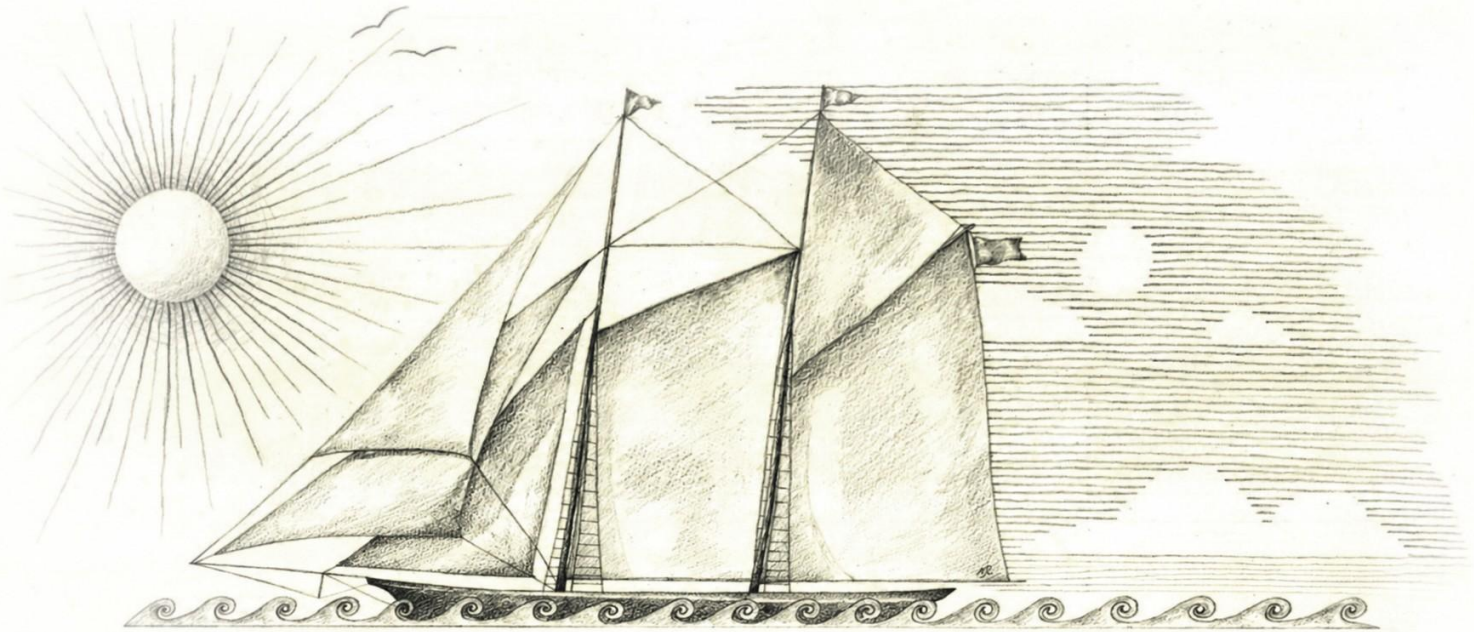


Sanctuary for Kids

Reading Sample — Chapter One

by

James B. Hansom

This sample presents the prose.
Typography and page layout may differ in the published edition.

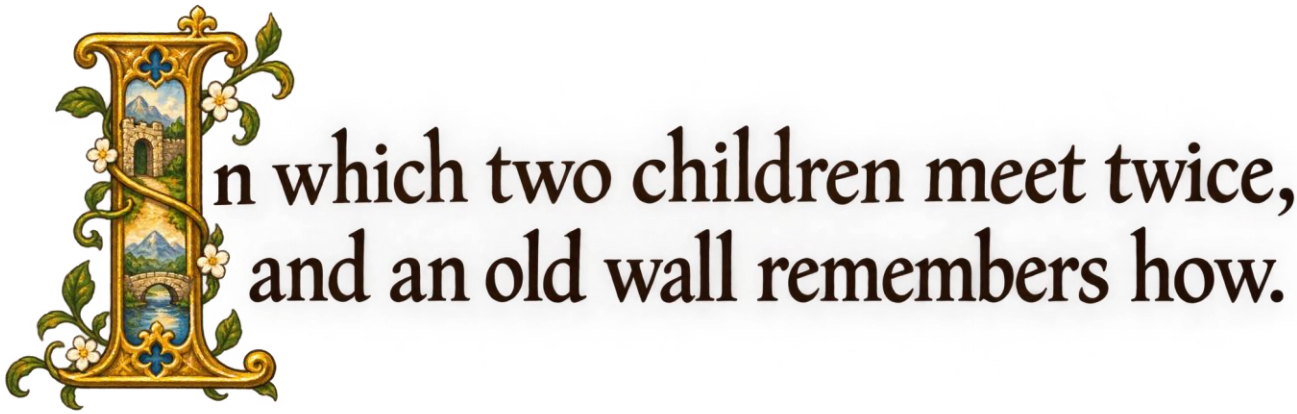
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WONDER / CURIOSITY

Curiosity finds openings in the oldest walls.



Far away in the mountains, two small villages sat beneath peaks that changed colour with the light.

Between them stood a wall.

It was taller than two grown men, and in places almost as thick as one was tall.

Nobody knew who built it.

Nobody knew why. It was simply there.

So people hung washing from it, leaned ladders against it, and got on with their lives.



The Boy knew every loose stone, warm step and crooked roof on his side of the wall. He knew which apricot tree dropped its fruit first, which baker gave away the burnt edges, and which old dog would chase him if he ran past laughing.

He climbed because things were there to be climbed, turned stones because things might be underneath, and followed paths because nobody had yet proved they went nowhere interesting.

By breakfast he had scraped one knee, lost one sandal, found a blue beetle, and been told “Don’t!” three times by three different grown-ups.

He considered this a very good morning.

Then he saw the Girl.



The Girl preferred to know what things were for.
She knew the smell of cardamom before the pot came off the stove, the sound of rain while the sky was still blue, and exactly which neighbour had borrowed her mother's red bowl and forgotten to return it.
She noticed loose threads, crooked baskets and people pretending not to stare. She also noticed the Boy. Unfortunately.
He was leaning over the wall as though the whole valley had been built for his convenience.
She folded her arms. He grinned.
Far above them, where nobody was looking, something shifted in the sun-warmed rock.
CRACK.



The Boy heard the mountain before he saw anything.
A crack.
A sigh.
Then something older than memory stirred inside the stone.
Dust lifted where there was no wind.
For one moment, a face seemed to exist in it.
Not a man.
Not a ghost.
Something else.
Something ancient.
The Boy froze.
A whisper touched his ear.
“Finally.”



Far away, the Girl looked up.
She had heard nothing.
But something had changed.
A thread pulled tight inside the World.
And another Djinn knew he was awake.
Across deserts, seas, ruined cities and forgotten roads, she had searched.
For years.
For lifetimes.
Now she smiled.
Then she bent towards the Girl.
And whispered,
“I found him.”



The Boy decided the Girl needed help.
The Girl had not decided this.
He reached for the cloth.
She moved it.
He reached for the basket.
She moved that too.
“I can help,” he said.
“I know.”
He waited.
Nothing happened.
The Girl looked at him.
“Wanting to help isn’t the same as being asked.”
The Boy discovered this was annoying.



For a moment, neither of them spoke.
The Boy looked at his feet.
One had a sandal. One did not.
This seemed unfairly appropriate.
The Girl went back to her work.
He stayed where he was.
Eventually, she looked up.
“Are you still here?”
“Yes.”
She went back to her work.
The Boy decided the Girl was extremely annoying.
The Girl decided the Boy was more trouble than help.



The Girl found the hole because the wall was untidy.
One stone sat crooked where all the others behaved.
She pulled it loose.
Behind it was darkness.
Not much darkness.
Just enough for a finger.
Or a secret.
She found a scrap of paper and a stub of charcoal.
For a while, she wondered what one wrote to a wall.
Then she decided.
IS ANYONE THERE?
She folded the paper very small.
And pushed it through.



On the other side, the Boy found a note where no note belonged.
Naturally, he opened it.
IS ANYONE THERE?
He looked at the wall.
Then at the note.
Then back at the wall.
His grin arrived before the idea had finished.
He found a scrap of paper of his own.
YES, he wrote.
Then, after thinking very hard, added:
WHO ARE YOU?
He pushed his answer into the hole.
And neither child went very far away.



By daylight, they were enemies.
Not serious enemies.
The irritating kind.
The Boy climbed things simply because she said he shouldn’t.
The Girl corrected him simply because he was wrong.
He called her bossy.
She called him ridiculous.
He stepped in mud.
She laughed.
She dropped an apricot.
He laughed louder.
By lunchtime, neither wished to speak to the other.
Both were lying.



By that afternoon, the wall had carried a dozen notes.
The Girl opened hers first.
YOU UNDERSTAND THINGS PROPERLY. I LIKE THAT.
She smiled despite herself.
The Boy opened his.
YOU MAKE ME LAUGH, EVEN WHEN YOU ARE BEING AN IDIOT.
He read it twice. Then three times.
Neither mentioned their bickering adversary.
Neither mentioned the impossible child from across the wall.
They wrote until the light began to fade.
Then each folded one last note very carefully.
And reluctantly, hurried back home.



The wall had been there longer than anyone remembered.
People walked beside it every day.
Nobody looked at it anymore.
The Boy did.
So did the Girl.
From a distance, there was nothing to see.
Stone followed stone followed stone.
But close up, one piece of wall ended strangely.
Another continued behind it.
The Boy stepped sideways.
The Girl did the same from the other side.
Where there had been a wall, there was suddenly a way in.
And both of them disappeared.



Inside, the wall was wider than either had imagined.
An old arch curved above two stone seats.
They faced one another.
So did the children.
“Oh!” said the Boy.
“Wow!” said the Girl.
Around them were names, marks and pictures worn by centuries.
Once, the wall had joined more than it divided.
Once, people had sat here together.
Somehow, everyone had forgotten.



They had both expected someone else.
That was the first problem.
The second problem was each other.
“You?” said the Boy.
“You?” said the Girl.
They held up their notes.
The Boy saw his notes in her hand.
The Girl saw hers in his.
Even the stupid little marks in the margins matched.
The Boy looked horrified.
The Girl looked worse.
“You are my wall friend?”
Neither of them liked the answer.



For a while, they argued with the evidence.
“You are rude.”
“You are bossy.”
“You throw things.”
“You correct everything.”
“You called me ridiculous.”
“You were being ridiculous.”
That nearly started another argument.
Then the Boy recognised one of her phrases.
The Girl recognised one of his.
Both went very quiet.
Then one of them laughed.
A moment later, neither could stop.



The wall was still there.
Nobody had knocked down a single stone.
On one side sat the Boy.
On the other sat the Girl.
Between them, the old opening waited.
They no longer needed notes.
Words travelled perfectly well through the opening.
So did laughter.
Outside, the villages went on as before.
Inside, two old seats were being used again.
The wall had not changed.
Only what they knew about it had.
And that was enough for now.



Later, when the chamber had grown quiet,
something older than either child stirred.
The Male Djinn felt it first.
A presence.
Familiar.
Impossible.
He turned towards the dark.
Almost far enough.
Across the chamber, the Female Djinn was already there.
She saw him.
He did not see her.
Somewhere between them, the old wall carried a Whisper.
And, for the first time in centuries, it answered with an Echo.



Some walls remember how to become doors.



Some walls remember how to become doors.



