

The Market

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Chapter 1 of 1

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I push my sunglasses to the top of my head and begin the familiar walk through the dark, crowded street market. Tiny shopkeepers try to pull me into even smaller shops selling everything from beautiful gems – quite possibly not real – to scruffy-looking rabbits – quite possibly someone's next meal. I smile, try to be polite, but I am not interested in these. The treasure I seek lies in the back, in a dimly lit corner.

The owner knows me for I have been here many times before. The guards nod to me, the strong stench of a forbidden cigarette wafting off their shabby uniforms, for they know me too. The proprietor bows slightly at the waist, as has been the practice of the tradesmen for generations. He welcomes me into his shop, offers me a chair, and pours me a cup of some sort of herbal tea. I don't know enough of his language to ask. He doesn't know enough of my language to tell.

We sip our tea slowly, as though the ritual will connect us in a way that life does not. He is poor; I live comfortably, if not richly by his standards. He is tied to this shop, as he has been for decades. I am young and free to travel as I like. He has seen war, uprising and famine. In my life, the worst thing I have seen are the pictures of some war that people I don't know are fighting, somewhere I have never been.

We sit for a moment or more as we finish the tea. I chuckle as the man waves off a rooster who wants to look for his hens in the shop. What an absurd thought, that the owner would let something as dirty as a chicken into his meticulously clean shop. The concrete floors are swept with an almost-religious devotion. The shelves, laden though they are with treasures, are wiped down every night. The guards, with their contraband cigarettes, would not risk the shopkeeper's ire by bringing their addiction inside. The police patrolling the market would be much more lenient.

I finish my tea a moment after the old man. I set the cup down on the worn, wooden table. He makes the slightest motion to refill my cup, which I promptly wave off. I have business to complete today.

With one step, I am in the heart of the shop, surrounded by color. The gray exterior, the gray skies, the gray-uniformed guards, melt into bolts of blues, reds, oranges and greens. Here, a sanctuary of color in the bleak, smoggy world of the city.

I run my fingers appreciatively over the first bolt I am shown, even though we both know I will not settle for this one. It is blue, deep yet bright, with a traditional overlaid design in navy. The quality of this piece is unmistakable – the work of true master craftsmen – but it is bolder than I want. The second piece is a compromise between what he thinks I should want and what he knows I need. This one, a lighter blue-green, is completed with a more modern, multi-colored design of flowers. It is a combination of east and west, for we both know these flowers don't grow anywhere within a four-thousand mile radius.

The third fabric makes the breath catch in my throat. It is a pale blue with an almost-silver design. This is the combination I love – the lighter colors to fit into my modern wardrobe, the ancient design to prove the authenticity. I rub my sweaty hands on my jeans and then brush my fingertips over the fabric, searching for any invisible imperfections. There are none.

I turn to the owner and nod slightly. I dare not let him know how excited I am by this find, lest he raise the price on me. Despite my attempts at stoicism, he recognizes my delight. He names a price too high for my liking. I counter with one too low for his. We haggle good-naturedly for a moment, finally settling on a price closer to his original offer than to mine.

He cuts the silk delicately to my specifications. He folds it and wraps it in clean, white paper. He sits down at his table and writes me an invoice in a language I have no ability to understand. He knows this, but it is tradition. It is the way he has done this for years.

Some days, I am the only shopper, so more tea would be offered. Today, a new woman blusters in, squawking on her mobile. She fingers the precious fabrics with no thought for her dirty fingers. And, sin of all sins, she has brought her drooling toddler, who has begun to pull the neatly stacked bolts to the floor.

The spell is broken. I share a brief exasperated glance with the shopkeeper as I hand him the money with both hands. He bows as he receives it, again with both hands. He places it in the drawer that acts as his till, hands me my package, and bids me a quick farewell.

We both know I will be back. I have come every month, early in the morning on the first Saturday after I get my salary. I already have a purchase planned for the next time - a more traditional gold fabric - though I might surprise the owner and myself by compromising on a different fabric as the mood strikes me.

I pass a guard on my way out. He makes no attempt to hide the cigarette hanging from his mouth - the police make predictable, hourly rounds. I walk slowly along the labyrinth of corridors and shops, trying to soak up the atmosphere as much as I can. When I step back into the sunshine, I will once again be connected with the modern - the traffic, the shrieking sirens, the blaring horns, the tinny mobile rings. This spot, however, will continue to root me back to what was.