

A vertical photograph of a forest. In the foreground, there are several tall, dark evergreen trees with dense needles, their branches reaching towards the top of the frame. The ground is covered in brown leaves and fallen branches. In the background, a path leads into a misty, hazy forest. The trees in the distance are lighter and less distinct due to the fog. The overall color palette is dominated by greens and browns, with a soft, ethereal light filtering through the trees.

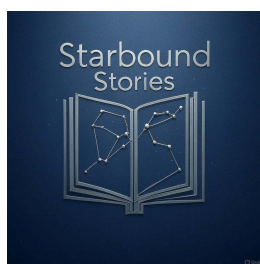
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BY A.S

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THE TREASURE OF SHADOWS



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Contents

The Map in the Dust	1
The Forest of Echoes	3
Secrets in the Stone	5
The River of Shadows	7
The Hidden Path	9
Shadows in the Cave	12
The Ambush at the Silver River	16
The Cavern of Echoing Winds	19
The Treasure of Shadows	21
A New Dawn	23

The Map in the Dust

Hinjan Hook had just turned thirty, a milestone that should have been quiet. Instead, it marked the beginning of an adventure unlike any he had ever faced. The road he travelled wound through a landscape half-forgotten by time. The sun burned high in the sky, illuminating the sprawling forests and jagged hills that surrounded him. His boots kicked up dust with every step, but it wasn't the road or the scenery that caught his attention. Something glimmered among the dead leaves—a hint of parchment, aged and torn.

Kneeling, he pulled it free: a treasure map, weathered by years and partially burnt. But it was incomplete—only half of the treasure map was in his hands.

The lines traced a path through forests, mountains, rivers, and a symbol that promised wealth and power beyond imagination. A thrill of excitement surged through Hinjan. He had hunted

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treasures before, but this... this was something else entirely.

He was so focused on studying it that he barely noticed a shadow moving across the path until a voice cut the quiet:

"Looking for something, or just lost in your dreams?"

Hinjan looked up. There stood Alsany Sowan, a woman known to him only from fleeting encounters on his previous travels. Her eyes were sharp, alert, and intelligent, and the glint of a secret in her gaze told him she knew far more than she let on.

Before he could speak, another figure stepped from behind the trees. Ginger and Coke, a treasure hunter infamous for cunning and ruthlessness, held the other half of the map.

"You've got one half. I've got the other," Ginger said smoothly, a grin spreading across his face. "Seems like we'll have to... cooperate."

Hinjan narrowed his eyes. Alsany studied Ginger with suspicion. The tension between the three could have been cut with a knife.

Yet adventure waits for no one, and the promise of treasure made even uneasy alliances bearable.

The Forest of Echoes

By late afternoon, the trio entered the Forest of Echoes, named for the way voices seemed to carry and distort among the trees. Local legends whispered that travellers often entered the forest and never emerged.

“According to the map,” Hinjan murmured, tracing a route with his finger, “we need to find the Stone of Whispers. That’s our first landmark.”

Alsany leaned close, inspecting the markings. “The stone isn’t just a place. It’s a puzzle. The wind through its carvings reveals a message, or a warning.”

Ginger scoffed. “I prefer my messages in gold coins, not riddles.”

Hours passed. Shadows deepened, and the forest seemed to close around them. Strange symbols marked tree trunks, and faint grinding sounds suggested hidden mechanisms. Hinjan’s

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instincts screamed danger.

And they were right.

A pit opened beneath Ginger, sharp stakes hidden within. Hinjan grabbed him just in time. Alsany quickly deciphered the symbols carved on nearby stones, realising they indicated traps along the path.

“Every landmark hides a clue,” she said. “We need to think, not just run.”

Together, they carefully advanced, learning quickly that trust would be as crucial as skill.

Secrets in the Stone

By nightfall, they discovered the Stone of Whispers, a massive rock carved with intricate runes. The moonlight revealed that the carvings shimmered faintly, almost as if alive.

Alsany pressed her hands to the stone and whispered the words etched into it. The carvings responded to her voice, carrying a message that only she could decipher:

“Seek the path where shadows sleep, where the river bends thrice before the leap...”

Hinjan frowned. “A riddle. The next step isn’t on the map. We have to follow the clue.”

Ginger muttered, “Riddles slow us down. I prefer gold in plain sight.”

But Hinjan knew this treasure was no ordinary hoard. It contained secrets, powers, and dangers long buried. The riddle

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was the first of many.

As they camped beneath the stone, Hinjan felt eyes watching them from the forest. Shadows moved unnaturally. They weren't alone. And the treasure... was far more dangerous than any of them realised.

The River of Shadows

Morning broke with a thin mist clinging to the forest floor. Hinjan Hook packed his satchel carefully, keeping the half-burned map close. Alsany Sowan moved silently beside him, examining the carvings they had discovered the night before, while Ginger and Coke lagged slightly behind, muttering complaints about damp boots and slow travel.

“The Stone of Whispers said... the river bends thrice before the leap,” Hinjan murmured. “That’s where the next clue lies.”

They pressed on through the forest, the trees gradually thinning to reveal a wide river. The water flowed sluggishly, dark and reflective, hiding jagged rocks just beneath the surface. Hinjan studied the map. One bend, two bends... the third bend jutted sharply, forming a natural cliff overhang.

“Here,” Alsany said, pointing. “The leap. But look—see those

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stones along the riverbank? They're aligned like steps. This is not a natural formation."

Ginger stepped forward, confident as ever. "Perfect. I can leap that in one go."

"Wait!" Hinjan shouted. "The map isn't just directions. Look at the carvings. One false step, and..." He didn't finish. The warning was enough.

Carefully, they began crossing, testing each stone. The river whispered secrets as their feet touched the slick surfaces. At the third bend, Hinjan noticed a faint shimmer beneath the water—a metal ring, partially buried in mud.

"That's it," he said. "It's a trap or a key. Possibly both."

Alsany leaned closer, inspecting it. "It's a pulley system, connected to something upstream. Look at the carving here—if someone steps wrong, a net could drop."

Ginger froze. "A net? Seriously?"

Hinjan ignored him and pulled a long stick, pressing it carefully against the pulley. A chain groaned, tension shifting. The three held their breaths as a small platform slowly rose from the river's edge. A hidden pathway revealed itself behind a curtain of ivy.

"See?" Alsany whispered. "The treasure doesn't just want seekers. It tests them."

The Hidden Path

The hidden path twisted upward, following a narrow canyon that smelled of damp earth and stone. The air grew colder as the sun disappeared behind jagged cliffs. Each step was measured, each shadow a potential threat.

“So far, so good,” Ginger said, brushing mud from his boots. “We’re doing fine.”

Hinjan shot him a wary glance. “Fine isn’t enough. The map has riddles. Someone set these tests for a reason.”

Alsany, as always calm, examined the walls. “There are symbols here—ancient script. Look at the sequence. They form a pattern that matches the map. Whoever made this... wanted only the cleverest to proceed.”

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Hours passed as they climbed. Hinjan's muscles burned, his hands scraped, yet the thrill of adventure kept him moving.

At last, the path opened into a cavern, dimly lit by cracks in the ceiling. Inside, stone pillars lined the chamber, carved with faces that seemed to watch every movement. At the centre lay a pedestal with a small, intricately carved chest.

Hinjan's pulse quickened. "Could this be it?"

Alsany stepped forward cautiously. "Or it could be another test. Look at the floor—these stones aren't just decorative. Step wrong, and..."

A click echoed. Hinjan froze. The chest remained still. Ginger laughed nervously. "Step wrong? What, like a trapdoor?"

Hinjan shook his head. "Better safe than sorry."

Carefully, Alsany traced a pattern with her fingers on the floor, guiding them to the correct approach. Together, they reached the chest. Hinjan lifted the lid, revealing...

A golden orb, smooth and glowing faintly, resting on a velvet cushion. But as soon as they touched it, the cavern rumbled, dust falling from the ceiling.

"Run!" Hinjan shouted. Stones fell, and the walls began shifting, revealing hidden passages.

The treasure was not simply a reward—it was a gateway to

something far bigger, a mystery that would demand every skill, every ounce of trust, and perhaps a confrontation with a force they had yet to understand.

Shadows in the Cave

Dust filled the air as Hinjan Hook, Alsany Sowan, Ginger and Coke sprinted through the cavern's twisting passageways. The golden orb glowed faintly in Hinjan's satchel, pulsing as if alive, illuminating the jagged walls with a soft, eerie light.

"This way!" Alsany called, pointing toward a narrow tunnel barely wide enough for two. They scrambled through, slipping over slick stones. The rumbling grew louder behind them.

As they emerged into a larger chamber, a voice echoed from the shadows.

"Well, well... what do we have here?"

Hinjan froze. From the darkness stepped a figure clad in black, hood drawn low, face hidden. Two more figures emerged behind him, silent as ghosts.

“Rivals,” Ginger muttered under his breath, unease finally cracking his usual bravado.

Hinjan’s instincts sharpened. “Looks like we’re not the only ones after the treasure.”

The hooded man stepped forward. “Hand over the orb, and maybe I’ll let you walk out alive,” he said, his tone calm but deadly.

Alsany glanced at Hinjan. “We can’t fight them here. Too many unknowns, and these passages could collapse.”

Hinjan nodded. He tightened his grip on the satchel. “We need a plan... fast.”

Ginger rolled his eyes but drew his dagger. “Or we could just... charge.”

Hinjan shot him a look that could cut steel. “Not this time. We’ll need cunning, not brashness.”

Using the orb’s faint glow, Alsany traced a series of markings on the walls. “These are more than decorative. They’re mechanisms—hidden doors, traps. If we can trigger one, we might escape and confuse them.”

With careful precision, Hinjan pressed a loose stone in the wall. The cavern trembled as a hidden passageway opened. Dust poured down, partially blocking the hooded figures’ view.

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“Now!” Hinjan shouted. They slipped through the passage, hearts pounding. Behind them, the voices of the rivals grew frustrated, shouting orders that echoed through the twisting tunnels.

As they ran, the orb pulsed brighter, lighting a path that seemed to react to Hinjan’s presence. Alsany frowned. “It’s almost as if it’s alive... or wants something from us.”

Ginger, panting, whispered, “Great. Now the treasure’s a sentient glowing thing. What next?”

Hinjan didn’t answer. His mind raced. Whoever had created this treasure had designed tests, traps, and guardians—not just to protect gold, but to challenge those who sought it.

They emerged from the cave into a forest shrouded in mist. The sunlight was dim, barely breaking through the dense canopy. For a moment, relief washed over them—they had escaped the immediate danger.

But Hinjan knew better. The map still had half the path left, and now rivals were on their trail. Every step forward would bring greater risks, greater mysteries, and perhaps secrets that could change everything they knew about the world.

Alsany looked at him, eyes fierce yet curious. “This is just the beginning, isn’t it?”

Hinjan nodded. “And we’re only going to get stronger. But we have to be smarter. Faster. We can’t trust anyone... not even

each other.”

Ginger sighed dramatically. “Great. Adventure, life-threatening traps, glowing orbs... and zero fun. Just how I like it.”

Hinjan smirked. “Welcome to the real hunt.”

And so, the journey continued. Rivers to cross, mountains to scale, riddles to solve, and a treasure that was far more than gold waiting at the end.

The Ambush at the Silver River

The forest gave way to a narrow valley, where the Silver River glimmered under the waning sun. Its waters were apparent, reflecting the clouds above like liquid glass. Hinjan Hook, Alsany Sowen, and Ginger and Coke approached cautiously. The map indicated that the river bend ahead was critical—the next clue awaited there.

“Stay alert,” Hinjan whispered. “The map doesn’t lie, but neither do the people hunting us.”

Alsany nodded, eyes scanning the treeline. “I sense we’re being followed.”

Ginger rolled his eyes but gripped his dagger tighter. “You two are paranoid. It’s just us and the river.”

Hinjan’s instincts screamed otherwise. He slowed his pace, motioning for the others to spread out. Suddenly, a net swooped down from the trees, narrowly missing Alsany.

“Trap!” she shouted, ducking.

From the shadows, figures emerged—three rival treasure hunters, led by the hooded man from the cavern. Their weapons

gleamed, and one held a bow with an arrow aimed straight at Hinjan.

“Hand over the orb!” the leader barked. “We know what you’re after. It’s ours now!”

Hinjan didn’t hesitate. “Move!” He grabbed a loose rock and threw it into the river. The splash drew the archers’ attention, and arrows whistled past their heads.

Alsany, quick-thinking as ever, seized a vine and swung it, knocking the nearest hunter off balance. Ginger, surprisingly agile, lunged, tripping another into the river.

“Keep moving!” Hinjan commanded. He pressed the orb against his chest as they ran along the riverbank. But the ground beneath them shook—the river wasn’t as calm as it seemed.

Suddenly, a hidden platform emerged from the water, triggered by pressure plates in the soil. Hinjan jumped, landing just in time. Alsany followed, landing gracefully. Ginger barely made it, slipping and almost falling into the rushing water.

The rivals were momentarily stunned, giving Hinjan’s team a chance to escape into the forest beyond.

Breathless, they paused among the trees. Hinjan turned to the others. “This isn’t just treasure hunting. Whoever designed this wants us tested at every step.”

Alsany traced the river with her fingers, studying the map.

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“The next landmark is the Cavern of Echoing Winds. The map says it’s guarded not only by traps, but also by intelligence and cunning. We’ll need all our wits there.”

Ginger groaned. “Great. More tests. And here I thought adventure was supposed to be fun.”

Hinjan smiled grimly. “Fun died the moment we picked up that orb. From now on, survival is the goal—and getting to the treasure alive.”

The forest grew darker as night approached. Shadows twisted, and the river whispered secrets, almost as if warning them: the hunt was far from over.

Hinjan tucked the orb carefully into his satchel. He didn’t yet understand its powers, but one thing was clear: this treasure was more dangerous than anyone imagined, and every step forward would be a battle of skill, wit, and courage.

And somewhere in the shadows, the rivals were already planning their next move...

The Cavern of Echoing Winds

The Cavern of Echoing Winds yawned before them like a gaping mouth, dark and ominous. Every step inside sent eerie echoes bouncing off the stone walls, making it impossible to tell where the sound originated. The orb in Hinjan's satchel pulsed softly, as if urging him onward.

"This is it," Alsany whispered. "The final landmark."

Inside, massive stone pillars rose from the ground, carved with cryptic runes. The air felt charged, almost alive.

Suddenly, a gust of wind blew through the cavern, extinguishing their torches. In the darkness, a deep, resonant voice echoed:

"Only the worthy shall claim the treasure. Answer the riddle, or be lost forever."

Hinjan stepped forward, heart pounding. A stone tablet rose from the floor, glowing faintly. The words formed on its surface:

"I speak without a mouth and hear without ears. I have nobody,

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but I come alive with the wind. What am I?”

Alsany whispered, “It’s the wind itself. It’s the answer!”

Hinjan nodded, touching the tablet. The pillars shifted, revealing a hidden staircase descending into the heart of the cavern.

The Treasure of Shadows

At the bottom, the cavern opened into a vast chamber. In the centre, a pedestal held a chest unlike any Hinjan had ever seen. It shimmered with golden light, but more than gold, it seemed to radiate energy, almost like the heartbeat of the earth itself.

Ginger and Coke gasped. “Finally... the treasure.”

Hinjan approached carefully, Alsany at his side. He opened the chest. Inside lay not only gold and jewels, but ancient scrolls, a glowing orb, and a crown engraved with stars—the Moonlight Crown of legend.

“This... this is incredible,” Alsany breathed.

But before they could celebrate, a shadow moved. The rivals from the forest had followed them, sneaking into the chamber.

“Hand it over!” the hooded leader shouted, drawing his sword.

Hinjan gripped his dagger, Alsany took a defensive stance,

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and Ginger reluctantly drew his weapon. But Hinjan noticed something strange—the orb in the chest pulsed brighter.

Suddenly, the cavern responded. The floor shifted, creating barriers of stone that separated the rivals from them. Rocks rose, forming a protective wall. The treasure itself seemed alive, protecting its rightful seekers.

Hinjan whispered, “The treasure... it chooses its owners.”

The rivals cursed, unable to reach them. Hinjan, Alsany, and Ginger looked at each other. They had survived traps, puzzles, and enemies. And now, the Moonlight Crown awaited them.

A New Dawn

With the treasure secure, they climbed out of the cavern as the first rays of sunlight broke over the mountains. The orb, the scrolls, and the crown glowed softly in Hinjan's pack.

Alsany smiled. "We did it. Against all odds."
Ginger laughed, finally relieved. "I have to admit... that was worth it."

Hinjan looked at the crown, the orb, and the ancient scrolls. He realised the treasure was more than wealth—it contained knowledge, power, and secrets of the past, enough to shape kingdoms.

He turned to Alsany. "We can't let this fall into the wrong hands. We have to protect it."

Alsany nodded. "Together."

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And as they watched the sun rise over the valley, Hinjan Hook felt something he hadn't in years: a sense of purpose, adventure completed, yet a feeling that the world still held secrets waiting to be discovered.

The treasure of shadows was theirs, but the story of Hinjan Hook and Alsany Sowen—the adventurers, the seekers, the keepers of secrets—would live on, whispered in the winds of distant lands.

The End. ☾