Pharaoh - GJDuncan

It was two years ago that I trekked the desert in search of wellbeing.

The doctors had been examining my mind for a while, regular sessions seemed more interesting for them than they were helpful for me. There was some melancholy about me that I could not seem to shake, the medical, mental, and magical examinations yielded nothing of substance. My mind felt some sort of dry hollow hunger; I felt the absence of something, but any appetite to satiate it was distinctly lacking. I simply felt distanced from the matters of the world.

My career as an illustrator was unfulfilling, and lacking any inspiration of my own I had become compelled to use what talent I had to satisfy the visions of others, with no satisfaction for myself involved. Politics was repetitive, success and failure cyclically cascading over one another with no real change to anyone's lives. Religion was so monolithic in its certainty, there was merit in devotion of course, but The Sun was not going to go out if it missed one follower among however many millions. My community just west of Sundria would keep ticking along no matter what happened, the southern coast would continue to inexplicably be "lovely this time of year", no matter what time of year that was. My family was spread around the continent, and I had never been particularly close with any of them except my sister Lucia, and she had disappeared during a trip touring Huefel many years ago. It was not that I saw these institutions as futile, but I felt no real personal attachment to them, or anything else in truth.

One of the doctors I had consulted, a man named Nebbi, whom I found distinctly less intolerable than any other I had tried, optimistically suggested a trip to the great desert to find some sense of connection. I knew it was advice from a place of desperation, a final scraping of the deep but useless barrel of well-intentioned suggestions. Of course, feeling no anchor securing me to my life in Sundria I acquiesced to Nebbi's request, and packed my humble bags for an extended journey of potential self-realisation. I had heard of some strange goings on in the great Sabbia desert, of mystical changes documented in folklore and academia, but I thought in my typical cynicism that this must have been the result of dehydration and tricks of the light.

The desert is not terribly hot during the day, and the temperature is rather tolerable in the warmer seasons, but The Sun is fierce and unforgiving, challenging any visitors who dare to walk where its power is most revealed to the world. The intensity of the light reflecting off the sand from all angles was certainly difficult to manage, but my affliction of apathy did not extend to carelessness with regard to self-preservation, and I had prepared well for the journey. Likewise the nights bivouacking in that wasteland were bitter, a cold chill unadulterated by any sort of wind-breaking respite. At any time of day there is a constant threat of dust and sand flying into one's face at terrible speed, at least in the eastern parts, but I was prepared for this as well. This was a world characterised by emptiness, leaving the elements to have their rough way with the landscape, and any unfortunate souls within it. It may have helped some others, to revel in the isolation of the extreme, but I had felt isolated for years. I could

appreciate the poetry of seeing an environmental manifestation of my internal condition, but I felt no relief or change in my outlook.

Nevertheless I persisted in my planned excursion, hoping that perhaps prolonged exposure to this desolation might inspire some sudden change in perspective. Certainly, it altered my perception of time; The Sun in that part of the world is deceptive, my father would say that Calunas takes the reins on this journey. I could not at any point predict at what hour night would fall, and the zenith of that celestial power seemed to shift from day to day on a whim. Eventually I ceased attempting to divine this mercurial behaviour and accepted that my only way of telling the time would be from the gradual diminishment of my provisions. The honeybread shrunk bite by bite, and my water was admittedly drunk faster than I expected. Feeling the pressure to conserve it, I pressed in the direction I believed to be home, somewhat disappointed by the failure of this strange world to effect some change in my condition, but ultimately unaffected, I simply did not care enough about anything any more.

Evidently the dehydration, altered sense of time, and boundless landscape did not help with my navigation. I was walking for longer than I had anticipated, feeling lost now geographically as well as spiritually. On my continued prolonged walk I thought I saw something poking out of the otherwise indistinguishable landscape that formed this labyrinth with walls. I thought it might be the start of a village or town, perhaps Sabbine, the town I had set out from, or at least a solitary dwelling with some kind stranger who might help me find my way home. As I made my trek to this potential salvation, and as my view of it improved, I came to realise that this was not some construction of civilisation at all.

It was a skull.

It was not a skull of a creature I recognised, though it had recognisable features. Though the remnants of its head were half buried in the rough ground there was a clear horn emerging from one side of what was the face. The horn was magnificent, curled around and ribbed like that of a ram, the point worn down by however many decades, centuries, millenia had passed since its momentous death. The rest of the face looked much like that of a Fellow, the structure broadly the same, but I could tell even from the bones that this was a more elegant being than any person I had ever seen. The jaw was slightly pointed at the chin, and the cheekbones were high. The brow, I could tell, had been light, and the forehead perfectly proportioned with the rest of the face. From what I could see the teeth were perfectly aligned, with some wear that must have been from post-mortem decay. The eye sockets were proportionally large, larger than they would be on a normal person's face, and there seemed some sort of vague intelligence about them, even though of course there was nothing there but bone and empty space. When I went to touch the skull it was definitely bone, not constructed by man. The bone was smooth but organic, almost enameled and glassy. The most striking feature of this strangely perfect skull was its enormous size. I had mistaken it for a dwelling because it was the size of a small house, the eye sockets large enough for a man to stand up in them. This decapitated colossus was magnificent, a spectacle I had never even dreamed of before, nor had anyone I knew.

How long had creatures like this been hidden from the common corpus of knowledge? How had such giants roamed these lands without us ever knowing? Did The Sun create this being, and somehow cast it out? Had this beautiful race fallen out of favour with the divine, or were they never condoned at all? What are we, if not inferior imitations of such titans?

I spent several hours marvelling at this skull, examining it from up close and afar. It has utterly transformed my life. Where before I was lacking any sort of drive, any spark of curiosity or ambition in life, this shifted my priorities. I had to know more, I had to show others, I had to understand what this meant. A sort of madness came over me, an obsession with reconciling this discovery with what I knew and what I had been taught in all my life. I had to let people know about this and find some sort of understanding from those more learned.

Desperately noting down any sort of landmarks I could find that would direct me back to this momentous site, the grave of the colossus, I decided to commit fully to finding my way back to society. The landscape naturally was working in opposition to both of these endeavours. But I was determined. Never before in my life had I been so sure of any mission or task. After a day, two days, I cannot remember, I finally found a small village on the outskirts of the desert, and from there replenished my strength. Telling the people of the village about the colossus, I was regarded as delirious, “Sun-mad” they called it. I knew otherwise. I had seen and touched and smelled the skull for myself, nothing in my life has ever been as real as that skull is. Realising my attempts with those people were futile, I made my way back to Sundria.

Unfortunately I have clearly been cursed with such a profound discovery that none will believe it. I have tried coworkers, doctors, librarians, clergy, scholars, even written to my family. None of them take me seriously. I made several drawings of the colossus and have circulated them around all manner of circles, but I have gotten hardly any traction. Multiple times have I attempted to show the colossus itself to others, including a representative of the Seisian church, a scholar of anthropology, and several myth-hunters, but the desert is a cruel and impulsive creature. The shifting sands of the Sabbia have tormented me, hiding that magnificent treasure and condemning me to be thought mad. Not even Nebbi believed me, and instead has prescribed more medicines and treatments for all manner of psychological conditions, but the only remedy for my obsession is validation and explanation. I do not take his infernal medicine for illnesses I do not have.

It was two years ago that I trekked the desert in search of wellbeing, and I did indeed find a purpose in life. It has led me on a path of obsession, a path of even harsher isolation than I felt before, but it is a path I must pursue, and I shall not rest until I understand the significance of that colossal skull that lies hidden among those sweeping sands.