

1. The House

A broad plain with grain swaying ever-so gently in the twilight lay between the two mountain ranges. The air was otherwise still, and there wasn't a sound. There in the centre of the field was a brown wooden hut, sturdy and quite out of place, alone among the heads of grain. As I drew closer to the hut I grew curious about its origin. I found myself hovering in the doorway, and the house engulfed me. It was much larger on the inside than on the outside, and I wandered from room to room, looking for something. I could hear a storm gathering in the sky outside, and desperately needed to find cover. There was an old table here, a leaning and empty bookshelf there, but nothing substantial. And then I saw it: a steel hatch in the wooden floor that was as out of place in the house as the house was in the grassy field. I lifted the lid easily, and began descending the ladder as fast as I could. Already hail was pelting down, and thunder and lightning were tearing the place apart. I reached the bottom in a few moments and made it through a set of heavy steel blast doors a couple paces away from the foot of the ladder. I looked behind and saw debris crashing to the ground a few feet away, falling through the hatch which I had left open.

The blast doors automatically slid closed, a distinct click of the latch punctuating the small cloud of dust that had managed to get through with me. I turned and there stretching before me was a narrow hallway with an aquatic-green tile floor and pale blue walls. It was brightly and evenly lit, though it was uncertain where the light was coming from. I walked for a while, and presently the stretch of hallway branched off in either direction. I could barely see the blast doors in the distance, but confident that I would be able to find my way back I took a right turn and continued down this new hallway. The floor was a plush maroon carpet, and instead of the rap of my heels on the tile now all that could be heard was a soft and steady padding. To my left there were doors, and also to my right. Each door was quite unique, but the knobs were all the same, round and with a nickel finish. One door appeared to be constructed of crisscrossed tree branches, dark and smooth. I could see light filtering through cracks between the branches. I opened it a crack, and was greeted by daylight and the noise of a crowd milling through a baked-mud street.

The door closed behind me, concealed quite well in a brick wall and beside a merchant's stand. No one seemed to notice that I had appeared in the street, and so I wandered along. There was a snake charmer skillfully lifting a large constrictor higher and higher with his enchanting tune. Men with brightly-coloured flowing robes, dark beards, turbans, and broad curved swords fastened securely to their hips strode by confidently. A few with grey and white beards sat off to the side, each in turn taking slow deep puffs from a large hookah. Heavily-laden camels were being led along to various booths, eager to have their burdens lightened by the buyers who now bartered openly with the merchants.

There was a short tug on my sleeve, accompanied by an "Excuse me," near my shoulder. "I've got a job for you to do. Take this..." and with that I was handed a parcel, neatly wrapped in oil paper and tied with twine. "Take that to my friend just ahead and around the corner."

"Wait," I exclaimed, "what does he look like? And what's your name?"

"They call me Allesandro, and my friend's name is Panth. He's got a thick green jacket and is rather portly if you know what I mean," he said with a grin and quick wink. "You'll be seeing lots of us, so don't worry!"

And with that he whirled and disappeared into the crowd, leaving me with this mysterious parcel.

2.

There I stood for a few moments, blinking in the bright sunlight. People continued milling about, and I headed in the direction Allesandro had pointed me in, immediately looking as if I belonged. The walls along my path now were fitted stone, rough from countless years of exposure to wind and sand. I put the neat and rather heavy parcel down on what was obviously Panth's table. The green-robed man was crammed in behind the booth, which was much like the others I had past, with a wood-plank tables and colorful fabrics providing shelter from the sun's rays.

With lively round eyes and smiling face Panth said, "Friend, what is the meaning of this object so haphazardly placed on my table?" Greetings between friends in this part of the realm consisted of a firm hug and kiss to either cheek, but Panth's curiosity and tight location both prevented this. He creaked forward in his chair, not waiting for an answer. Sniffing the parcel, he asked, "Did a rather small and pointy-nosed man give this to you? Was he impeccably dressed and introduce himself as Allesandro?"

"Well, he didn't introduce himself at all to begin with," I said, "and he's only just now sent me over to you with this!"

"But of course! Open it up, will you?"

It was only a matter of pulling on the bow strings and peeling back the paper, and there on the table was a hard grey stone.

I exclaimed, "A rock, I say, and who in their right mind would go to all the trouble of wrapping up a common..."

Panth interrupted me, "This is no ordinary rock! Place your hands on it, quickly, before someone else does."

I did so, not seeing the point in such an exercise.

"Now," said Panth, "No hammer-blow laid on this stone will crush it. It is yours only, linked to your own life. Keep it near, and it will keep you from trouble. Kings and warriors have died searching for such treasure."