

1: Into the Something Kum

I despise my sister.

Well, that's not true. Not despise exactly.

...But close, but close.

Alex thinks because she's sixteen, she should be the next president of the International Brilliant Intelligence Club. She thinks that any male (that's me, Mike) just barely thirteen (also me) is dirt. Less than dirt. Gum wrapper. And that's how she's always treating me, even when she's saving my life.

Look at her across the kitchen there, her arm flapping, yakking on the phone. She's trying to explain to her lawn service client, Mr. Hillyer, why she didn't mow his lawn last week on schedule. She's telling him the truth, which is her first mistake.

Nobody's going to believe that story. It sounds like a plot from Indiana Jones. Sure, we really did fly to the middle of Asia where even your teacher can't tell you where it is. And we got into trouble like you wouldn't believe. Sure, we found amazing stuff. Rode camels. Almost got killed, too. But you don't tell Mr. Hillyer something like that and expect him to believe it. Why doesn't she just say she overslept that day or something?

I bet Mr. Hillyer never even heard of Bukhara.

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Into the Kyzyl What?

"Kara Kum. Kyzyl Kum. Got it, Mike?" Pop is certain I need More Facts to make my life complete (I don't think I do). "The Kara Kum and Kyzyl Kum are famous deserts which..."

"Not quite as famous as the Sahara."

"Not quite. But famous to ecologists. They lie primarily in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan. We're in the Kyzyl Kum."

"Got it." And I wasn't about to encourage him to explain the stuff any further. On the map, Kara Kum and Kyzyl Kum look pretty much like all the same desert. There's the Caspian Sea, a big blue kidney shape, and a blue glob that's the Aral Sea, and our plane had just landed southeast of there.

We were in the city of Bukhara, Uzbekistan, in one of those Kum deserts. That's already as much as I really wanted to know.

Alex didn't even want to know that much. She stood beside Mom in baggage claim, scowling as if someone had stuck gum in her ponytail. Not that it hasn't occurred to me.

We all four stood there, but not because we had baggage. Mom and Pop, Alex and I have learned to travel anywhere with just a carry-on. That way, you aren't arriving in Melbourne, Australia, while your suitcase is being unloaded in Caracas, Venezuela. But our ride from the airport here into Bukhara was supposed to meet us in baggage claim (we'd cleared customs already, in Tashkent, the major city in Uzbekistan, and boy, what a nightmare that was!). So where was the ride?

Pop went off to reconnoiter. Alex wandered out the glass doors to a jewelry peddler in a dirty turban. I could see him through the glass. The man sat crosslegged beside a spread-out blanket. His wares; rings, necklaces, bangles and bracelets; were all masking-taped to the blanket. Clever. At quitting time, he could just roll his blanket up and be out of there, instantly.

The area around the airport here was wall-to-wall with taxi cabs, all with drivers who shout. There were peddlers, too, men and women both, all sitting behind or beside whatever they sold. They offered bread, bowls of strange nuts and seeds, jewelry, rugs, shawls, plenty of brass ashtrays, odd-looking carvings and lots of other stuff. You name it.

The women who sold things were mostly all in bulky long skirts and scarves, wild colours and wild prints that some would call "too much contrast." But a few women walking around were

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covered head to toe in long, loose skirts and robes, long scarf-like head covers, and veils over their faces. It reminded you with a jolt that former Soviet republic or not, this country was still mostly Muslim. Very conservative Islamic women keep their faces covered in public (Mom told me once that the dark head-to-knees veil is called a chaderi). According to Pop, though, Uzbekistan is not a particularly conservative place.

I told Mom, "We forgot Alex's leash. I'll go ride herd so she doesn't get lost. You remember Copenhagen. I'll see if anyone is waiting for us, too."

Alex once got lost in Copenhagen exactly forty-two feet from the hotel door. I mention it every chance I get.

I hustled outside before Mom said not to, because I don't do real well at just standing around and waiting. Mom does.

We were here in Something Kum to look for treasure. I suppose when you're out searching for treasure, you can expect to stand around awhile now and then. Exactly what kind of treasure, nobody knew. I pictured running my hands through a couple quarts of rubies and emeralds. Alex dreamt pretty much exclusively of gold. Ingots, preferably. Mom and Pop wouldn't speculate, at least to us kids.

Treasure. So far, all we were finding was lots of dust and noise. According to Pop, someone heard rumors about someone else finding extremely old treasure; you know how those things go; and someone else told the Minister of Antiquities. The Minister called Pop, an old friend, and all of a sudden, here we were in the middle of Asia, in the Kara Kum desert. Or was it Kyzyl Kum? Whatever.

Hey, I was game! I'd never gone on an actual treasure hunt before.

I stood out in the sun a couple minutes just looking around. The sky here was blue, at least. Pop claimed the sky used to be blue over Tashkent, where we first touched down, but industrial pollution and irrigation had muddied it up. It didn't seem to be as bad here. It was more like you expect a desert town to be, warm, dry air with a shimmery sort of dust haze.

Police officers. Good gravy, all the cops! Policemen on every corner, two or three in sight all the time. They swarm in Uzbekistan. You'd think that with so many cops, the place would be safe as a baby's crib, but the biggest danger here, Pop said, is the cops themselves. Uzbekistan enjoys, if that's the word, the reputation for having the most corrupt police force in Asia. And I hear Kazakhstan really gives them a run for their money. They love to shake down the rich Americans.

And what a mess of vehicles! Limos hung around the curb. A couple donkey carts with donkeys harnessed to them accompanied peddlers here and there. More limos than donkeys. More limos than regular cars, in fact. You saw only a few private cars like you'd find zillions of at an American airport. More taxi cabs than you can ever imagine. Small to medium-sized trucks roared all over and tooted their horns a lot, but none seemed to be looking for four Americans.

I saw Pop a couple hundred feet down the street, talking to drivers, no doubt trying to find out if one of them was waiting for us.

Alex came swooping over and poked my arm. "Did Daddy give you any money?"

"Yeah."

"What is it in Uzbekistan?"

"Sum." I pronounced it soom. A hundred tiyin are one sum like a hundred cents are an American dollar, but nobody uses coins in Uzbekistan, so nobody bothers with tiyin. You get about 35 sum for a dollar. But raw American dollars and Russian rubles work too.

"Give me some."

"Alex, there's gotta be some reason he didn't give you any. Spend somebody else's...hey! There's a guy looking kind of lost. Or expecting someone." I waved my arm, the handiest pointer available, toward a really beat-up looking three-quarter-ton pickup cruising by.

She scowled. "Mike, that's a pickup truck. If the Minister of Antiquities is sending a driver for us, it'll be a limo. That's why Daddy is checking all the limos along here."

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But I was already stepping out into the street to flag him, because he was staring right at me. He had a sort of "ah hah!" look on his face.

The road was clear, more or less; suddenly a bumper the size of a rhinoceros was right by my ear, followed by a city bus the size of a city bus, with a horn that could call in airplanes. That's when I found out they don't stop for pedestrians in Uzbekistan like they do in the States. Alex out-shrieked the bus horn.

I dove for the sidewalk. You wouldn't believe how fast I can toss my body in a different direction if I have to. The bus didn't touch me, but another coat of paint and it would have. A dozen angry voices yelled helpful things at me in languages I don't understand. I stood on the curb in a cold sweat, and just breathed awhile. Shook a little, too.

By the time I was done getting out of the way, which didn't take all that long, the guy in the beat-up truck had gone on. Oh well. He probably wasn't it anyway. Too small a vehicle. I could just see Mom and Pop sitting in front, with Alex and me in back. I love riding in the bed of a pickup, but Alex doesn't. She says it messes up her hair.

Two police officers came roaring up, but Pop charged up to us as well, so furious at me he was white. He always gets mad at me when I do something without thinking. He said in Russian, "We are guests of the state!" And the cops moved back, apparently very unhappy that they couldn't throw me in a dungeon.

I apologized to Pop; it was easier than trying to explain that I really did look before I stepped out, and I really didn't see that bus coming.

Mom joined us a minute or two later. Pop looked grim. That's not like him at this stage of a journey. He usually saves grim for about halfway through, when everything's going haywire.

"I tried to reach the minister again. The office must be closed. No answer." Mom frowned. "It can't be a holiday, can it?" Frowns were highly uncharacteristic of her, too. She didn't have to frown. All she had to do was stare at you if she was angry. When she frowned, she was worried.

"You never know. We'll go to Ayim's and see what he has to say. Four kilometers down that road." Pop pointed. "We can walk there faster than we could take a bus. They don't go there directly."

No, they're too busy bearing down on me, but I didn't say that out loud. Mom didn't see my near miss, and I wasn't about to mention it. She might start bugging me about it, the way I have a very slight tendency to bug Alex about Copenhagen.

"Four...!" Alex, instantly defensive, asked, "I forget. How far is that in English?"

I hitched my carry-on up my shoulder a little higher. "Two and a half miles. When are you going to go metric with the rest of the world?"

We started hoofing it, but we didn't get more than fifty feet (about 13 meters to us metric folk) when a rattletrap pickup truck pulled alongside. The driver called something to us. Then the fellow clambered down out of his cab and stood right in front of Pop, gesturing enthusiastically.

And yes, you're right. It was that truck! Three-quarter-ton pickup. That same guy. He wore cotton pants and a Russian-cut cotton shirt, washed a lot of times, it appeared, with harsh soap. Over the shirt was a knee-length tunic in a wild paisley print and over that what looked like a plain old quilted bathrobe in vertical stripes. I noticed a lot of men in Uzbekistan dressed like that, especially older ones.

He wore the embroidered hat, sort of a black beanie with silver scrollwork, that most men in Bukhara wear. His thick black moustache seemed to pry his long nose and long chin apart. He was sun-tanned, but you'd expect that on a desert, and probably balding, since no hair stuck out from under the cap anywhere. You wouldn't expect that on a man who looked maybe forty.

Should I tell Pop about this fellow? If so, how? Where the guy can hear or some other way? And besides, so what? The fellow saw me try to flag him down, figured we wanted a ride and swung around to make contact. Nothing suspicious, really. Still....

Pop dickered with the driver in rapid-fire Uzbek. We tossed our bags in the back. Pop climbed in and Mom hopped in beside him. I scrambled up over the tailgate. It must have been

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trampled by raging elephants. In fact, the whole truck must have been in the path of the stampeding herd. Nothing else would have beaten it up that badly, with dents and gouges. Alex crawled in and settled herself back against the cab, trying to stay out of the breeze.

I was ready for some breeze, myself. I was sweating, a hot sweat as opposed to my previous cold sweat. It was a lot warmer this time of year in Bukhara than it was in Columbus, Ohio, and my bod was used to Ohio weather. Besides, the near miss with the bus had my insides all churned up.

The truck jerked and bolted, shied and lurched as the driver tried to move through city traffic without applying his brake or his brains. I was kind of afraid he would run over some of those women who were completely covered with robes and veil, but they were as spry as all the others in spite of the baggy, bulky clothes.

I glanced at Alex. She pressed against the cab with her eyes closed, looking about as happy as a cat in a bubblebath.

My mind kept slipping back and forth between treasure and the bus. It was like the bus had been lurking somewhere and revved up after me when I stepped out within reach of it. On the other hand, how could something the size of a bus lurk? And just exactly where would you lurk if you were something that size? This was nuts. I tried to put it out of my mind.

It was nearly dark when the truck bumped and jerked and rolled to a stop outside the regional ministry office in Bukhara. Their windows were all dark.

The short wispies in Alex's hair made a free-floating halo around her face, not to suggest she's a little angel. Her ponytail was askew. Her nose was starting to turn pink, too. She was going to need a hat.

We climbed out and retrieved our gear as the driver apologized that his brakes didn't work. Pop gave him a little extra anyway.

The man examined the money in his hand a few moments. He looked at Pop. They conversed in slow, measured Russian: The man said, sort of accusingly, "You are not Muslim, Comrade Geroy."

"Christian, Comrade Nasim."

The fellow digested this a few moments. He grunted. "Christians depend upon guardian angels, this is true? In Bukhara, angels are not enough these days. You need a protector. For two hundred dollars American, paid at the end of each week, I will be your chauffeur and protector."

I happen to know that Pop was being hustled, because two hundred is a fortune in Uzbekistan. Some people there don't make fifty American dollars in a year. Surely Pop knew that too.

"Can you take us places outside town?"

"Anywhere."

Pop bobbed his head. "Deal."

The man gravely studied Pop's face, Mom's, mine, and Alex's. "Good. Good. You are going to need me."