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The Clapping Hands of God

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How much explorers learn about a world? and what they can do about what they find? depends on how they come to it.

To a world unnamed by humans, humans came. The gate swung open on a pleasant mountain glade, where the weather could be cool without being cold, and which lay cupped in a high valley below the tree line and far from the gray smudges of the cities on the plains below. This isolation was by happy chance and not by wise choice. Gates swung where God willed, and man could but submit. Once, one had opened in the midst of a grim fortress full of armed and hostile *things* and what befell the team that crossed no man knows, for the gatekeeper sealed it forever.

Here, the humans erected a fine pavilion of gay cloth among mighty growths that might be called trees and colorful splays that might be called flowers, although they were neither trees nor flowers exactly. The motley of the fabric clashed with the surrounding vegetation. The colors were off. They aped the complexion of a different world and seemed here a little out of place. But that was acceptable. The humans were themselves a little out of place and a bit of the familiar ought to surround them in the midst of all the strangeness.

They decked the pavilion with bright cushions and divans and roped the sides up so the gentle and persistent eastern breeze could pass through. They stoked their larder with melons and dates and other toothsome delights and laid their carpets out for prayer. Though no one knew which direction served? the stars, when the night sky came, provided no clue? the gate itself would do for *mihrab*.

The humans spent a night and a day acclimating themselves to the strange sun and testing the air and the water and the eccentric plants and such of the motiles as they could snare.

They named these creatures after those they knew? rabbit, goat, swallow, cedar? and some of the names were fair. They stretched their twenty-four hours like taffy to fill up a slightly longer day. By the second nightfall they had shed their environmental suits and felt the wind and the sun on their skin and in their hair. It was good to breathe the world? s largesse, and many an outlandish aroma teased them.

Exploring their valley, they found a great falls and spent another night and day at its foot, spellbound. A stream poured into the valley from high above, where the snows always fell and the snows always melted. It tumbled from the sky with a roar like the voice of God, throwing up a mist from which they named the mountain and within which a kaleidoscope of rainbows played.

Its ageless assault had worn a pool unknowably deep in the rock below. Where and how the waters drained from the pool God withheld. There was not another like it in all the Known Worlds.

Afterwards, they clustered in their pavilion and reviewed their plans and inspected their equipment, and assembled those

