

The Stranger



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The Arrival

It's cold in here, it's been cold, but the heat knocks me awake. It's bright out, although the sun is probably barely risen. I've just woken from what feels like a very bad dream although that may just be the G-forces. There's fire outside the window and the sound is loud enough to deafen someone.

I didn't even remember getting out of the ship. The sand shifted under my fingers as I moved to get up, but the grains were too loose to get a firm hold. It was unnaturally cool for such a day, but the sun on the back of my neck burned. By crawling, I managed to move myself to the top of a sand dune but I slipped at the top and tumbled down the other side, bowling myself straight into a small child.

He couldn't have been much older than ten. He was able to keep his balance and he quickly backed away and called to his father who was a couple dozen yards away, just cresting the next sand dune. He was wearing long sleeved pants and a shirt, and he had long dark hair that had been braided with several brightly dyed pieces of thread. He had large snowshoes on his feet to keep him steady on the

sand. I also noticed the child had a similar pair.

When the man had approached me, he asked me something in a language i could not understand. I tried to speak to him in all the languages I knew a decent amount of, but he understood none of it. For a while we just sat there, unsure of what to do, until he suddenly moved to go back. He had gone maybe ten yards when he realized I was still sat on the ground, and beckoned me to follow him.

The walk was long and arduous. I hadn't eaten or drank anything since I left the ship. We must have walked at least a dozen miles, or at least it felt that way. My feet were aching and I was sure everywhere was sunburned. Soon, we came across this rather large mound with high walls, at least ten meters tall, built from large hewn bricks that had bleached in the permanent sun. In front of us, around twenty meters above the ground at the base of the walls, was a large portcullis. A very wide, uneven staircase rose from the ground shortly in front of where we stand. On every single step and along the steep slope up the walls there was a jar, or sometimes multiple jars. Some were intricately shaped and ornately decorated, and some were very simple, roughly shaped pieces of stoneware. Most had lids, but some didn't, some lay on their sides in

pieces.

The older man looked me in the eyes and gestured at me not to move, I waited and watched as he walked up the steps, found a modest jar, pulled out a small cup, and poured it over his son's head. He then did the same on his own head. He shouted a short phrase I couldn't make out, and walked up to the portcullis, where he seemed to speak with someone up in the gate, who then raised it.

Many minutes passed before he returned, this time with a man dressed in a red cloak, carrying a large basin full of water. They approached me. The red cloaked man barked an order at me that I clearly did not understand. He raised his hands and I thought he was about to slap me, but instead he grabbed my wrists and dragged my hands towards the basin, but he stopped before I touched it.

He screamed at me again, something like "put your hands in the water", so I did just that. He then did the same and grabbed a small cup from inside the water basin and, as before, poured it over me. Returning the cup to the basin, he shouted the same thing that the father had said earlier.

We made our way back inside, the water

from the basin was returned to a large vessel near the entrance. When we had passed the walls, which had to be nearly as thick as they were tall, I truly witnessed the magnificence of the town. Every house was made out of mud bricks and every few blocks there was a tower, some square and some more rounded, made from smoothed out mud bricks. As it turned out, we were heading to the tallest one, a behemoth complex of at least three large towers arranged along the corners of a square, with the fourth being a high, steep rock rock formation that reached about half the height of the other three. They were located at the highest point of the mound, on the outside corner of the vaguely boomerang-shaped town.

We headed inside the southernmost of the towers and headed up two floors to the walls connecting the towers, where we then crossed over to the northern tower. The three upper levels of this tower were an observatory dedicated to mapping and charting everything. They seemed to keep meticulous records on everything. I could not make out the script but the records that I saw were detailed. They had at least six scribes on the wall level, each laying on cushions and pouring over multiple thickly bound books and scrolls, the beads of their

abaci clinking. The level above that contained more of the same, although they wielded more protractors and straightedges than abaci. The level above that, however, was far different. Dozens of various sets of equipment lay strewn around the room. There were vials of dozens of liquids and several powders, In a small chair sat a frail old man poring over a small book. I did not approach him, nor was I able to see the book, but occasionally he would find something in the book and note it on another sheet. Whenever he wrote his hands shook so much I was certain it wasn't legible.

The other two swiftly climbed the ladder up to the roof which held a large, crudely fashioned telescope that was made of wood, a material I would not originally have thought to be present on the moon. It looked like you could see everything from the tower. The whole town was visible. I saw the gate I entered from, and past that, going far past the horizon, a faint path of disturbed sand heading off into the plains. On the other side of the gate the terrain was much different. Instead of the endless rolling dunes of the desert plains, the other side featured a veritable forest of what looked to be cacti, covering the edge of the plains up to an inclined plateau that featured notably dry riverbeds

feeding into a nearly dry creek at the bottom. Irrigation canals were carved into the valley, separating the fields into roughly rectangular plots. Between the mound and the fields, there were small huts not dissimilar to the ones in the town, albeit more separated. There was a bustle in the fields, people of all ages walked around fields carrying baskets and tending to the fields.

The man in the red cloak grabbed me by shoulders and pushed me into the merlons of the tower. He shouted into my head something that I still couldn't understand, and, upon my inability to respond, positioned me over the edge of the crenels. In my panic, I don't quite remember what I said, however upon shouting in English, I saw a flash of recognition cross his eyes. He pulled me back from the crenels and stared at me, somewhat bewildered, as if looking for the words.

"Who are you?" he asked.

The Stranger

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I awoke early the morning the day the stranger came. I had left the gate of the town, originally to visit my mother in the valley below. I was counting the steps down to the floor when I noticed it, a bright comet falling out of the sky. I barely saw it before it crossed the horizon towards the Mother Mountain. Cautiously, I washed myself and reentered the town. The gate operator made a snide comment about my cowardice, the kind of thing you would expect from a five year old, not someone who had seen his 16th year. I returned to my house and found my son.

"We're going to see the magistrate" I told him.

He asked me why, and I said "I think it's about time we start to show you the way to Mother Mountain"

His eyes lit up. Mother Mountain is a massive mountain almost due east of where the town is, and the journey there is an arduous month-long trek across the plains. Everyone who can make it tries goes as a rite of passage. They say there are more mountains to the north,

but that's for the northerners, not me, to care about. My son had been pestering me about it since the day he turned 5, the earliest age the magistrate would even consider letting someone go on the difficult journey. I reminded him that we'll just be following the route part of the way.

The magistrate worked in a set of three towers not too far from where I live. I was glad he was awake, as it was still quite early in the morning. He was sitting in his office drinking Qixyag, the bitter juice of the cactus of the same name. I've always found the taste repulsive, yet the magistrate offered me some anyway. I figured it would be worth the off-putting taste this time. I told my son to wait outside while I spoke to the Magistrate. I told him how my son was old enough to make the journey, and it was time to start preparing him. The magistrate agreed, and I told him my plan to take him about half a day's journey into the desert to give him a feel of the start. With the plan squared away we returned to my house to eat, and we set out shortly after.

The sand was slippery, but the wide shoes helped with balance as we set out. There's not much to say about the journey itself, as hours and hours of sand is not very interesting. At first I told my son to stay behind me, however I got

tired of telling him to wait behind me, and just told him to stay in sight of me. We walked six or so hours before stopping to eat. I presumed we had gone past whatever had fallen from the sky, so I prepared to turn back, but my son insisted we push forward. After barely half an hour more of walking, I caught the faintest hint of something sulfurous, and could see something smoldering far in the distance.

I tried to call out as my son raced in front of me, but he would not listen to me. He was maybe a quarter mile in front of me when I first saw it. My son was slowly backing away from a person I didn't recognize. They wore an unnaturally bright blue... something. It was weirdly shiny, as if wet, despite that being almost impossible, and it covered basically every inch of their skin. The only area that was exposed was their head. They clambered back up the sand dune and tried to stand but the shoes they were wearing simply did not let them stand on the dust of the desert. I approached him and helped him stand, but he just fell back down.

"Who are you?" I asked, but he did not respond, which confused me. Even northerners understand, so I had no idea what was wrong with this strange person. We stared at each

other for a difficult amount of time before I turned and began to walk back. I called for my child to follow me back, as the sun was now setting and could guide us back. I got the stranger to be able to stand and walk after they doffed their bulky attire, and we trudged our way the half day's walk back to the city.

I was surprised at how well he fared on the walk back, as they had improper shoes for desert travel and had just fallen from the sky. We made good time back to the town, making it back before the sun reached its final third. I gestured for them to wait outside while I took my son back inside. I cleansed myself and my son and entered. No more snide comments from the gate operator. I told my son to go back home while I went to find the magistrate. He wasn't in his office, but I saw him on the wall between the middle tower and the one that held his office, and was able to intercept him as he climbed down the ladder.

"I'm busy!" he exclaimed.

"This is extremely important," I replied, "It cannot wait"

"What could possibly so important so as to require my immediate attention?" he asked exasperatedly, "I promised the butchers I would

meet with them before nightfall!"

"With all due respect," I began, "I saw a man fall from the sky,"

The magistrate looked concerned, although tinted with curiosity, so I continued, "Not only did he live, he is waiting right outside the south gate."

He turned to his assistant and told him to reschedule the meeting with the buchers. Leading the way, we passed through narrow streets and by my house, where my son was sitting inside with my wife and her mother, deep in conversation. We made it to a large fountain a couple of paces from the gate. I grabbed a shallow basin, as one would do for any visitors, and filled it with water. We passed the gate operator and left the walled town. I was worried, perhaps due to the ephemerality of their arrival, that the stranger had spontaneously vanished, but, lo and behold, there they were, standing a handful of paces away from the stairs, exactly where I had left them. We approached the stranger and I held out the basin and cup for them, but they seemed confused. The magistrate yelled at them to cleanse themselves, but they were as clueless as ever. The magistrate then firmly grasped their hands, and, as one would do with

a young child, gently dipped them in the basin, then he grabbed the cup from the basin and poured the contents shortly before the hairline.

"Now you may enter," he said, although the stranger refrained from answering.

Entering the town, we passed by the fountain, where I returned the basin and cup. The three of us continued back towards the towers. We ascended up the magistrate's tower and crossed over to the observatory, and I knew what he was going to do.

"You can't do this!" I pleaded,

"I have to!" said the magistrate, "They're not permitted!"

"They're clearly confused!" I replied, "What if I permit them?"

"You don't have that authority!" he claimed,

"You know very well who I am," I stated.

The magistrate was nonetheless unconvinced and so we ascended to the roof of the tower. I could see the awe on the stranger's face as they took in the sights of the tower. I tried but doubted I could conceal the somber look I felt crossing my face. The magistrate also

had a conflicted look on his face as he looked back to me.

"You don't have to do this, you know,"

"I have no choice" he responded.

The magistrate then pinned the stranger against the wall of the tower roof, taking advantage of their distractedness to overpower them, and yelled questions at the stranger, who would have been too shocked to answer even if they could understand what the magistrate was saying. Nonetheless, the magistrate held them over the edge of the wall as if they were a trespasser. I was too shocked to say anything, and I was even more shocked when I heard them speak. It was a strange, affected, nasaly sort of speech that I couldn't understand. The magistrate, to my further surprise, seemed to understand, and removed him from the edge.