



Seeing Different Horizons

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I'd never thought before that one could sit angrily, but I did so now. I fairly radiated rage as I slumped back in my chair, arms crossed, glowering. My clothes—waterlogged from the Crook, then dried by the sun—hung in wrinkled folds. Folds filled with sand. Boots filled with sand. My feet felt scraped raw from our trek across the desert. I don't even want to talk about my hair.

Farhaan and I had ridden our emergency raft for only a short time before the old wood started to give way. We stumbled, waterlogged, onto the far bank and there decided to head south, to Ipeq.

"It's no farther away than Tephu," Farhaan said. "And from Ipeq we can hire a boat. That way we'll throw Kema and her crew off the trail."

It wasn't a perfect plan, but it wasn't bad, and I had been curious to see the famed city of Ipeq. We slogged along the riverbank for another day until the walled bastion of the city rose on the horizon.

The trek was more arduous than I'd expected, though, and I found I couldn't easily appreciate the magnificence of Ipeq—and it is magnificent. There could be no hopping over the walls here as I did at the necropolis in Wati. These city walls, gleaming white, stretched over a dozen feet tall and were so wide a crocodile could sun itself comfortably atop them. Armed guards stood watchfully at every possible point of entrance. But my sunburn and sand-rash and hunger had rendered me immune to Ipeq's glamour. All I could think about was finding a place to wash off the sand and get a good meal.

Now we sat inside a cool inn—the Shadowed Oasis. As the name promised, the room's clay walls kept the heat out and the light dim. False palm fronds woven from linen and dyed in riotous colors hung from the ceiling. A mug of fine Ipeq beer (thick and sweet and filling as a loaf of bread) sat before me, next to a plate of mostly eaten slices of cold ox tongue and pickled vegetables. But my anger overshadowed these comforts.

"I don't know what else you expect me to do," Farhaan said. "I certainly don't have any money. I was kidnapped, remember?"

"Yes, and you haven't yet explained that."

"I told you." Heavy sigh. "Kema is an unbalanced and uninformed woman. She thinks I did something horrible to cause the deaths of my team inside the necropolis. She's a fanatic. It was a dangerous mission and I did my best, end of story."

"Beginning of story!" I made a mental note to change that line to something cleverer in my journal, then decided against

it for the sake of accuracy. "That's the worst lie I've ever heard, and now it's cost me my most valuable possession."

"I didn't ask you to sell it."

"We didn't have much of a choice, since you had nothing to contribute."

"Most sorry. I should have asked Kema to leave my money pouch on me when she dragged me out of my bed."

I took a long drink of mud-thick beer and tucked a few scraps of tongue into the travel satchel that rested on the table. Toothy stirred within, and I soon heard him chomping away.

"At least we have money now," I said, rage ebbing to resignation. "We can buy passage back to Tephu as soon as you like. From there you can find your own way to Wati."

Farhaan's eyes softened. He picked up his beer, stared at it, then set it down. "Nenet, I'm sorry about your amulet."

"I'll head down to the docks right now," I said, horrified to hear a tremor in my voice. I stood up quickly, slung Toothy over my shoulder, and headed out the door.

"Nenet!"

I strode away from the inn, pushing my way through the crowded street. Farhaan called my name again. I pretended not to hear. He caught up to me moments later despite my efforts, catching me by the shoulder. I shrugged off his touch but let him draw me to the side of the busy street.

"Nenet, I *am* sorry. I meant that."

"You're going to have to do better than that if you want me to believe you."

Farhaan looked as bad as I did in his bleached, wrinkled garb. He'd torn off the long hem of his tunic to make a head wrap, but his nose was still peeling from the sun. He frowned. "I don't understand why you're so angry. It's not like you've been honest with me."

"Me? I'm honest as the day is long, and in the desert that's pretty blasted long."

"You haven't been straight with me since the day we met, with your stories about seeking out your 'ancestral heritage.' Give me some credit. I see the desperation in your eyes."

My heart twinged as if stabbed with a needle. I shifted the travel satchel from one shoulder to another to buy me time. "I have been honest. At first I didn't tell you about excavating the tomb to find the amulet, but only because I didn't know you. I told you the truth soon enough. I am looking for my heritage, nothing more."

"I don't believe you any more than you believe me."

I let out an exasperated breath. "Fine. If that's what it takes to hear the truth about you and Kema. I am here to learn about my ancestry, but only because—Farhaan, look!"

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THE CITY OF IPEQ

Thousands of years ago, An-Hepsu III, the Pharaoh of Blades, ruled Osirion with unparalleled military might. The Pharaoh of Blades personally trained his own honor guard and routinely sparred with his soldiers, killing those who failed to impress him. Yet the pharaoh's most notable deed occurred in -2385 AR, when he erected the city of Ipeq.

Ipeq was originally a strictly military holding, designed and constructed at the pharaoh's behest by genies, and its origins are immediately obvious in the high walls, imposing fortresses, and remnants of inhumanly straight streets. Over millennia of relative peace, however, the human inhabitants of Ipeq have made the city their own, slowly laying a more mundane warren of streets over the perfect lines of the original city. Even today, travelers can find small gold plates fused into the walls of Ipeq's buildings, stamped with script in the language of the genies praising the Pharaoh of Blades and extolling the city's strength.

Though invasion from Katapesh is no longer a serious concern in modern-day Osirion, Ipeq maintains its military might and brings a feeling of security to the Osirians. Ipeq's garrison is widely known to house the strongest and most skilled warriors in all the land, and its navy, comprised of its famous scorpion boats, handle threats to Osirion's rivers and the trade that they facilitate. Ipeq's position on the bank of the Crook cements its position as a bustling trade hub even as it remains a symbol of Osirian military might.



To his credit he *did* look, which showed he trusted me to some extent. Working their way down the packed street were three familiar figures in robes and colorful scarves. Kema's gang had made it to Ipeq as well.

"Down here," I said, tugging Farhaan's arm as I headed for the nearest alley.

"This way," Farhaan said at the same time. He tried to pull me into the churning crowd.

We pulled each other in opposite directions for a second before each of us tried to follow the other. My nose bruised against his shoulder as we collided.

"Ow!"

"Sorry."

"Just follow me."

We sprinted down the alley, but I soon realized that Farhaan's plan might have been better. Ipeq was built by humans originally, but legend says genie-magic helped the development along. Many of the city's boulevards are matched by clean, wide alleys that stretch in perfectly straight lines between the buildings, in order to create tactical opportunities for the city's militia. We seemed to be right in the middle of one of those damnably straight-angled districts.

I saw no ready hiding places, so we raced along the entire length of the alley until we reached the next thoroughfare. This one was packed with travelers and residents, vendors and purchasers. Stalls and carts lined the bases of the two-story sandstone buildings that loomed over the crowd. Shouted voices, the braying of beasts, laughter, and song echoed off the buildings and filled the corridor with a vital din. To the right I heard the hum of machinery and saw a potter's wheel spinning beneath an open-air hut attached to a larger building. To the left, a communal fountain splashed over paving stones. Clusters of children raced around the fountain, laughing.

As we darted into the crowded street, I cast a look over my shoulder. A robed kidnapper jogged along behind us, still a few dozen feet away. I let the crowd sweep us along and said to Farhaan, as quietly as I could amid the din, "I think we've been spotted."

His muttered curse was lost in the noise. We moved fast, pushing our way past knots of people and squeezing past mule-drawn carts. Vendors called out to us, hawking everything from dried fish hanging in string-tied bunches to tiny pyramids of fragrant incense.

"You said earlier we could leave whenever I was ready," Farhaan huffed. "Now seems like a good time."

MUMMY'S MASK



I recalled what I could of the city's layout. "Right at the next turn. That'll take us toward the docks."

We were almost at the end of the street when the crowd changed direction. People ahead of us turned around and started back the way they'd come or spread out to either side of the street. At first I was grateful for the space, allowing Farhaan and me to hustle forward, but then I saw the reason for the shift.

A wall of flashing steel and trailing pennants blocked the entire cross-street. I stopped in dismay, shielding my eyes against the gleam of sun on polished helms. "There can't be an attack," I said. "No one's warred in this city for decades."

"It's not an attack," Farhaan said. The soldiers tromped before us, keeping perfect step. Crimson and gold paneled tunics embroidered with blue scorpions covered their light breastplates. Red crests adorned the helms of the officers. "It's the processional. Once a month they celebrate Ipeq's strength with a military showing."

"And they happened to pick today. Lucky us."

I made for a narrow space between two buildings, not an alley but an alcove made to allow access via side doors. The crowd was turning slowly but steadily, and soon we'd be completely exposed to our pursuer. "I hope you can climb," I said as we ducked into the alcove.

"After you." Farhaan gave a mock bow.

I found handholds in the cracks between the sandstone blocks and hauled myself up. Halfway up the wall I glanced down to make sure Farhaan followed. I figured anyone who had made a name for himself exploring the necropolis would be able to climb at least a little. Despite the purchase the rough wall afforded me, my muscles shook by the time I pulled myself onto the roof.

I rolled onto my back and stared at the dazzling sky, breathing heavily. Farhaan clambered onto the roof with a grunt and flopped down beside me.

"Think he saw us?" Farhaan asked.

"We'll know soon enough. Maybe now you can tell me why exactly they're after you?"

"Oh no. You were telling me about your mission."

I rolled onto my stomach with a sigh and inched to the edge of the roof. I peered over the edge cautiously and scanned the crowd. I didn't immediately see our robed pursuer, and I ducked my head back quickly, not wanting to make myself a target. I shifted back to where Farhaan lay, hands folded over his stomach.

I couldn't figure out the best place to start. "I never had anyone except my grandfather."

"Mother's father or father's father?"

"Father's. My folks died when I was just a baby." My voice sank into a well-worn cadence as I recounted the events again.

"When Mother got sick, she sent me away to Grandfather's to

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keep me safe. Father stayed to take care of her, but caught the same illness and they both died. Varisians call it river fever. People catch it from time to time.”

“So it was just you and grandpa.”

“Pretty much. He seemed ancient to me, a scholar who cared only about his books. History and genealogy. He was set in his ways, and I wasn’t into having my ways set. He always said we saw different horizons.” At Farhaan’s blank look, I searched for a corresponding Osirian idiom. “You could say we drank from different wells.”

“I get it. So you left in search of more amenable relatives?”

“Oh, no, it wasn’t like that. No matter our differences, Grandfather and I loved each other. He didn’t understand my wanderlust—he thought my curiosity could be satisfied with books, but I wanted the experience to *write* those books. Still, he cared so much about family. He was always telling me stories about how we’d traveled from Osirion to Varisia six generations ago, fleeing Kelish oppression.” I rolled onto my back and fixed my eyes on a wispy cloud. “He always told me we were descended from pharaohs.”

“The picture becomes clearer.” Farhaan raised himself up on one elbow. “You’re searching for your family fortune.”

“My lineage,” I stressed. “After six generations, things get a bit muddled. Maybe we’re royalty, maybe we’re not, but grandfather cares so much about our bloodline. If I could find some evidence, some certainty about where we came from...”

That tremor was back in my voice. It was enough for Farhaan to guess the truth. “He’s sick?”

I nodded. “More old than sick. The healer says this will be his last winter. Once I get the tomb translation I’ll go home, and then he’ll know our family history will be recorded properly.” My voice softened. “I never took his stories seriously. Never cared about my Osirian heritage or where my great-greats might have come from. Now that I’m here, though... well. That’s all.”

When Farhaan spoke again, his voice was muted. “I know that helplessness. To see someone slipping away and there’s nothing you can do. I’m sorry.”

I was about to reply when I realized the sound of armored marching had faded away. I got up in a crouch and scuttled over to the edge of the roof. The street below was clear (well, clear of soldiers anyway). The usual throng packed the avenue once more.

I also saw, almost directly beneath us, a band of scarf-wrapped kidnappers. They talked among themselves, hands on scimitar hilts. I drew back onto the roof.

“Parade’s over,” I whispered, “but we’ve drawn a crowd.”

“Are they climbing?”

“I don’t think they know precisely where we are. They’re hoping we’re hiding nearby, though, and that they’ll spot us when we try to leave.”

“Can we get around them?”

I pointed to the neighboring roof. “How are you at jumping?”

“About the same as climbing.”

“Here.” I handed him Toothy. “I’ll go first.”

The gap between the rooftops wasn’t too wide, but the fall looked awfully long. I took a running leap and cleared the space easily. I let myself fall into a roll on the other side and came up dusty and breathless but undamaged.

Farhaan tossed me the travel satchel and I slung it over my shoulder once more. He followed with a powerful jump, and while he crossed the gap easily enough, his landing was far less graceful. He hit hard and collapsed into a sideways sprawl. I ran to help him up. “You alright?”

“Never better,” he said with a grimace. I saw he favored his ankle, but there was nothing I could do to help. We crossed the roof and climbed down the other side of the building. By the time Farhaan touched ground and we started for the docks, he was limping noticeably.

I saw no signs of pursuit as we made our way to the river’s edge. Farhaan’s ankle slowed us down. He had to take my arm and lean on me as we hobbled along. His injury turned out a blessing in disguise, though, because it gave me time to spot Kema before she spotted us.

She’d removed the colorful robes of her order to reveal well-worn traveling gear. She’d even tucked her hair under a light blue scarf to further disguise herself. I was on my guard, though, and caught a glimpse of her face beneath the scarf before we got too close. How she’d tracked us here I didn’t know, but here she was and she was obviously watching for us.

Unlike the docks in Tephu, tall stone walls surrounded Ipeq’s waterfront. Armed guards flanked the single gate through which travelers streamed in and out. Of course a military city would have a defensible dock. Kema would be sure to see us when we tried to pass through.

I steered Farhaan to the side. We took cover behind a group of women in colorful caftans who haggled noisily over strings of peridot beads.

“I’d hoped never to see that face again,” I muttered.

“Kema?”

I turned to Farhaan and stared him square in the eye. “I need to know what’s between you and her. Why is she hunting you?”

Farhaan hesitated but didn’t look away. Finally, he nodded. “On the last run we made, I lost two companions inside Wati’s necropolis. They were all seasoned explorers, used to danger, but we underestimated the power of the undead within. I underestimated their power. I could have done more research. I could have—I could have done something.”

“I thought Kema was all about protecting Osirian artifacts, though. Didn’t you have permission to enter the necropolis?”

The women near us raised their voices in shrill objection to the price of the necklaces. Out of the corner of my eye I saw the merchant bring out a substantially smaller string of beads. That didn’t please the women either. I let their chatter cover our conversation and turned my attention back to Farhaan.

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"We did. When we destroyed the undead, even though we suffered terrible losses, we were able to consecrate their bodies and put the tomb back in order. The undead had several items we couldn't identify, though, including some valuable pieces. We brought them out with us and the priests of Pharama let us keep them as a reward."

"And that's what's got Kema's robe all bunched?"

"Not exactly." Now his gaze dropped. "One of our team was killed and reanimated by the undead. We had to destroy her and burn her body."

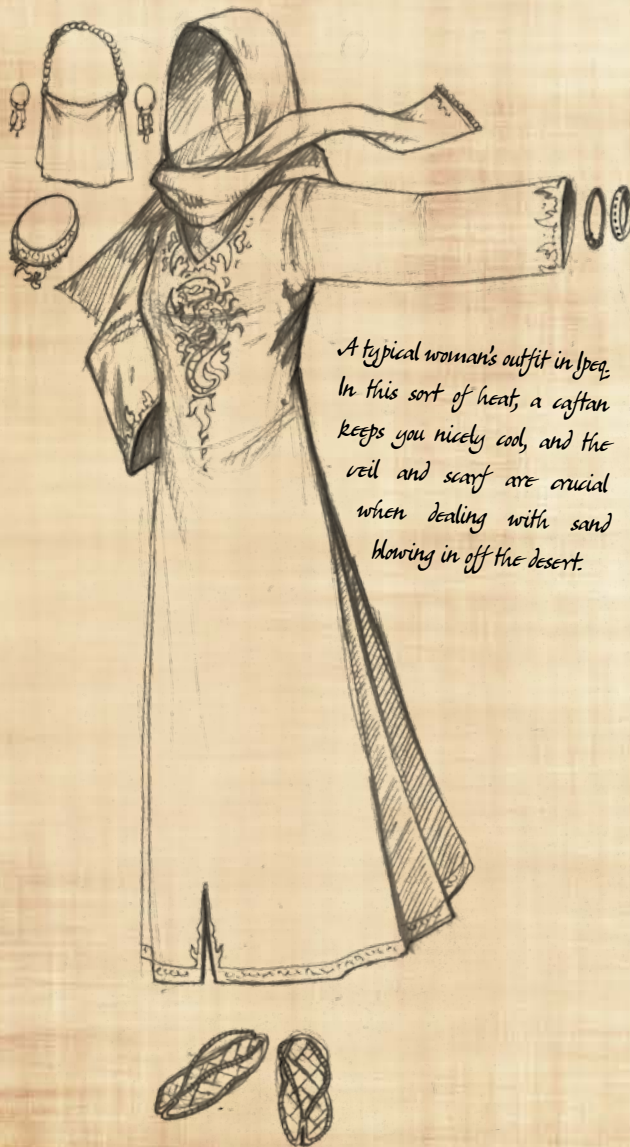
"And she was...?"

"Kema's sister."

"Oh." I glanced in the direction of Kema and the gate. "I see."

"I promise, Nenet, I did everything I could to save her. When we ran out of options, I ensured she would find peace after death. I tried to tell Kema that, but..."

"Yeah. I don't imagine she was very rational about it."



A typical woman's outfit in Ipea. In this sort of heat, a caftan keeps you nicely cool, and the veil and scarf are crucial when dealing with sand blowing in off the desert.

"Exactly."

I let the silence settle between us, but I knew we couldn't wait here all day. To the best of my knowledge, the gates closed at night, and as the shadows lengthened and the crowds thinned, we'd be hard pressed to hide. Perhaps in a crowd, at least we could sneak through the gate.

"Any ideas?" Farhaan asked.

"One," I said, eyeing the colorful baubles at the stall next to us. I turned away from Farhaan and said in my best Osiriani, "Excuse me, ladies—how much money are you short?"

"I thought I'd have to talk you into this," I said some time later.

"Nope."

Farhaan and I ambled toward the gate with our newly bought friends around us. Altogether we made a group of six—enough, I hoped, to throw Kema off the scent. I tried to watch Kema without looking like I was watching her. "I mean, I thought you'd object a little bit."

"Not at all."

I gave Farhaan a sidelong look. I'd used an overly heavy hand with the kohl, giving him a raccoon-like appearance over the face scarf. "Well you certainly, um, wear it well."

Farhaan smoothed his hands down the front of his silk caftan. "Arshea isn't unknown in these southern regions, you know. Am I making you uncomfortable with my femininity?"

Somehow I was the one blushing. "Not at all," I muttered. The ladies around us giggled brightly and one took Farhaan's other arm. My own caftan seemed a size too large and I almost tripped on the hem. "We can both work on being feminine. I'm about as graceful as an aurochs in this thing."

"Try putting your weight more on the balls of your feet."

"Quiet, we're getting close."

I kept my arm on Farhaan's to help him balance, but our slower pace looked more natural in our flowing garments. Farhaan talked to me in Osiriani, affecting a lighter tone and acting as if we were on a trip to visit relatives in Tephu. The other women picked up their own conversation.

I focused on not meeting Kema's gaze while keeping my own eye movements and body language natural. As we passed by, I glanced briefly at her, just as I would with any stranger standing squarely in the middle of the road. She glanced back, and a cold chill ran down my spine. Farhaan kept the conversation up, and I moved on as if we hadn't a care in the world.

Just like that, we were through the gate. I forced myself to keep my steady, even pace as we made our way down a flight of broad stone steps to the waterfront. Once we were safely ensconced in the crowd, we bid goodbye to our new friends. They wished us a blessed voyage free from Kema's wrath. (I'd told them she was a jealous ex-lover set out to ruin our trip. I don't think they entirely believed my story, but they were happy enough to dress up Farhaan and accept my gold.)

Crafts of all sizes and configurations bobbed on the river, stretching in either direction as far as the eye could see.

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Farther down the bank I saw two scorpion boats floating side by side. The craft are legendary in battles. Some say the scorpion boats came into existence through the same genie-magic that spawned the city. Curved, segmented legs seemed to form the hulls, and a barbed scorpion tail, plated with gold, arced off the back of each boat. I feasted my eyes on the famous craft, wishing we had more time to stop and examine them.

Sailors called out fares and destinations and I stopped at the first one to say, "Tephu. How much for two?"

The sailor, a tanned man with a prodigious gut despite his rosy muscles, named an outrageous fee, and Farhaan expertly haggled us down to five gold pieces altogether.

"When do we leave?" I asked.

"When we fill the fares or tomorrow morning, whichever comes first."

"If we pay for ten fares can we leave now?"

The sailor raised an eyebrow. "I'll speak to the captain."

We lingered by the ship, waiting for the sailor's return. I fought the urge to look over my shoulder and see if Kema was watching us. Farhaan held my arm lightly, but I could feel the tension in his body.

After what seemed like forever, the sailor returned. "Come aboard, then. We'll leave immediately."

The ship—a good-sized, flat-bottomed craft—prepared for departure. The crew, only a half-dozen men, hustled around untying ropes and freeing long poles from their racks. Farhaan sank down on a wooden bench on deck.

I freed the travel satchel from beneath my robe and fished inside for the money pouch. Toothy nosed his way out of the bag to look curiously about the deck. I glanced at the sailor, whose eyes had grown suddenly large. "It's alright," I said. "He's tame."

As I spilled gold into the sailor's palm, my eyes drifted over his shoulder. Kema stood at the gate, staring down at us. Her blue scarf caught the last of the dying light. I glanced down at the travel satchel, where Toothy once again lifted his snout into the air.

"You have your money," I said hastily. "Now let's go!"

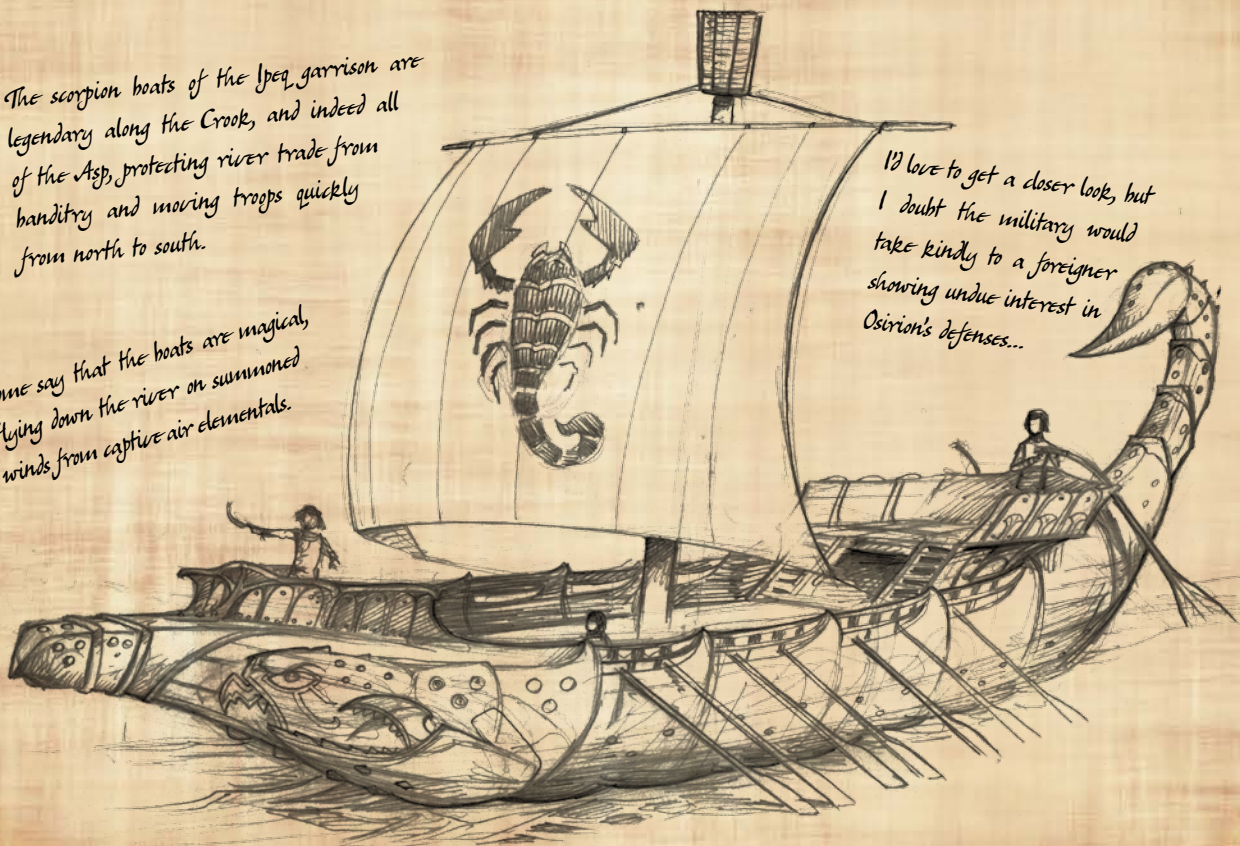
The captain hollered the order to cast off. Kema broke into a run. I stood frozen, all my muscles tense, watching Kema bound down the stairs. She hollered as she ran—I thought I heard the word "criminal," and my heart sped up. If she accused us of something, then innocent or not, we could spend days or weeks tied up in the legal system.

One sailor poled us away from the dock. Kema tore down the waterfront, heading straight for us. A couple of the sailors had noticed her and pointed as she flew toward us. I put a hand on Farhaan's shoulder for balance as the current caught us and the boat swayed.

Up until the last moment, I thought Kema was going to try to make the jump. I think she thought so, too, as she sped up just before she skidded to a halt at the edge of the dock. My last sight as the current caught us was her scowling face, watching us as we sailed away.

The scorpion boats of the Ipeq garrison are legendary along the Crook, and indeed all of the Asp, protecting river trade from banditry and moving troops quickly from north to south.

Some say that the boats are magical, flying down the river on summoned winds from captive air elementals.



I'd love to get a closer look, but I doubt the military would take kindly to a foreigner showing undue interest in Osirion's defenses...