

Arabia, Arabia!

(or, How To Be Forgotten)

A semi-existential quasi-historical comedy
by Alexander Utz

Characters: (3M, 3W, or NB)

THE NARRATOR	A narrator. (W/Enby, 20-50s)
VON HAVEN <i>(von HAY-ven)</i>	A linguist. Lazy, arrogant. (M/Enby, 20s-40s)
FORSSKAL <i>(FORCE-kal)</i>	A botanist. Determined, arrogant. (M/Enby, 20s-40s)
NIEBUHR <i>(NEE-bur)</i>	An astronomer. Hardworking, understated. (W/Enby, 20s-30s)
BAURENFEIND <i>(BORE-in-faynd)</i>	An artist. Jovial, talented, drunk. (W/Enby, 20s-30s)
KRAMER <i>(KRAY-mer)</i>	A doctor. Incompetent. (M/Enby, 20s-50s)
Time:	1761-1767, sort of.
Place:	Various, along the route from Denmark to Arabia Felix (Yemen).

Notes on the text:

- This play must be cast with diversity in mind.
- Pronouns may be changed to reflect actors' gender identities.
- The playing space should be almost bare, with scene locations being suggested minimally through the use of chairs, props, and potentially maps/projections.
- If performed outdoors, make use of the playing space. Perform traveling, or in the round, or with the action surrounding the audience. Have fun with it!

ACT 1

One

Lights up on the NARRATOR, with a book titled "Arabia Felix". They look at both covers.

NARRATOR

Arabia Felix. Hm.

They open to the middle of the book. VON HAVEN, FORSSKAL, NIEBUHR, KRAMER, and BAURENFEIND appear, on a boat. VON HAVEN is lying down, clearly not well. He groans.

FORSSKAL

Get him some water!

KRAMER

We're surrounded by water!

FORSSKAL

Fresh water, you imbecile! We're in the middle of the ocean!

NIEBUHR

I have some left in my canteen.

NIEBUHR hands FORSSKAL the canteen. FORSSKAL forces VON HAVEN to drink. VON HAVEN tries to swallow but ends up spitting it out.

FORSSKAL

Come on, Von Haven, come on.

BAURENFEIND

Maybe he wants some gin?

FORSSKAL

Give that to me.

BAURENFEIND

I'm helping!

BAURENFEIND gives FORSSKAL a flask. FORSSKAL takes a drink from it and throws it offstage.

Hey!

BAURENFEIND exits to retrieve the flask, and quickly returns.

NIEBUHR

What should we do?

FORSSKAL

It's a cold. He needs rest and water. Our *doctor* should know that.

KRAMER

Can I have some of that gin?

NIEBUHR

You're sure it's a cold?

FORSSKAL

I'm sure. He'll get better.

Pause. They all take a second to look around.

BAURENFEIND

Um. Where are we?

KRAMER

The middle of the ocean!

NIEBUHR

Not this again. Okay, where is it?

VON HAVEN

Why'd we all stop paying attention to me?

BAURENFEIND *re: the NARRATOR*

If we're in the ocean, they're walking on water.

VON HAVEN

Am I dead? Is this heaven?

KRAMER

Welcome to heaven, von Haven!

VON HAVEN

Oh no, it's hell.

NIEBUHR *to the NARRATOR*

You, with the book. Come here. Why are you reading this?

NARRATOR

Just for fun.

FORSSKAL

Neibuhr, don't accost strangers about books.

KRAMER and BAURENFEIND try touching the ground. They're surprised it's not water.

NIEBUHR *to the NARRATOR*

Don't pay attention to them. They don't know what's happening.

NARRATOR

What *is* happening??

NIEBUHR

You displaced us. It happens when someone reads this book. Which isn't very often.

NARRATOR

Oh — I'm sorry. I didn't mean to.

NIEBUHR

Just skip to the end, and we'll go back where we're supposed to be.

NEIBUHR reaches for the book. The NARRATOR withholds it and looks at the back cover.

NARRATOR

But this says all but one of you will die by the end.

VON HAVEN

So I *am* dead.

KRAMER

Welcome to hell, von Haven!

NARRATOR

If you're here, maybe I'm supposed to make that *not* happen.

BAURENFEIND

You think you can save us?

NARRATOR

I picked up a book and you all appeared, so — I guess anything's possible.

NIEBUHR

Just flip to the end, please. It's for the best.

NARRATOR

No. I'm going to flip to the beginning.

The NARRATOR flips to the beginning. Time starts to shift.

KRAMER

Ooo, what's happening?

FORSSKAL

This feels weird.

VON HAVEN

I don't feel sick!

BAURENFEIND

I feel — hungover.

FORSSKAL

You probably are.

NIEBUHR

Here we go, I guess. See you all at the beginning.

NARRATOR

Okay, magic book — From the top!

*The time shift is over.
Transition.*

Two

The NARRATOR stands center, with the book. They look around.

NARRATOR

Okay. Weird. Let's see what happens.

The NARRATOR reads:

Arabia Felix! "Happy Arabia!" A mysterious land where there is happiness! Exotic treasures and pleasures abound — you can find your fortune, change the world, cement your place in history! It's 1761. King Frederick of Denmark has put together a world-class expedition — the first of its kind — to Arabia Felix. The brave explorers on this mission will be sent to learn all they can about this strange land. Arabia Felix. Happy Arabia. Why is it so damn happy? Can these Europeans find out, and be happy too? Only time will tell. Ooo — keeping us on the edge of our seats!

Okay, it goes on like this for a while. Let's skip ahead.

The NARRATOR skips ahead. All except VON HAVEN enter.

Oh — you're still here! I guess it's time to meet the scientists! Hello!!

KRAMER

Hi!!

FORSSKAL

Hello — what are we all doing here?

NARRATOR

Meeting! The king has arranged a dinner to get you all together.

KRAMER

Great. I'm starving. Where's the food?

NARRATOR *looking around*

Um, I — don't know.

BAURENFEIND

What about drinks?

NARRATOR

Why don't we all introduce ourselves?

NIEBUHR

Aren't we missing someone?

NARRATOR *counting*

Oh — right. Where is he?

VON HAVEN *off*

I'm studying in Rome, be there soon!

NARRATOR

He's — on his way. Let's introduce ourselves!

FORSSKAL

Great! You first.

NARRATOR

You know me, we just met.

FORSSKAL

I don't know who you are.

NIEBUHR

You went to the beginning. They don't remember.

NARRATOR

But you do?

NIEBUHR *nodding*

Yep. You're in the story now.

NARRATOR *referring to the book*

I'm in the story. Fun! Ookay, so — I'm Baron von Bernstorff! I will be the point of contact between you and King Frederick. Very fancy. Who's next?

FORSSKAL

I'll go. Hello, everyone. I'm Peter Forsskal.

ALL

Hi, Peter.

FORSSKAL

I was recommended by Carl Linnaeus to join this expedition.

NARRATOR

Linnaeus?

FORSSKAL

You don't know Linnaeus? The "Father of Taxology" —?

Really? Nothing? Strange. Anyway, he thinks I'm pretty great, which is true, I am. I enrolled at the University of Uppsala at age ten. I studied theology, philosophy, oriental languages, zoology, and of course biology, my greatest passion. At age 24, I was the youngest person to be elected to the German Academy of Science.

NARRATOR

Quite the resume.

FORSSKAL

I'm not finished. I also published a dissertation called "Thoughts on Civil Liberty," criticizing the Swedish government's censorship of the press and advocating for free speech.

BAURENFEIND

What happened?

FORSSKAL

It was censored.

BAURENFEIND

Figures.

NARRATOR

Any fun facts about yourself?

FORSSKAL

The national flower of Sweden, the Linnaeus Borealis, is named after my mentor Carl Linnaeus.

NARRATOR

Not a fun fact about botany, a fun fact about yourself.

FORSSKAL

Oh. My favorite plant is mullein —

NARRATOR

Alright, moving on!

To BAURENFEIND:

How about you?

BAURENFEIND

I'm Baurenfeind. I'm an artist.

ALL

Hi, Baurenfeind.

BAURENFEIND

You can call me Barry, if you want.

NARRATOR

Barry. Tell us a bit about yourself!

BAURENFEIND

I attended the Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen, they gave me a couple of medals for my work, and now I do portraits of rich aristocrats because it pays the bills. So yeah, that's me!

FORSSKAL

Can you draw us something?

BAURENFEIND finds her sketchbook and pencil and begins to draw quickly. After a moment, she finishes and reveals her drawing, an intricate sketch of the word "No."

Point taken.

NARRATOR

Who's next?

To NIEBUHR.

How about you?

NIEBUHR

I'm not really great at public speaking.

NARRATOR

It's fine. Go ahead.

NIEBUHR *to audience*

Hi. I'm — um — Niebuhr. Carsten. Not in that order. I'm Carsten Niebuhr. I like — science. And space. Science about space.

— Maps too. Of space. And land.

FORSSKAL *sarcastic*

Impressive.

NIEBUHR

I also served in the army, I'm a lieutenant.

FORSSKAL

Very well, Lieutenant. Where did you study?

NIEBUHR

Gottingen.

FORSSKAL

— And?

NIEBUHR

That's all.

FORSSKAL

Hm. I see. Nothing — better?

NARRATOR

This isn't an interview, Forsskal.

FORSSKAL

Am I the most qualified person here? Who's next?

NARRATOR

It's my job to ask who's next. You need to chill, dude.

FORSSKAL

I'm perfectly composed.

NARRATOR

Who's next?

KRAMER

Me!

NARRATOR

You! Tell everyone who you are!

KRAMER *confused*

— I'm me!

NARRATOR

No, like your name and what you do.

KRAMER

Oh! I'm Christian Carl Kramer, and I'm a doctor!

ALL

Hi, Kramer.

NIEBUHR

How long have you been practicing?

KRAMER is confused.

FORSSKAL *is this guy serious?*
Medicine.

KRAMER
Oh. I haven't. I only received my degree last week. Want to see my thesis?

KRAMER shows a research paper.

NIEBUHR
"Canaries and Their Care."

KRAMER
That's right. I studied how to care for —

FORSSKAL
Canaries, yes.

BAURENFEIND
Cute!

KRAMER
I wrote that, and now I'm a doctor!

NARRATOR *to audience*
1761, everyone.

FORSSKAL
So I'm definitely the most qualified here.

NARRATOR
You. Shh. Who's up for a team-building exercise?

VON HAVEN *entering*
Everybody shut up and look over here! The Professor Frederick Christian von Haven is arriving from Rome!

ALL *clumsily*
Hi, Professor Frederick Christian von Haven arriving from Rome.

NARRATOR
Well, we're all finally here! A botanist, a doctor, an artist, an astronomer, and a linguist!

VON HAVEN
Philologist, thank you.

NARRATOR
Why don't we go around and say what we're most excited about?

NIEBUHR
I'm really looking forward to seeing other parts of the world, new cities and landscapes —

FORSSKAL

Yes, imagine all the plants there are to discover!

NIEBUHR

Right, that too —

BAURENFEIND

I want to learn another culture, see how people live. And just — *draw* it, you know?

VON HAVEN

How eloquent.

BAURENFEIND

I'm so tired of drawing rich Europeans and their weird little dogs. I want to draw something — raw. Honest. Connected with the earth. *Sensual. Raw.* — Did I already say raw?

FORSSKAL

Yes.

BAURENFEIND

Nobody's going to make me paint fruit bowls in Arabia Felix.

KRAMER

Speaking of, where's the food?

NARRATOR

The food is still being prepared. What about you, von Haven? I'm sure you're excited to immerse yourself in the language. That's what you were studying in Rome, right?

VON HAVEN

Yes, I was studying Arabic manuscripts.

FORSSKAL

Impressive. I study with Carl Linnaeus.

VON HAVEN

Ah, Linnaeus, yes. I'd have great respect for him if he wasn't Swedish.

FORSSKAL and VON HAVEN laugh.

FORSSKAL

I'm Swedish too.

VON HAVEN

— Oh.

FORSSKAL

Anyway, I'm sure your Arabic is fluent by now. Let's hear some!

VON HAVEN

Well — you see, my Arabic tutor could only teach me in the mornings. And there was a bit of conflict because the manuscript library was only open from nine o'clock until noon.

FORSSKAL

I'm confused. Do you speak Arabic or not?

VON HAVEN

I do! I'm just — still learning.

FORSSKAL

Ah. The "esteemed linguist," everyone!

VON HAVEN

Philologist!

FORSSKAL

I thought this was supposed to be a prestigious group.

VON HAVEN

I thought this was a Danish expedition, and yet here I am looking at an ugly Swede!
I hope the rest of us are Danish.

NARRATOR

Does it really matter that much?

VON HAVEN

Raise your hand if you're Danish!
VON HAVEN and KRAMER raise their hands.
What??

FORSSKAL

Swedish.

NIEBUHR

German.

BAURENFEIND

I don't really believe in the whole "nationality" thing —

VON HAVEN

This is an outrage!

FORSSKAL

I think it's only an outrage for ugly Danes, von Haven.

VON HAVEN

Are you intent on insulting everyone here, Professor Forsskal?

FORSSKAL

Just the incompetent ones.

VON HAVEN *to the NARRATOR*

You can't allow him to speak to me, the expedition's leader, this way!

NARRATOR

Actually — about that. All members will rank equally.

KRAMER

Does that mean we're all doctors now?

NARRATOR

— No.

VON HAVEN

Rank equally? I can't believe it!

NIEBUHR

It's only fair, Professor.

FORSSKAL

And at the order of your king.

VON HAVEN

I'm not talking to you anymore.

FORSSKAL

Oh, thank god. I thought the time would never come.

VON HAVEN

I will not suffer these indignities!

— I will not!!

Beat.

Do you understand?!!

NARRATOR

We'll see you tomorrow for the departure, Professor.

VON HAVEN

I am *not* happy, Baron. I want to be the leader. I want to be in charge.

NARRATOR

Don't we all. I think the Professor is tired from his travels. Goodnight.

VON HAVEN

I'm not tired! It's not my bedtime!

NARRATOR

Goodnight, von Haven.

VON HAVEN *exiting*

Come on, Kramer. Let's go.

KRAMER *exiting*

Bye everyone! See you later!

BAURENFEIND

Bye! Sweet dreams!

FORSSKAL

Rank equally with him? I'm the most capable of the lot. Put me in charge.

NARRATOR

Oh. Well, since you asked. Sure, you're in charge.

FORSSKAL

— Really?

NARRATOR

No! What don't you understand about "king's orders"?

FORSSKAL

You'll regret this, Baron von Bernstorff.

NARRATOR

I take it you'll be next in the line of people storming out of the room?

FORSSKAL

I — you don't — I am not like them!

FORSSKAL storms off.

NARRATOR

Called it.

NIEBUHR *to BAURENFEIND.*

Can I have some of that?

BAURENFEIND

Knock yourself out.

NARRATOR

When does the expedition actually begin?

NIEBUHR

Next chapter.

BAURENFEIND

The way I see it, all life is just chapters, beginning and ending, with lots of words in between —

NIEBUHR

Uh huh.

NARRATOR

Here we go.

*The NARRATOR flips ahead.
Transition.*

Three

NARRATOR

So, our brave explorers began their journey aboard the Danish warship *Greenland*.
Fanfare! VON HAVEN, FORSSKAL, NIEBUHR, BAURENFEIND, and KRAMER enter one by one. They each carry a traveling bag.

Let's get this party started! Okay, here are your assignments. Doctor Kramer will study the diseases of the region, their treatments, and will be responsible for all medicine on the expedition.

KRAMER

Ooh! Responsibilities!

NARRATOR

Professor von Haven will observe the customs and habits of the country, by collecting and studying historic manuscripts.

KRAMER

Ooh, you get some responsibilities too!

NARRATOR

Professor Forsskal will make zoological and botanical collections.

FORSSKAL

Don't say it, Kramer.

KRAMER

I'm just excited.

NARRATOR

Lieutenant Niebuhr will make a map of the region, and record the size of the population, the relations between the living and the dead, and the relations between men and women.

NIEBUHR

That last part seems a little invasive.

NARRATOR

It's what the king wants to know.

NIEBUHR

— Why?

BAURENFEIND

What about me? There wasn't anything for me.

NARRATOR

Oh! Right. Hold on. Baurenfeind, is to — um — assist the other members when help is required.

BAURENFEIND

— Great.

KRAMER

Vague responsibilities!

FORSSKAL

Kramer!

KRAMER

Sorry, I couldn't help myself.

FORSSKAL

I'm sure I'll need my botanical samples drawn as I catalog them, Barry.

VON HAVEN

But maybe I'll need Barry's help, too! You can't hog the artist, Professor Forsskal.

FORSSKAL

I'm not trying to hog — you know what? Never mind.

NARRATOR

Maybe we can try to be nice to each other? I'm sure the trip will go a lot smoother that way.

FORSSKAL *exiting*

Great. Let's just get on with it and get to work. I'm going to my cabin.

VON HAVEN *exiting*

As the appointed leader of this expedition, and the smartest, I must board first!

BAURENFEIND

This is going to be fun! Road trip! Or, boat trip, I guess.

NIEBUHR *to the NARRATOR*

"Be nice to each other." Yeah, you're never going to change the direction this is headed.

KRAMER

The boat? It can only go one direction, right? Whichever direction Arabia Felix is. — South?

NIEBUHR

East. And that's not what I meant, I —

KRAMER

Now which way's the ship?

Chanting as he exits..

Arabia Felix! Arabia Felix!

Okay, it doesn't make for a very good chant.

BAURENFEIND *exiting*

We can work on it.

NARRATOR

Being nice never hurt anyone.

NIEBUHR

No, but it's also not going to keep everyone from dying.

NARRATOR

You've done this before, right?

NIEBUHR

Many times.

NARRATOR

I'm curious — in any of those times, did you meet someone with the last name Attieh?

NIEBUHR

No. Or if I did, I don't remember. Why?

NARRATOR

Just wondering. And every time someone reads this book, the same things happen?

NIEBUHR

All but one of us die. But maybe that's because people usually only read to laugh at us.

NARRATOR

Maybe this time can be different.

NIEBUHR

You think so?

NARRATOR

I'm not here to laugh at you, I'm here to learn. Now let's get moving — time to get on the boat.

NIEBUHR

It leaves tonight. I'm not in a hurry.

NARRATOR

Get on the boat, Niebuhr. It leaves as soon as you board.

There is a strange, seismic shift in the air.

NIEBUHR

It doesn't leave this early. It never leaves this early.

NIEBUHR looks at the book.

— Oh, it leaves right now.

NARRATOR

Really, that worked? I mean, of course it leaves right now. Things are going to be different.

NIEBUHR

— Okay. Yeah. Different.

NIEBUHR looks at the NARRATOR for a moment, then exits.

NARRATOR

Alright. Changing history.

The NARRATOR flips ahead.

The boat departs, en route to Constantinople!!

The NARRATOR attempts to make a foghorn type boat sound.

Our heroes settle into their cabins and begin to work. (Finally, I know.)

On the ship. FORSSKAL, alone in his cabin, writing in a journal. NIEBUHR approaches.

NIEBUHR

Knock knock.

FORSSKAL

I don't have time for jokes.

NIEBUHR

No, um, it's me, Niebuhr. I want to talk to you.

FORSSKAL

Oh, okay. Fine.

NIEBUHR

I hope I'm not interrupting.

FORSSKAL

You are.

NIEBUHR

I'm sorry, I just wanted to see how you're doing.

FORSSKAL

I've already discovered seven different types of seaweed since we departed from Copenhagen. Have you started work on anything?

NIEBUHR

Venus is going to pass in front of the sun soon, so hopefully these clouds clear so I can observe it.

FORSSKAL

Why are you staring at me like that?

NIEBUHR

Things seem — different around here. Changed. Don't you think?

FORSSKAL

If you say so.

NIEBUHR

Like the boat is leaving earlier than we thought.

FORSSKAL

Is it? I didn't notice.

NIEBUHR

And Von Haven is calling himself the expedition leader again.

FORSSKAL

Let him. We both know he'll tire himself out eventually.

NIEBUHR

That doesn't upset you?

FORSSKAL

I don't care to be distracted by petty matters the way Von Haven is.

NIEBUHR

You seem more focused on your work now than when we first met.

FORSSKAL

Because the expedition has actually started now.

NIEBUHR

No other reason? You haven't noticed any other weird changes?

FORSSKAL

What are you talking about?

NIEBUHR

Nothing. Never mind. Are you worried we might die on this trip?

FORSSKAL

Well, now I am. I have to work. Please leave.

NIEBUHR

Sorry. Bye.

NIEBUHR, exiting, accidentally steps on a plant sample.

FORSSKAL

My seaweed!

NIEBUHR

Ah! Sorry!

The NARRATOR turns a page and the scene shifts. VON HAVEN is with KRAMER.

VON HAVEN

Who does this Swede think he is? At every turn, he disrespects me!

KRAMER

Do you think he means to?

VON HAVEN

Of course he does! He wants me removed from the expedition! He wants to be leader! It's a coup!

KRAMER

I thought we all ranked equally.

VON HAVEN

Oh, my sweet simple Kramer, you are too thick to see it. He's plotting against us. It's clear as day.

NIEBUHR *entering*

Knock knock, hope I'm not interrupting —

VON HAVEN

You are!

NIEBUHR

Does the world feel different to you?

VON HAVEN

Of course — I'm not leading this expedition! Now get out, we're in the middle of something.

NIEBUHR *exiting*

Right, sorry!

VON HAVEN

Enough of this madness. I'm going to confront Forsskal.

KRAMER

Now?

VON HAVEN

Things don't change unless you change them, Kramer.

KRAMER

Me? Why me?

VON HAVEN

Not you specifically, the general "you". Do I really have to explain what that means?
Things don't change unless *one* changes them, okay? We must strike while the iron is —

KRAMER

Iron.

VON HAVEN

Precisely. Now, let's go put this Swede in his place. For Denmark!

KRAMER *chanting*

Denmark! Denmark!

Oh, this is a great chant! Denmark! Denmark!

*VON HAVEN and KRAMER exit. The NARRATOR turns a page and the scene shifts again.
BAURENFEIND is drinking and drawing. NIEBUHR enters with an astrolabe.*

BAURENFEIND

Whatcha got there?

NIEBUHR

An astrolabe.

BAURENFEIND

Right, cool, right. I totally know what that is.

NIEBUHR

Venus is going to eclipse the sun, and I want to make sure I can take measurements.
Are you working?

BAURENFEIND

Working? We're on a boat, Niebuhr. Let's enjoy it.

NIEBUHR

I'll try. Do you feel like something has changed, like in the air — ?

KRAMER *off*
Denmark! Denmark!

BAURENFEIND
Is somebody chanting?

KRAMER *off*
Denmark! Denmark!

VON HAVEN and KRAMER enter.

BAURENFEIND
Hey, great chant, Kramer! Are you going to war or something?

VON HAVEN
We are preventing a coup!

BAURENFEIND
Cool, can I come?

KRAMER
Okay!

KRAMER / BAURENFEIND
Denmark! Denmark!

NIEBUHR
This is new.

VON HAVEN, KRAMER, and BAURENFEIND approach FORSSKAL working.

VON HAVEN
Knock knock.

FORSSKAL
Not now, Niebuhr —

NIEBUHR
Oh, he doesn't want to be disturbed —

VON HAVEN
Forsskal, I'd like a word.

NIEBUHR
Oh boy.

VON HAVEN, KRAMER, and BAURENFEIND confront FORSSKAL.

FORSSKAL
What are you all doing? I'm trying to work.

VON HAVEN
I will not allow you to throw a coup and take my place as leader!

FORSSKAL

You're not the leader. We don't have a leader.

VON HAVEN

But I want to be!

FORSSKAL

Alright, please leave now. I'm working.

VON HAVEN

You can't tell me what to do!

FORSSKAL starts to push VON HAVEN away.

FORSSKAL

I asked you nicely.

VON HAVEN

You can't push me! This crazed man is pushing *me*, the leader of the expedition!

FORSSKAL

I don't want any trouble, just leave me in peace.

VON HAVEN

I know how jealous you are of me and my accomplishments!

KRAMER

Danish accomplishments!

FORSSKAL

Is that what this is about? Nationality? I thought we were past that.

VON HAVEN

You thought wrong! Now do the honorable thing and take your leave of this expedition.

FORSSKAL

Why would I do that?

VON HAVEN

— Because I don't want you here.

FORSSKAL

I can't believe this.

NIEBUHR

Um — maybe we should all take a deep breath —

FORSSKAL starts to leave.

VON HAVEN

Don't walk away from me!

FORSSKAL

Watch me! Now I'm going to slam this door in your face!

VON HAVEN

Don't you do it.

NIEBUHR

Anyone? A nice deep breath?

FORSSKAL slams the door.

VON HAVEN

I hope you disappear up your own ass!

FORSSKAL

Right back at you!

VON HAVEN

I say we write a letter to the king and demand his removal. Who's with me?

Pause. No response.

Kramer?

KRAMER

— I don't think that's the best idea.

VON HAVEN

But he's trying to —

NIEBUHR

He's trying to work. Just like the rest of us. That's what we're here to do, right?

NIEBUHR notices something above.

Look — Venus.

They all look. NIEBUHR begins taking measurements with the astrolabe.

BAURENFEIND

That's another planet? It looks just like a blip in front of the sun.

FORSSKAL *entering and looking up*

Is it happening? Never mind, I answered my own question. Wow.

NARRATOR

They all watched Venus pass in front of the sun. A once in a lifetime sight.

The 1761 Transit of Venus was observed by astronomers all around the globe. It was a landmark event in calculating the distance between Venus and the sun, and the size of the solar system as a whole. How these huge unknowable worlds related to each other.

The squabbles of the expedition seemed to fall away before this celestial wonder.

BAURENFEIND

That's incredible, Niebuhr.

KRAMER

I've never seen anything like it. It's like — a weird dot.

FORSSKAL

It's almost as impressive as my seaweed.

VON HAVEN
I have no words.

One by one, they exit. NIEBUHR and the NARRATOR remain.

NIEBUHR
Don't look too long, you'll hurt your eyes.

NARRATOR
Thanks.

NIEBUHR
This usually doesn't happen. It's usually cloudy.

NARRATOR
Big changes already.

NIEBUHR
So, you like history?

NARRATOR
I guess, sure.

NIEBUHR
Because even people who *really* like history don't find us often. How did you?

NARRATOR
Just happened across the book.

NIEBUHR
Uh huh. You know — by making our ship leave early, you made Forsskal obsessed with his work, von Haven paranoid about his status, Venus visible — a lot of changes.

NARRATOR
A lot of changes. Should we see if it's saved a life?

The NARRATOR flips ahead. Same as Scene One. VON HAVEN is coughing.

FORSSKAL
Get him some water!

KRAMER
We're surrounded by water!

FORSSKAL
Fresh water, you imbecile!

NIEBUHR
Nope.

FORSSKAL
— What?

The NARRATOR flips back again.

NIEBUHR

He's still dying.

NARRATOR

Bigger changes, then. Do you trust me?

NIEBUHR

Let's see how this goes.

NARRATOR

Great. A ringing endorsement. Here goes nothing!

The NARRATOR flips ahead.

Transition.

Four

NARRATOR

The expedition arrives at its first major stop: Constantinople! Welcome welcome!

FORSSKAL, NIEBUHR, BAURENFEIND, and KRAMER enter.

The NARRATOR refers to the book, to find a name.

I am Von Gahler, the Danish ambassador here, and I'm so happy to see an expedition from Denmark to Arabia Felix! What a wonderful achievement for King Frederick!

FORSSKAL

And for science.

NARRATOR

That too, sure. Now, aren't there supposed to be five of you? Where's Von Haven?

KRAMER

He said he had to stop by the apothecary.

FORSSKAL

For what?

KRAMER

I don't know, medicine? Apothecary stuff?

NARRATOR

He thought he could skip out on meeting me, *the* Ambassador von Gahler??

KRAMER

Um, I guess?

NARRATOR

How rude! I'll be right back.

The NARRATOR flips ahead and the others are gone. VON HAVEN is there.

Excuse me — von Haven?

VON HAVEN

Ah, hello! I see my intelligence has garnered me admirers as far afield as Constantinople! A fan! What would you like me to sign?

NARRATOR

Actually, I'm the apothecary. Can I help you find something?

VON HAVEN

Yes, I'm looking for some arsenic?

NARRATOR

Arsenic, like poison arsenic?

VON HAVEN

Are you an idiot? Yes, poison arsenic!

NARRATOR *getting arsenic*

Coming right up. I saw Ambassador von Gahler the other day, he was very excited to meet you.

VON HAVEN

I'm sure he was.

NARRATOR

Have you seen him yet, since arriving in the city?

VON HAVEN

Not yet — I'm on my way there now.

NARRATOR *handing VON HAVEN the arsenic*

Terribly rude to keep your host waiting.

VON HAVEN *paying*

I'm on my way there now. Keep the change.

NARRATOR

Have a great day!

VON HAVEN

Byeee.

NARRATOR flips the book back, and is back with the others..

NARRATOR

I'm back! Von Haven was at the apothecary.

FORSSKAL

How'd you get there and back so quickly?

NARRATOR

I run fast. He bought arsenic. A lot of arsenic. And now he's on his way here.

KRAMER

Arsenic as in poison arsenic? That doesn't sound good.

BAURENFEIND

Is he going to poison us?

NIEBUHR

You didn't stop him??

NARRATOR

It all happened so fast! This doesn't usually happen?

NIEBUHR

No!!

FORSSKAL

He's going to kill us. Well, probably mostly me.

BAURENFEIND

It's been nice knowing you.

NIEBUHR

What are we going to do??

VON HAVEN *entering*

Sorry I'm late.

NARRATOR

Oh! Professor von Haven. Hello. Um. It's an honor to meet you.

VON HAVEN

Hello, yes, it is.

They're all staring at VON HAVEN.

KRAMER

How was the apothecary? Find what you were looking for?

VON HAVEN

Yes.

Silence.

KRAMER

That's — good.

VON HAVEN

Yes. Well. Thank you for hosting us, Ambassador, but I'm going to retire now. The next leg of the journey requires a well-rested leader.

NARRATOR

I thought you all ranked equally.

VON HAVEN

We do, in the end, don't we? Good night, all. Sleep well.

VON HAVEN exits.

NARRATOR

Oookay.

NIEBUHR

This isn't what I meant by bigger changes!

NARRATOR

It's fine! I've got it under control!

NIEBUHR

So what do we do?

NARRATOR

Let me think. Maybe it won't actually end up being a problem.

The NARRATOR flips ahead. NIEBUHR, FORSSKAL, BAURENFEIND, and KRAMER are dead, poisoned. VON HAVEN stands over them, laughing.

VON HAVEN

Who's the leader now??

Sees the NARRATOR.

Von Gahler! You've seen too much!

NARRATOR

Ahhh!!!

The NARRATOR flips back. Everyone is alive again.

So it doesn't end well with the arsenic.

NIEBUHR

No kidding!!

FORSSKAL

We should tell the king, right? They'll have to remove him from the expedition.

BAURENFEIND

It'll take weeks for a response.

KRAMER

And arsenic kills faster than that, I'm pretty sure.

NARRATOR

Let's write a letter anyway.

FORSSKAL

I'm going to die.

NIEBUHR

Nobody's going to die.

BAURENFEIND

What should we write?

KRAMER

Letter! Letter! Letter!

NARRATOR

"Dear King Frederick." Start there.

BAURENFEIND *writing*

"We are writing to inform you of a matter which has caused us all great fear."

FORSSKAL

Von Haven's trying to poison us!

BAURENFEIND

Easy does it, now. Geez.

"While in Constantinople, Professor von Haven purchased an astonishing amount of arsenic. The amount is so large, it would easily serve as the last meal for over twenty men. When we consider this in conjunction with the arrogance and temper he has always shown, we can imagine only the most horrible of intentions."

FORSSKAL

We. Are. Going. To. Die. Out. Here. Please. Help.

BAURENFEIND

"Please put our minds at ease and remove Professor von Haven from this expedition, for the safety of all of us."

NIEBUHR

Here, give me that pen.

BAURENFEIND

No, I'm writing! Hey!

NIEBUHR *taking the pen*

"If he should attempt to poison us, I will as a soldier know how to avenge it. To be sure a bullet isn't much comfort, but more honorable for him to die a gentleman than a coward."

BAURENFEIND

Did you just offer to shoot him?

NIEBUHR

Only if we need to.

BAURENFEIND *taking the pen back*

Give me that. "With deepest respect, we remain your majesty's humble servants."
Let's sign it and get this over with.

BAURENFEIND, NIEBUHR, and FORSSKAL sign the letter.

NARRATOR

Great letter. Let's send it.

The NARRATOR takes the letter and hurls it offstage. It hits VON HAVEN, who is entering.

VON HAVEN

Ow! What was that for?

NARRATOR

Oops! Sorry. I'll take that.

The NARRATOR throws the letter offstage again.

FORSSKAL

I thought you were going to bed.

VON HAVEN

I got thirsty.

Pause. They're all staring in fear again.

So I'm just going to get some water.

NIEBUHR mouths "What do we do?" to the NARRATOR.

NARRATOR

New plan.

VON HAVEN
What?

NARRATOR
I know about the arsenic, von Haven.

VON HAVEN
Arsenic? What arsenic?

NARRATOR
I know about the arsenic.

Another strange, seismic shift in the air. VON HAVEN holds out the arsenic, almost against his own will.

VON HAVEN
Oh — this arsenic?

KRAMER
What is happening?

NARRATOR
You're not going to use that, right?

VON HAVEN
No.

NARRATOR
Not even to poison your fellow expedition members?

VON HAVEN
No, why would I do that?

NARRATOR
Then why did you buy it?

VON HAVEN
For fun.

NARRATOR
Fun. Yes. Fun. We're just going to forget all this happened, okay?

VON HAVEN
Okay.

NARRATOR
Excellent. All fixed. Nobody was poisoned and nobody died. I think I'm getting pretty good at this!

VON HAVEN
Well, I'm exhausted. Think I'm going to turn in for the night. Nice seeing you all.

FORSSKAL
Are you going to poison me?

VON HAVEN

No, silly. What would I even poison you with?

FORSSKAL

— The arsenic you're holding.

VON HAVEN

Oh, this arsenic? I forgot I even had this. How embarrassing.
Why don't you hold onto this, Kramer? Since you're the doctor here.

KRAMER *taking the arsenic*

Ooo, dangerous responsibilities. Thank you.

VON HAVEN

No, thank *you*. See you all tomorrow!

VON HAVEN exits.

BAURENFEIND

— That was weird.

NIEBUHR

Can we trust him?

KRAMER

He handed over the poison.

FORSSKAL

I've never seen him that — innocent before.

NIEBUHR

Big changes, I guess.

NARRATOR

That's right.

NIEBUHR

Except no more arsenic scares, please.

NARRATOR

You got it. My bad on that one.
What's next?

*The NARRATOR flips ahead.
Transition.*

Five

NARRATOR

Here we go. Onward to Cairo! There are things to learn!

A shift, and they are all in Cairo.

VON HAVEN

Cairo!

NIEBUHR

The Nile!

FORSSKAL

The Pyramids at Giza!

BAURENFEIND

The Sphinx!

KRAMER

The Library of Alexandria!

NARRATOR

Um, that isn't in Cairo. That's Alexandria. It's literally in the name.

FORSSKAL

And it was famously destroyed. Like, centuries ago.

KRAMER

Huh. Bummer.

BAURENFEIND *to the NARRATOR*

Hold on, who are you?

NARRATOR

Oh, I'm your — guide. Here in Cairo. Welcome.

BAURENFEIND

Oh, that's cool. Hi.

NARRATOR

Anyway, I'm sure you will find plenty here to research and keep you occupied before you continue your journey.

FORSSKAL

Yes, I'm off to find botanical samples for my collection!

NIEBUHR

I'll make a map of the town. Then I can talk to locals and find out how their irrigation system works!

BAURENFEIND

That sounds, just — so boring.

VON HAVEN

Where will we be staying?

NARRATOR

You're looking at it. You'll be staying in this house, purchased specially for you by the king!

VON HAVEN

This dump? Bought by the king? There's barely enough space for me, let alone everyone else!

NARRATOR

Well, ideally you'll be spending most of your time outside the house, researching.

VON HAVEN

I can't work like this. We are here representing the king of Denmark. Surely you can do better.

FORSSKAL *exiting*

I'm fine with it. I'm going to get to work.

NIEBUHR *exiting*

Same here. Thanks!

VON HAVEN

I am not "fine with it." I demand different accommodations be made!

NARRATOR

— Alright. Fine. There's a French businessman in town who may be able to host you.

VON HAVEN

French? God forbid!

NARRATOR

I swear to god, von Haven — It's either that, or you stay here.

VON HAVEN

— Fine.

The NARRATOR and VON HAVEN exit.

KRAMER

So.

BAURENFEIND

So.

KRAMER

I mean, it's a good thing he won't be staying with us.

BAURENFEIND

Yeah, no poisoning our food!

KRAMER

Oh right, yeah. I just meant he was getting kind of annoying. He never wanted to talk about canaries with me.

BAURENFEIND

And their care?

KRAMER

See, you understand. What you want to do, when caring for domestic canaries especially, is —

BAURENFEIND

Actually, hate to interrupt, but I should probably start drawing some stuff. Talk later!

BAURENFEIND exits, leaving KRAMER alone.

KRAMER

Get real, Kramer. Nobody ever wants to talk about canaries.

The NARRATOR reenters.

NARRATOR

Sorry, bud.

The NARRATOR flips ahead. Shift. FORSSKAL and NIEBUHR are at the Pyramids of Giza. FORSSKAL is collecting samples, NIEBUHR is measuring the pyramids with her astrolabe.

NARRATOR

Once everyone was settled in Cairo, Forsskal and Niebuhr got to work immediately. They even traveled to Giza to study the famous pyramids.

FORSSKAL

What are you doing?

NIEBUHR

Measuring.

FORSSKAL

I thought you use that thing to map stars.

NIEBUHR

I do.

FORSSKAL *re: the Pyramids*

— Those aren't stars.

NIEBUHR

I know that.

FORSSKAL

Right. So what are you doing?

NIEBUHR

Measuring.

FORSSKAL

Forget it.

NIEBUHR

They're so big, up close. It's incredible. I've never seen anything like it.

FORSSKAL *looking at a plant*

Neither have I.

NIEBUHR

So perfectly constructed.

FORSSKAL

Yes.

NIEBUHR

Geometric.

FORSSKAL

Yes.

NIEBUHR

Like they're growing out of the Earth.

FORSSKAL

And so prickly!

NIEBUHR

— What?

FORSSKAL

This plant!

— That's what you were talking about, right?

NIEBUHR

Um, sure. Let me see. What kind of plant is it?

FORSSKAL

I don't know, I've never seen it before.

It's a tough one — growing out of stones and sand. Relentless.

FORSSKAL imitates the plant.

"I don't care what conditions I'm under, I'll flourish anywhere. I'll make it work"

NIEBUHR

Sounds familiar. You should call it the Forsskal.

FORSSKAL

You flatter me. But I like the sound of that. It needs to be Latin, though — the Forsskalea.

NIEBUHR

That sounds like a disease.

FORSSKAL

Thanks. Very kind of you. I can't wait to send a sample of it back to Linnaeus.

NIEBUHR

Do you ever think about how lucky we are, to be chosen to come here and do this work?

The NARRATOR runs over, accidentally stepping on FORSSKAL's plant.

NARRATOR

Watch out!

The NARRATOR whacks FORSSKAL with a fly swatter.

FORSSKAL

Ow! What was that about? And who are you?

NARRATOR

You had a mosquito on you! You don't want to get malaria. No biggie, but I probably just saved your life. You're welcome.

FORSSKAL

You step on my plant and then hit me with that thing?? You're the one who's going to need saving!

FORSSKAL lunges at the NARRATOR, about to attack them.

NIEBUHR

Woah there!

NIEBUHR restrains FORSSKAL.

NARRATOR

Wow, sorry! I was just trying to help — I didn't realize you were that aggressive! Let's adjust.

The NARRATOR flips back a page A change in FORSSKAL.

FORSSKAL

Owie — you hit me with that thing and it hurt.

NARRATOR

Sorry about that. I was looking out for your safety.

FORSSKAL

Can you kiss the booboo to make it better?

NARRATOR

— Ookay. I think I went too far in the other direction. Take two.

The NARRATOR flips back again. Another change in FORSSKAL.

NIEBUHR

Is this really necessary?

NARRATOR

Yes.

To FORSSKAL.

How do you feel?

FORSSKAL *blank*

I feel nothing.

NIEBUHR

That's not good.

NARRATOR

One more try.

NIEBUHR

Maybe you should stop changing people —

The NARRATOR flips back again. Another change in FORSSKAL.

NARRATOR

How bout now, Forsskal? Feel better?

FORSSKAL

I feel alive! I feel the sun on my face and the wind in my hair and I hear the music of *life*, pure *life*, happening all around me! Isn't everything just incredible???

FORSSKAL hugs NIEBUHR.

NIEBUHR

Fix him. Now.

NARRATOR

Sorry, sorry.

The NARRATOR flips back again. Another change in FORSSKAL. He lets go of NIEBUHR.

NIEBUHR

Please tell me he's back to normal.

FORSSKAL

What are you talking about? And why are we all just standing around? I have plants to research. Come on, Niebuhr.

FORSSKAL exits.

NIEBUHR

One second.

FORSSKAL *off*

Don't get upset if I make an amazing discovery without you!

NARRATOR

There he is. Good as new.

NIEBUHR

Alright, no more of that. You're going too far. Doing things like that won't help the expedition.

NARRATOR

I'm keeping you all out of harm's way —

NIEBUHR

We can get through this without you meddling in our personalities.

NARRATOR

I wouldn't call it meddling.

NIEBUHR

What would you call it, then?

NARRATOR

— Dabbling. With good intentions.

NIEBUHR

Fine. No more dabbling. Agreed?

NARRATOR

Even if it's to save your lives?

NIEBUHR

How about you save our lives in a normal way, without meddling?

NARRATOR

Dabbling. And okay. Yeah. I can do that.

NIEBUHR

Thank you.

NARRATOR

Like, "Hey, Niebuhr, just so you know there's a mosquito on you."

NIEBUHR

There you go. That's better.

NARRATOR

Seriously, there's a mosquito on you.

NIEBUHR *swatting the mosquito*

Oh, thanks. And thanks for saving his life, by the way. That's usually when he catches malaria.

NARRATOR

No problem. Sorry about getting carried away. Want to see if we're on the right track?

NIEBUHR

Sure.

The NARRATOR flips ahead. Same as Scene One.

FORSSKAL

Get him some water!

KRAMER

We're surrounded by water!

FORSSKAL

Fresh water, you imbecile!

VON HAVEN

Why are we shouting? It's not urgent, it's not like I'm dying.

FORSSKAL

Because we've become good friends recently, and you said you're thirsty, so I want to help you!

VON HAVEN

Thank you!

BAURENFEIND

Here's my flask.

The NARRATOR flips back. Shift. The NARRATOR and NIEBUHR are alone again.

NARRATOR

Starting to look good. Want me to skip to the end for you?

NIEBUHR

Not yet. I want to experience those good moments for real. Those don't usually happen. I want to be there at the end, when we all make it back home alive.

NARRATOR

So we'll keep going.

NIEBUHR

What made you want to read this book, out of all the books you could've read?

NARRATOR

I thought I might learn something.

NIEBUHR

What do you want to learn? Maybe I could teach you.

NARRATOR

I don't know how to put it — I guess I want to learn about the people. Their history.

NIEBUHR

Okay. I can help with that.

NARRATOR

Thank you.

NIEBUHR

I'll hold onto the book for now, though. We're on the right track and I don't want to mess it up.

NARRATOR

Hold on there. We're helping each other. You help me and I get you all home alive. That's the deal.

NIEBUHR

— Fine.

*The NARRATOR flips ahead.
Transition.*

Six

NARRATOR

Back in Cairo, the expedition waited on a response from the king, about what to do with von Haven and his arsenic. In the meantime, a lot of work was being done.

The NARRATOR finds VON HAVEN and BAURENFEIND lounging and drinking.

VON HAVEN

This is the life, isn't it? I'm so glad I asked to stay with this lovely Frenchman. I don't care what you say about them, Baurenfeind, the French are a fine people. Excellent hosts.

BAURENFEIND

I never said anything about the French.

VON HAVEN *noticing the NARRATOR*

— Who are you?

NARRATOR

Oh! I'm — your host. Hi.

VON HAVEN

Ah, Monsieur Papillon, of course! Sorry, the sun was in my eyes. Could you get me a refill?

NARRATOR

Yeah, let me get you a refill from — somewhere.

VON HAVEN

Thank you. I think we've earned ourselves a break, don't you?

BAURENFEIND

— From doing nothing?

VON HAVEN *referring to a stack of papers*

I bought these the other day!

BAURENFEIND

Papers?

VON HAVEN

Manuscripts, my dear Barry, manuscripts! Very rare too, according to the salesman. You wouldn't believe how much money I spent.

BAURENFEIND

Cool. Have you started translating them?

VON HAVEN

Another time, another time.

The NARRATOR starts discreetly looking at the manuscripts.

Why are we staying in Cairo for so long? — Not that I mind, I'm very much enjoying myself.

BAURENFEIND

We're waiting on word from the king.

VON HAVEN

Word about what?

BAURENFEIND

Um — just a response to a letter we sent.

VON HAVEN

What letter?

BAURENFEIND

— Some of us needed clarification on what to do when we get to Arabia Felix.

VON HAVEN

But it was all laid out for us! This really is a team of nitwits, isn't it?

VON HAVEN picks up a manuscript and looks at it for a moment.

I have no idea what this says.

BAURENFEIND

What?

VON HAVEN

What?

FORSSKAL and NIEBUHR enter.

FORSSKAL

Any response yet?

BAURENFEIND

None.

VON HAVEN

Hello, Forsskal.

FORSSKAL

Professor.

NIEBUHR

Want to see my sketches of the Pyramids? Using triangulations, I could calculate their height —

VON HAVEN

Wonderful, yes, they're very tall, good job.

BAURENFEIND

Let me see those sketches. Yeah, I can fix those for you.

FORSSKAL

How have you both been? Keeping busy with research?

VON HAVEN

I'm going to miss Cairo.

You know, I was just speaking with my host last night — the Frenchman, Monsieur Papillon — about Voltaire's new tragedy, *Tancredè*. You've seen it? Anyone? No? Well, it was a marvelous work. I saw it in Marseilles during my travels to — from? — Rome, before we departed. What a

show. I'll remember it forever. I can't remember the specifics of the story but they'll come to me. Mademoiselle Clairon was enchanting. A horrifyingly talented woman. Are you familiar? Mademoiselle Clarion? No? Well, you need to get out more, I'd say. Or my mother would say, she was always saying things like that. Quite the woman, my mother — not as talented as Mademoiselle Clairon, but she did give birth to me, which is a notable achievement itself — Anyway, my host and I were speaking about the play — my host, the Frenchman, Monsieur Papillon — and wouldn't you know it, we had seen the same performance! Can you believe it? In Marseilles. What a coincidence! We laughed and laughed — Not at the play, it was a tragedy, but we laughed last night, about the coincidence. Of us both being at the same performance. And now here we both are again, in Cairo, crossing paths on our separate journeys through this thing we call life. Makes you think, doesn't it?

FORSSKAL

— About what?

KRAMER *entering with letters*

We've gotten letters from Copenhagen. This one's for you, Von Haven.

VON HAVEN

For me? How exciting! Read it to me, Kramer.

KRAMER

Um — okay. My mouth is kind of dry, can I have a drink first?

VON HAVEN

Absolutely not.

KRAMER

Cool. Cool. Sorry.

"To the esteemed Professor von Haven,

With all the respect I bear for you and your intelligence, I must write you now with the one small thing that disquiets me. It concerns the unity, harmony of character, and bond of common interest that should exist among you and the members of your expedition. This bond will bring you all to the great achievements that your king, and the world, expect from this expedition."

VON HAVEN

I'd say we're succeeding so far. I just spent an insane amount of money on these — papers!

BAURENFEIND

Manuscripts.

VON HAVEN

Manuscripts!

KRAMER

"I have received a letter from the other members expressing a few concerns, namely about the purchase of arsenic. Do I need to tell you, Von Haven, that they have given me some ground for worry that there is some incompatibility between you all?"

VON HAVEN

So you *did* send a letter about me? What could possibly make you want to do that?

NIEBUHR

The arsenic, Von Haven.

VON HAVEN

Oh, that? That was just a misunderstanding. Right, Kramer?

KRAMER

Oh, me? I — um —

FORSSKAL

Keep reading.

KRAMER *struggling from thirst now*

"Remember, Professor, this is a very honorable task, to be able to work for the glory of your King and your country. Think of the honor and acclaim that awaits you on your return, and keep in mind the consequences of any ill-advised deed that would destroy the purpose of the expedition. Read this as the sincere advice of a friend. I only have your best interest in heart. And please keep this letter confidential from the others."

VON HAVEN

Well, too late for that. Keep going, Kramer.

NIEBUHR

Okay, he clearly needs something to drink.

BAURENFEIND *handing over her flask*

Here. Take this.

VON HAVEN

You ruined it! I wanted to see how long he could go.

NIEBUHR

Why?

VON HAVEN

— For science? I don't know. Whatever. Keep going, Kramer.

KRAMER

"Finally, we are impatiently awaiting your results from Mount Sinai and from St. Catherine's Monastery. Please send your results as soon as you are able."

NIEBUHR

Mount Sinai?

VON HAVEN

Right, of course. How could I forget? Silly me.

One of my tasks is to visit Djebel el-Mokateb, this hill near Mount Sinai with ancient Biblical inscriptions that probably don't even exist, and transcribe them for interpretation.

Also, I'm supposed to visit the library at St. Catherine's. Apparently they've got a lot of rare manuscripts. But we don't know for sure, no European has ever been there.

FORSSKAL

A very prestigious task. Why haven't you mentioned it before?

VON HAVEN

Must have slipped my mind. Oops!

KRAMER

"You have been putting off this task for far too many months during your stay in Cairo. Please do not waste any more time."

VON HAVEN

Okay, Kramer, stop reading, that's enough.

FORSSKAL

You've been putting it off??

VON HAVEN

I'm scared. It's hot and dangerous out there.

FORSSKAL

It's hot and dangerous everywhere!

VON HAVEN

Will somebody go with me? Baurenfeind?

BAURENFEIND

Oh — I would, but I've got things to draw.

BAURENFEIND coughs.

Plus, I think I'm getting sick. Sorry, but it's a no from me.

VON HAVEN

Kramer? My fellow Dane!

KRAMER

I'm honored —

VON HAVEN

Wonderful!

KRAMER

But no. I'm a doctor, not a linguist. Plus, if Baurenfeind's getting sick, I should stay here.

VON HAVEN

Kramer, please.

KRAMER

I'm sorry.

VON HAVEN

Fine. Forsskal?

FORSSKAL

Me? Ha. My instructions never mentioned joining you on a trip to see inscriptions. So, no.

VON HAVEN

Niebuhr. What about you? Please? Don't make me do this alone.

NIEBUHR

I have no problem with joining you.

VON HAVEN
— Really?

FORSSKAL
— Really?

NIEBUHR
Why not? It might be interesting.

VON HAVEN
Wonderful. Of course I get stuck with the German peasant. I'll go prepare. No time to waste!

VON HAVEN exits.

FORSSKAL
Have you lost your mind?

BAURENFEIND
He might poison you out there.

NIEBUHR
I'll be fine. I'm not worried.

KRAMER
There's a letter for the rest of us, too.

FORSSKAL takes it and reads.

FORSSKAL
"Dear Forsskal, Baurenfeind, and Niebuhr:"

KRAMER
And Kramer?

FORSSKAL
No, it's not addressed to you.

KRAMER
Oh.

FORSSKAL
"Your thoughts and fears concerning the arsenic are based on sheer imagination and misunderstanding. Please have no fear. The world is not as evil as one might think. You may now continue your travels to Arabia Felix"

BAURENFEIND
Hold on, they're just saying "don't worry"??

FORSSKAL
The whole thing is nothing, don't worry about it! Just chill out, they say! Are they insane?

BAURENFEIND
Well, what can we do? It's the king's wishes.

KRAMER

If it makes you all feel better, I still have the arsenic.

FORSSKAL

Right, that makes me feel *so* much better.

KRAMER

But at least he doesn't have it. And he's going away to Mount Sinai for now.
We'll be safe. Most of us, that is. See you later, Niebuhr!

KRAMER, BAURENFEIND, and FORSSKAL start to go.

BAURENFEIND

Have fun out there, bud.

FORSSKAL

Don't die, okay?

They are gone. The NARRATOR enters.

NARRATOR

So, Niebuhr would be accompanying von Haven on the next leg of the journey. Alone.
Very brave of you. I wouldn't want to spend that much time with von Haven.

NIEBUHR

I figured, better me than anyone else. And maybe we'll find something about the people and their history for you!

NARRATOR

Good point! I'm excited to see what happens next.

NIEBUHR

Me too! Let's find out!

NIEBUHR grabs the book from the NARRATOR.

NARRATOR

What are you doing?

NIEBUHR

One more thing. I'm not taking any chances. Whatever you've done, it seems like we'll be okay.
I'm just going to ride it out until the end. Sound good? Good.
Next stop: Djebel el-Mokateb!

NARRATOR

Niebuhr, wait.
Wait!

*NIEBUHR flips ahead.
Blackout.*

END OF ACT 1