

## Unlocking the Alcazar



**1** Lost in thought, Joaquin watched patterns of light dance across the ceiling of the bus. He and his history classmates were on their way to see the centuries-old palace they had been learning about—Alcazar de las Estrellas, or Castle of the Stars. According to legend, the alcazar's design itself held clues to the location of hidden treasure, which captivated Joaquin's thoughts.

**2** As the bus came to a halt, Joaquin snapped back to the present. "OK, everyone! Off the bus!" said Senor Lopez, their teacher. Once outside, Joaquin stared in awe at the alcazar's stone façade and massive turrets, which cast an enormous shadow over the students as they gathered near the arched entrance.

**3** "Follow me," Senor Lopez instructed, leading the students into a great hall with graceful pillars covered in intricate tilework. The students tilted their heads back to take in the soaring ceiling, murmuring in appreciation.

**4** "As you can see, the decorative theme centers around the celestial," said Senor Lopez, sweeping his arm around the room to emphasize the geometric pattern of 12-pointed stars adorning the walls, floors, and pillars. "The people who built this castle long ago sought to understand the world and our place within it, seeing geometry as a way to impose a pattern on chaos."

**5** The teacher beckoned the students toward a stone niche in one of the walls. The shelf in the niche was empty. "This niche," he explained, "once held a sealed urn. Inside that urn was a map of the alcazar's secret rooms—the rooms where the royal treasure was hidden."

**6** Joaquin took a sharp breath, realizing this was the great mystery he had read about. Senor Lopez continued in a hushed tone, "Thieves disguised as servants tried to steal the

map by smashing the urn. If the old tales are to be believed, the instant the thieves pulled forth the map, it crumbled to dust before their eyes.” His words lingered in the air.

**7** Joaquin considered these words and raised his hand. “Senor Lopez, is it possible that the paper disintegrated because it was too fragile to be exposed to the air?”

**8** “That’s quite likely,” the teacher replied, “if the story is true at all. No one has ever found another map, although there are rumors that a copy exists somewhere in the alcazar still.” Senor Lopez glanced at his watch and announced, “We have a lot to see, so—follow me!”

**9** Joaquin gazed around the room one more time, reluctant to leave. “These designs aren’t exactly random,” he thought. He noticed a pattern of stars near the niche and then spotted the same pattern near an opening to a hallway. He walked into the hallway and looked for the pattern again. There it was! The stars were grouped above a strange door that was only half as tall as a regular door. The door was closed, and there was no handle or knob.

**10** In the distance, Joaquin could hear the rest of the class walking and talking with Senor Lopez. “I can catch up with them,” he told himself. “There’s plenty of time.” He approached the door and cautiously pushed against it, but it didn’t move. There was nothing to pull on. Something made Joaquin look up at the star pattern again.

**11** Was it his imagination, or was one star slightly larger than the others? He traced the pattern with his eyes and noticed that the larger star was above and to the right of the small door. Joaquin reached out to touch the wall below the larger star and was amazed to feel a stone give way beneath his fingertips. With a soft *snick*, the small door released and swung inward.

**12** Inside a small, dark room was a pedestal, upon which sat an urn—a sealed urn. Could it be the copy of the map that Senor Lopez mentioned?

**13** Joaquin knew he had uncovered something astonishing and needed to report his discovery to his teacher, who would then inform the caretakers of the alcazar. Before doing so, though, he pondered whether it would be safe to open the urn and peek inside. What if unsealing the urn caused whatever was inside it to disintegrate? But what if he didn’t open it, and the urn was taken away, and he didn’t get to see the map?

**14** The weight of the decision closed in on him like the walls of the alcazar. The palace seemed to hold its breath in the silence, as if it were a slumbering, sentient giant, waiting to awaken.

Read “Unlocking the Alcazar.”

At the end of the passage, Joaquin finds an urn in the alcazar and must make a decision on what to do next. In your own words, write a multi-paragraph story that describes what Joaquin chooses to do after finding the urn in the alcazar and why he makes that choice.

Use what you have learned from the passage to help you write your story.

Remember to —

- provide a beginning, a middle, and an end to your story
- put events in the order in which they happen
- include descriptions of people, objects, and settings
- use correct spelling, capitalization, punctuation, and grammar

**Use the space provided to write your story.**