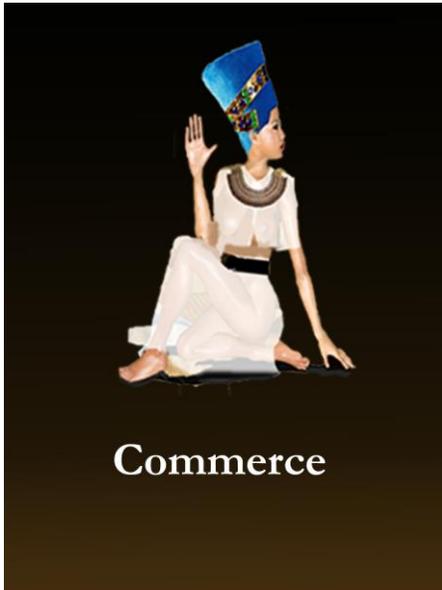


Commerce

Late summer, 3000 BCE. Memphis is a trading center between the southern valley and the northern delta of Egypt's Nile River, crossed by the trade route connecting western North Africa and Mesopotamia. Hesina, daughter of a successful commercial warehouseman, awaits a caravan arriving from an oasis in the western desert. The caravan carries leather goods, dates, fruits, and other goods



Late summer on the Nile. Its source high in the mountains that lie southwest of the Horn of Africa. The lake, covering 26,000 square miles, would become known in modern times as Lake Victoria. From this source, the longest river in the world flows over 4,100 miles through deserts, mountains, and multiple outlets in its delta to the southern shore of the Mediterranean Sea.

Now, in the time of this story, the Nile has returned to its banks following the annual spring flood, once again restoring fertility to the vast territory in northeast Africa that will eventually become known as Egypt.

In the city of Memphis, Hesina is a young girl, intelligent, a quick learner, and eager to find new things to learn. She helps her father, Senna, with his warehouse business, linking the traders along the Nile with traders from the eastern and western deserts. She strives for improvement in these businesses wherever and whenever she can. Such are Hesina's talents and intelligence that several tutors have been

engaged at the suggestion of Pharaoh Djer, grandson of Narmer Menes and friend of Hesina's father from an early age. Because their patriarch is the man credited with joining Upper and Lower Egypt into a single governing entity, the power of the family of Narmer Menes is unquestioned.

One of Djer's recommended tutors, Amenemhet, introduces Hesina to a woman of nearly the same age, Nena, a member of the royal household who is also under his tutelage. The two young women have become close friends over the years.

Here, Hesina begins her story.

Part 1.

I am sitting cross-legged, sipping hot tea on the roof of my father's warehouse as dawn breaks over the western suburbs of Memphis. The early morning light casts a weak shadow of my body as it falls across the roof in front of me. I am looking away from the dawn, though, staring intently into the still-dark west as I wait for Alim's caravan. He will bring us baskets loaded with dates, nuts, and precious but perishable figs from an oasis two days journey to the west. The thought makes my mouth water.

I had been alerted to Alim's arrival by his son, Rabiah, who serves his father by acting as runner and messenger in advance of his caravan of burros, camels, and other beasts of burden, all carrying items for trade.

Commerce

I consider our options in light of Alim's approach. If my father and I can trade with him for the figs, we will have to rush to distribute them to our vendors and most favored customers before they spoil. I tap the cup thoughtfully against my lip. Among his less perishable products Alim may be trying to trade dates. If Father decides to buy these less perishable products, we will have to find a company to ship the dates north along the Nile, through the delta, to the Mediterranean port of Rhakotis, and from there by sea north to the ancient city of Jerusalem. There, the dates will be accepted and passed along to other traders and merchants by our long time agent and business partner, Laret.

I grin as I stand. I'm not sure what I'm worried about. Alim is a tough negotiator, but he was not happy the last time he did business with us. Father had recognized my talent with numbers and hieroglyphs early on, and had enhanced my natural talents by having me trained as a scribe by the priests in the temple of Ptah. My skill with the new ways of tallying sums using pebbles and grooves in the ground had gotten Alim to agree to compensation that Father knew gave him a rather slim profit margin.

As I descend into the warehouse, I wrap my shawl more closely around me. Mornings are chilly here in the desert, though I'll likely wear nothing more than a cotton wrap once the heat of the day begins to simmer.

Despite my prowess in our last negotiation with Alim, I know that the nuances of my father and the western trader's relationship are valuable, and therefore at least as important to any trade negotiation as my skill in recording our wares. Even so, I will focus on the part of the transaction in which I excel. I've moved onward and upward, from pebbles and grooves to the permanence of clay tablets.

Keeping a record of trades by making impressions in wet clay has been in use for some time in the distant cities along the Euphrates River. Or so I am told. I learned of this and of the clay tablets from a trader who recently brought jewelry from the city of Uruk far to the east. The trader had come to Memphis to trade his jewelry for a quantity of cotton grown along the Nile, the kind used to produce cloth by our weavers here in Memphis.

Once the jewelry trader was able to complete a deal with Father for a large quantity of cotton, I watched as he pressed his codes into the soft clay of the tablet. Once dried in the sun, the trade information could be stored permanently, even longer than that recorded on papyrus. As the trader bent to the tablet his coat fell open to display a neckpiece with a hanging pendant made of an inset jewel of deep blue streaked with gold. He explained that the stone had been passed down among his people. It was an honor for him to wear it. In my eyes, the stone was as beautiful a decoration as I had ever seen.

My father has encouraged me in all my explorations and experiments with these new ways of recording values and doing trades. He also enjoys exploring new ideas for his several trading groups with me, and I know he hopes that I will follow in his footsteps many years from now.

By the time of the journey I wish to share, Father had already built a substantial trading and warehouse business by working with traders and shippers who needed storage space.

As such, he had turned his sights to a new venture in boat building and shipping. Father has set up a workshop in this complex of buildings and has engaged the services of a man who has designed some of the successful boats, which are capable of carrying grain and livestock to us here in Memphis from the irrigated agricultural areas along the upper Nile. Because he has already established warehouses for grain in our complex, Father will not have to pay for storage any time he negotiates with these grain buyers. A savvy business decision on his part, I'd say.

I have a lot on my schedule today, but I make a note to talk to Father about the trader's beautiful blue and gold pendant. I cannot keep it from my mind. Father agrees that the blue stone might be valuable.

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Commerce

"Building a boat capable of commercial travel on both the Upper Nile and the Nile Delta is foolish," I say. I can't help my truculent tone or the way my arms have folded themselves across my body. I stand in a room my father reserves for himself within one of the warehouses. Father has told me about his idea for a vessel to do such a thing, but the numbers in my head just don't add up. "The shipping from growing areas in the delta is too scattered and undeveloped, and the channels are too variable year to year. Besides, a boat built for shipping in the delta would never be fast enough or have enough capacity to compete with the bigger, faster boats built for shipping bulk grain.

"Far better to build two boats; one for each type of shipping." Hesina paused. "But it is even possible that any boat built for the delta cannot earn enough to fatten the single owner no matter how well designed, and no matter how fit and eager the crew. Some kind of association of shippers may be feasible, but it will take time to find enough warehousemen and shippers with enough uncommitted resources to make it work long enough to establish a value for the service."

Father inclines his head in my direction and chuckles. "As always, daughter, your insights into the problems of business and trade opportunities are as good as any in Memphis. I believe your thinking is correct, but I still wish to ponder the idea of building a single boat to travel both waterways. I like the idea of forming an association of shippers, though."

He drums his fingers on the wall. "Once we establish the delta service from Memphis, we can think about a warehouse and port on the Mediterranean Sea. But that is in the future. For now, my daughter, I have another business proposition for you to consider. I have been aware of the jeweler from Uruk, and his flaunting of the blue stone among those with refined tastes and plenty of money. He has been here before. He spreads precious fragments around like a monkey scattering his turds, and the activity is having an effect. Many are talking about it. If I am able to find a supplier, and a foothold in the market for it, I think we will gain much if we can bring some quantity to Memphis."

"You know my interest in expanding our enterprise, Father," I say, "but you have not yet tried to expand into markets with sources of supply beyond the reach and protection of Pharaoh. How will you protect your Mesopotamian suppliers when they are trying to bring a shipment of blue stone to you here in Memphis? I don't think your experience so far with your sales agent in Jerusalem will be of much help. Besides, I am not sure I trust Laret. The quantities in his reports do not always add up, and the mistakes seem always to go to his advantage."

"I am well aware of Laret, and his loose connection with the reporting of his trades. To some extent I forgive him because his connection with hieroglyphics is also loose, and with hieratics almost impossible. Worse, he does not have much experience with the counting systems you have set up. But he performs other services for us that I do trust and cannot do without as long as I seek to trade our goods anywhere in Jericho, or anywhere along the Jordan River to the Sea of Galilee. As I have told you many times, I dream of expanding our enterprises into the lower Euphrates River in Mesopotamia, and Laret and Jericho are my stepping stones toward that goal."

"Yes, Father," I reply.

After a pause to drink some beer, Father continues. "At any rate, the Uruk jeweler and trader in Lapis is named Faiza. He will be returning to Uruk soon, and he has invited me to send one of my personal representatives with him to explore whatever markets we might have an interest in.

"I want you to be that representative, but you and I know that the venture will be filled with great danger and great discomfort. The rewards, if any, could be as smoke. They could blow away in the first breeze. Please give this some thought and speak to me about it in a month.

He has come to his point. I know from the way he massages his left ear, a telltale sign that I should listen. "I know that I will feel more confident in you traveling such a great distance if you take on a shorter journey in the meantime," he says. "So, I want you to go upriver with Serenen to check on the irrigation project that our friend, Heti, is working on near Beni Hasan. He is trying to increase the quantity of grain that he can plant and ship to us in the spring. I need your assurance that he is

staying on schedule. If he is having trouble, I need to know what is causing it, and I need your ideas for resolution of any difficulties you might find. You will leave tomorrow.

"I know this is a lot to ask, my daughter, but I have many things going on, and I need your help in making sure everything is going smoothly."

My heart beats quickly under the hand I have brought to my chest. I am certainly excited by my father's request, the responsibility he is lavishing upon me is tremendous, but I remain terrified by all I do not know. What if I fail him? "But Father, I have never been upriver," I protest. "How will I know what I am seeing?"

Father still seems confident, which buoys my spirits. "Serenen has been upriver many times, and he knows Heti very well. They worked together to prepare the fields that now produce so much good barley and beer for us. I want you to have the experience of traveling with Serenen because I think he will need to be one of your companions on your trip to the north with the Mesopotamian trader... if you decide to go, that is."

I know that he expects me to go with the Mesopotamian jeweler, and that he will be greatly disappointed if I choose not to. The dangers, discomforts, and difficulties of the trip give me a great deal of concern, I must admit. However, the opportunity for adventure and learning and exploring new possibilities for enterprise mean that I have very little reason to say no.

"Yes, Father," I decide. "I will tell Serenen to prepare so that we can be ready to go upriver in the morning."

Father clasps me up in a hug. "Excellent. Be sure to talk to him about the trip to Mesopotamia, too."

"Yes, Father," I reply.

I couldn't sleep that night. Lying on my cot on our roof, I tossed and turned. One moment, I would think of how excited I was to feel the breeze come off the river as our boat was steadily rowed up the Nile. I could see myself ducking out of the way as the sail setters moved around the boat trying to catch the nuance of each breeze. The next, my heart would plummet into my stomach as I prayed to the gods that I wouldn't disappoint my father.

Early the next morning the sun rises on a stiff northerly breeze. I rise, knowing that the breeze will mean a faster trip up the river to Beni Hasan — possibly five days instead of six.

One of the Nile's many boatmen, Akar, a man well known to my father and me, is sailing upriver with his crew of ten oarsmen to Thebes. At Father's suggestion Akar has invited me to come along with whatever staff and equipment I need in the irrigation fields. He will drop us off at Heti's, then turn around to pick us up on his way back down the river.

Akar has now docked close by our warehouse. The big, muscled man moves toward me and greets me with a familiar, teasing tone. "The boat is ready, but first, my sweet beauty, you must serve me tea."

"Of course, Akar," I reply with a roll of my eyes, though all of my teeth show in my smile. "Do you think you will have any problems finding your way upriver? You will be hauling precious cargo, as you know." I let a smirk cross my face, then motion to one of our household slaves to bring some tea and honey-sweetened biscuits. "It looks windy this morning. Can you tell me how the trip will go?"

"It may be a bit rough because of the wind, but the disturbances from the summer flooding have now subsided. I have a very capable crew. With our sails out we should be able to capture most of the north

wind. If we do a good job of sailing and rowing, we might be able to cut the time to less than five days."

I'm impressed to hear this. "I'm sure you know, but this will be my first time on an extended trip upriver. Are there any dangers that I may not be aware of, that I might have to prepare my staff for?"

"There is a lot of traffic moving up the river with tools for the irrigation and planting, as are you and Serenen. Have you made arrangements for pick up and return to Memphis?"

"Yes. We are allowing ourselves five days helping clear the irrigation channels at our fields near Beni Hasan, then my father has made arrangements with our friend Kames to bring us back. Do you think Kames is a capable boatman?"

A raven with a single white feather lands near us as we talk. I toss it a morsel of biscuit, and the bird hunkers down as if to give his thanks before grabbing it with his beak. I smile and turn back to Akar, who seems to be considering my question. "Well? Is he a good boatman or not?"

Akar sucks his teeth. "He is a good boatman if he can find a good crew. He usually can, but that is never guaranteed coming from Thebes. Your man, Serenen, is a good one with either an oar or a sail. I think he is fully capable of running a boat of his own if you and your father ever decide to put your own boat in the water.

"In any case, on your return to Memphis you will be traveling downriver with the current. That is a much easier task in terms of effort and navigation, but never forget how dangerous the Nile can be when you are coming downriver. The river is vast and relentless. She doesn't care a fig about the humans who try to earn a living on her. Remember: things happen fast when you are in control of your boat. They happen much faster when you have lost control of it while going downriver on the Nile."

By this time, Serenen has loaded the tools, equipment, and two weeks of foodstuffs onto the boat with the help of Akar's crew.

It is time to go, but I am not yet ready. I stand and stretch lazily. "My father is sending one more passenger to go with us. We need to wait for him. I also sent word to the Pharaoh's palace this morning, asking my friend Nena to travel with us to keep me company. I hope this will not add too much of a burden to you and your crew, Akar."

"Of course not, my pretty one. I know your friend Nena. She is a very charming woman, and I know her to be among the circle of friends who are familiar with Pharaoh. You can count on my complete discretion. Who is the other passenger?"

"I believe the one coming up the street is our last passenger." A man comes up the path. He is short in stature but well muscled and at ease on his feet even though his burden appears to be heavy. "This is Paru, a lieutenant of guards in the palace of the Pharaoh. My father has asked Pharaoh Djer to send him with us to protect us, and to assure our peaceful intent to any on the river who might inquire as to the Pharaoh's interest in our trip."

"Do you feel this extra protection is necessary? Do you and your father not trust us enough?" asks Akar.

"Please put those concerns away, Akar. They are not worthy of you. My father wants Pharaoh to be fully aware of our plans for the property at Beni Hasan, and he has sent his most trusted and most physically capable lieutenant of guards. Once we are underway, Paru can assist with the rowing and sail setting. He is under your command for anything to do with the operation of the boat on the water, even if others along the river have hostile intent toward us.

"If a minor problem escalates, though, I will want you to defer to Paru's experience in combat. If he calls on you or on any of your crew for assistance while we are under threat, I will expect you to give

him all that he may need." I nod toward the newcomer's satchel. "You have seen the heavy bag he has brought on board. I can assure you that the bag contains weapons and that Paru is very well experienced with their use."

Akar begins to protest, but I hold up a hand. "To be clear, Paru is here primarily as a diplomat, a representative of Pharaoh. I do not expect trouble on this trip, but if trouble occurs, Paru will be in charge of our defense."

Our captain inhales, and as he exhales, his fighting spirit seems to deflate. "Yes, Hesina. You have my full support in this."

"Thank you, Akar." I see a friendly face coming up the path and brush the crumbs from my skirt. "Ah! Here comes Nena. Once she is aboard with her things, we will be ready to sail."

Nena is a tall and darkly attractive beauty, though, today, she is dressed modestly with a shawl to protect herself from the wind.

I rush off to greet my friend.

"Hesina, hello," she drawls, draping me in a hug. "I wanted to bring more bags with me," she says, indicating the servant struggling under two trunks, "but I was told there wouldn't be room on board."

"Hello to you, too." I hug her back and turn to take in Captain Akar's boat. "Well, what do you think?"

Nena does her best not to simper. I can tell she's thinking about all of the barques she's floated on, accompanying the Pharaoh and his family on their river cruises. "Charming," she settles on "Quaint."

I don't let her comments deter me from taking her hand and guiding her on board. "This is our own cabin," I say as I show her the area Akar has draped off with patterned cloth for our privacy. I almost do a little skip step. At home, I sleep on the roof with my parents. This is the first time in my life I've ever had my own private cabin.

Nena peers around the corners. "Where are the beds?" she asks. I shake my head and remember her telling me about the woven cots that litter the Pharaoh's palace.

As we return to the main deck, I hear some of the off-duty rowers tuning instruments. Soon, drums, tambourines, and lutes regale us. I know that Captain Akar wants to be as professional as possible — he is on business for my father, and I would do well to remember that I am, too — but I see that even he is tapping a toe to the music.

The rest of the crew begins to row, muscles rippling in the sun, and we are underway. A deckhand gestures to a table full of food and encourages us to partake. Small beer, bread, dried raisins and dates, and some salted meat are laid out on the wooden table. I take a bite of meat, savoring the way its saltiness melds with the sweetness of the raisins, and I rinse my fingers in the water bowl.

Nena looks up at another member of the palace entourage. He has brought aboard a small pot of expensive honey, which he is slathering on a piece of bread. "Djal," she hisses and subtly flicks her wrist as though to ask for the honey pot.

Finally, I chuckle. I throw an arm around my friend's shoulders. "I know this is all rather hard living after the palace and our day trips to see the sites around Memphis. But this trip upriver is an adventure; ... a real adventure."

I can't stop the smile from crossing my face. My hair whips in the wind as we head up the Nile and

closer to Beni Hasan. Nena seems unsure.

Once darkness falls, the workday for the boat crew is over. The dangers of trying to travel on the powerful river when there is only moonlight and it is too dark to see are too great for any but the most skilled crew motivated by the greatest of possible emergencies. Toward the end of the day, Akar looks along the shoreline for a place to park the boat where we will be safe from thieves, crocodiles, and hippos, which might have too great an interest in the human contents of the boat.

I listen to Akar instruct his men on the procedure for their night watch. Each of the rowers and sailors has an assigned time when they will have to keep watch for danger. A dripping pot of water marks their time on guard. When it is empty, the watcher will rouse the next watcher out of his restful sleep. Any watcher who fails to stay awake has been threatened to expect several lashes from Akar's whip.

"I'm grateful to not be a watcher," I whisper to Nena.

She yawns as she nods her agreement, and we settle into our cabin for the night.

The rest of our journey and our arrival at our fields near Beni Hasan has been uneventful. We meet my father's associate Heti and his family and set to work clearing the irrigation ditches.

Akar the boatman continues upriver after dropping our party and our tools and supplies off at our fields. He thought that he would not return downriver for many days but told me that he would send a message to Kames; that he should be prepared to take us back to Memphis within the next several days. "However," he had said, "if I cannot find Kames, or if he is not ready, I will come back downriver myself to pick you all up for the return to Memphis. I will plan on seeing you again in five days if that becomes necessary."

I have always known how to work. Without the benefit of sons to pass the business on to, Father has not kept me from the necessary work of his warehouse. Now, after several days in Heti's fields, I know the sore muscles and blistered satisfaction that come from turning the fertile ground to produce the barley and beer that is the backbone of our trading business. Heti's fields do not seem to suffer from lack of water or from too much water. He and his family are grateful for our help, though, as there is much to be done.

We work all day and much of the night while in our fields. At first, I feel shy to work without a wrap in the heat of the day but toiling with sweat and the risk of heat exhaustion quickly rid me of that. By the end of the second day here, I came to think nothing of stripping off my clothes as the sun rises higher in the sky.

The work is hard and makes the small pleasures of life all the more valuable. We eat and laugh together at night, and we sleep well under the stars.

At first, Nena wasn't sure about working in the fields. She worried, and with good reason, about bringing embarrassment to the house of Pharaoh as a woman of her class tilling the fields and being seen naked in them.

However, the work was too much for our small group to handle. On the afternoon of the second day, in a fit of pique brought on by Nena wondering why I hadn't removed my wrap, I snapped at my friend to get off her high horse and dig. She may have been upset that day, but soon, she also got into the habit of working, bare-skinned, in the hot sun. I know my friend well enough to know how good it feels for us to pull our own weight out of sight of our parents and overseers. Now for possibly the first time ever we feel worthy of the food we put in our mouths.

There is a niggling worry in my mind that I have neither seen nor heard from Akar or Kames. On the

sixth day at Beni Hasan, we are clearing a particularly difficult drainage ditch. My hope is that dislodging the bracken that's built up within it will allow the river to flow into this patch of crop.

Along with her clothes, Nena has dispensed with her ladylike decorum. "Hesina," she asks, raking the silt, "what do you call a water buffalo with a human face?"

I pretend to think on the answer to her joke, which is sure to be off-color, but I don't get to hear the punch line. I look up from my work to see Akar's boat on the river, coming toward us.

"I'm not sure, Nena," I say, "but would you run tell Heti's wife to prepare eleven more settings for dinner this evening? We have company."

A flash of the old Nena is back, as she primps her hair and dons her waistcloth before running to the farmer's house. Heti was delighted that such beautiful women would help in the fields and show off their womanly charms at the same time. He, his wife, and another older couple lived on the farm to do the planting and help fend off the creatures who would come to feed on the green shoots when they popped out of the ground. The other members of Heti's family, and their two friends also worked naked, but they looked away from the young women. They all had a note of sadness in their eyes, perhaps remembering their own younger days.

I lay down my rake and rush to greet my friend. As I come closer, I overhear Akar instructing his oarsmen. "Tie the boat up near the trees, then stay out of the heat for the afternoon. By late afternoon, when it is cooler, bring the boat back up the river to these fields. Maybe we will get a good meal tonight."

As his boat departs, Akar approaches me. He must be amused to see a merchant's daughter naked under the sun like a commoner, as he says, "Well, my beauty. Hard manual labor becomes you."

"Be careful of your language, Akar," I warn. "Do not take advantage of my need for comfort in this heat. How was your trip upriver? I am very glad to see you back here by the way."

"The trip was good, but Kames was nowhere to be found and my own plans were thwarted when the men I intended to meet with could not be found either. I will be delighted to take you and your party back downriver, but I need to know how much more time you need in the fields."

I wipe my brow and survey the field as I consider my answer. "If Nena and I and the families here are the only ones working, then it will take us another full day. On the other hand, if you can release your boat crew to us, we can probably finish in half a day."

Akar nods. "Aye. They shouldn't be too sore from our light row this morning." Akar paused and looked down at his feet for a moment. "I will make you this offer, pretty one. If you and Nena will put your clothes on while my men are working with you, we can probably get all the work done. Do you understand me or do I need to explain my concerns further?"

"Yes I do understand, Akar. I understand completely. Nena nodded in support. We will cover our bodies when your men are around.

"Wonderful." I grin. It feels good to be the one delegating for once. "Now for more important things. I have alerted Heti to your arrival and have asked him to prepare food for this evening's dinner. In our time toiling in these fields, we have discovered that the palace guard Paru is a poet of considerable ability. If those of your men who can play instruments will play for us tonight, it will be a joyous event."

After Akar has called his men back to Heti's dock, we all head for the main house, Paru greets our shared friend. "Did you have a good trip upriver, captain? See any crocodiles?"

"No. No crocodiles," Akar answers. "A few hippopotamus only. They stayed well clear of the boat."

“Good. I would have hated to not be on board to wrestle a crocodile for you.”

Akar tips back his head and laughs. Hesina tells me you are concerned about our return to Memphis. Something about nudity.”

“Yes. Something about nudity. It is a custom in the rural areas for Egyptian farmers to work without clothes in the heat of the sun. Hesina and Nena have also picked up that habit and seem to enjoy the feeling of freedom. The men on my boat also work without clothes when the sun is hot. My concern is that the nudity is bad when there are two such attractive women on the boat, who also enjoy nudity, and seem not to worry about the effect of it on men.

“Ascertain, any problems that might arise from the temptations that could overtake some of the men, could put the boat itself in jeopardy.

“I want to require that everyone cover their nudity on the boat while we are underway, no matter how hot it might get. That will include you, Paru, and Serenen, and it will especially include Nena and Hesina. Hesina and Nena have both agreed but I need the support of you two men if I am to enforce the rule.

“I believe it will be very difficult to enforce the rule among at least a couple of my rowers. Since I need to be in full control of the boat and the rowing at all times when we are running downriver, I will have to have one or both of you ready to apply whatever punishment might be needed to calm any bad situations. Do I have your agreement on that?” Akar asks.

“Yes. Of course. “But you know your men, and you know the potential trouble-makers. How will you communicate your concern to us, and how will you show us the problem so that we may act on it?” Paru asks.

“I will tell my crew what I want them to do to cover their nakedness, and I will tell them what I have in mind for punishment if any are unable to control their passions... or their erections. They know me to have a strong whip arm, and they know that if I warn them about expected behavior, that I will use the whip on violators.

“How about you, Serenen? You have not yet spoken in my presence. What are your thoughts?”

“Should a problem arise, Captain, I will defer to Paru, unless the problem is urgent and I am closer to it. If I must deal effectively and quickly with the problem, and Paru is not able to assist, I may heave the offender overboard, and take over his responsibilities on the oar, or rudder, or sail. I am well-experienced in all aspects of boat operations.

“Please understand, Captain, that I have been attendant, protector, and mentor to Hesina since she was a small child. I take my responsibilities very seriously.”

Paru spoke up. “Be assured of my full confidence in the words of Serenen, Captain. Before he became protector to Hesina he served with me in the Pharaoh’s personal guard unit in the palace. We have been involved in many battles. I trust him with my life.”

Akar sat back and rubbed his chin as he thought about the words of the two naked men standing in front of him.

Akar speaks. “I am glad to have your understanding and support. I thank you. In the morning while everyone else is working in the fields, I will want to work with Paru to correct any possible sources of problems on the boat itself. Though I will be moving the boat toward Memphis with haste, there will be several long hot days on the river. The women’s shed will need to be completely shielded from casual views by the boatmen. At the same time, to avoid boredom, the women will need to have an opening toward the shore for their viewing, and there must be an opening for breeze. I will assign the boatmen in such a way that they won’t be constantly thinking of what the women in the shed might be up to; ...but there will be leisure times when we are under sail, and they

might all be unoccupied, and left to their own imaginings. That is the time we must be most alert. Two of my boatmen are particularly trustworthy in enforcing my wishes among the others. I will ask your advice, Paru, on how they should be deployed, and how advised as to their responsibilities.

“Let us now see what we can do to finish this day’s work in the fields, and then prepare for the evening meal,” Akar concluded.

Our party was quiet and didn’t last much beyond the last bowl of honey-sweetened dates. All the participants were tired after several days of hard work in the fields and on the boat, and another hard day of work would begin again the next morning.

We finished irrigating the fields as the sun passed its highest point in the sky. After a lunch of bread and a small ration of beer, we were able to finish loading the boat with tools, weapons, and foodstuffs. Akar wanted to get as much time as possible to move down the river before dark, so he pushed everyone to move quickly to finish the loading. I overheard one of the rowers tell him that he enjoyed the life around Beni Hasan and wanted to stay a while longer. Though this visibly irked Akar, the man was not contracted to him beyond this voyage, and we pushed off without him. “Ah, well,” Akar said. “We can make do with one less rower.”

Now, we have cast off from the small dock, and into the Nile’s steady, inexorable push downriver toward Memphis and the great sea beyond.

Once on the main channel, our oarsmen begin their routine of coordinated rowing. I’ve learned that it’s designed to give Akar maximum control over his boat as he searches the river’s surface for the fastest currents. The rudder men and sailors are tuned to his every hand gesture and to the nuance of his every verbal command. As well-experienced boatmen, Paru and Serenen are alert to the same signs.

Nena and I start the day watching them row, but the repetitive motion grows boring over time. The view on the banks of the river isn’t that interesting either, now that I’ve seen it once. I wish I could be more useful to Akar, pull my weight literally at the oar or clean the deck for the men, but he tells me not to worry myself over it. Eventually, I lie down, somewhat sullenly, and await nightfall.

At the end of the day, Akar compliments all on the crew for their good, strong work through the day. As we tie up for the night, Akar tells his men that they have to sleep ashore in the trees, the better to watch for the various creatures, or persons, that might otherwise threaten the boat and our precious cargo.

“I regret that I cannot offer beer to you this evening because there is none on the boat,” he says to some grumbling. “You will have to quench your thirst with river water, but I am told that this place has a source of very fine water, and I am sure you will be most pleased. There are extra rations of dates, salted meat, and honey to repay you for your work today. I’m hopeful that the weather and wind will hold, and we will have a good day tomorrow and the next day.”

The captain, Paru, and Serenen lay out their sleeping mats around our shelter and ask us how our day has gone.

I look at Nena and shrug. “It was fine, but we wondered if, tomorrow, we might spend more time outside of our cabin... maybe even take a turn rowing?” I see Akar’s expression sour, so I hasten to add “Or set the sail, or the rudder.”

Nena agrees. “If we spend another day in pampered indolence, I think we will grow fat, and our moods will be unattractive.”

“I am less worried about unattractive moods than you may be,” Akar says, “yet I am mindful of

your concerns and will give them some thought. I'll let you know in the morning. Now it is time to sleep. Rest well in the encircling arms of Horus."

Before dawn the next morning, Akar, Serenen, and Paru come to visit us. Akar has given our request some thought, and Nena and I will be assisting the rudder men, allowing them to take occasional breaks.

The day's sailing downriver proceeds well. Nena and I work hard in our new roles. The rudder men gave us liberal tips on how we can improve our mastery of the procedures involved in changing rudder settings.

By the end of the day, Nena and I were very tired, but also very happy that we had been useful and had performed well. I saw Akar laugh a few times as he captained his crew today, but I can tell he still feels reserved over whether we'll have smooth sailing over our remaining three days of travel. We spent the evening hours building more spears to add to our weaponry. Even Nena and I have our own small stockpiles should we be attacked. As I ready for bed, I overhear Akar tell a mate that before we will pull up to my father's dock in Memphis, there are pockets of crocodiles and hippos in some of the sloughs ahead, and worse — though he has never had to deal with them — there is a nest of thieves at work in this part of the river.

I sink onto my pallet with my stomach churning. "What's got your goat?" Nena asks.

I can't help thinking of a goat, bloodied in the mouth of a crocodile. "Nena, have you ever seen a crocodile?" She's spent more time on barges than I have, so I know she won't sugarcoat things for me.

"I have, but if we don't go overboard, we won't have anything to worry about. They cannot easily crawl onto the boat."

This makes me feel safer, though I resolve to move more carefully about the deck tomorrow.

Making and loading the weapons into Akar's hiding places took some time the following day, so we didn't get underway until the sun had reached its peak in the sky. The rest of the day was mostly uneventful. The two exceptions occurred because the two women were now moving freely from rowing position to rudder position, to sail setting position through the day. Akar had not relaxed his modesty rule, but the sight of two such beautiful women moving quickly among the men, and occasionally bumping into them when the deck shifted required more discretion than two of the boatmen were capable of maintaining.

Akar applied his whip judiciously, to the men as their erections popped up as a result of inappropriate — and possibly unavoidable — touching.

Once touched by the whip, the shame-faced offender did not allow the problem to occur again.

The next two sailing days — our third and fourth on the river — were also uneventful, but late on the fourth day, today, there is a change in the look and feel of the air as we pass beyond some trees on the west bank of the river.

I can now see a sandstorm building on the western horizon. The churning dust cloud is already far higher than the tallest buildings I have ever seen. I can hear the dull roar of the storm as it builds and moves toward us. I am frightened.

It seems to unsettle Akar, too. He quickly instructs his boatmen to steer for the western riverbank. He calls to me. "We must tie up and wait for the storm to pass."

I nod and adjust the rudder, but as we move closer to the western bank, Akar points to a calm spot there. "Look to the opening of that slough! Collapse the sails and steer for it!"

I'm not sure why we're changing course so dramatically, but the crew trusts Akar. They seem calm even as they follow his urgent orders, so too do I.

As I hold the rudder steady for the sudden change of course, I hear Paru at my elbow. "The sands will be intense, miss. There is no shelter here on the open water. You and Nena must lay down on the deck out of harm's way."

I give the rudder to one of the more experienced crew and comply with Paru's command to step aside. Better that an expert rudder man moves us forward than a merchant's daughter who might drive us into the bank in a way that damages the ship.

From our place on the deck, I can feel the boat turn to the bank as soon as we enter the slough. We bump hard. I am grateful for my place so close to the splinter-infested planks. Those who were not ready for the rough stop fall to the deck around us. I hear the splash of a man going overboard.

I raise my head. "Is he okay, Akar?"

"Do not worry yourself," Akar replies, putting his cloth wrap over his face. "Just stay down. Paru and I will help get the man back into the boat."

He orders the boat secured to the shore and secured against the wind and sand.

"Captain, what of the sand?" a rower asks. "If enough of it gets in the cracks around the hull, we'll sink."

I share a look with Nena. Neither of us had thought of that.

"Once we secure the boat we need to get out of the water," Paru says nearby. "There are probably crocodiles in the swampy area beyond the banks of this slough. If they are nearby, it won't take them long to find us." In the pause that follows, I grip Nena's hand. "Perhaps we need to move the boat further down the slough now while we have plenty of daylight."

It will be stormy and miserable to work in the middle of a sandstorm, but that's better than fighting with crocs while we try to move the boat in the morning."

"Good thinking," Akar says. "I'll talk to the boatmen. We will need to post guards with spears to watch for crocs, and we will need to distribute our digging tools to the strongest diggers. The women can keep watch from the boat. They should be prepared to climb the masts from time to time so they can get a better view."

Nena sits up on her elbows, blowing a strand of hair out of her face. "That won't be a problem, I assure you."

After some time, tools and spears have been distributed, and the men bend to the task of widening the banks. Nena and I watch for crocodiles. Four of the men accompany Akar and Paru downstream in the slough to clear any underwater mounds of sand that might hinder the boat's passage.

Meanwhile, Nena and I use ropes to rig a way to climb quickly up and down the boat's mast, and I take the first watch near the top of the mast. Nena moves to the back of the boat to watch for possible threats that might be coming from the river. From this high up, I can see the river in either direction, the sandstorm fast approaching, and little settlements beyond, on the peaceful bank. I think of my beloved perch on the roof of Father's warehouse, and I am comforted, even in these stressful and unfamiliar circumstances.

The horizon looks clear of crocodiles and other immediate threats, but the storm is coming closer. I cannot see beyond the storm front. I will have to climb down from the mast when the storm gets too

close. I have no idea what the force of the winds and the blasts of sand might do.

Before I have the chance to find out, Akar comes to the bottom of the mast. "Come down from there, my pretty one. I need to see what the storm is doing."

The wind picks up as Akar climbs. As I watch him go, I can hear it howling in my ears, a low moan like one from the world beyond. The sky on the west is completely dark. My heart pounds.

"Adjo! Djal!" He calls his two most trusted boatmen to his side. "We have time to move the boat just a little before the storm hits," I hear him say. There are words the wind steals from me, and then he is yelling, "Hurry!"

They comply.

"Hesina." He turns his attention to me as he descends. "Please. Get into your secure space. I cannot protect both you and the boat from the storm."

Nena, ever a daredevil, decides to climb the mast. She shouts down to me that the storm is very close now. I only leave our cabin to alert Akar. The men stop their digging and focus on securing the boat to the shore. I am pleased to see that, by their digging, they have advanced the boat to a place within sight of the slough's opening back to the main river.

In the end, we escaped the worst of the storm. We lost one sailor overboard then quickly pulled him back aboard. There was wind and blowing sand through much of the night, but no damage to the boat — though quantities of sand had to be moved overboard. Because of the possibility of crocodiles, Akar ordered everybody to sleep on the boat deck while at least two men kept watch through the night. We covered our faces with our wraps and waistcloths to keep the sand out of our nostrils and mouths as best we could.

As soon as there is enough morning light to see beyond the boat, Akar climbs to the top of the mast. I watch him as he ascends over the lip of the privacy cloth he had put up for Nena and me to sleep behind on our very first outing. He looks around the boat and reports down that he does not see any threats. "We need to get everybody up to begin digging so we can get back to the main channel as soon as possible. With a good day's rowing, we should be within sight of Memphis by dark."

Memphis, my heart murmurs. Home.

Akar catches sight of me and calls to me as he climbs down, disappearing from view behind the curtain. "Hesina, I hope I'm not prevailing on you and your friend too much, but with two men down, I need your help rowing."

My heart already has felt too full, and now it is bursting. I am proud to do so, and I look forward to telling my father of my active role in returning us safely home. I nod. "We will do what we can."

Nena is awake, too, and is getting some food before beginning her turn at the top of the mast. Suddenly there is whistling in the air and a loud sharp cry from Nena. I turn from my conversation with Akar to gape at my friend, where she lies collapsed to the deck, with an arrow through her thigh. I cannot help screaming. I stopper my mouth with my hands to stop myself.

Paru, luckily, has a more even head than I. "Thieves!" he hisses. He moves immediately to his cache of weapons and motions for everybody on deck to stay down and get out their own weapons from their hiding places without showing them until he issues his orders. I stare in blind fright at my friend, who lies, biting back a yell, on the deck. This is the worst thing any of us could have imagined. I believe that even Paru did not wish to command our vessel, but now, my friend is pierced by a marauding arrow and we must defend ourselves. Even me. I, who only feel at home with tablets and styli, must now defend my life with a spear.

Paru raises his head up above the lip of the deck until he can see and assess the threat. "A boat," he whispers near me. "Two archers."

"Can we capture it?" Akar asks hoarsely, from Paru's other side. "Take it as a prize?"

"No," Paru says. "We are still stuck, and they are moving too fast down the river." He turns to look over his shoulder and makes a motion to two men. They nod. On his command, they rise with him and loose their arrows toward the hostile boat. All three arrows find their marks. I peek over the lip of the deck. The two archers on the hostile boat have fallen. None take their place.

Paru and I rush to Nena's side. Serenen brings a knife to cut the arrow away and a cloth to bind her wound and stop the bleeding. Paru is not yet sure whether the arrow has hit one of the vessels in the leg that carry a lot of blood, but he assures me that Serenen is the most experienced healer on the boat. Paru motions to Akar to get the men working on freeing the boat from the silt of the slough; Nena's life may depend on how fast he can get us to Memphis.

The morning has suddenly gone terribly wrong. I fear for my friend, but I remember my promise to Akar. Nena is in good hands with Serenen.

Along with all of Akar's guests and crew, I bend my back to the task of freeing the boat and begin rowing as fast as I can to help get us to Memphis before nightfall.

Akar pulled his boat up to my father's dock early the next morning. Paru ran as fast as he could to find Father and to look for a priest or physician to look after Nena's wounds. Despite our best efforts to stop the flow of blood with a mud poultice, I spent a sleepless night concerned that I had not done enough. We tried to keep my friend warm, but she grew pale and struggled to breathe. I feared for her life.

Paru soon returns with my father. I had no idea how much I needed to see his face, and I weep as he hugs me.

"Paru said there was a sandstorm. Were you all right?" His voice is shaky.

"I'm fine. Better now." I give him a great hug in return.

My mother arrives on the scene with a hooded wool garment to cover me in place of the thin cotton I had covered myself with after we left the slough. I had not thought much of my nakedness since we pulled into the slough ahead of the sandstorm. I accept my mother's warm covering gratefully. I know that I will need days to try to grasp and absorb all that I have learned on my trip upriver. I know that I have done things that will make my parents proud, but for now, in the shock that follows our violent adventure, I am grateful beyond belief for the love of my parents.

I can hear Father cautioning Paru against calling a priest to look after Nena's wounds. "They are too enamored of their knowledge of useless potions and leach treatments that they think cause healing. Actually," he corrects himself, "they are worse than useless. To the extent that they interfere with a careful analysis of what the actual disease or health condition or wound is, their application can lead to the condition growing worse.

"I believe the best treatment now is to have Serenen and Hesina continue Nena's care here. There is no need to move her further. Nena is a strong woman, and I believe she will recover from this wound. As always Serenen has brought the correct healing practice to her, and I believe she will survive," my father said.

Nena's wound did respond to the care shown her by Serenen. After some time her color returned and she became again the adventuresome Nena of our long friendship.

My father was very grateful to his friend the boatman Akar for safely bringing his daughter, her guests and protectors through events of such great danger on the Nile. In an inspired moment he invited Akar and his entire crew to join our family and Nena at dinner a few days later after they had all rested. As he did on the trip Paru came, now in formal uniform representing Pharaoh. This way those of us who had been on the great journey to the upper Nile were able to share all of our stories about the trip and would be held to the truth of our tales by the others.

Between stories many gifts were pressed upon Akar and his crew by my father on behalf of our family. For his part, Akar told us a story of his negotiation over a thumb-size piece of beautiful blue/violet, almost translucent stone with a nomadic Nubian trader from the mountains at the source of the White Nile, the major source of the Nile itself.

As guest of honor Akar told his story first. "I had seen the stone in the Theban market while passing by a trader showing the stone to another who was interested in it. When I asked to see the stone the trader, an old, stooped and wrinkled black man with an ancient gray-haired burro by his side was rude, insulting to me and all who served me. He cursed me for my family roots far down the Nile. He said we were unworthy of his attention. He was impossible to deal with according to Akar. But the stone was so beautiful in its' deep blue/violet color that Akar told us he could not turn away from it. All in his audience were fascinated by his story.

"I could see into the stone almost to its heart. As I turned it over in my hands the stone almost came to life," according to Akar. "It felt warm and seemed to grow warmer the longer I held it. I knew I had to have the stone!" Akar said with enthusiasm.

"With a fearsome scowl on his face the old black man finally agreed to sell the stone to me and then quoted an outrageous price for it. I agreed to the price without a moment's thought. His demeanor at the end of our exchange was so fearsome that I thought he might spit at my feet before walking away. He did not spit but, after a few steps, he did wave his arm at me with a rude gesture that any Egyptian will recognize as very offensive. By now the burro had turned in my direction and began braying in a particular way that was, I'm sure, intended to be even more offensive."

Akar is a story-teller and no stranger to the verbal tricks needed to have his audience on the edge of their seats on the way to the end of his tale.

I was not able to restrain myself. A loud question burst from my mouth. "Can we see the stone Akar!"

All nodded their heads enthusiastically. My father also added his voice. "Yes Akar. Do you have the stone with you and can we see it?"

Akar looked at me and then to my father.

"Yes, Senna, my good friend. I will do more than let everyone see the stone. I will make the stone a gift to you and your family. In that way I believe it will be a permanent tribute to our long friendship and success in commerce. Also, it will always be available to your beautiful and very ship-worthy daughter Hesina. She and her friend Nena, equally skilled as a sailor, are welcome as crew on my boat any time," Akar said as he lifted the beautiful stone from his purse to the shouts and gasps and applause of all those gathered before him.

It was a wonderful evening.

I learned from my father, later, that the Uruk trader in those other rare blue/gold stones from the distant lands beyond Mesopotamia had to leave sooner than he had hoped. There was a disruption in deliveries he had a personal interest in because of a shipping problem near the ancient city of Jericho. He begged forgiveness that he had not been able to wait for my return but promised to return to Memphis next year. He hopes that we can renew our plan to take Father's representatives, to Uruk to investigate trading opportunities in the gem trade. My heart was full to bursting because father had already assigned me the task of leading that delegation.

Commerce

As a token of his commitment, the trader left a sizeable piece of the blue stone with brilliant streaks of gold to tickle our imaginations while we await his return.

Of course we feel that Akar's gift to us is at least as desirable as the blue/ gold stones brought to us by the Uruk trader from the north, but we had no idea where the old Nubian trader had found the stone, nor where to begin a search for him or for the source of the stone itself.

I sit, pondering these stones on the warehouse roof this morning. I look to the east and see a new caravan from the east with new goods and materials that will need to be appraised, purchased and taken into my father's warehouses;...and the traders on the caravans will have stories to tell of their adventures in the desert on their journey here. I fly down the steps to greet them with honeyed dates and portions of beer.

I cannot wait to hear their stories.

END