



Cave of Wonders

Matthew J. Kirby

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To all those who teach and study history,

I thank you

— M.K.



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Have you seen in all the length and breadth of the earth

A city such as Baghdad?

—Umara ibn Aqil, ninth-century poet





Caravans and Camels

THE DESERT wind whipped around them, stirring up sand. Dak shielded his eyes and used his shirt to cover his mouth to keep from breathing in the grit. Sera and Riq did the same. They were standing in the middle of a dusty road, the three of them having just warped from the Great Wall in Ming-dynasty China. For Dak, the prickling, sickening disorientation of having his body squeezed through time and space like a basketball through a keyhole hadn't faded yet . . . and neither had his excitement.

"Where are we?" he asked.

This was their twelfth warp together. You'd think by now, Dak would be used to it, but that question still thrilled him.

Where are we?

What would they see and do? Who would they meet? So far, Christopher Columbus, Vikings, King Louis with his wonderful gooey cheese, Harriet Tubman, the ancient

Maya. People and cultures Dak had only read about in books before now.

Sera checked the Infinity Ring before tucking it away in her satchel. "Coordinates are right. We should be near the city of Baghdad on January 27, the year 1258."

"Good." Dak reached to pull out the SQuare. "Let's figure out the Break we're supposed to fix here."

"Hold on." Riq coughed. "Let's get out of this wind. All this sand won't be good for the SQuare."

"Oh. Right." Dak looked around, and then realized he had just agreed with one of Riq's suggestions without arguing or mocking it. Sera would be so proud. He turned to her. "Bet you're glad I've got the SQuare in my pants, now, huh?"

Sera rolled her eyes at him. "Which way should we go?"

Riq pointed. "I think I see something that way."

The three of them peered down the road, straining to see anything through the windblown sand. Dak was trying to decide how best to make fun of Riq in this moment, when a horrible grunting sounded right behind them.

The three of them spun around to find themselves face-to-face with the protruding nose, huge teeth, and flapping lips of a camel.

The man riding the camel shook his fist at them, shouting in a language Dak didn't recognize. He wore long robes, and a turban coiled around his head.

“Arabic,” Riq whispered.

Dak and Sera cocked their heads at the same time as their translation devices kicked in.

The man threw his arms up. “Are you deaf? I said, get out of the road!”

The camel blared at them again. Spit flew out of its open mouth. Its breath smelled bad, and not in the good way a nice cheese smells bad. In the *bad* bad way. Sera plugged her nose while Riq pulled her and Dak off to the side. The rider passed them, and behind him came others. Many others. Most of the camels bore huge bundles slung over their humps.

It was a caravan. An actual camel caravan! At the sight of them, facts bubbled up in Dak’s mind. That’s how it felt. Like bubbles in a soda, or a burp. They just rose up, and he couldn’t keep them in, even though he knew it annoyed most people. “Those bundles are probably filled with spices and silks and frankincense and stuff like that. Baghdad was on the Silk Road trade route, and—”

“Dak!” Sera and Riq both said.

He winced inside. Same as always.

“Sorry.” He shrugged. “At least we know which way the city is. I bet this caravan is going there now.”

Sera and Riq nodded their agreement with him. So they set off down the road with the caravan, walking through the sandy wind alongside the smelly camels.



Neither Sera nor Riq said much along the way. Dak was used to Riq not talking much with him. They'd become better friends than they were in the beginning, after fixing the first few Breaks together. But the dude still got on Dak's nerves. A lot. So he didn't mind that he was being so quiet right now.

But Sera.

Sera's silence worried him. Normally, he could practically read her thoughts, like she could his. But lately, she felt very far away, and he had no idea what was going on inside her head. There was something she wasn't telling him. He knew it. But he didn't know what that was, and that really bothered him.

The other travelers on the road didn't seem to take any particular notice of them. Dak figured that was because they were still wearing their clothes from China, which was also on the Silk Road, and people here probably saw clothing from China all the time. For once, Dak, Sera, and Riq didn't look so out of place. Or out of time. Dak was glad, too, that their Chinese clothes were relatively thick and warm. It was wintertime here, and the desert air was surprisingly cool.

Baghdad turned out to be less than a mile away. It soon loomed up out of the dust and sand. The wind died down as they passed through the city outskirts, where some buildings were constructed in stone, but most were made out of mud bricks. They crossed several canals, and passed houses with thick walls, low doors,

and narrow windows, a design perfect for life in this climate. They crossed open squares where people gathered around wells and in the shade of palm trees.

Ahead of them, the outer walls of the city rose up, high and imposing, reminding Dak of a really huge sand castle.

More facts bubbled in Dak's head. "Baghdad was built not far from where Babylon used to be, and it was one of the greatest centers of learning in all the world, with giant libraries holding thousands of books. This was a Golden Age for the Middle East, while Europe was in the Dark Ages."

Riq turned to look at him. Dak kept going before he could interrupt.

"Scholars and philosophers from all over the world traveled here just so they could study, and everyone worked side by side, no matter where they came from, or what religion they belonged to. The most important thing to them was knowledge."

Riq was still staring at him. Dak waited for him to make fun of him, getting ready to fire something back. But Riq didn't say anything. He just . . . stared.

"What?" Dak asked.

Riq shook his head. "I just don't get why you like history so much."

That caught Dak by surprise. How could someone *not* like history? It was everyone else who was weird, including Riq, and even Sera. But then again, Dak didn't

understand why Riq loved languages so much, or why Sera was so into science and math. So, why *did* Dak like history so much? He realized he couldn't exactly answer the question Riq had just raised.

They soon arrived at a city gate where many caravans and travelers merged, jostling Dak from all sides. He heard the others around them call it the Khurâsân Gate. It was only after joining the crowd that Dak noticed the guards standing watch with their metal helmets and swords. They were collecting a toll from everyone who entered the city.

"Um, guys?" Dak stopped in the road.

"What are we going to do?" Sera asked. She had obviously seen them, too. "We don't have any money."

But before they could come up with an answer, the pressing crowd behind them drove them forward. Dak looked around, frantic, but there was no way to escape. The traffic going into the city had caught them in its current, and with each moment brought them closer to the guards.

"Just act natural," Riq whispered. "We've faked our way out of worse stuff than this."

He was right about that. Dak took a deep breath.

They shuffled forward behind the large caravan they'd met on the road, and before long, they were almost to the guards' station. The leader of the caravan, the man who had yelled at them earlier, got off his camel and went to the guards to pay the group's toll.

"I have an idea." Riq moved forward. "Follow my lead. Stay close together."

Dak and Sera glanced at each other, and went with Riq. He led them in between the camels, mixing in with the other members of the caravan. It was a good plan, to try to blend in, but Dak found himself forced right up against the backside of a camel, its tail whipping him in the face, and it smelled even worse than the other camel's front had.

"We better not be here for too long!" he hissed.

Sera and Riq both suppressed smiles.

One of the caravan riders noticed them and looked down, scowling.

Riq gave him a sheepish shrug. "Sorry. Busy day at the Khurâsân Gate."

The rider snorted.

After that, the three of them kept their heads down and remained quiet. And when the caravan started moving, they moved with it, staying as hidden as they could. Dak risked a glance at the guards when they reached them, but the men seemed to already be looking beyond the caravan on to the next travelers.

"It worked!" Dak whispered.

"Of course it worked," Riq said, and then Dak regretted saying anything.

They passed under the shadow of the gate's high arches, through the city wall, and into a busy street where a cacophony of sights and smells and sounds assaulted

them. Buildings rose up several stories to either side, sprouting tents and canopies at their bases. Shopkeepers and street vendors shouted their wares.

“The sweetest dates you’ll ever taste!”

“Olives! Plump, rich olives!”

“Come! Run your hands over the finest silk between Samarkand and Damascus!”

“The brightest lapis and jasper your eyes have ever seen!”

The sharp smell of spices filled Dak’s nose, mixed with that of smoke and camel and other things he couldn’t place. It was overwhelming, and amazing. He felt like Aladdin, and could almost believe there was a lamp somewhere waiting for them with a genie in it.

“Wow,” Sera said. “Okay. Let’s find a quiet place to pull out the SQuare.”

“You!”

The three of them turned to see one of the guards marching toward them.

He pointed at them. “You three! Stop!”

“Uh-oh,” Dak said.