

# Chapter One:

## *Ahd*

*T*hwack. Ahd Bel grunted as he plunged his axe into a nearby tree and placed his hands on 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. Why was he wasting his time stalking after some grand fortune—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 harnessed 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.*

Ahd loved his father dearly, but he 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, but wanted 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 jewel-filled cave hidden deep in the desert. He assumed the thieves pawned what they stole and moved 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. He'd been working in the clearing one night when a stampede had nearly run him over. He had

rolled backward and dashed into the nearby underbrush, avoiding the onslaught of horses, all sturdy beasts carrying men draped in blood-red cloaks. Each man had cradled a wooden chest under his arm, and Yaksah had been the last.

Yaksah had always been a mysterious man. From his first day in Mursem, 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 Mursems had christened him King of Thieves.

That night, Ahd had watched, fascinated, as they cantered up to the boulder and muttered something, the words masked by their 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 wealth that he had left a trail of valuables leading right up to the door. When all the men had disappeared, Ahd crept closer to inspect the items left behind. 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 in his caravan, snapped awake as the ground shook with the unmistakable rumble of the boulder. He 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 thirty-five before Yaksah 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 insects 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. He crept inside and began scooping handfuls of treasure into the canvas bags slung over his shoulders. 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. 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 patchwork 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, however, when he noticed an assortment of rare jewels and gems lying atop the dresser. He swept up as many as possible, including a fine gold necklace with amethyst set in the oval pendant.

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

But that didn't stop Ahd from looking over his shoulder and cowering in fear at every sound as he ventured back to Mursem.