

CHAPTER ONE: AHD

Thwack. Ahd Bel grunted as he plunged his axe into a nearby tree and grasped his knees to keep them from buckling as moonlight reflected off the blade. Moving under the cover of darkness would not be in the cards tonight, not if he was to claim the treasure for himself. He wiped the sweat off his brow, wondering why he was wasting his time stalking after some grand treasure—one guarded by the most fearsome and deceptive men in the land—when he had enough wood to supply his projects for the week.

He stole a glance at his caravan, already overflowing with his “spoils” of the day. For a second, Ahd contemplated climbing atop the mule saddled to the front and journeying back to town.

An honest day's work for an honest day's pay, son. As long as you have a roof over your head, a fire to warm your bones, and food to fill your belly, Allah will do the rest. His father had been a simple man, from birth to death, he only needed his family.

Ahd wanted more for himself than to be known as the woodcutter son of a travelling seaside merchant. He didn't desire gluttonous splendor as his brother did. Just to afford his wife a nice house in the country while keeping his newborn daughters safe and secure. The only sure way to safeguard the future of his children was to go forward with his plan.

Until a month ago, Ahd had never believed the rumors of a treasure-filled cave hidden deep in the desert. He assumed the thieves pawned what they stole and moved slowly up the societal ladder under the blissful cloak of anonymity. He would have remained ignorant to their true charade had he not seen it with his own eyes. Having stumbled onto this clearing one night, a stampede of hooves had thrown him off balance as he worked. He had rolled backward and dashed into the nearby underbrush, avoiding the onslaught of horses, all sturdy beasts carrying

two or more men draped in blood-red cloaks. Each man cradled a bulging wooden chest under his arm. Yaksah had been the last.

Yaksah had always been a mysterious man. From his first day in Vymn, no one knew much of his past. Some had sworn he was no more than a ghost. Those who *did* see him said he moved swifter than a phantom and disappeared in the blink of an eye—often taking valuable possessions with him. A year into his residence, the Vymns had christened him King of Thieves.

That night, Ahd had watched, fascinated, as they cantered up to the boulder and muttered something, though what had been hidden by the veils—head scarves covering their faces save the eyes—and the stone rolled away to reveal an expansive cave. Even crouched in the foliage, Ahd could tell the space was decorated finer than any palace. The men and their mounts disappeared behind the boulder, which moved in and out of place as if enchanted. Yaksah's chest had been so overflowing with weight that he had left a trail of objects leading right up to the door. When all the men had disappeared, Ahd crept closer to inspect them. They glittered in the starlight. Pure gold.

Ever since then, Ahd had journeyed to the clearing three times a week before daybreak, tracking their entries and exits until after dusk. Tonight, he had finally cracked the code that would allow him into the cave.

Just after midnight, Ahd, who had begun to doze against the stump after dismantling the tree for his woodworking, snapped awake as the ground shook with the unmistakable rumble of the boulder. Ahd scrambled to his feet in time to see the first in a seemingly endless stream of thieves exit the cave. All in all, he counted 35 before Traksh brought up the rear and the boulder slammed behind him. Ahd waited until not even the king's silhouette was visible before slinking up to the cave. He glared daggers at the boulder and uttered the unforgettable phrase.

“Open Sesame.”

At first, nothing happened. Wind rustled among the leaves and cicadas chirped overhead as they ventured into the night. Then the boulder shuddered, trembled, and rolled away, leaving all the splendors of the kingdoms exposed for the taking. Slowly, he crept inside, and began scooping copious handfuls into the canvas bags slung over either shoulder. Soon enough, he had more than he could carry, but something made him stop and scan the darkness. A small opening masked by a beaded curtain caught his eye. Drawing it back, he gasped at the sight before him. The finest carpets, richest fabrics, and most ornately crafted bedchamber furniture he had ever seen filled the room. As his gaze swept over the finery, it stalled at the tattered remains of a patch-work uniform, complete with a skirt and apron, draped across the chair next to the desk.

Why would the King of Thieves choose a servant, of all the women in the land, to bed? The thought was whisked away with the breeze, however, when he noticed an assortment of rare jewels and gems laying atop the dresser. He swept up as many as he could carry, including a fine gold necklace with amethyst set in the oval pendent.

The king has hordes of treasure. He won't miss a few jewels.

That didn't stop him from looking over his shoulder and cowering in fear at every sound as he ventured back to Vymn,

