

MUMMY'S MASK

Trouble in Tephu

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Tell me again how you joined our caravan.”

I looked down at Parili, the smallest child I'd ever seen in a caravan. My accent fascinated the boy, and he'd been pestering me all day to tell stories. I squatted by the fire and settled back on my heels.

“I came to Wati in search of my past.” As I settled into my tale, recounting the fight in the Tooth and Hookah and my encounter with zombies in the necropolis (the latter altered to omit illegal activities), Parili's eyes grew wider and wider.

“And then what happened?” he demanded.

“I stumbled through the streets of Wati, bone-tired and covered with sand. All I wanted to do was bathe and fall into bed. But when I returned to the inn, it was surrounded by guards.”

Parili gave a theatrical gasp. In truth it had been two guards, but that had been enough to set my heart racing. I was sure they were there to arrest me for tomb-robbing.

A bribe to a resident beggar had revealed the truth, though. “Farhaan, the owner of the Tooth and Hookah, had vanished! Someone had seen masked figures drag him from the inn in the dead of night.”

“What did you do?” Parili asked.

I shrugged. “What could I do? I had no allies in the city. The few inquiries I made went nowhere. Farhaan had disappeared, but the mysteries of my past remained. The local translator I'd been using couldn't decipher the tomb rubbings I had, and suggested I visit a sage she knew in Tephu. So I hired on with your caravan as a guard—but not before making one last stop at the inn. It had been shut up in Farhaan's absence, as he had no family to take over the place. And while I barely knew Farhaan, I knew there was one thing he'd worry about while he was gone.”

With a flourish, I flipped open the leather satchel at my side. Toothy's tiny eyes gleamed in the firelight.

I had consulted with an animal handler before leaving Wati, and with his help I'd crafted a travel satchel for my miniature crocodile. The bottom was lined with rags I could dampen whenever Toothy grew too warm, and into which he could nest if he became too cold. While I knew caimans and other crocodylians could be aggressive, Toothy's eyes drooped shut as Parili stroked the little crocodile's rough skin.

While Parili played with Toothy, I leaned in closer to the fire. The nights were surprisingly cold in Osirion, given the blistering heat of the days. Many travelers going between Wati and Tephu would have journeyed straight across the river and been there by now, but given my lack of sea legs, I was distinctly unqualified to work my passage that way, and

my purse was almost empty anyway. Though it irked me to waste time, I had decided to hire on with a caravan traveling downstream to a less desirable but more affordable cargo port, replenishing my funds more with each camel-scented hour as the caravan traded at the flyspeck villages along the way. Now at last we were less than two days from Tephu.

Eventually I freed Toothy from Parili's enthusiastic grip and bid everyone goodnight. The caravan's herd animals stood in a makeshift rope-pen near the central fire. Two smaller fires provided some warmth for the families, while the guards slept under the stars. After ensuring my hieroglyph rubbings were safe in their scroll case and packing Toothy away in his travel-satchel, I wrapped myself in my bedroll and lay down to sleep. Someone would wake me for my shift in a few hours.

As it turned out, I was up sooner than that.

A single scream popped my eyes open and got me moving. More screams joined the first, and by then I was kicking away blankets and drawing one of my blades. The sky was still black. Guards shouted, and I saw figures running toward the central fire. They looked like caravan folk, so I turned my attention to the edges of camp.

I made it two steps before the sand erupted in front of me. The clattering, snapping claws of a scorpion jabbed at my waist, and I hopped back with a cry of shock. The scorpion measured at least three feet from tip to tail, and it was the latter I was worried about. Those claws would cut me up, but a sting from that tail might kill me.

As if sensing my thoughts, the scorpion's tail snapped over its back and straight for me. I slashed wide with my dagger. The steel sliced off a chunk of tail and the scorpion squealed. I stepped back to give myself room to maneuver. Around the camp I could hear more squeals of pain and shouts of alarm.

A second scorpion skittered toward me from my left. I fainted at it, then sprinted right as my original target snapped at me. I drove my dagger into its back, splintering through bony plate. The scorpion gave a gruesome spasm and curled, twitching, on the ground. I left the dagger in its body and drew a second as the other scorpion charged me.

“Nenet!” someone called. I looked instinctively and almost lost a leg to a snapping claw. I jerked back at the last second, but the scorpion clawed a nasty gash under my knee. I stumbled to one side, my blood staining the sand. A caravan guard faced off against two scorpions a dozen yards away. “Nenet, over here!”

“Hold on a minute.” My knee was on fire. The scorpion's tail twitched, and I knew what was coming. I flinched

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back, and the tail hit the sand in front of me, spraying grit everywhere. The tail retracted and I lunged forward and slammed my blade into the scorpion's head. It collapsed, quivering, and I wrenched my dagger free.

I sprinted to the guard's aid as fast as I could. Together we were able to slay the scorpions in short order. Around the camp, the sounds of combat were fading. Judging by the tight group of caravaneers by the fire and the victorious calls of the guards, the scorpions had been driven off.

A shrill wail cut through the night air.

"Wait here, keep the others safe," I barked to my companion and staggered off across the sand, limping into another ring of firelight.

Two scorpion bodies curled atop spreading pools of blood. A cluster of caravaneers huddled around a small form on the ground. A woman knelt over the body, her wails lashing against my ears. I hurried over and pushed through the crowd.

It was Parili.

Even in the poor light I could see the ashy tint to the boy's skin. His eyes were closed and his breathing shallow. I grabbed the nearest person's shoulder. "Where's the healer?" Every desert traveler knew how to deal with ordinary scorpion stings, but giant scorpions were another matter.

"We—we don't have one," the man stammered. "We were going to hire one in Teph—"

Without waiting to hear more, I dropped to my knees. "Where was he stung?"

Parili's mother couldn't respond, and no one around me seemed to know. I checked his legs and quickly spotted the gash. "Sit him up," I ordered. "Keep his heart above the wound." A bystander propped the boy into a sitting position. "Bring water."

While another man ran to obey, I hurried back to my bedroll and grabbed my backpack. I'd spent some of my time in Osirion collecting and learning the uses of local plants. I hoped what I had would be adequate.

Back at Parili's side, I carefully clean his wound, then mixed a poultice from several roots and applied it to the sting site. "I'll have to watch him."

In some ways, that night seemed longer than the one I'd spent trapped in a coffin. Parili remained unconscious, and I hoped I'd acted quickly enough to neutralize the venom. I replaced the healing poultice several times, each time glad to see the wound clean and cool. Assistant helped me tend to the boy, keeping him sitting upright and me awake.

At last dawn's light flooded over the camp. Exhausted, gritty-eyed, and terribly relieved, I saw that color had come back into Parili's face, and that he was beginning to stir.

"He'll be weak for a time," I said to my assistant, "but he'll live." With the sounds of the caravan stirring around me, I staggered to my bedroll and began breaking camp.

The rest of the day passed in a blur, and it was with extreme gratitude that I lay down once more the next night, having been relieved of a guard shift. Yet before I'd slept

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more than a few minutes, I sensed a presence over me and opened my eyes.

A woman stood looking down at me. Parili's mother.

"Thank you," she said.

I sat up. "You're welcome. Glad I could help."

"I tried to think of a gift," she said, her words accented but clear. "Will you come?"

As sleep seemed determined to elude me despite my fatigue, I stood and followed her. She led me to a pile of supplies and motioned for me to sit down on a crate. I did so, too drained to ask what she had in mind.

Moments later I felt her hands on my head. "Your hair," she said. "It is not good."

"It hasn't been my top priority lately," I said in surprise.

Her fingers moved with strong precision across my scalp. "See how it breaks and knots? You have to oil it."

"I tried when I first got here, but it just ran down my neck when I sweated."

She clucked as she gently worked sweet-smelling oil through my curls. "This is almond oil. Very light. Just a little keeps your hair from drying out. Your mother didn't teach you this?"

"She died when I was little." I closed my eyes, feeling the tension drain away. "My grandfather raised me. He's bald."

She laughed, and we slipped into a comfortable silence. She separated my hair into sections and twisted each section lightly, until it held a coiled shape. "There," she said, what could have been hours later. It was dark, and the quiet sounds of camp surrounded us. She washed her

hands and pressed a silk scarf and a bottle into my hands. "A little oil when you get dry, and tie the scarf around your hair at night. It will be nice now."

"Thank you." I squeezed her hands gently, and we stood there for a moment, two shadows in the darkness.

When I returned to my bedroll, scarf tied securely around my hair, I was asleep before my head hit the ground.

Tephu was a grand city, massive compared to Wati, and smelled of the nearby marshlands. Though I longed to visit the city's famed archives, the translator in Wati had given me explicit instructions to seek out a sage named Bethos. I found his shop at the end of Banded Serpent Lane, near the papyrus workshops. Shelves of parchments lined the walls, and a small golden sphinx gazed serenely from atop his desk.

Bethos looked to be as old as my grandfather, his long white beard bound with engraved brass rings, but fortunately he spoke Taldane. He squinted at my parchments. "These engravings are very old."

"Yes—several hundred years, at least. They were in the tomb of one of my ancestors. I believe they hold a record of how—of my family line." I had to stop myself from saying more. I didn't want to give the sage any ideas about telling me what I wanted to hear. Likely he had travelers in here every week claiming to be descended from pharaohs.

"Tomb writings are often enchanted." Bethos gave me a stern look. Thick black kohl lined his eyes, but a shaky hand had left the lines smudged and imprecise. "My price goes up if I have to deal with wards."

"These are only rubbings. I bought the parchment and charcoal in a marketplace, so I doubt they contain any curses."

"Perhaps." Bethos returned his gaze to the parchments. "Sometimes the enchantment runs deeper, however. Wait a moment."

I waited impatiently while Bethos stretched his hands out above the parchments. Eyes closed, he intoned arcane words that made the hair on my arms stand up, then opened his eyes. Blue light sheened over his previously dark orbs. "There are no wards, but there is still magic here."

Excitement flickered in me. "What kind of magic?"

The sage's eyes narrowed. "And what do you plan to do with this information?"

I stared at the man, taken aback. "I intend to pay you for it. What more do you want?"

Bethos gestured over at the rows of scrolls against the nearest wall. "You're not the first Pathfinder I've met, girl. Those who assist in great discoveries should find their names passed down to scholars of the future."

I laughed. "You want credit if I write about this?"

"Bethos Sawalah," he said simply, then spelled it out.

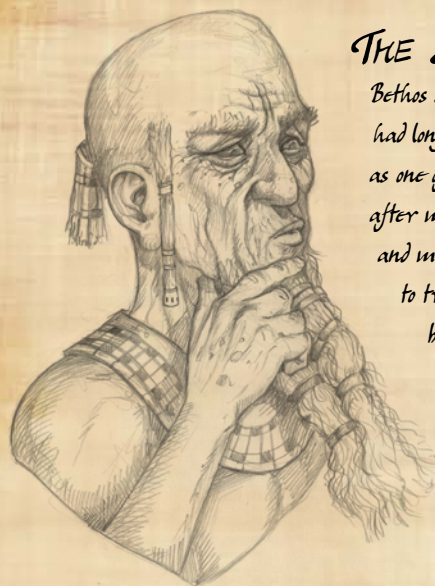
I made a show of retrieving my journal from my bag and had him spell his name again while I inscribed it at the top of the page. "Now. Tell me what your spell revealed."



In the deep desert, scorpions aren't just something you check your boots for...

The problem with giant scorpion venom is twofold: not only is there far more venom injected by the stinger, but it's often more potent as well, designed to take down large prey.

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THE SAGE OF BANDED SERPENT LANE

Bethos Sawalah's shop was originally a library and research study for the sage. A native Osirian, Bethos had long dreamed of making a radical discovery or developing impressive new spells to build his reputation as one of the greatest wizard-scholars of his time. Bethos's ambition outstripped his talent, however, and after multiple failed attempts at researching powerful new spells—and several pointed rebuffs by scholarly and magical organizations that objected to his self-important attitude—the sage decided to open his doors to translation work. At first his paid services were offered merely as a way to build up his coffers, but soon Bethos realized the demand for his translations and research was growing. He converted the front room of his study into a shop floor where he sells scrolls and provides research services. Though Bethos makes a comfortable living through his shop, he still dreams of the day when a truly significant ancient document crosses over his desk, and he can be the one to decipher it. Perhaps with the fame and fortune such a discovery might bring, he could finally show up those snooty scholars at Tephu's famed archives once and for all...

He took a bottle from a nearby shelf and pulled its cork. He tipped a small amount of yellowish powder onto the parchment and blew gently across the page. A sigil, previously invisible, leapt into view.

I gasped. “How could that symbol be there? These scrolls are only copies.”

“This is a very old symbol.” Bethos tapped one finger on the newly revealed mark—a bisected eye. I traced a careful copy into my journal. “Priests of Nethys used it to mark important historical documents, in part to sanctify them and in part to let other faithful know that the document is genuine. This alchemical powder I used is able to reveal the symbol. The mark sometimes transfers itself to copies made of the original writings, to preserve and track them.”

“So this mark means the writings are important, right? A genuine historical record?”

“Likely, yes. I’ll have to perform a more thorough investigation, though. It may take some time. These old translations are notoriously tricky, even with a key. Often the same glyph holds multiple meanings, and depending on its position relative to others and the context of—”

“How much time? I need to get the translation as soon as possible. And I’ll be certain to note the speed and thoroughness of the sage who helped me in my report.”

“I’ll concentrate all my energies on it. Two days?”

Now that the end of my journey was so close at hand, I found myself impatient. I pictured myself returning home only to find myself a day late, and grandfather gone.

“Two days, then.” I reached a hand out and touched the edge of one parchment. “Take care with these. They were extraordinarily difficult to obtain.”

The sage inclined his head, and I let myself out of his shop. I stood on the street for a moment, squinting in the sunlight and breathing in the pulpy smell of the papyrus workshops.

The next step was to find a place to stay, get settled, maybe visit the archives.

Only a few people strolled along this side-street. A woman trailed behind a small girl who ran shouting after a stray dog. A group of men stood beneath an awning, smoking pipes and chuckling over a shared joke. At the end of the street, a group of figures in flowing caftans moved past, their heads wrapped in colorful scarves.

One of the figures stumbled, and another man jabbed him in the back. I frowned, curiosity and concern rising in me, and started down the street. As I did, I noticed that all the figures were armed save the one who had stumbled. He held his hands in front of his body in an awkward way. As if they were bound.

I was halfway down the street when the prisoner glanced in my direction. The scarf covered most of his face, but his eyes met mine and widened with surprise.

“Farhaan!”

I called his name before I thought better of it. The reaction was instantaneous. The group broke into a jog, hustling Farhaan along with naked blades. I broke into a run as the group disappeared around the corner.

The street opened up onto a wider avenue. People scattered with cries of alarm, and I saw the robed figures fleeing through the crowd. I charged after them, not certain how I would deal with eight armed enemies, but not willing to abandon Farhaan to... whoever they were.

I was a dozen yards away when the group veered left and barreled through a pair of doors into a two-story wooden building. A broad wooden sign engraved with hieroglyphs identified it as a papyrus workshop. “Nenet!” I heard Farhaan call before he disappeared.

I sprinted to the doors and slammed into their unyielding surface. Locked or barred from the inside already.

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THE NETHYSIAN EYE

Any Osirianologist can tell you that hieroglyph translation is neither an easy nor an exact field of study. Hieroglyphs vary by region and historical period. Often a single symbol was used for multiple meanings, depending on its location relative to other glyphs, and they can also contain coded messages, or even be used to represent phonetic language.

Untold generations ago, Osirian scribes dedicated to Nethys began using a special symbol to mark and bless documents of particular importance or historical significance, created magically and visible only to those who cast the appropriate spells. Known as "the Nethysian eye," this mysterious symbol takes the shape of a stylized eye split in two (mirroring the god of magic's split personality), and is thought to invite Nethys's attention and protection. Though its usage appears to have waxed and waned throughout the centuries, the symbol can often be found on ancient tombs, and treasure-hunters with a scholarly mindset are well advised to keep a magical eye out, as the symbol sometimes marks secret chambers or record rooms as well. Little more is known about the symbol, including whether or not it's still in use today, as the church of Nethys refuses to discuss the matter with outsiders.



Open windows stretched across the upper story. I backed up, jostling curious observers out of the way, and took a running start. Using the door frame to help my progress, I scrambled up the rough stone wall. The heavy sign provided a handhold, and I hoisted myself up to the window above. A wide sill gave me room to perch and scan the room below.

There was no second floor, only cross-beams above the huge workshop floor. Long troughs beneath me held strips of papyrus reed soaking in water. On the other end of the room, piles of shredded reeds lay heaped against the walls. Cutting tools and half-stripped stalks covered half a dozen tables. A strong vegetal scent permeated the air. A group of workers shouted in confusion and brandished short knives as the kidnappers dashed through the room.

Directly beneath me, one of the kidnappers lingered by the door, no doubt waiting to see if I would force my way in. Before I had time to think better of it, I tucked Toothy's satchel under my chin and dropped, plummeting ten feet straight down. The kidnapper looked up just in time to see me falling and threw his arms up, which softened my landing somewhat. The wind left my lungs as I slammed into the man and we flattened on the ground. I sat up, head spinning, and saw that my unexpected descent had knocked my adversary unconscious. I scrambled to my feet, slinging the satchel back down near my waist.

Two doors led farther into the workshop, one by the wooden troughs and another by the cutting tables. Half the kidnappers went one way and half the other, but one broke away from the rest and headed for me. I could see little of his face behind the scarf wrapped around his head, but his eyes and the sabre in his hand looked mean.

I drew my dagger and took a running start straight toward him. He hesitated, thrown off by my direct approach, and I stopped short and flung the dagger at his face. He whipped his head to the side, the dagger slicing a piece off his scarf

but doing no real damage. I drew a second as he resumed his charge.

By the time the dagger was in my hand, he was upon me. I gave ground, teeth gritted, all too aware that every second wasted here took Farhaan farther from me. The kidnapper cut at me in broad slashes. I deflected the sabre with my dagger, got lucky and dealt a shallow gash to the man's arm, but was unable to get around his defenses. I spun and twisted as we dueled, winding this way and that as the workers watched in confusion.

I became aware of one of the soaking troughs to my right. I hopped back a step and faked a twisted ankle, giving a sharp cry as I sagged toward the ground. The kidnapper pressed his advantage, swinging overhand toward me.

I sprang forward and up, under his swing, and caught him in the middle with my shoulder. With a heave, I flipped him up over my back and straight into the soaking trough. He landed with a satisfying splash and bellow. As he floundered in the gluey mass, I turned and dashed for the far door. I had no way of knowing which way Farhaan had been taken, but instinct guided me.

I slammed through the door into a smaller room. Lines of stone slabs stretched across the floor like tombstones flattened against the ground. Wet papyrus lay sandwiched in linen sheets beneath them, drying into the finished product.

Unfortunately for me, a robed figure also waited in this room, next to the door. I caught a glimpse of glittering steel as he swung, enough to warn me of my imminent decapitation, and dropped to the ground, twisting to keep from squishing Toothy. Between this and my jump from the window, I was going to be covered in bruises tomorrow.

With a grunt, my attacker recovered and sliced down at me. I rolled over and heard the blade ring against stone. I scrambled to my feet, tripped on a slab, and nearly went down again, but caught my balance and staggered away. I heard the

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swish of the sword cutting air, and then a searing line opened along my back. I gasped in pain but kept my feet.

I spun and drew my last dagger. My attacker was a mere foot away, lashing at me once more with the blade now tipped with my blood. I slapped the sword away with my dagger and kicked out, catching him in the stomach. He staggered back.

I couldn't waste any more time. I flung my dagger at the man's eyes, and when he flinched back, I turned and ran for the exit. I hit the door with all my strength and—ducking in case another would-be executioner lurked on the other side—burst through into an alley behind the workshop.

The alley was empty. So much for instinct.

Cursing, I turned left and sprinted down the alley and around the edge of the workshop. I paused, struggling to catch my breath and wincing from the pain in my back, and listened hard for sounds of pursuit.

I heard the clatter of the door and the sound of low voices. Wishing desperately that I understood more Osiriani, I heard something that sounded like “trouble” and “guards.” A moment passed, and I heard nothing else. Carefully, I peeked around the corner and saw the flutter of a caftan disappearing down another alley.

I couldn't let my only lead on Farhaan disappear. Though I'd only known the barkeep a short time, he'd taken my side in a fight and led me to the translator in Wati. I couldn't abandon him to whatever fate had befallen him here. Taking a deep breath, I left my hiding place and crept after my attackers.

My experience hunting game back in Varisia had taught me how to move quickly but silently. I kept far enough

back to escape my quarry's notice, but close enough to keep them in sight. The figures joined a crowded main street, making my job easier, and hurried straight for one of the gates out of town. My pulse quickened. It would be easier to follow them in the open desert, and while the odds were stacked heavily against me in direct combat, I might be able to set up ambushes or otherwise even the odds.

The robed figures disappeared into the throng of people moving in and out of the city gate. I broke into a jog, more afraid of losing them than of being seen.

I needn't have worried. As I neared the gate, the robed figures rose above the crowd. My first confused thought was that they were somehow levitating. Then I realized the truth.

Camels. I hadn't considered they might travel mounted.

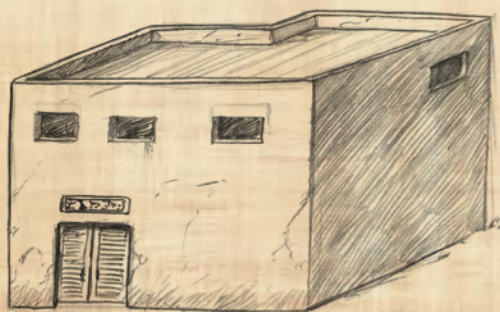
As the kidnappers rode out of the gate, I slowed to a stop, glowering at the retreating camel-riders. There was no way I would catch them on foot. Given time, though, I could track them through the desert, and already my mind raced through plans on how best to follow.

One of the kidnappers looked back. A gust of wind tugged at the rider's scarf, revealing the face beneath for an instant. My muscles tensed. I knew that face.

Kema.

I watched as she turned away and urged her camel through the gates after her compatriots. It seemed there had been more to her presence in the Tooth and Hookah that first night in Wati than merely picking fights with foreign tomb-robbers.

It was time to see just how much I'd learned about surviving in the desert.



The workshop stands two stories tall, but has no second floor, only one large open space. I'm not clear why the process requires so much headroom. Perhaps it's just for security.

Papyrus reeds grow abundantly in the marshlands where the Crook and Asp meet.



Papyrus reeds are soaked in the troughs and processed, then pressed into sheets by giant stone blocks in the northeastern room.

