



## Cave of Wonders

Matthew J. Kirby

To all those who teach and study history,  
I thank you  
— M.K.



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## The Riddle of the Cave

THE GUARD had one hand on the pommel of the sword he wore at his waist. “Did you pay the toll?”

“We were with the caravan that just passed through.” Riq tried to sound confident. His skill with languages meant he usually ended up being the spokesman. *And let’s face it*, he thought, looking at the other two, *that’s probably a good thing*. “The leader of our caravan paid the toll.”

The guard looked all three of them over, and took his time doing it. “They came from Medina. How is it you are wearing the clothing of China?”

“We spent time there before joining up with that caravan,” Riq said.

The guard didn’t seem to be buying it. He kept looking at their clothes. “You’re pretty young to be working caravans.”

For a moment, Riq worried that maybe the man was a Time Warden, an undercover SQ agent on the lookout

for time travelers, and his heart began to pound. But he tried to hide it, and told himself to stop being paranoid. “We . . . uh, travel with our parents.”

The guard narrowed his eyes.

“Yeah,” Dak said. “They’re silk traders.”

“And they’ll be expecting us,” Sera said.

The guard released the pommel of his sword. “All right. Get moving, then.”

The three of them nodded and turned away. They walked down the street together, and Riq could feel the guard staring at them, his gaze a weight on the back of his neck.

“He’s watching us, isn’t he?” Sera asked.

Riq peered over his shoulder. “Yup. Just keep moving.”

“Do you think he was a Time Warden?” Dak asked.

Riq shook his head. “We can’t assume that everyone who looks at us funny is a Time Warden. We tend to get a lot of funny looks.”

Dak looked down at his Chinese clothing. “I guess maybe we need to find some clothes that will help us blend in better. The good news is that Baghdad at this time was a diverse place. I mean, it was on the Silk Road, after all.”

“The Silk Road?” Sera echoed.

“Duh, like I said before. The Silk Road was a trading route stretching from the Mediterranean all the way to China. Meaning Baghdad had people from all over the world coming through here. We don’t have to pretend

to be locals, we just might want to look a little less . . . exotic.”

Sera glanced around. “I think we need to check out the SQuare before we do anything about clothes. We need to figure out the Break.”

“Oh, yeah.” Dak pointed at an alleyway nearby. “How about over there?”

Riq nodded. “Looks good.”

The three of them crossed the busy street and entered the alley. It was narrow, filled with deep shadows, and aside from a few baskets, it was empty. Dak pulled the SQuare out of his pants, and Riq expected Sera to say something about how gross that was. But she just took the device from Dak with a blank expression. Riq wondered what was going on with her. She wasn’t acting like herself. Maybe something was happening with her Remnants, those strange feelings and false memories that came in waves and hinted that something . . . wasn’t how it was supposed to be.

“Okay.” She flipped on the SQuare and peered at the screen.

Riq waited for her to tell them what she saw there. It was usually some kind of Art of Memory puzzle or a coded message protecting what little information the Hystorians had managed to load onto the device.

“Listen to this.” She read it out loud:

*“To find what Aristotle gave*

*Speak the words, open the cave.*”

*Inside a treasure gleaming bright,  
The jewels of learning, history's light."*

The SQuare let out a little bleep, and an empty box popped up.

"Weird." Sera's eyebrows knitted together. "It looks like it wants a password for something."

"For what?" Dak asked.

Riq peered over Sera's shoulder. "Try *password*. That's what worked before."

"Wait, wait." Dak held his hand out over the screen. "Is this one threatening to blow up if we don't get it right?"

"No." Sera typed. "Okay, *password* didn't work. Any other ideas?"

Riq had no ideas. But the riddle had mentioned something about history. Which meant it was kind of Dak's thing. The kid was annoying, but every once in a while one of those endless, useless facts he pulled out actually helped. "See what Dak can do with it."

Dak nodded. "Let me see it."

Sera handed him the SQuare. He read over the riddle again, and within moments Riq could see him getting all excited. When he got talking about history, he kind of rocked back and forth on his heels.

"Okay. Aristotle," Dak said. "He was the one who founded the Hystorians back in 336 BC. His writings helped uncover the existence of the Great Breaks in history. That *could* be what the riddle means about what Aristotle 'gave.' Or, it could also be referring to how

Aristotle's writings influenced the great minds of Europe during the Renaissance."

Riq sighed. Sifting through all the facts for the useful one sometimes took a while. "That's great, Dak. What else you got?"

"Well, it says 'Speak the words, open the cave.' We *are* in Baghdad. That line of the riddle might refer to the tale of Ali Baba, which, by the way, some believe was *not* one of the original tales from the *One Thousand and One Nights*. Same with *Aladdin*, which was originally set in China. But it would make sense with the 'treasure gleaming bright.' I'm not sure what that would make the 'jewels of learning,' though." He tapped his chin. "I'm going to try something."

"What?" Riq asked.

"*Open sesame.*"

Sera raised an eyebrow. "Actually, that sounds right, with the cave and all."

Dak nodded and typed it in. The SQuare's screen flashed. And then something else came up. "Guys?" Dak held the device out. "Check this out."

Arin Cole appeared on the screen. She was one of Riq's fellow Hystorians, the one who had tried to load all the information they would need about the Great Breaks onto the SQuare. It appeared to be a prerecorded video, created before the attack on the Hystorians' headquarters. She looked stressed, as usual. *More* stressed than usual, in fact.

“He-hello,” she said. “Dak and Sera and the rest of our insertion team.”

The sight of her, thoughts of the old HQ, it all made Riq think about how he’d grown as a Hystorian. About what he’d given up for the mission.

*Kisa.* His first true friend, the girl he’d left behind during their mission in the time of the Maya. The girl who had become the first Hystorian to her people. Riq missed her. When he thought of her, he felt the pain and longing of a different kind of Remnant, and he had to take a deep breath to drive it out and focus on the recording.

“If you are watching this,” Arin said, “you have reached the Great Break in Baghdad, in the year 1258.”

Riq, Sera, and Dak all looked at one another. That was true. They were in the right place. So far, so good.

“That’s the good news.” Arin sighed. “Now the bad news. In two days, Mongols under the leadership of Hulagu Khan, the grandson of Ghengis Khan, will sack Baghdad. The city will be decimated.”

Okay, that *was* bad news. Riq thought back to Paris when the Vikings had laid siege to it, and did not like the thought of going through that kind of thing again.

“During the destruction of the city, hundreds of thousands of books will be destroyed, including those in the House of Wisdom.”

“What’s the House of Wisdom?” Riq asked.

Dak perked up. “Oh! The House of Wis—”

“*Shh!*” Sera looked hard at both of them. “Do you mind?”

“The House of Wisdom contained a library,” Arin said, “with many of the writings of our founder, Aristotle. The Mongols emptied the library and threw all the books in the Tigris River. Among the books they destroyed was a volume of Aristotle’s research on the Great Breaks. Specifically, research pertaining to the very first Great Break – or, from your perspective, the *last* Great Break. The final one you will fix.”

Riq leaned closer. If the Hystorians didn’t have the volume about the last Great Break . . .

Sera shook her head. “But if the book was lost –?”

“*Shh!*” Riq said.

“Without that book,” Arin said, “that first, crucial Great Break – the Prime Break – will be impossible to fix, and our entire mission will be lost. New Breaks will occur faster than you can fix them. The Earth will be destroyed in the Cataclysm. We Hystorians knew this day would come, when our knowledge of the Prime Break would have to be saved.”

“Great,” Dak said. “No pressure or anything.”

“*Shh!*” Riq and Sera said at the same time.

“Your task,” Arin said, “is to save the library at the House of Wisdom, and with it the writings of Aristotle. It is the only way to save the world.”

Arin stepped aside, and then Brint and Mari walked into view on the recording. Riq hadn’t seen them since the SQ had attacked them all, before their first Break saving Christopher Columbus from a mutiny.

“We want to express our gratitude and admiration,”

Brint said. "If you've made it this far, you've fixed eight of the Breaks. Only a handful more to go before the Prime Break."

Eight done. Only a few left. As Riq thought about that, a dread seeped into him about what would happen to him when they finished. He knew he had messed with his family tree back in 1850. He didn't even know if he technically existed anymore. . . .

It didn't help that the people in the video, people he'd known all his life, weren't addressing him by name. But he told himself that was just because he had joined Dak and Sera's mission at the very last second.

Mari spoke next. "After you have fixed the Baghdad Break, and saved the information we need on the Prime Break, you will face the most dangerous part of your mission so far."

More dangerous than a Mongol invasion? Riq froze, waiting for what Mari would say next. So, it seemed, did Sera and Dak.

"Your current SQuare has no information on the Prime Break," Mari said, "because we didn't have any information to load on it. If you fix the Baghdad Break in the past, we will have that information in the present. That means you will have to return to the present for a new SQuare at some point."

Riq's whole body felt like he'd just walked outside into the snow in his pajamas. Every Hystorian knew that once you entered the time stream, it would be extremely

dangerous to warp back to the present before all the Breaks were fixed. There was no telling what would happen. Paradoxes. Holes ripped in the fabric of reality. The end of the universe. But Riq had something else to be afraid of.

“We know it’s a risk,” Mari said.

*You have no idea.* If Riq went back to the future *now*, he might cease to exist.

“But it’s one we have to take,” Brint said. “There is no other choice. Hopefully, by this point, history will be repaired enough to cope with the potential paradoxes.”

Riq swallowed. *What if it isn’t?*

“Good luck,” Mari said. “And one last thing. Arin?”

“There’s *more*?” Dak threw up his hands. “Isn’t that enough?!”

Mari and Brint stepped aside, and Arin came back on the screen, clutching an armful of papers.

“Yes.” She adjusted her glasses. “I’m sorry. I’ve done countless hours of research. Really, you have no idea. I mean, if you could see the mountain of parchment I—”

“Arin.” That was Mari’s voice off to the side. “It might help if you could get to the point.”

“Right.” Arin cleared her throat. “Unfortunately, we have no idea who the Hystorian in Baghdad was. You’re on your own.”