



In the Belly of the Crocodile

PATHFINDER'S JOURNAL: SHADOW OF THE SANDS 4 OF 6

Deserts offer no mercy to the unprepared. Between the unrelenting heat, the scarcity of food and water, and the desperate denizens carving out their existence in the stretches of sand, the desert proves a singularly inhospitable place. Research helps. Experience is better.

And, of course, it never hurts to have allies.

I found the caravan near the marketplace. Parili let out a whoop of joy on seeing me, and I was buoyed to see the boy's good color. When I'd untangled myself from his ferocious hug, I explained my situation to the caravanners. My daggers were lost back at the papyrus factory, and I needed supplies as quickly as possible.

The caravanners pulled together, and before the hour was out I had provisions, two sharp daggers on loan, and a worn caftan. The garment's original owner explained that the dun linens would help me blend in with the sand and keep me cool during the day. I thanked the caravanners fervently, even trotting out some broken phrases of Osiriani. My accent was getting much better.

Before I left Tephu, I made one more stop. Back at the sage's shop, Bethos blinked in surprise to see me.

"More gold won't speed the process along," he said.

"I'm hoping gold will buy me something more substantial than time."

Bethos had alchemical gear for sale, and we haggled over a few choice items. The money I'd saved (and earned) by traveling with the caravan was gone now, but at least the translation was already paid for. Once I rescued Farhaan, I'd find some way back to Varisia.

Only a few hours of daylight remained by the time I made it back to the gates, but I pressed on. The kidnappers had left on camels, and I hoped that meant they would camp for the night. It's risky to push even a sure-footed mount onward in the darkness. If I traveled with as much speed as possible in the remaining daylight and pressed on through the night, I might catch up with them by morning.

Over the years, my long nights hunting had prepared me for sleeplessness. I waited patiently through the gritty eyes, the yawns that nearly unhinged my jaw, and the dizziness, on into the jittery, wide-awake stage that followed. I felt keen and alert. I moved as quickly as I could along the sand that too-quickly gave up its heat to the night. Soon I was hustling to keep warm as much as to catch up with my quarry. To my left, the Crook ran through the desert, its constant murmur keeping me company. The sand stretched to a gritty shelf that overhung the riverbed. Reedy vegetation and date trees filled the space between

shelf and river. A drop of only eight feet or so divided desert and bank.

The moon illuminated the rolling dunes, and the trail left by half a dozen camels following a river was easy enough to spot. I kept Toothy's travel satchel under my caftan, against my side. Though he had plenty of rags to burrow into, I worried about him getting too cold.

As the hours passed, I found my overtired strength ebbing. I hadn't fully recovered from my all-night vigil over Parili, and despite my determination, my steps dragged. Then I caught the unmistakable whiff of camel on the breeze. I was instantly awake, hurrying forward until I spotted the small camp on the horizon. I hunkered down to lower my profile and swung around the camp toward the river, hoping its noise would cover any sounds of my approach. Whatever I was going to do, now was the time.

I wished I had a plan.

The kidnappers had found a ruin in which to camp. Old settlements and temples littered the desert, some with wind-scoured walls ground down to rocky lines, others mostly intact. This one seemed halfway between—a few walls stood and provided some shelter from the desert winds, while piles of rubble marked where the rest of the structure had been. A ruined outpost, too small to hold all the kidnappers, sat in crumbling silence to the east. I saw the shuffling shadows of camels tethered in a group to the south of the structure and a humanoid shape I suspected was a guard.

The moonlight that had allowed me to track the kidnappers now threatened to reveal my presence. I sidled up to the edge of the rock shelf that overhung the river. I could see a sandy slope downstream. The kidnapper's camp faced onto a steep beach leading down to the water. After some quiet scrambling, I made it over the shelf and landed in the river grass below.

My boots instantly sank into silt. Water seeped into the hem of my caftan and dragged it down. I crouched, getting my knees wet, and let the waving grass help conceal my form. I crab-walked farther into the river, where the riverbed became rockier and more stable. I was in rushing water up to my knees now, but I could move more quietly and the reeds were taller here. Still crouching, I swished my way through the river, making straight for the beach.

The river was cold, and shivers soon wracked my body. I saw the guard more clearly now: a definite humanoid shape with a scarf wrapped around the head. I waded closer, pushing aside floating branches from a fallen date tree. The tree's trunk rested horizontally on the river's surface,

IN THE BELLY OF THE CROCODILE



CROCODILIANS

"Crocodilians" is the proper term for crocodiles and their kin. The long-bodied, sharp-toothed creatures can be found all across Osirion, and in many other regions as well. Unlike alligators, crocodiles can live comfortably in salt water as well as fresh water, so any relatively roomy body of water can be a home to them.

Remember that the next time you consider taking a dip in the ocean or bend over a river to refill your waterskin.

Crocodiles do prefer warm climates, though, so you're unlikely to encounter them in far northern regions. Besides the common crocodile, there's the marine crocodile, which lives in tropical oceans; the dive crocodile, which can swallow an adult ore whale; and, of course, the ferocious deinosuchus, an enormous beast that grows up to 50 feet long. I suppose that with such variety in the species, it's possible some

relative of the common crocodile has developed to survive in northern climes.

Osirian crocodiles tend to measure fifteen to twenty feet in length. Their hides are dark brown or olive-green, and young crocodiles often display black bands on their skin that fade as they age. Baby crocodiles survive on a diet of insects, frogs, and tiny fish, and as they grow, they incorporate larger fish, water birds, snakes, and carrion. Adult crocodiles readily attack large prey such as antelopes and warthogs, and attack domesticated animals if near a settlement. And, of course, they sometimes attack the owners of domesticated animals, particularly if the owners wander too close to the river. Another good reason to bring along someone who can conjure water when venturing into the desert.

Caimans are tiny versions of crocodiles, and while their small size makes them less of a danger to humanoids, they are by no means domesticable. Like all crocodilians, caimans are cold-blooded and must be kept warm in cool climes and cool in hot weather. They eat mainly small fish and insects, but have trouble digesting hard-shelled bugs. Their propensity for biting fingers off the hand that feeds them also warrants care on the part of the handler.

half-submerged and directly in my path. The trunk was wider than most, but I thought I could make it over. I leaned my upper body against the rough bark and twisted until I could get my legs up and lie flat. I was straddling the tree, wondering why it seemed so buoyant, when a knot on the trunk opened to reveal a slitted eye.

I froze. My thoughts were a tangled panic threaded through with profanity in several languages. My chest pressed against the crocodile's back. The rough hide snagged on my wet caftan. For a moment, the world seemed frozen. Even the rushing of the river seemed to cease. Then the crocodile's eye flicked, forward and back, as if searching for the source of whatever had disturbed it.

In my research on Osirion I had, of course, read about crocodiles. Their jaws were powerful enough to bite through the hull of a river barge. Once they got hold of prey, they dragged it down to the river's bottom and feasted on still-living flesh while the victim drowned. I'd read gruesome true accounts of crocodile attacks. Even seen some woodcut illustrations.

This was almost worse than the zombies.

As I tried to quell my panic and figure out how the hell to get off my scaly perch, the croc shifted. It swung its muzzle from side to side, the same way Toothy did when he was hungry.

Toothy! I'd almost forgotten about my little mascot. I knew from the last few days that Toothy was almost immobile at night. The cold rendered him sleepy and slow. Perhaps this oversized creature operated the same way. If I moved slowly it might not see me as a threat. Toothy ate only every few days, after all—maybe this beast wasn't even hungry.

I shifted my weight cautiously to one side, preparing to slip quietly into the water and be on my way. The croc swung its head ponderously in my direction, eye searching for me. I gulped. Toothy liked scratches at the base of his skull so I tried that, digging my fingernails into the pebbled hide. The croc's eye slowly closed and it settled back into the water. Trying not to breathe too loudly, I slid all the way off its back. The croc remained where it was, floating silently on the river, almost indistinguishable from a floating log (though I had a feeling I'd be able to tell the difference from this point on).

With as much haste as I could manage, I waded through the reeds down the last few yards to the ruins. The steep beach led from river's edge to ruins like a sandy ramp, the shelf face rising up vertically on either side. A wide stone block, probably an observation point, overlooked the disjointed frame of an old shadoof—a pivoting pole with a bucket on one end used to lift water into the outpost. In the bright moonlight I could see lines carved into the rock

MUMMY'S MASK

face—tally lines. This was an old port where river craft once stopped to pay a tax when traveling between Tephu and Ipeq. I guessed the ruins were an old temple to Wadjet, an ancient river goddess still worshiped locally in Osirion.

I took a moment to commit the tally lines to memory and hoped I'd have time to come back and make a proper sketch to add to my report. My shivering intensified and I turned my attention to the more pressing matter. At the top of the beach, the camels shifted in their pen, their gamy scent wafting down to me. The guard focused more on the desert than the river, and I couldn't blame him; I wouldn't be expecting a single attacker to come bursting up out of the river in the middle of the night either.

Rising up like a waterlogged river spirit wouldn't advance my cause, though, so I watched until the guard's attention seemed firmly fixed on the desert. Then I flattened myself against the sand and crawled up the beach until I reached the camel enclosure.

Two swift slashes from my dagger undid the ropes on one side of the pen. The camels didn't react; habit kept them in place more than the pen did. I heard footsteps as the guard made his way toward the riverbank and I flattened myself on the ground. The footsteps paused and I held my breath. Then the steps moved away, around the edge of the camp.

I scuttled in the opposite direction. A pile of rubble afforded me some concealment. I saw huddled shapes around a dying fire by the walls of the ruins and knew Farhaan must be among them. Once I was well shielded by the rubble, I reached into my pack and took out one of the items I'd purchased in the sage's shop.

Different cultures have different terms for the small exploding rocks alchemists produce; I've always called them drumstones. I turned the plum-sized rock over in my hand, sized up the distance to the pen, and threw.

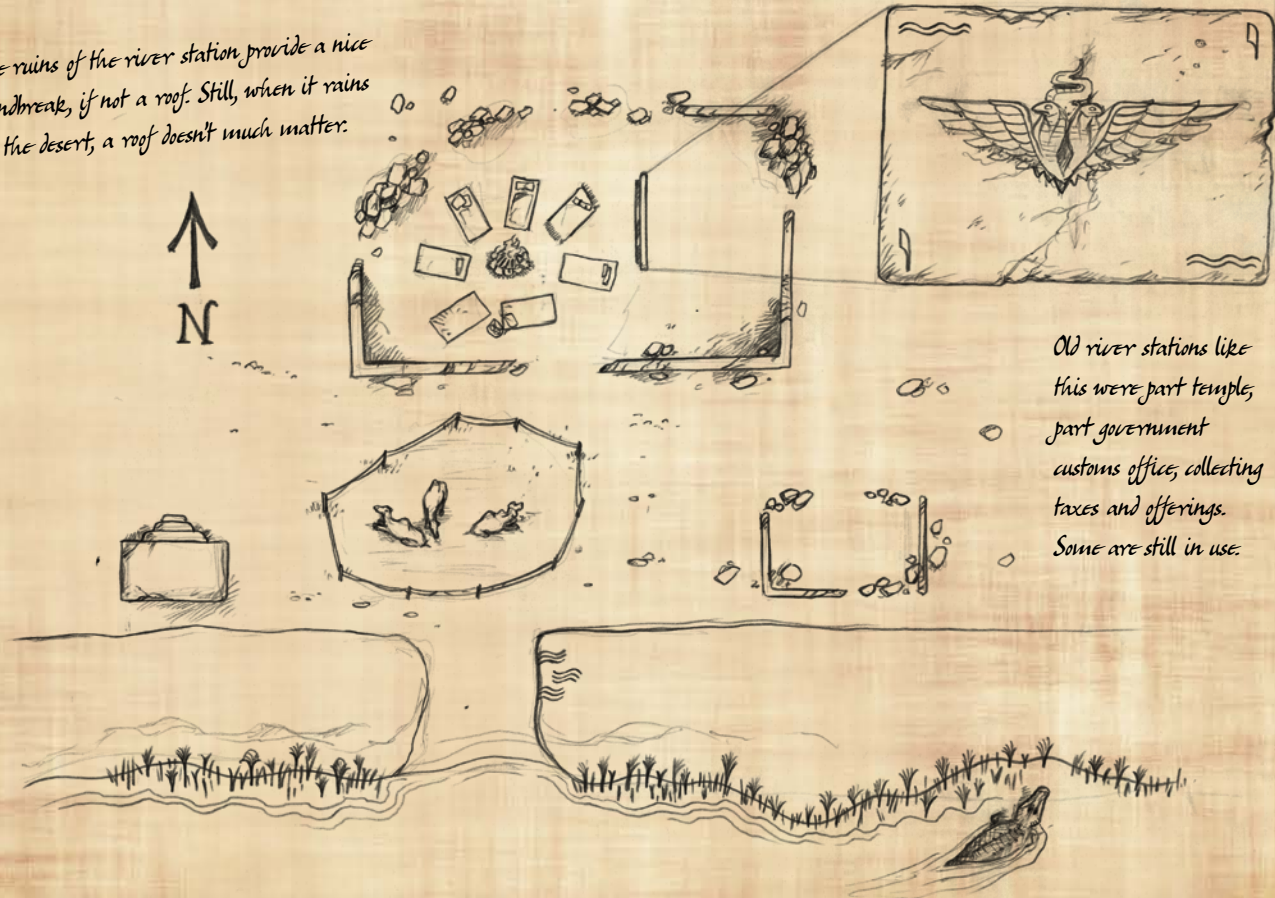
A thunderous boom echoed through the camp. The camels' sounds of panic were lost in the roar and the beasts charged over the sagging ropes of their pen.

Shouts erupted from the camp, and the sleeping figures reared up in their bedrolls like worms wriggling from the ground. Someone yelled, "Get the camels!" Most of the sleepers ran to collect the spooked mounts, and one sprinted over to the guard. One figure stayed on the ground, another standing over him.

Farhaan. It had to be.

I slunk through the shadows toward the prisoner, drawing a dagger as I moved. With luck I'd be able to fell the guard quickly and get Farhaan out of there before anyone noticed the camel stampede was a distraction.

The ruins of the river station provide a nice windbreak, if not a roof. Still, when it rains in the desert, a roof doesn't much matter.



Old river stations like this were part temple, part government customs office, collecting taxes and offerings. Some are still in use.

IN THE BELLY OF THE CROCODILE

The kidnapers stayed alert, though, watching for trouble. Two stood at the top of the beach and kept glancing back at the prisoner and his guard. I cursed under my breath. I'd thought I could just walk into the camp, cut Farhaan's bonds, and wander out again while everyone ran after camels. This whole situation was a mess. What was I even doing here? I contemplated turning and sprinting into the desert, leaving Farhaan to his fate. Sure, he'd helped me in the bar, led me to the first translator, called my name in the street in Tephu. But I owed him no real loyalty.

I hesitated for a moment, just long enough for the screaming brays to reach us from the river.

The sounds were so horrible I almost stepped out of the shadows to find out what the hell was making that noise and whether I should start running. The two alert guards charged for the beach, their forms disappearing from my field of vision as they slid down the sandy slope. More agonized screams, a thunderous growl, and the splash of churning water came together.

One of the camels must have bolted down the beach and into the shallow river water. It seemed my friend the crocodile had been more disturbed by my passage than I knew, because judging by the sounds, it now faced off against the mount and one or more of the kidnapers.

The prisoner's guard looked down as if weighing options, then muttered something and sprinted for the beach.

I hustled into the camp, my distracted mind taking time to note the symbol of Wadjet painted on a square, wooden display, almost six feet tall, propped against a wall. The symbol, faded from the years, showed a double-headed cobra with wings stretching out to either side. In its day the display would have shone in Wadjet's colors of gold and blue.

I reached the prisoner's side and dropped to one knee, sawing at the ropes winding around the bedroll.

A face blinked in the moonlight. Dark eyes I recognized, a chin stubbled by days on the road. "Nenet?"

"You seem surprised." My voice rasped from stress and the chill. "Did you give up on me so soon?"

"Not at all." Farhaan struggled out of the bedroll as the ropes fell away. "I thought you'd be here hours ago."

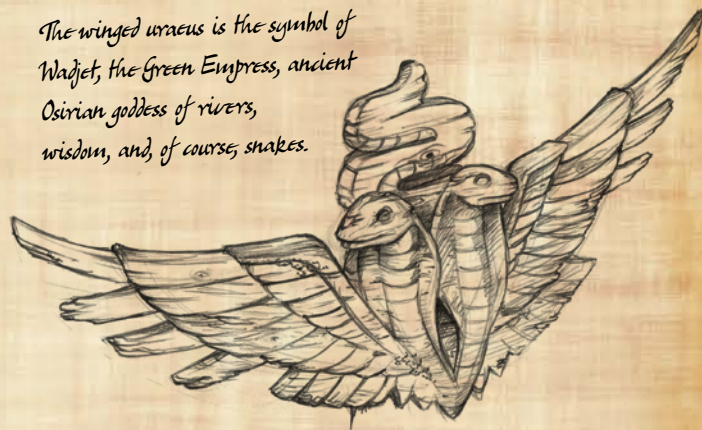
"I stopped for a drink first."

I took Farhaan's hand and hauled him to his feet. Farhaan wobbled a bit but stayed up. "Now what?"

"Now we... uh..." My plan had involved us running while the kidnapers tried to recapture their camels, before they had time to make a real pursuit. Now that plan seemed frail and flimsy. These kidnapers appeared more determined and skilled than I'd hoped. I swiveled around, searching for the most promising direction in the moonlit desert. "Now we—" "Run?"

Farhaan and I jumped and spun around in tandem, no doubt amusing Kema, who stood only a few feet from us. The hairs on the back of my neck rose just seeing the

The winged uraeus is the symbol of Wadjet, the Green Empress, ancient Osirian goddess of rivers, wisdom, and, of course, snakes.



woman. Kema had traded in her long knife for a curved scimitar, and its blade caught the light as she pointed it first at me, then at Farhaan.

"Well, well," she said when she got a look at my face. "Look what crawled out of the mud."

I brandished my dagger. "You might be able to kill one of us, but not both. Let us go and we won't have to take you down."

Kema laughed. She looked much as she had back in the Tooth & Hookah, though she now wore battered leather armor over her linen tunic and trousers. "My allies are driving off your beast as we speak. They'll return to me in a few moments, whether I call them or not. Surrender now and save yourselves the trouble of a fight."

"Not a chance," Farhaan said, almost before Kema finished her sentence.

"Hey!" I sputtered. "You don't speak for both of us."

Twin surprised stares from Farhaan and Kema.

"Kidding," I said. "You should have seen the look on your faces."

Kema snarled and took a step toward me, raising her scimitar. Farhaan took the opportunity to jump in and deliver a solid punch into Kema's armpit. Kema bit back a howl of pain and retreated, glowering. I pressed forward with dagger outstretched. "We're not interested in killing you."

"You don't speak for both of us," Farhaan muttered.

"Let's say goodbye here and hope our paths never cross again," I offered.

Sparks all but flew from Kema's eyes. "I'm not surprised he would team up with a grave-robber. Look at you two. Desecrators of tombs, killers of innocents. Kill me and my allies will incapacitate you and bring you both to our temple for justice. Kill them and your punishment still awaits, inevitable, in the Boneyard."

I let her ramble while I wracked my brain for a plan. I couldn't argue with the logic of Kema's statement, barring the religious diatribe at the end. We were at a serious disadvantage. I scanned the camp, searching for any sort of

MUMMY'S MASK

aid among the crumbling columns and scattered bedrolls. My dagger followed Kema's every move like a dowsing rod. I slipped my free hand into a pocket of my caftan.

"We're neither tomb-robbers nor murderers," Farhaan was saying. "You've been misled."

"Oh?" Kema kept her scimitar up, her sharp eyes watching for an opportunity. From the river came a shout of alarm, a figure pointing at us from the top of the beach. "How many of your troupe returned from the mausoleum? 'Hero of the Half-City' indeed. More like 'Destroyer of—'"

"We don't have time for this." I freed my hand from my pocket and flung a cloud of glittering, sparkling motes into Kema's face.

At least that's what was supposed to happen. My swim in the river had left the alchemical powder damp and clumpy. Much of the glitter and sparkle was gone, leaving mostly dun-colored blobs that spattered onto Kema's face.

Still, enough of the effect remained. A few dancing motes flew into Kema's eyes. She shrieked and rubbed at her face. Bethos had told me the blinding effect would last only a few minutes, so I grabbed Farhaan by the elbow and took off toward the camp.

He dragged on my arm. "Where are we going? There are a lot of very angry, very armed people that way."

"Trust me, I have a plan!"

Kema slashed blindly at us as we darted past. The tip of her blade scored my arm and I winced.

"This isn't over!" Kema howled.

The kidnappers gathered on the beach. Two sat on the ground, badly injured by the looks of it, while one secured the recovered camels. Two others faced toward us, blades drawn, and I couldn't see the rest. Either they were chasing camels in the desert or in the belly of the crocodile.

The two armed guards dashed for us. I pointed my dagger at the wooden carving of Wadjet's symbol on the wall. "Grab that."

"What?"

"The wooden thing. Grab it!"

I charged our attackers, hoping I could hold them off for the minute or so it took Farhaan to do as I had ordered. I tossed a dagger at one kidnapper and sliced his neck, eliciting a grunt of pain and a spray of blood. I drew a second blade and dove between the two as they neared me. They flailed at me as I tumbled past. I grabbed a handful of sand and threw it at one man's face as I righted. It wasn't blinding powder, but he flinched and gave me room to get my blade up and secure my footing. I feinted at the other kidnapper, drawing him away from Farhaan, while he tried to take my head off.

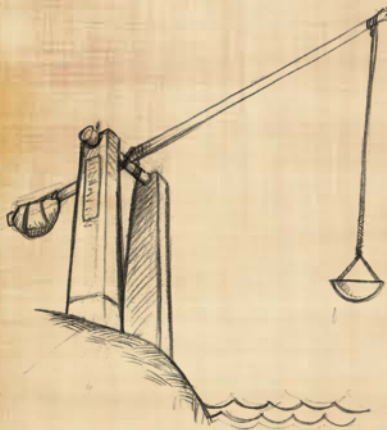
Now they were on me in earnest, working together to force me back into a corner where two old walls met. I gave ground before their weaving blades. Remembering Kema's words, I took heart in the idea that they weren't fighting to kill me, only to kidnap me and bring me to some mysterious cult-temple for yet more mysterious "justice." That sounded much better.

Farhaan crossed behind my attackers, dragging the wooden carving along. The cumbersome board made it hard for him to hustle. He met my eyes as I feinted and parried, trying not to give ground. I tossed my head toward the river, hoping the movement looked natural. Farhaan nodded and changed direction.

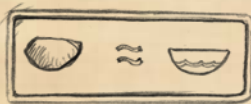
One of the kidnappers caught the movement and leveled a heavy sweep of his scimitar at my head. I gave ground, and he angled himself between me and my route to Farhaan. The kidnappers exchanged short, growly sentences I couldn't make out. I tried a rush between them, but they drove me back with quick jabs of their blades. Gritting my teeth, I fell back further. They pushed. Pinning me into the corner.

I heard Farhaan call my name. "Jump!" I shouted. "I'll follow!"

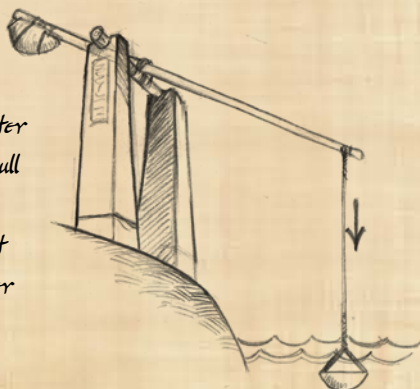
If I didn't get out of here in the next few seconds, I'd be left behind at the mercy of this gang. I let my gaze drift to the left and make a motion with my free hand, as if signalling an ally. One kidnapper turned his head to look.



A shadoof or shaduf is a common Garundi irrigation tool that helps people haul water from the river.



A counterweight that can support a half-full bucket is attached to a lever.



The person hauling the water uses her weight to easily pull the bucket down, filling it, then lets the counterweight help her lift it, to fill water jars or irrigation ditches.

I took my chance, slamming into his chest and driving my dagger into his side. The man let out a scream and tried to swing at me, but I was too close. I let go of the dagger's hilt and grabbed two fistfuls of robe. As the other came for me I swung my new shield around and heaved. The momentary tangle as the kidnappers danced drunkenly was enough to let me sprint after Farhaan.

I careened around the old wall and saw the wide stretch of riverbank, and Farhaan already plummeting off the cliff. He disappeared from sight but I heard the splash as he hit the water.

I hesitated for a split second. Footsteps pounded in the sand behind me.

Then I was running for the observation post, the stone shelf I'd seen from the river. Worn steps cut into the side and I took them two at a time. The last kidnapper was on my heels. I reached the summit and leaped out over the river.

A brief moment of dizziness and elation as I soared through the air—

I hit the end of the shadoof and scrambled for purchase. The weighted beam swung wildly—it was made to hold a bucket of water, not a flying Pathfinder. But I managed to keep my grip on the crumbling wood as the beam hauled me out over the river. In a second it would bring me back around and slam me into the river bank.

I let go as I swung out over the river, and my momentum carried me along a few more feet before I plunged into the water. I came up sputtering, dragging Toothy's travel-satchel to the surface with me to make sure he didn't

drown. Farhaan called my name. Already the current was carrying the board away, Farhaan clinging to its edge.

I kicked out hard, and despite the caftan dragging around my knees and the awkwardness of the travel-satchel, I managed to swim to the makeshift raft. Farhaan reached out a slick hand. I twisted my fingers in his sleeve and he hauled me close enough to scramble up. I lay halfway on the raft, my legs dangling in the water.

I coughed wetly. "You owe me five new daggers."

"A small price to pay for such a dramatic rescue by such an... innovative rescuer."

"One was enchanted, too. What do you mean, innovative? I had everything under control." I practically had to shout to be heard over the rushing river.

Farhaan tapped a hand on the board. "I wouldn't have thought to use this as a raft."

"What can I say? I live by my wits." I adjusted my position, settling more firmly on the raft. "Kema wasn't in your inn coincidentally, was she? You knew who she was when you jumped into our fight."

"You don't think I put my life on the line for anyone who wanders into my bar, do you?" he hollered.

"No, just me."

He grinned. I was dying to ask him about Kema and her interest in him, but I had to concentrate on staying afloat, and I could barely hear him at that moment. When we made landfall, I'd make him tell me everything. Until then, I had to be content with a companionable silence as we floated down the winding Crook.

RIVER TAXES

Rivers are the arteries of a country, carrying life-giving water to farms, villages, and cities. It's no surprise most cities are built next to a river—or even better, on a delta where a river splits in two. The water irrigates the land, provides the people with something to drink, and brings boats and fish to the area. Many riverside communities in Osirion build shadoofs—long poles balanced with a bucket on one end and a counterweight on the other—along the banks. With minimal effort, farmers can swing the bucket into the river and then swing it back to irrigate fields or fill jars.

Like anything vital to survival, rivers are often taxed by governments. Historically, in parts of Osirion, river level charts were carved on sheer banks or on stone pillars placed along a river. Seasonal floods changed the water level over the course of a year, and predicting these changes was vital to the prosperity of the nation. Lines carved in the pillars allowed river-watchers (usually priests of Gozreh or Wadjet) to measure the changing water height and check the quality of deposited silt in order to predict how fruitful the growing season would be. Taxes for river travel would then be adjusted accordingly: In fertile seasons, the river tax would be high in anticipation of this abundance. In dry seasons, tax rates fell and travelers would be warned that lean times were coming.

In the wake of Arden's death, a number of storms ravaged the Osirian coastline and disrupted the cycle of the rivers. The river level charts were temporarily abandoned, and new tax systems were put in place in individual cities to replace the income. Though the rivers have returned to normal, most cities continue to maintain their own tax systems. A few river level charts are still in use, but most are no more than curiosities along the riverbanks.

