

Fat Dreams

by

Idris Ostrovsky

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Prologue

The cobbler lived and worked on the second story of the Brueckner building on 867 West Lane, Portsmouth Corner.

If his schedule had held, my shoes would be mended and awaiting my collection. The weather on this day was questionable as Mayhaven weather often tended to be. To folk, it seemed it only ever stopped raining for no other reason than to lend a renewed sense of drama to the next downpour. The banks of dark clouds above and the endless puddles below had succeeded in putting downward twists on many mouths and backs. People walked with the hunches of wet vultures, wishing their shoulders could protect them from the little streams that ran off the countless rooftops of the city.

No matter the discomfort to the bodies of man, Mayhaven itself stood proud against the deluge. It was a single magnificent tortoise shell of human achievement: statehouse basilicas in shouldered lockstep with the lattices of factory and apartment alike. The whole city, from cobblestone to cathedral, sighed beneath its clockwork crown of industry, with nary a rooftop unshod by some steaming appliance. Despite the grandeur, beneath the steeples and smokestacks, people trundled along encumbered solely by the weather, the individual mind so sadly prone to dismissing the glorious achievement of the collective.

I walked the streets hardly able to share in the botherations of my countrymen. My shoes were waiting and the anticipation outshone any discomfort the rain could muster. I remember my mother telling

me long ago that one of the most important things to a man ought to be his shoes. You could tell much about their owner by looking upon them. Now, this is the point of value, to my mother's logic, because the man does not expect you to look there. Therefore, if his shoes look well, it is because he wants them to look well for himself and not for others. Now, without delving into philosophy, I proudly assert that shoes indeed qualify as a prime article in my life's inventory. I have found there are few pleasures that can compete with wearing a pair that fit ever so perfectly. Such an issue is one I dedicate myself to gladly, one of those rabbit holes I ever more readily cast myself into with age.

Mayhaven is like that, built of folk and their preferred veins of content. In the enthusiastically progressive age we live in, Mayhavenites are never without a new activity or invention with which to occupy themselves. And it is to this code of proactive conduct they adhere with religious zeal. In honesty, I cannot say I participate in many of these novelties. Ever more when I find myself without a pressing appointment, I would rather put on my treasured shoes, arm myself with pipe or teacup, and set to reading all the books I was not bright enough to read in my childhood. However, aloft that lazy vantage, I spectate with boundless optimism upon a world that is so rapidly advancing beyond the world of my forebears.

I mark both with scientific certainty and a certain clannish pride that this current of change issues forth from the contemporary blossoming of human civilization. Whereas man once trod in the

brutish weeds of the animal realm, we have risen from such darkness by holding aloft lights of our own making. In prehistoric pasts, forces of nature were free to juggle us about in a disinterested apathy, making us wander from one cruel periphery to another in their crooked and unsettled domain.

Yet over the millennia, through bitterness and triumph, we have grown and grown until there now shines an undeniable truth, the truth that the central beating heart of this world has passed from the cold breast of nature to the ribs of man. And this new balance is upheld by man's promise of progress, a covenant no lesser beast can match. A promise that ascends unfettered from the western cradle of Mayhaven, all the protestations of uncouth wilderness long since bested before the city's spires. Now it is honest man that stands as the compass for the ship of the world. It is the newly-born automobile that is the writer of the modern holy book. Or the chemical compounds that allow men to blast deep into the earth to find its buried treasures. Or the newly-come telephones that allow us to communicate at great distances. It is these shining spears hurled unto and beyond potential that show us the limits of our world, and thus truly shape our times. These are developments of self-attesting importance and I, no matter how codgerly I may grow, am more than willing to acknowledge that they are every bit as vital as my shoes.

However, at this moment my shoes had priority. I made my way ever closer to the Brueckner building where the cobbler waited,

pacing quickly. It was a walk to be sure. A gentleman such as myself would not violate the codes of sober conduct by running through the streets like a scapegrace, even with something as vital as my readied footwear at stake.

Of course, I do not find anything particularly wrong with running, in fact I acquiesce to the reality that running is in all men. Our ancestors took to running because they *had* to run. Now we, in the peaceable age we have earned, no longer have the same need, but still find ourselves given to doing so. No, the reason I refrain from moving at such a rushed pace is that I exist in a society comprised of gentlemen and ladies of such perfect composure that I fall quickly as an outcast if I do not mimic certain rhymes and paces every step of the way.

Yes, I suppose it is a rather silly concern when you state it so. And perhaps this very rigidity might be called *the* problem with Mayhaven's gentlefolk. You see, nothing comes without a price and often this price rises in parallel to the value of the thing to which it is attached. In this case our conviction, proper though it is, that we are nearing the pinnacle of a perfect society reliably leads us into measures of confrontation with those who do not conform. These nonconformists can find themselves within our society, perhaps even natives of it, yet for one reason or another fail to see the world in the proper way.

It is a strange fate to consider: that one may come from parents

like any others, attend the same school, wear the same uniform, see the same parades, and yet still find themselves incapable of viewing life in the likeness of their peers. These characters often lead tragic lives as their souls, isolated as they are, begin to speak in languages other than the common tongue. It is not that these sorry beings cannot love or be loved, rather they cannot be understood. The gap in language—I am referring of course to the language of the soul—means that even sincere attempts to communicate sympathy or concern can often end in nothing more than a wretched pain for the recipient. In this pain, these people are apt to yell out, crafting new words from their woe, ever widening the gap between our languages, and so our shores.

Yet not all nonconformists come from within our society. True, the majority of them are cursed with the simple sorry misfortune of being born somewhere other than Mayhaven or its surrounding counties. I am referring of course to those tribes who live in the east.

Aged and far-flung though these folk may be, their many peoples are bound in the shared sufferance of a single crucial ailment: an inability to grasp modern truths. And, no matter what base succors pagan simplicity may grant, when the banner of reason rests unrisen, there can come no enlightenment, cultural or otherwise... Though this hardly seems to bother them. Quite the contrary; many of these undeveloped bands seem ill-disposed to the very concept of modern civilization. Instead they are set on wallowing in the desert ash, painting pictures upon rocks that the winds scour away the next day.

The government of Mayhaven has extended its hand to the desert peoples numerous times over the last few years. Yet what should have been from the start a firm handshake between cultures has in truth remained an awkward fluttering of fingers, with intellectual exchanges uncommenced and unease fueled by anecdotes. Across the many miles, often only tattered accounts of these engagements pass back to the city. We hear only of diplomacy here, violence there, and the occasional demolition of a tribal village to make room for ongoing railroad projects.

Far back here in the city, talk of the desert tribes has a strange effect. It both intrigues and repulses civil folk, equally awash in mystery and impropriety. I should hardly be surprised as indulgent gossip is quite the Mayhaven tradition, yet a profound amount of conversation concerning the eastern peoples takes place, utterly undeterred by how few facts float amid the many words. All that rests in the mind of the average citizen is a vague sentiment, some foggy fluttering of savages lurking amongst distant dunes. An opaque way of life brewed in the violent heart of the desert.

Though, in living, never would I deny the Mayhavenite (myself included) his shivers and dark curiosity toward all to do with the east. For, when one lives in the city, one can pass through the train station and see those returned from eastern ventures. They step from the carriages, clothes worn by loveless weather and with hollow countenance. I hear many fall into a furtive quietude, broken only in mad tavern-side yarns of the distant land.

Long have I found it strange that our government has never asked for my opinion in such an important field. After all, I am a professor. Professor Leopold Traum, teacher of cross-cultural relations at Grimsbuck College. Yes, that is *the* Grimsbuck College located in Jakobheim Square, right here in Mayhaven.

Though, to be fair, when I lower my credentials and review my notes, I cannot call my overlooking undeserved. Indeed, I find myself decidedly bereft of current information on the eastern situation. I know not what we are saying to the tribes nor what they are saying back. Scholarly articles concerned with the matter have slowed in recent years. And with the spaces between my classes becoming ever vaster, I scroll through my repertoire of information only to find several names and hazy concepts I picked up years ago. The names of certain tribes come to mind: Phglvrk, Wpehki. And of course whenever I gnaw on the jumbled syllables of eastern names, up through memory recurs that imposing appellation *Gul'Ul'Kul*.

The name is of no real relevance, attached neither to tribe, chieftain, or site. It is brought to mind for no reason save its hideous thumping sound. If my memory holds, it is but the name of the deity in the superstitions of the easternmost tribes, chiefly those most distant and inscrutable of folk: the Ythvk. We still have not properly translated their bewildering languages, but we have established that “Gul” is a title as opposed to part of the name. And so, with translation, the name is in fact Fat Ul'Kul. Never did I strain an understanding of what this figure is, either caregiver,

trickster, or devil, but I am sure the only culture that could produce and prostrate before such an oddly-named creation is one decidedly devoid of the amenities of civilization, such as shoes.

Ah yes, the *shoes!* I cannot believe I forgot about such treasures, even as I draw ever closer to them. You see, my mind has a tendency (increasing of late) to wander. Maybe it's for the best that my duties as a professor are growing sparser, because a holiday seems in order. After all, even with the most comfortable shoes, a man must rest his feet every once in a while. And, having come this far, my feet are tired, my socks soaked through by the muck of alleyways, my soles in dire need of sunlight. But I'll stopper the grumbles for now, as I have reached my destination.

It is a rather bothersome walk up to the second floor of the Brueckner building. One might say that any man or woman who cannot climb one flight of stairs is in a rather soggy position in terms of bodily health. I won't necessarily disagree, as my indulgence in the city's cafes, restaurants, and tea houses has left me hostage to a rather hefty waist. However, I still refuse to take all responsibility upon myself as the location "second floor of the Brueckner building" is quite deceptive.

You see, the Brueckner building, as with most structures of Portsmouth Corner, was erected sometime in the lofty "super-classical" fever of the last century, and so bore the vaunted high ceilings of the period. This meant the second floor rested where the

fourth floor would be in most other buildings. Furthermore, the residents of Mayhaven, ever since the city's storied inception, have had a dread fondness for spiral staircases. Now these staircases, despite their aesthetic appeal, are a rather infernal creation. They are just steep enough to set your legs aflame by the time you reach the top, yet their tight curvature and low-set rings demand you bend and twist your back in the most unpleasant of ways. The reliable result is the traveler reaching their destination, rendered a cripple with crucified calves and, for me, this sorry reality is only exacerbated by the Brueckner building's aforementioned height...Oh forgive me, perhaps my grumbles have not been stoppered after all.

I reached the top after a minute or two and drew my handkerchief across my forehead to mop away the sweat. It may be a detail you are rather uninterested in hearing, but I sweat more now than I ever did before. To dispense with all tact for a moment, I'm an aging rotundity with a seeming weeping-wall occupying every trench my beleaguered hairline surrenders. It's deeply amusing to me how I was called a pig by my mates in the schoolyard when I was a boy because I fancied playing in the mud. Now, later in life, I am the most intelligent, well-mannered, and cultured man I could ever be, yet also more than ever am I looking the part of that ancient insult.

The handkerchief went back in my jacket pocket and I knocked three times on the cobbler's door. The door promptly swung open and the cobbler ushered me into his cluttered home workshop, the spacious ceiling minimized by the steep slant of the roof. The

interior looked much like any other Mayhaven house, with dark oak wood, a small fire, and a certain density of personal possessions, pictures and such. The smell of leather was strong, as if smoked into the very beams of the room. By odor alone, this place would forever bear the history of its current occupant.

As the cobbler readied my shoes, I examined the room's decorations. The walls were dominated by dozens of decorative pictures, all of some fruit or blossom. There was something tawdry and innocent about the monotonous display, cute yet as devoid of deeper meaning as a faun's spots. And yet there was an importance here, for these were the bricks of a Mayhaven life. Mayhaven may be the collective might, it may be roads and great bridges, but in this home, these little trinkets were just as fast a piece of its spirit.

My trinkets, my home-makers, are quite different. For me, it is books and fine crafts, with no pictures upon my walls save a few portraits of members of the Traum clan. Though it was not always so. Once there were many pictures hanging in my home. They were not erected by me, but rather by my late ex-fiancée Margaret Aisling...Oh, Margaret.

She was always an odd woman, concerning herself with things that I never understood. She ever had a habit, one in fact that controlled her life, of considering things of utmost triviality to be of cosmic importance and vice versa. I attributed this strange trait to her sheltered upbringing in a tiny village outside of Mayhaven.

I met her several years ago as I was passing by on a college assignment and her face and fair voice caught my attention rather handily. Soon after our meeting, I persuaded her to come live with me in the city. She agreed, we became engaged, and the two of us were happy for many months. But then she changed, as people so often do. She began to complain of the city, saying it rattled her mind. More and more she insisted that the streets were full of wild animals that snapped and barked as she passed by.

At a fateful point, these demons of hers worsened to where she, without any consultation, absconded to the village of her childhood. Hardly being the inquisitive sort, it was only when she stepped off the train and was walking among the upturned cobblestones that she realized the village had been demolished soon after we met to accommodate the city's expansion. I never had the heart to tell her.

And so she returned to me in Mayhaven under a kind of unshakable defeat, continuing in her horror of imaginary things. The woman that had once tittered and sung without reprieve eventually did nothing more than sleep in her chambers, sit on the floor, and fight the sun with ever heavier drapes. On many occasions I tried to comfort her and make her understand that the animals she feared so greatly did not truly exist. I tried to lift her spirits with thoughts of our upcoming marriage and perhaps even children one day, but soon she shrank from me as well, isolated in the thickening shell of her mad fancies. The months wore on until one day I came home to find her dead. She had shot herself through the heart with a

pistol. I buried her in Mayhaven General Cemetery. No family came to visit her. And that was that. I suppose her animals just barked too loudly.

Ah forgive me, I should not have troubled you with this. It seems these days my words wander as well as my mind, though I suppose it better they go errant than my moods and feelings.

Bringing me back to the present with a dull thud, the cobbler placed my shoes on the table, whispering the price in a humble murmur. From my pocket I drew my billfold, pausing as I did, rueful at its recent thinness. I refused to linger on the consideration. I counted out the notes owed, handed them over with a smile, and grabbed my mended shoes, which gleamed with renewed vigor. Oh, what joy such perfected items brought me! I was like a little child opening their birthday gift. Dare I say, the sight and feel of them ushered me to a happiness more crisp than any in recent memory. I nodded to the cobbler, turned, and exited his shop. Such was my merriment, even the calamity of the spiral staircase did not bother me a second time. And, in the end, is that not what truly matters in this world: what a man feels and what a man does not feel?

Ever since, oh, I would reckon my teenage years, I have conscientiously strived to cultivate a method of maximizing or minimizing the effects various actions or informations, gay or grave, have had on my mental well-being. For example, with thought and temperance, I have managed to dismiss the grief associated with

Margaret's death while yet letting blossom the joy of receiving my shoes. Over the years I have shared this striving with several of my cohorts, and from among them, at times, would trickle some word of disdain or disagreement.

These speakers, often with passionate conviction, would say that sorrow should not be dodged, lest one lose the sense of responsibility connected, and that to indulge only in joys brought idleness. I disagreed, always politely, and did not let the civil conversations sag into more emotional banter. No, I'd rather remain with a view of the world precise and result-bound. For, in the end, this clarity has given me contentment, a vantage to see the truth and be soothed by it. The truth was my shoes were impeccably mended, my health was fast, and I was walking down the streets of history's greatest city.

And so, contented, I made my way home. Yes, the rain continued to patter and my countrymen continued to walk with shoulders hunched and faces tightened, but the drear did little to encroach upon my inner peace. Within an hour I had reached my abode and ventured inside. When I was a child I always had fantasies, as many little boys do, of living in a warm and snug cave. While I have certainly abandoned the barbarous prospect of literally dwelling in such a cavern, I am pleased to say that childhood feeling of bundled comfort returns whenever I enter my home proper. I hung my raincoat and, with the help of a minimal fire in the fireplace, heated water for my tea.

As I waited for the kettle, I put on my unblemished shoes and approached the shelves of my private library. The bookcases were master-wrought beauties, yet they were noticeably bereft of any new titles—call it a current “constraint of estate”. Again without lingering, I pulled out a random book. Then the true peace ensued. I readied pipe and tea, swung my regally clad feet atop a stool, and opened the book.

Reading was not my true goal. Rather, I simply sampled the various sentences within the text, with the same wandering calm with which I sipped my tea and enjoyed my tobacco. The meaningless words drifted in and out of my mind, made ever more pleasing by the gentle illumination of firelight.

If I had any present interest, I could devour the book in its entirety, stringing together the thousands of sentences like puzzle pieces and perhaps, once finished, garner a great, life-altering truth. I accepted and appreciated that the pages that lay before me could contain any magnitude of fascinating revelations. Perhaps it would only take a reading of just several pages in proper conjunction to leave even my deepest convictions altered. However, I can say quite honestly that such a passion was not burning at present. Instead, my heart was much more susceptible to the slothful peace of examining one sentence, or even better, one word at a time and the calming effect associated with such ambitionless fragmentation.

Nonetheless at certain points in our lives we are no longer

allowed to enjoy the peace of illusions and we are forced to digest large servings of truth that can often be most upsetting. I am sorry to say that such a time had arrived for me, with a series of events that would be sent spiraling into action by a simple knock upon my door.

Knock Knock.

I rose, rather irritated that my peace had been broken so abruptly, and answered the door. A young lad stood at the entryway.

“Hello, Professor Traum, sir,” he started. “Professor Sueno seeks an audience with you at the college. He wishes you to meet him in the second-floor conversation room in the library.”

My eyebrows crept toward my hair. Though we considered each other friends and I had long held respect for the fellow intellectual, it had been ages since I had sat down and spoken to Archibald Sueno. “When does he wish this appointment to take place?” I asked the boy.

“Well, sir, now,” he replied, shrugging awkwardly.

With a frown, I looked back within my quarters, staring for several moments at the dimming fire. Appointments, particularly those I learned of at short notice, made me uncomfortable. When

schedules conflicted, it felt to me like a collision of maritime vessels, my agency encroached upon by the roguish boarding party of someone else's plans.

“Very well,” I replied. “I am coming.” With that, I gave the boy a coin and sent him on his way. I then extinguished the fire, grabbed my coat, and rolled up my pants ever so slightly, so as to expose any passerby to the beauty of my refined footwear.

The weather had grown more amiable over the last hour. The banks of clouds had wrung themselves thin and sailed on. I still had to weave my way around puddles to keep the dirty water from sullyng my shoes. This vital task kept me largely occupied and thus unable to enjoy the rest of Mayhaven opening up after the rain. People began to trickle out of the innumerable buildings until they formed the large surging crowds that defined the great city in fair weather. Automobiles owned by the richer families trundled along the roads, assaulted by the envious eyes of all others. I myself kept as close to the buildings as I could, where the puddles were least frequent.

Soon I entered Jakobheim Square, the regal heart of modern Mayhaven. It was a great brick plaza, bordered by the most beautiful structures man has ever wrought. Even in muddied early twilight, it sung its worth to the world. Elegant stonework met stained glass. Banners billowed over pillars. Tall, proud steps extended from great doorways to meet the brickwork. At the center of the square was the

massive bronze statue of a sitting man, metal head resting upon a fist, deep in thought. The philosopher looked on, dignified, cultured, inquisitive, the ideal citizen. I found much of myself in him. I would often nod to him, as a friend, while making my way to the college.

I approached Grimsbuck College itself, towering gloriously at the long end of the square. How triumphant it was, how magnificent; how much this one structure defined my life. No matter how mundane the encounter, some part of my heart yearned whenever I saw it, as if wishing one could make love to a building. Here was a fount of truth, of intrinsic value, an artifact that expressed man's mastery of time. I sometimes mused that, if ever our species was to decline in some far future, new races would come upon this place, preserved across the ages, and say "My god, here once lived giants!"

I entered the great institution, navigating the halls to the given destination. Baroque panels, lush carpet, and storied portraits adorned rooms both large and small. Curiosity as to why I had been called electrified my otherwise tired steps, my hand tapping against the various banisters. Grimsbuck's library was particularly wondrous, a hushed temple of shelves and chandeliers. Few students still remained at this hour. With an eagerness I assure you is quite uncharacteristic, I walked to the library's second floor and entered the designated conversation room.

The room itself was a hearty place, cluttered with armchairs and

small writing desks. Dim lamplight sighed upon the drawers and upholstery. It was one of the college's many homey haunts and side rooms. Within stood two dapper men: one tall, the other short and stout. They turned to me as I entered. Even with faces half obscured in the muted light, I recognized them easily enough.

The tall man extended his hand with a smile. "Ah, Leopold, great to see you."

I shook my old companion's hand with a nod. "Mr. Sueno, you look well."

"It's been ages since I've seen you. Not since you got the class, if I remember correctly."

"No, the last time we saw each other was the Jakobheim Feast, just a year ago." I replied, after a hasty dig through my memory.

"No, no, both of you are wrong," the stout man interjected. "I am quite sure you saw each other at the New Year's Celebration just four months ago."

I turned to the other professor, my mouth bridged between smile and frown. "Salutations, Mr. Droom. I believe *I* am the primary frequenter of my own memory."

Geoff Droom averted his eyes in the filling of his pipe. "A rather soggy memory at this point, Leopold. Tell me, when did you host your last study? Two months ago, as *I* recall. If your memory and

aught else was in astute condition, surely you would practice your passion more often.”

I brushed his provocative words off with a smiling shrug. Droom was oft to play the prickly one in any conversation.

Sueno stepped in with the lightest tap of a foot. “Fellows, please. Cattiness does not become professors, and egos need not be stroked here. Let us do justice to ourselves and this building in which we congregate by conversing on...*worthy* matters.”

“Well, I indeed hope that the matters in question are of some significance.” I rested an elbow atop a desk. “I trust you called me here for good reason, Archibald. An aging man like myself places ever greater value on undisturbed hours.”

Sueno inclined his head. “I respect that, Leopold. However, I hope you shall not dismiss tonight’s meeting as a mere fanciful chat. Nor, once we depart, I pray, shall you let it play second fiddle to your retreats and evening strolls...It’s more than that, however. I will be honest with you. I *do* seek to deprive you of the free time by which you have found yourself so swallowed as of late.”

I frowned at that. Do you also feel those icy weeds sprout in your legs when you sense someone is about to burden you with an unwanted duty?

He went on. “But never mind that for now. I am reaching the end of a very long discussion before it has even taken place. Please

sit, my friend. We must talk.”

I let myself slowly sink into an armchair. Already the few words spoken made me bristle. Apprehension was like a traveler at my body’s border, awaiting the train that would usher it into my stomach.

Sueno elected to stand, leaning back against a table. Droom sat further away. I withdrew my pipe from my jacket and began to fill it as Sueno continued. “We all know we can converse for hours at any gathering where civil folk convene in their numbers, dissecting topics of any interest or relevance pertaining to our country. However, we are talking here in the dim and quiet because we are to excavate matters going beyond our borders.” My eyes flashed to Sueno. “I wish for us to talk about the eastern tribes.”

With a sigh of exasperation, Droom pulled the pipe from his mouth, cutting through the halo of smoke that circled his head. “Oh, god, *this* is what you called me for?” he exclaimed, earning our curious stares. “And by the way...*him?*” Droom pointed at me with his pipe.

My eyebrows raised in confusion. What did he mean?

He carried on without pause, fingering a brow. “I am sorry, Sueno, but why are we wasting our time with these people? The government expansion is underway, working well enough alone. Here we are in Mayhaven, in *Grimsbuck*, so why should time be

wasted talking, even to talk for talking's sake, about savages and barbarians? Quite frankly, I'm far more interested in where I can find the cobbler who did such a job on Leopold's shoes. That discussion would at least have some share of relevance...and *reason*."

"Not being a Mayhaven gentleman," Sueno responded, "does not make one a savage, Geoff. The eastern folk possess artists, engineers, more than enough to make a mutually beneficial connection. Did you know that, while prospecting south of the ergs, the Bramelly Expedition found remnants of a sunken city over two thousand years old? A place that had high walls, aqueducts, palaces—"

"Old bones and *ruins!*" Droom gave a swing of his arm. "Sure, if you take all history into account, any sandpit in the world will transfix you with storied antiquity. But we're not here to talk about history, Sueno. We're here to talk about the here and now, and the tribes of today do not build cities. Moreover, a scant few *ever* did. We have not found a single one still inhabited. A handful of sane clans might tend flimsy townships, but the rest trudge around the desert, getting themselves killed by wild beasts or other tribes. And, as explorers travel further east, the dregs they discover living there—the ones I know you wish to speak on—are even *worse*. They lack any shred of reason, logic, or, I daresay, humanity.

"We've reached out dozens of times, we have. We've convened with their leaders, their mystics, their hunters, everybody! We've spent months explaining every facet of our culture to them and

afterwards they look at us blankly, as if to say ‘Sorry, didn’t catch that.’ They are not there! They ignore every word we say, every order we give, every suggestion of their *own bloody senses!* Put one foot in front of the other? Too hard! Oh, no, much better to whisper and wail without reprieve or, as we’ve all heard about your oh-so-intriguing Ythvk, just stare into the horizon for days at a time, like fleshy statues.”

As I lit my pipe, Sueno gave a sigh. “...Well, Geoff, in your disagreement, you’ve driven us right to the heart of the issue. Let us be blunt. Mayhaven will not soon turn away from the east. Indeed, our nation’s dealings with the desert peoples will only increase in the coming years. As western ventures expand about the circumference of the desert, our national interest demands a more definite mapping of tribal behavior.

“What’s more, as certain expeditions pass onto the farthest reaches of the east, our government is incentivized to build profiles on those most remote indigenous societies. A particular mystery at present is that of the Ythvk tribe, which you mentioned, Geoff—the deepest-dwelling inhabitants of the east yet on record.

“From our brief observations, these people seem of a staggeringly base and ambitionless nature, lacking any pursuit of technological or cultural advancement. They fail to fully exploit the springs and oases of the desert. They wield stone tools and walk bare. Where they could make sturdy structures from mud bricks, they insist on building huts of grass, homes that offer no cover from storms or

beasts. Whereas other tribes have vibrant works of art, Ythvk culture is a barren thing, documenting neither history nor folklore. And, as if to crown this inactivity, they seem to possess a signature habit of simply sitting idly, occupying themselves with nothing more than empty staring for hours if not days. Now, bearing witness to such disinterest in one's own progression, I would say we are obligated to ask the question 'Why?'"

A silence stretched across the room. I quietly smoked my pipe, gazing at a portrait on the wall until I noticed Sueno and Droom looking at me. My eyes widened. "You're asking me?"

"Yes. It's a stumper. This is why you were brought here." As Sueno spoke, Droom eyed him with a look of impatience. I felt there was something I was not yet being told.

I shuffled in the chair, apprehension inching along. "You know my ignorance on contemporary tribal issues, Sueno. Surely there's little I can offer on this that hasn't been suggested many times over by more involved minds."

"You're a professor of cross-cultural relations." Sueno encouraged. "We'd like to hear your thoughts all the same."

A breath rippled through my lips as I was forced to think. "Well, as I understand it, the tribe enjoys significant geographic isolation. Perhaps their simplicity is but a mental defect that has proliferated through generations of inbreeding. Maybe their corner of the desert

is so stagnant that such a weakness goes unpunished by nature.”

Sueno lit his own pipe, the room now hazy with smoke. “Of course, mental degeneration is unsurprising in any people stranded in such horrid land, yet the Ythvk do not seem outwardly stricken by such a disability. Through our sparse meetings, they seem perfectly able to understand the concepts of historical records, complex tools, whatever the subject may be. They simply have no wish to put these concepts to use. It is as if their lethargy is a matter of will.”

“Well, if a matter of will it is, perhaps they are in an intellectual bondage put forth by their leadership,” I proposed. “Such a quaint society seems susceptible to a lunatic achieving power and instituting odd practices.”

Sueno slightly craned his neck. “Perhaps. The Ythvk have a village hierarchy with a chieftain at the head. Sadly, further details of their leadership are unknown to us. No visible legal codes or designated law enforcement have been observed. Behavior, both communal and individual, seems to tumble on without regulation. If the practices in question are implemented by the chieftain, it does not seem to occur through direct enforcement, but rather through some broader means of collective mediation. At this point, all I can say is this is an inconclusive though unlikely suggestion. Do you have others?”

I ran a hand across my face, scraping through my thoughts. “Certain accounts make mention of exotic drug use among the

tribes, stories of maddening herbs, incenses, and strange potions. What if the Ythvk, too, participate in such grotesque indulgences? Would any of us remain surprised at their peculiarity upon discovering they are floating about in a drug-addled stupor?"

I made this claim on uncertain ground. Little more than sun-touched stories informed me. In this field, my professorship put no academic distance between me and the average westerner. In truth, I offered this bit hastily, wishing to tread a different path of discussion sooner rather than later. For a reason I could not place, this entire topic struck me as unsuitable. The seed of my apprehension had been planted, small but there.

"Hmmm. Drugs, you say." Sueno brushed his chin with a finger. "Some traveling traders have imbibed potent spirits, or other nameless elixirs, they purchased from tribesmen, often Wpehki or other more sociable types. From our inquiries, we have deduced that the tribes use these concoctions for ritual or celebratory purposes. Now, a common effect of these substances seems to be the onset of hallucinatory episodes. Some of the traders, perfectly reasonable western folk otherwise, have killed, self-harmed, or committed lesser crimes under their influence. Such evidence illustrates that these substances are of a wretched and harmful nature."

Droom grumbled something to himself, but Sueno went on. "And that is why I question this suggestion, Leopold. In all the incidents we've witnessed, the consumption of these foreign

substances causes otherwise decent men to become reprobates. Give a man one of these drugs and he will enact a slew of unruly behaviors: dancing naked in the streets, violating passersby, getting into physical altercations, and so on. Your hypothesis would be tantalizing if the Ythvk acted like wild animals or bratty children, but they don't. No, the Ythvk, as we have already made clear, live lives of utter banality. They are as hollow vessels with no prospects, no interest in future or past. No substance we have yet documented induces such apathetic behavior. If a drug is the culprit, it is not any substance we have encountered."

I looked up as another silence began to set in, wondering where Sueno meant to take this discussion. "So...no?"

"Doesn't seem so."

"Ah, well. If you wish to keep picking my brain, I'll need to refill my pipe." As I occupied myself with the pouch of tobacco, the aforementioned icy weeds tightened. While I was not so irritated as to share Droom's vitriol, every word spoken here needled me with an odd suspense. What insights were to be gained from this *chat*? What value could the tribes far across the waist of the continent hold to the civilized world? They are but another fringe oddity of nature, born to the far chilly periphery of reason's campfire. And only a naïve romantic would think this misfortune has endowed them with anything beyond the interesting yet pointless patterns born of nature's cruel disregard, like the fetching shells a harsh sea spits out.

And, with hundreds of miles between us, their mystery holds no interest to me. I have no desire to go poking along that hazy margin that teeters beyond reason. Let the fringe be the fringe. Let the darkness remain dark. Let the ignorant stay ignorant, particularly when they are willingly so. Best to leave room for the idiot who wishes to dance in the moonlight and move oneself on to better projects. To do otherwise is to ask for trouble. And yet here I sit, still talking.

My pipe ceased to calm me at this juncture. I slowly rubbed a temple as I offered my last suggestion. From murky retellings, I gathered my words. “What of religion? What of this *Fat Ul’Kul* they worship? Perhaps their conduct is but some manner of religious observance.”

The two men paused and pondered the notion. It was a strange thing to contemplate a foreign god, a god I knew naught of beyond a name. *Fat Ul’Kul*: what a name it was. From what sunburnt daydreams did he come? What effigies were carved and burnt in his name?

“On this I cannot comment,” Sueno said softly. “I do not believe anyone can. We know very little about the Ythvk faith. In none of our encounters have any secrets been divulged.”

“None?”

“One could call it our greatest anthropological ignorance.”

Droom grumbled out from his cocoon of smoke. “You say that as if it reflects poorly on us. Tell me, Archibald, what could possibly be gained by investigating such a field? Here our nation sits, with only so much money, only so much time...and you, notepad at the ready, would look past outmoded infrastructure and struggling families to throw resources at an answerless question? To spring to action concerning such a moot issue when one could occupy oneself with studies that truly matter is, I find, perverse. Fat Ul’Kul, ha! Rubbish! We might as well spend millions of marks researching dreams. Surely we’d come away with material for a fascinating conversation, but nothing that would substantively affect our view of the natural and *consequential* world.”

I watched Droom from the corner of my eye, my mouth twisting in agreement. Sueno was not so taken. He pierced Droom with the stare his students feared. “Geoff, might I remind you that belief forms the cornerstone of man’s character regardless of where he resides? And it wields the power to make men do both eccentric and extreme things. Mayhaven itself was founded by reformist priests. And here we are discussing relations with inhabitants of land valuable to our government. You yourself have stake in the railroad project, do you not? Understanding could be the difference between the destruction or assimilation of an entire culture. Therefore their religion and their god is of some consequence, no?”

Droom shot Sueno an angry look, rolling his jaw like a bulldog. Not wanting to address Sueno’s inquiry or give his words credence,

he turned to me and asked “Traum, who did such a wonder on those shoes?”

Though caught off-guard, I cannot deny I felt a warmth as I was snapped from far-off imaginings back to the embrace of Mayhaven things. “Oh, well, his name is—”

“Traum!” Sueno said sharply.

“Yes?”

“This conversation has reached its head and it is now that I must make my request.”

Those icy weeds I mentioned? They yanked tightly, like anxious wintry vines. “Will I like this request?”

“Would you be willing to journey to the desert in two days’ time to formulate a report on the Ythvk?”

A clanging organ of surprise blasted within me. I felt my eyes nearly pop from my head as my face was contorted by a mashing of emotions. Suddenly the far-off imaginings felt very near, as if they had soaked into the wood and leather of the room. “I beg your pardon, sir?”

“You would be part of a state-funded desert-wide expedition. Some time on a train, some more on a caravan, several weeks among the tribesmen, and handsome compensation upon your return.”

“I understand an interest in the Ythvk,” I started. “But actually going there? In *two days*?” I spluttered with surprise. “Sueno, why are you even asking this of me? This request is absurd and you know it!”

Sueno’s voice softened in an attempt to calm me down. “It’s a government request, Leopold, and you’re the most qualified of all of us.” His voice dropped in both pitch and volume. “...Well...perhaps the *second* most qualified.”

I leaned forward in my seat, some part of me near believing this whole affair was a jest. “Wait a minute, what do you mean? Who’s the most qualified?”

Droom chimed in. “The man that was slated for the job, of course! A senior professor from the Vecesterwolds Academy. He was on board for months. He was all studied up and ready to go, until—”

“Geoff,” Sueno said flatly.

“Until what?” I pressed.

“Until about a week ago,” Droom continued. “When he thought it would help his preparation to chat with some folks who have been that far east. Apparently one of them changed his mind.”

“Ah, the professor had some unexpected health problems as well,” Sueno asserted. “Anyway, that explains the short notice.”

My head found itself shaking slowly. “Why in blazes would the government send just one man all the way out there?”

Sueno’s voice leveled out. “Well, you know how they are. Just because they put forth a substantial investment doesn’t mean they won’t trim it at every corner. Besides, I’m sure they assume it doesn’t take more than one esteemed professor to conduct a simple survey. Don’t worry, the expedition is large enough that you can bring all the luggage you desire. And as for your safety, the caravan will be led by seasoned guides. Once in country, you will be under the protection of an Ythvk diplomat who will make sure your stay is productive and unperturbed. I can assure you he’s quite civilized.”

“Unlikely. What’s his name?”

“Thothothomek.” Sueno sounded as if he had practiced pronouncing the name.

My head was still shaking slightly, as if trying to push away the unwanted magnitude of this proposition. “See, the name says it all. Never have I had a Thotho-what’s-it buy me a cup of tea.” Somewhere in the smoke, Droom gave a cough of amused agreement.

My nerves were hardly calmed when Sueno barked “Traum! Good god, man, I need you to see this issue with clear eyes. Our relations with the eastern tribes are contentious at best, and it is vital that we change this. For agreements to be reached, we must

understand, or at least begin to understand, those on the other side of the table. Amidst such an undertaking, your task is a very simple one. We're not asking you to go over there with a western scepter and holy water and convert the whole tribe."

"That would be a sight!" Droom laughed. "Leopold Traum, the cleric! Kneel, you savages! Kneel and confess your sins!"

"Mr. Droom, please be quiet." Sueno commanded. Droom scoffed loudly and disappeared behind a veil of tobacco smoke. Sueno turned back to me and continued. "You will simply conduct a general survey and census, and, if possible, answer two key questions: 'What is the cause of the Ythvk inactivity?' and 'How open are they to western settlement?'" Sueno now spoke with a firmness that diminished my sense of choice in the matter.

I tapped my pipe out and stored it in my jacket. "Why do you speak of this as if I've already accepted?"

"Because accepting this offer is nothing less than the assurance of your future happiness."

"Hah, future happiness among the savages." Droom snorted. "There's a laugh."

Sueno snapped to him. "Droom, you've had little enough to contribute to this conversation thus far. Is it so much to ask that you speak no further?"

“You see?” Droom pointed from Sueno to me with his pipe.
“Even talk of the savages encroaches on our demeanor.”

Sueno sighed through his nose, both hands tensely resting on the desk. “Thank you, Mr. Droom. You are dismissed.”

“And it’s a bloody good thing too!” Droom spat, rising from his chair. He was fuming more than his pipe as he stomped over to the library door and swung it open. He paused for a moment, calming himself. “Leopold,” he said, staring into the hall. “It seems you know the right answer to this ridiculous prospect.” With that he departed, shutting the door behind him.

I sat with my hands together, quiet in the smoke sent swirling by his leave. My blood ran ill at this whole proposition, filled with a brackish cocktail of scorpion venom and Sunday evenings.

Sueno pointed to the door, eyes hard on me. “Do you see that? Do you see *that*, Leopold? That is the ignorance we must combat. We are so put off by our lack of knowledge on these matters that we are willing to abandon discussion, lest the serenity of our own minds be marred. Discussion. *Discussion*, Traum. We professors, we who ought to be its greatest defender, would abandon simple discussion to our fears like a babe to wolves. It’s unacceptable, man. Surely you can have no disagreement there.”

I thought of the comfort of my home, overwhelmed as I was. My feet were growing sweaty in my new shoes. “You were saying

something about my future happiness.”

“You said you want time to yourself.” Sueno’s voice grew soft again. “You said you enjoy your peace. But for how long will that peace last, hmm? How long before your position here at the college fizzles away and your funds start decaying? I know your fortune wanes, Leopold. I know it’s been waning for years now. How many more years before you will have to start selling books from your library just to keep your house?”

I stared at the wall in silence, taking in the cascade of irrefutable words. He continued in an even softer voice. “You can leave now and have your peace, but only for so long. Or you can take this offer, and upon completion you will be given a handsome government reward, so sufficient that you can disappear into tea, sweets, and literature for the rest of your days. As someone slowly approaching a similar position, I think this is a smart choice.”

I was still silent, but my head shook once more, returned to that nervous motion by the looming scale of the proposition. After several moments, Sueno reinforced his encouragement. “And, no matter the anxiety you may feel, doesn’t this venture have a taste of *destiny* about it? What is this, if not the purest chance to place your own brick in the tower that is Mayhaven? Think of the library just outside. We both treasure its collection of knowledge. But, as its stewards, we must also respect the duteous truth: Tomes are not written within the library. They are given back from without...I

fancy myself your friend, Leopold. And so, of course, the choice is entirely yours.”

I was angry at Sueno then, awash in the cold internal frustration we feel toward those who bring up the realities we wish they would let us go on avoiding. As daunting as the thought might be, the man was right, starkly, horribly right. Equally hurled in words of pragmatism or romance, this truth was like a boulder sent to batter down the doors of my personal world, no matter how tightly I might padlock them. “...Several weeks, you say?”

“No more. Arrive on the caravan, leave on the caravan. You’re back in your home in just over one month, left to your books and dreams without any further disturbances for as long as you live.”

I breathed deep. In two days’ time...“Very well, sir. I accept.”

PART I

Exodus

An hour later I walked out the doors of Grimsbuck College. I had signed the official documents Sueno procured and could now return home. The lamp-lit library room had now been replaced by the moonlit streets of Mayhaven. Jakobheim Square was just as splendid under the stars as it was under the sun, with yet a few merry couples still ambling about under the pools of lamplight. Yet these calm surroundings earned little of my attention. Indeed, even as I walked, I wallowed, reeling from the ramifications of the encounter just had. I again took my pipe from my coat and lit it in an attempt to calm my nerves. Before starting for home, I paced at the foot of the steps, smoking.

Surely you have some idea of my feelings at this juncture. A great threshold loomed before me. I had never before in my life been submerged in foreign lands, nor did I need the experience to guess it was not something to which one casually acclimates.

I'd never been one for adventures, but now I found myself on one's unnerving cusp. It was very strange; I lived all my life within Mayhaven, believing I had seen all, or at the very least the vast majority, of what life had to offer. And only when I was confronted with the cold immediacy of seeing another side of the world did I realize just how much of this earth remained, and would forever remain, untapped by me. I will not lie to you: I was nervous. If you pushed me further, I would admit I was afraid. I worried not, though; insisting a civilized constitution would rise above all fretful emotions. Yes...yes, I told myself. In all dealings, no matter how

titanic, the truth in due course comes forth, and the gentleman is first to embrace it.

Nevertheless, the predicament I faced seemed better suited to a braver and more romantic version of myself, a man who had since eloped with youth. I was now called to action, forced to rouse old ambitions that I found rusty and cobwebbed in the cellar of my being. As the years passed, I perceived that only a reduced form of myself remained, much like an old engine that now needs more fuel to travel fewer miles. This flattening of passions had gone unhindered in the city...but now the city would be left behind.

I would be leaving this place for an ancient and foreboding kingdom, where storybook beasts lurk and dunes reclaim the ruins of strange pursuits. There I would sojourn, gathering both answers for my report and tales with which to regale my homeland. *I still have two days*, I told myself. *I still have two days before I must depart*. I repeated this again and again to myself, trying to funnel all my turbulent emotions into a string of simplistic and mathematical facts. They were far easier to ignore this way. And yet, the unease coiling in my veins proved difficult to parse. I prayed the insanity of the tribes wasn't catching.

As I paced in contemplation, a passing man came upon me. After a moment, he reached out with a gloved hand. "Pardon. That wouldn't happen to be Professor Leopold Traum I spy?"

I turned to the man. "Yes?"

“Oh, wondrous!” he exclaimed, shaking my hand. He had the tone and finery of a fellow gentleman. “My name is Clarence Sonn, original proprietor of Sonn Books and proud patron of Grimsbuck! If I may, what college business has called you here at this late hour?”

I looked down as I stowed my pipe. “Well, Mr. Sonn, it would appear I have shifted from lectures to field research.”

Sonn’s eyes and smile both widened. “You would not, by chance, be referring to the government’s mission into the desert?”

I blinked in surprise. “I am.”

“Splendid!” Sonn cried, vigorously shaking my hand a second time. “Then we are comrades and colleagues! Would you care to join me for a cup of tea? A café of superb repute is a mere block away.”

Tea and talk would do much to soothe my unease. “I would enjoy that, Mr. Sonn.”

Minutes later, we sat across from each other in the café. I sipped from my cup. “So you are part of the government assignment as well? Visiting the tribes?”

Sonn nodded. “Quite right. I’m part of a teaching mission. Thankfully, I won’t be embedded with the tribe. Instead, we’ll have the children come to our institution on the edge of their land. I

won't be in any danger.”

“What’s the village’s name?” I asked.

“Kmatep.”

“And how far from the village is your school?”

“Shy of ten kilometers, I’ve been told.”

I took another sip of tea. “The children will have to walk ten kilometers? Every day?”

“I’m sure they will make the journey eagerly for a chance at true education. This is the first opportunity in the tribe’s history for them to uplift themselves, to be something more than foragers.”

“Is Kmatep near the Ythvk?” I asked hopefully.

Sonn gave a polite laugh of surprise that worried me. “Oh, good heavens, no. Those living that far east are stark raving mad. A whole legion of teachers couldn’t help them. Besides, I wouldn’t travel that deep into the desert even if the government paid me a fortune. No telling what’s going on out there. God help the poor soul they are sending.”

“Me.”

“Hmm?”

“I’m the one staying with the Ythvk.”

Sonn clasped his hands and averted his eyes. I could see his discomfort went beyond embarrassment. It was as if merely being close to the man who was to stay with the Ythvk bothered him. Were there some recent horror stories about the tribe I had not yet heard? Were they responsible for my predecessor's change of heart?

"Bring a parasol," Sonn said, his voice low.

"Excuse me?"

"A parasol. You'll need one. A parasol in the desert is as important as a coat in the cold. For some it has been nothing short of the difference between life and death. That far in, the desert sun can peel the flesh off your bones as you stand."

In my nervousness, I gulped down the rest of my tea. "I'm grateful for the advice...Which tribe are you working with, then?"

"Xoltek."

"And what's the situation with them?"

"Ah, *ongoing*." Sonn turned in his seat and gazed across the café. "We've been teaching them for near two years now. It's all been very stop-and-start. There was some nasty business a few months ago. One of our priests disciplined a child. The tribe had quite a start with that, near wanted blood." His face grew sad. "What a very strange world we live in."

“No...I don't think so.” I spoke to comfort myself as much as convince him. “I don't think the world is strange. It runs on reason and sensibility straight to its core. Its surface just happens to be irritated in places by strange things, bits of runaway nature that clatter about for however long they may.”

Sonn's face lit for a moment with contemplation. “I suppose.”

A handful of silent minutes passed. I savored them, at peace in this Mayhaven hearth. I had not even left and yet I could not wait to be back. “Will we be departing together?” I asked. “The morning after next?”

“Oh, no, alas. My train leaves in a week. The Xoltek live on the outskirts of the desert, so I needn't bother with the caravan that will take you across the heart of the land.”

“How long will you be staying at your institution?” I asked.

“A half-year stretch.”

“You'll miss home?”

“I don't doubt it. My children are grown, and my wife is able, but the idea of being so far away from them makes me grim. I suppose that is a vexing side of Mayhaven's wonder: it makes anywhere else feel heartless.”

I nodded, hands under my chin. “Only one month will I be gone,

yet I doubt a day will pass when I do not yearn for this city.”

“Well,” Sonn smiled, “let us both take heart, then. We’re not two useless old men yet. We’re banner-men of Mayhaven’s glory! We may not be able to stay in the city, but we bear the city with us in our hearts. Men of knowledge in savage lands. Chins up!”

I traced my hand over the decorative designs carved into the wooden table, designs that matched those painted upon the teacups. Mayhaven glory. I smiled, then rose and shook Sonn’s hand. “This chat has been most enjoyable, but I’m afraid I must be off. I have yet to get all my effects in order.”

“Don’t forget the parasol, old boy.” Sonn called as I departed, leaving him sitting all alone.

I have found apprehension to be an oil that aptly greases the gears of time. The next day passed in what felt like mere minutes. In the darkening hours of the following evening, I was back in my home, looking over my tiny trunk of supplies. In the case lay clothes, my journal and necessary papers, several pens, a small lamp for nightly note-taking, a kit for my daily ablutions, my pipe and tobacco, and a comforting pouch of Mayhaven sweets. Several effects were not included in the trunk, such as my handkerchief, pocket watch, and recently purchased parasol, a dainty thing of white and orange.

These possessions would be the only items going with me beyond the horizon. The only company I had to brace myself against an experience coming all too soon. No books from my library would be taken. No collections of pictures, or mind-bending pocket puzzles, would uphold me across train or cart or camp. I was driven to ensure that the diminutive trunk would be light enough to haul without issue. Moreover, I intended to occupy any empty time I had during my travels with note-taking, interviewing, and other such formal pursuits. After all, I was in for a job, not a holiday... Then again, no sane man ever went on holiday to the desert.

Amid my mind's rapid fluttering, I assured myself I was properly prepared. This knowledge made little difference. Even as every requirement lay before me, I remained possessed by the feeling that I was missing something. This nervousness was electrifying, a jittering veil that bid me pace back and forth and siphoned away any hope of relaxation in my usual hobbies. I keenly felt how effortlessly this impending task dammed my reason, while it sent churning every river of unease and unhelpful speculation.

Soon my supplies were fully packed, and my home was prepared to lie dormant until my return. All that remained was another evening of waiting before the morning walk to the train station. In my restlessness, I reasoned that the one aspect I could ready further was my own mind. My knowledge of the tribes was embarrassingly limited. Accordingly, I had fetched a book from the college that I could peruse to refresh my comprehension. My home sat silent—no

tea was brewed, no fire tended—while I sat to read. I seated myself beside a window with the book, a flickering candle draping a dusky sheath upon the pages.

The book itself was entitled *On the Eastern Tribes: History and Traditions*, a tome I admit was printed over a decade ago. Even then it was a lackluster thing, little more than an unrevised compilation of many accounts widely varying in validity. I opened to a random page and began to read.

—Excerpt from the Chessary Report: “The Sictiru live a ghostly existence. Bands navigate the sands by methods most elusive, all the way culling meager vittles from ash and stone. If my grasp of their tongue has held true, then this gaggle of wispy souls boasts of once living in cities further east. They tell that these cities were lost in a great war fought with the Thnzandztch, a tribe long passed into obscurity. Sictiru contemporaries now avoid the far east out of superstitious observance, labelling as divine will this eviction from native lands. When they bed down and speak among themselves, I sit by a far fire and glean all I can from their oral histories. But then the story-telling will oft turn to a singing my heart finds too ill for listening...”

I skipped along to another random page, masking my true tangle of feelings as disinterest.

...The actions of many of the tribes seem inexplicably erratic by civilized standards. Exemplars are the Qeturu, one of the westernmost. Upon first contact, this tribe was amiable, with petty trade a near-instant development. Ere long, the Qeturu chieftain, Qthaal, agreed to return to Mayhaven with visiting missionaries, curious of the ways of civilized man. Upon reaching the city gates, Qthaal's calm mien was replaced with a sudden and violent animus. Without arm or apparent aid, he savagely murdered two citizens, including a constable of the watch, before stealing away back to the east. When state soldiers rallied to the village to bring Qthaal to justice, they found these formerly peaceful folk, under command of the criminal chief, reformed into a terrible war band. Violent confrontations escalated until military officials authorized the complete destruction of the Qeturu settlement and all militants therein...

A whispery dread creaked inside me as I read the words. It was a feeling of deep *un-wanting*, my stomach awash in a thorny marmalade. This world apart was giving me a toothy smile through the pages.

...In north Raurya, where the sand turns to clay, clusters of structures squat, echoing of the shells of giant insects. Whether these are architected homes or indeed the chitins of real and dead things I cannot say. I have only neared and found their make strange, more akin to bone or cold

beast-born than thatch and lumber...

Again, I scented the alien intruding into the nearness reserved for the familiar. Eerie sounds echoing up from the shadows. A claw springing up from dark margins and dragging itself into the lamplight.

...Documented paintings and tile-work of beast and insect cast in religious fashion, an indulgence of icons common in pagan superstition...

I wished to close the book, but stubbornly flipped to another page.

...elders will go out from the village, walking east until they die from dehydration, an ancestral death ceremony...

The trepidation deepened, making me cross and uncross my legs repeatedly.

...who hunt with poisoned darts and shroud the land in pits and snares...

Another page.

... *“death by predator” is second only to “ritual suicide”...*

In nervous frustration, I flipped back to the table of contents and located the section on the Ythvk tribe. There was only a skeleton of information.

YTHVK

-Easternmost tribe on record

-Population unknown

-History unknown

-No formal report conducted. Civil folk to avoid contact.

The book shut with a soft thump as it slipped between my legs, my muscles gone slack.

Minutes later I sat with a cup of tea, cradling it for warmth. The lone candle flickered on the desk, beset on all sides by the swatting shadows of night. The book lay beside it. Dread prodded my belly,

as if a coil of wiry serpents were stretching out and exploring my insides. I sat there, trying to take reason like a broom to the crushed glass of my emotion. "Of course this worries me! Of course it makes me nervous!" I told myself. For it to do otherwise would be strange. I was experiencing nothing more than the mind's discomfort when confronted with the new and, in those opening moments, the discomfort exaggerated itself. It was no different from a nightmare, which, as cruelly as it may torment in the night, dissolves into nothing in the sunlight.

All I need is the constitution to stay this path, I thought. My imagination may wander and fret, filling every shadow with danger; yet, deep down, I already know what will happen. I will go, I will ask my questions, and I will return. Another notch in my belt, no more. And—if the going be easier armored in romanticism—along the way, I shall toss light into the shadows and uplift the debased with western logics.

I drained the tea cup and held it up like a rod. Let this distant otherworld show its teeth and flare its eyes! Even if it should rear its head with all the unpleasantness of a nightmare, what ultimate darkness can be mustered from foreign brush and bad weather? And what can the troubles found among those sandy shrubs, no matter their wretchedness, do in the light of Mayhaven, fount of truth and wisdom? Even if savagery most uncouth rained upon me, such tallow would melt off as I returned. Backwardness, when brought before the truth, can but wither and fall away.

And Mayhaven is the kingdom from which I come. This, brilliant center of the world, is my home. I comforted myself with that. In all tests and long tallies of life, I have already won. A month in the heat is powerless to change that.

I lay down in my bed to sleep, to rest for one final night before my departure. Despite my self-assurances, the serpents within still fluttered. Nightmares are nothing in the day...but the day was slow to come.