. No, I believed it was nightfall that had triggered them. The sun had been close to setting when I entered the tomb. If that was the case, I just had to last here until morning. And since I hadn't heard thumping or

groaning from the sarcophagi in the main room, hopefully the rightful residents of this tomb—family members like the one I lay upon, interred here with the proper rites and protections—wouldn't animate.

Of course, if I was wrong and the zombies had animated for some other reason, I could well wake up in the arms of an undead horror, or be trapped here for a very long time. Buried alive.

As I tried to make myself more comfortable to wait out the long night, my eyes finally adjusted to the little light in my new bed. I'd assumed the underside of the lid would be smooth, but instead small hieroglyphs covered the surface. I peered at the markings with interest, trying to ignore the occasional zombie fingers clawing down near me. Ancient Osirians often buried their dead with money and items, even servants, to help them in the afterlife, a practice that continued today. Perhaps my ancestor had been buried with records and other information.

My excitement grew as I worked to interpret the symbols. I cracked a second flameless torch from my pack, sparking a flurry of activity outside the sarcophagi. The pictures I was seeing were exactly what I'd come here to find: the story of a royal ancestor, his life and his great deeds, and his untimely death. I fumbled the parchment and charcoal out of my pack and set to work copying the intricate writing above me. Despite the long night ahead and the sounds of the hungry dead clawing for my flesh, I grinned.

"I've got it, Grandpa," I whispered.

Desert Undead

Many people believe that mummies are the most common form of undead found in the desert, but this is not the case. Dead bodies that are mummified may rise as undead, but most rise as common zombies or skeletons, simple abominations given false life by a relatively small spark of dark magic. They're sent back to their rest easily enough—at least, in comparison to greater horrors. Despite popular tales by bands (most of whom have never even been to Osirion), the funerary practices used to mummify deceased Osirians is very different from the magical ritual used to create an undead mummy.

Mummies are usually created deliberately by necromancers, and while the process usually begins with ritualistic mummification, it's followed by intense spellcasting. Such creatures are used mainly as guardians, and my research indicates they were often royal guards or loyal advisors in life and set to guard their patron in death. Some evil rulers even leave instructions for their most faithful followers to be murdered and raised as mummy sentinels, should the ruler die first.

Many superstitions surrounding undead exist in Osirion—understandable in a land with so many undiscovered tombs and grave robbers in search of wealth. Some of the legends I've heard claim that undead animate only from sundown to sunrise (this one I can personally verify to be true in some cases), that undead form when buried under the wrong name or in the wrong tomb, and that undead animate only when individuals of ill intent enter their burial place.

I have heard rumors as well that undead in the desert can take on strange characteristics. Dried out by the sun, their withered forms host unusual powers. Some stories tell of sunbaked undead burning unprotected flesh with a touch, while others speak of zombies that crumble in a cloud of choking dust upon death. Adventurers expecting to meet undead would do well to investigate local rumors and inquire at temples to learn the reported abilities of any local restless corpses.

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The arid desert climate means that even poorly embalmed corpses often remain intact... for better or worse.

Many traditional Osirian embalmers remove the brain, though this does little to slow down zombies.

Properly embalmed Osirian corpses have their organs removed and the cavities stuffed with herbs and sawdust. That does little to improve the stench of such zombies.

The poorly stitched cut on the right breast likely represents the wound by which the corpse's soul departed this world. The broken skull was all me.

As these are not true mummies, they cannot curse you with a touch. Still, you don't want to let one of these things scratch you. Those hands haven't been washed in centuries.

If you ever needed proof that undead are unnatural, look at that arm. How does the hand move without tendons?!

There shouldn't be so much strength in limbs that have atrophied that far, and yet...

The fact that these corpses have no finery of their own makes me think they were removed from other tombs by robbers and dumped here. Well, that and the fact that they were lying scattered on the floor...

