

The Hidden City of Stone

He was nearly out of air when he reached the top of the mountain. It was a hell of a climb, even for a seasoned hiker like him. There was no trail, just a mad scramble over boulders and loose rock, up an incline that made his stomach churn to look down. He'd nearly buried himself in a couple rockslides on the way up, and would have to be twice as careful climbing down.

The view was worth it though. The whole world stretched before him, and he was at its center.

He hunkered down behind a large stone and ate a sandwich to celebrate, careful to snatch the plastic bag before it could blow away in the wind. He wouldn't be caught dead littering, unlike the locals who seemed content to live with their trash. It was a shame these people didn't take better care of their environment. Still, that was why the foundation's work was so important.

As soon as he returned to civilization, he would meet with the board and tell them to push ahead with the acquisition. They wouldn't get the mountain itself—the government wasn't willing to sell that—but they could acquire enough of the land in the surrounding valleys to control access to the preserve.

It was an arrangement in which all would benefit. The land would be returned to its pristine state, and the sale of its carbon credits would allow the foundation to continue its important work of purchasing distressed natural assets and safeguarding them against further misuse. The locals, of course, would be grateful for the opportunity to leave their crude houses of sticks and mud behind for the city. He'd never actually seen one of their villages, but he assumed they were rudimentary at best. He smiled, thinking of all the good he was doing.

As he prepared his pack to set down the mountain, something caught his eye. At the base of the stone where he'd sat there were carvings inscribed in the rock. They were worn down, obscured by lichen and dust, but undeniably man-made.

These mountains had once been home to great emperors and kings. He had seen their artifacts on display in several museums back home. Perhaps this was the site of one of their tombs! His mind swirled with possibilities. The carvings alone were worth a fortune, it was a shame he had no way of removing them from the mountain. He began to dig at the base of the stone, and when one of his fingernails cracked and started to bleed he hardly paid it any mind.

He found it after some time—a jewel the size of his fist, without a single scratch or speck of dirt on its surface despite passing an age underground. He held it to the sun, marveling at the resplendent light that shone through its prism.

He wrapped the jewel carefully in his scarf and stowed it in his bag, then turned to head down the mountain, grinning at his good fortune. The gem would fetch a fabulous price back home.

The descent was precarious. It took all his concentration to keep from falling, or from pulling the mountain down on top of him. Nearly every step sent a trail of loose rocks tumbling into the canyon below. More than a few hikers had gone missing over the years in this place, and he could see why.

He was nearly to the bottom of the slag pile, where the trees resumed and the incline mellowed out, when the rocks beneath him gave way and the earth swallowed him.

He landed hard on his ass. Gravel pelted his shoulders. Boulders bounced around him, The mountain shook with falling, tumbling stones.

Finally, after what seemed an eternity, the earth fell silent.

He opened his eyes to find himself in near total darkness. He'd fallen into some sort of fissure in the rock, and its opening had filled with debris during the ensuing rockslide. He could make out a few cracks of daylight in the ceiling high above, but they were far out of reach. Even if he were somehow able to climb up to them, any attempt to clear a way out would probably bring the mountain down a second time.

He screamed for help but quickly fell silent, worried the echo of his cries would loosen the rocks above him. He got to his feet. Thankfully, nothing seemed broken. A quick look around with his headlamp confirmed his fears—the walls were too steep to climb, and the opening through which he'd fallen was plugged completely with rock. He would have to find another way out.

The fissure he had fallen into was narrow, little more than an arms' span across, but extended a long ways back into the mountain. He followed its walls, meticulously searching for any crack or opening that would allow him to escape.

He found what he was looking for at the end of the fissure, where the walls narrowed and the ceiling tapered to the floor—an opening about the size of a dog door. He got down on all fours to approach, pushing his pack in front of him because it could no longer fit on his back.

He looked through the opening and saw that it ran perhaps a dozen feet before connecting to what looked like a larger chamber beyond. It reminded him of a train tunnel. He tossed a pebble to the other side and heard it echo off the walls of the far chamber. It didn't sound like a dead end. There was no other way out, he was sure. But if he went in, there would be no way to turn back if he was wrong.

He gritted his teeth, and crawled into the opening.

The stone was cold against his skin. He felt its ancient weight envelop him and fought back against the urge to panic. He would not die here, alone in the darkness of the mountain. He pushed the pack forward through the tunnel, wriggling behind it a few inches at a time. After only a short ways, he was exhausted. Sweat soaked the band of his headlamp and ran into his eyes. His arms trembled with exertion as the stone pressed in tight against his shoulders.

Before long, he was barely able to turn his head. Still, he squirmed forward, sucking in his breath as the mountain closed in around him. The end of the tunnel was close. He could see it just beyond the edge of the bag.

He was nearly there when the pack snagged on the side of the tunnel. He pressed against it, but it wouldn't budge. Panic set in. He gulped for air but his chest wouldn't expand, the rocks were too tight. He screamed and struggled, strained against the bag until finally he felt the canvas rip and with a final heave he pushed it through, out of the tunnel and away into darkness.

A rush of cold, musty air greeted him as he pulled himself through the end of the tunnel and collapsed to the floor, gasping for air like a drowning man finally thrown up by the surf.

He lay on his back a long time, shaking. Gradually, he began to take in his surroundings. The cave was enormous, its ceilings so high his lamp couldn't see their end. Huge stalagmites sprouted from the floors, and in the distance he could hear the faint trickle of water.

There were carvings too. Thousands of them, just like the ones he had seen at the top of the mountain. He was not, he realized, in a cave at all, but rather some great stone temple hewn into the very heart of the mountain.

His despair turned to elation. Now *this* was an archeological discovery! He could already see the magazine profiles and news reports. He salivated at the thought of worldwide fame and acclaim, his name forever inscribed in the history books as the one who discovered the Hidden City of Stone (that, he decided, was what he was going to call it). His palms began to sweat in anticipation.

The air was stale and musty, but still breathable, which meant there must be a hole someplace where it could get in. He plucked a hair from his head and let it fall to the floor. The draft was faint, but noticeable. He wandered the great chamber, chasing the flow of air he hoped would lead him out.

He was passing by one of the support columns when his headlamp caught a figure crouching behind it. He stumbled back, nearly losing his balance. The figure didn't move.

"Hello?" he called to it. "I'm sorry to disturb you. I fell into a hole, you see..." He trailed off. The figure didn't answer.

"Do you know how to get out of here?"

Still no sound.

He took a timid step forward, keeping his beam trained on the figure so it couldn't slip away into the dark. "I didn't mean to frighten you. If you could just point me toward the exit—" He stopped.

The figure was made of stone.

He forced himself to laugh. It was amazing he hadn't realized sooner. The statue was the same granite color as everything else in the chamber. Still, it was incredibly lifelike.

As he got closer, he saw the statue had no distinctive facial features. It had eyes, a nose and mouth, but these were so worn they had become nondescript. It reminded him of a manikin. The figure's arms and legs, he noticed, were submerged in the stone.

He patted the statue on the head. "You sure gave me a scare, bud." As he drew back his hand, he noticed a pair of charred rings where the figure's heart should be—one on its chest, the other on its back. He touched the marks, but felt nothing unusual on the surface. Some sort of discoloration of the rock, apparently.

He remembered the jewel for the first time since he'd fallen into the mountain. He took the bundle from his pack and unwrapped it hurriedly, fearing the stone was broken. Thankfully, it appeared undamaged. He sighed with relief, then caught his breath—the stone appeared to be glowing. He turned his lamp off to be sure. The light was stronger in the darkness, nearly bright enough for him to navigate without the lamp. He turned, and the jewel's light fell upon the face of the statue, and he realized that the figure was screaming.

He put the jewel away and turned his headlamp back on.

He continued down the chamber, following the direction of the draft. There were more statues, but he made a point not to look at them. After a while, he came to an

elaborate archway even more spectacularly carved than the rest. Beneath it was a door, its frame adorned with runes.

The room on the other side of the door was smaller but no less ornate. At its center stood an altar. Even with his lamp on, he could tell it was glowing. He approached it, trembling with anticipation. The glow of hundreds of jewels illuminated his face. Visions of unimaginable wealth danced in their reflection.

He unslung his bag to begin loading the treasure, when something else caught his eye—daylight!

He turned off his headlamp to be sure. It was there, faint but unmistakable. He dropped the bag and rushed to it. The light came from a tunnel off to the side of the altar, small compared to the scale of its surroundings, but navigable nonetheless. He broke into a run.

Sunlight met him around the turn. He fell to his knees, and let its warmth sap the cold of the mountain from his bones.

The tunnel came out onto the side of a cliff perhaps sixty feet above the ground. He remembered passing beneath the same place earlier that morning. From below, the rocks had seemed impossible to scale, but from this vantage point he could see a clear pathway down—a ladder carved into the rock.

He was seized by the urge to climb down immediately. He had been reunited with the open sky—after everything he had been through, surely that was enough.

But it wasn't. He turned away from the sun and walked back into the mountain.

He spilled the contents of his bag at the foot of the altar. It wasn't an offering, he just needed to make room. He stuffed the pack with gems until it overflowed. He was struggling with the zipper when a voice called to him from the darkness.

"Those do not belong to you." The voice was ancient, heavy like stone.

He wheeled around, but saw nothing.

"Those do not belong to you," the voice repeated. "Leave them, and you may go."

He scanned the chamber, yet still saw nothing. "Where are you!?" he called to the darkness.

Something moved on the far side of the wall. There was a crunch and crack of rock as a figure detached from the stone. It loomed over him, filling the chamber with its presence, neither human nor animal nor rock, but something in between. He could feel its ancient power radiating through the stone beneath his feet.

The creature watched him, waiting for a response.

"You speak English?" he stammered. It felt like a stupid thing to say, but it was all he could think of.

"I speak the original tongue. It is known to all beings."

"And what should I call you?"

"I have known many names. Which you choose does not matter. Return what you have stolen, and you may leave this mountain." The creature took a step towards him. The ground shook beneath its weight.

He instinctively clutched the bag tighter. The tunnel that led to the cliff was only a few paces away. If he could make it to the entrance, the creature would be too large to follow him and farther.

As if reading his mind, the creature took another step forward. "You cannot escape this place. Return what you have stolen and you will be allowed to leave."

He could feel the tension building in the air, like the moment before a lightning strike. A voice inside him begged him not to run. He ignored it.

He lunged for the tunnel, but his feet wouldn't move. He looked down and saw that his legs were sinking into the ground, slowly turning to stone. He heard cracking as his joints sealed up with rock and his stomach filled with sand. He opened his mouth in a wordless scream. And then there was nothing.

Sighing, the creature approached the grave robber's statue. It always offered them the chance to leave, and yet none ever accepted it. Such a shame. It took no pleasure in taking their lives.

It placed its hand over the robber's chest. The stone smoldered, then melted away as the creature extracted the thief's heart. It glowed softly in the darkness of the chamber. The creature placed its latest jewel upon its altar, then sank back into the mountain.