

The Nanban Puzzle

The wind rustled through a small village at the edge of a quiet forest in Portugal's interior, carrying the ocean's aroma. As the sun dipped beyond the horizon, it bathed the sky in a red glow, streaked with a sheen of gold. A young woman named Eva sat next to her father's worktable, her hand sweeping over the frayed fringes of a letter. The letter bore her father's personalized wax seal, though he had been gone for many years. The script in it was worn, yet readable. The letter read, "Dearest Eva, if you're reading this, it is time for one more adventure. The treasure I've left you lies in a riddle, a puzzle that will lead you to a chest you've never seen. The chest is your key, but to open it, you must first understand its story. Start where we last spoke of it—next to the old lighthouse on the ocean's shore."

Eva's heart skipped a beat. The chest—her father had spoken of it often, though never in detail. There was always a secret in his tone, something he was hiding in plain sight, waiting for her to discover it. She put on her jacket, the night air biting at her skin, and quickened her pace toward the lighthouse. The sea rumbled in the background, whispering secrets yet to be uncovered. As she came to the lighthouse, Eva saw a chest on the ground in front of her, beautifully painted and decorated with scenes that seemed to stir in the dim light. The box was small, yet there was something of undeniable beauty in it, overlain with a sheen of lacquer that seemed to glow in spite of age. Hares, cranes, birds, and deer leaped across its face in a thick cluster of bellflowers and camellias, all in mother-of-pearl and copper gilt. It was a work of art, one that seemed to tell a story of secrets. There was a note to the side of the chest, scrawled in her father's unmistakable handwriting: "Nanban.", it said, "Find its meaning, and the chest will reveal its secret."

Eva knelt, her trembling hand tracing the design on the chest, her eyes drinking in the delicate work of flowers and animals. This was not a chest to be cast aside in a storage shed or packed in a trunk in a basement. This was a chest of a different era, a chest of the Momoyama period of Japan when such a work of art was cherished for its delicate workmanship and symbolic wealth. Her father was always fascinated by Japanese culture, in particular by the effects of the 16th century Portuguese traders, men to be called Nanban, or "Southern Barbarians." Eva felt the burden of the puzzle in her chest. She remembered the hares and cranes—symbols of different aspects of existence in Japanese folklore. The hares symbolized quickness and resilience, while the cranes represented longevity and grace. The thick foliage and flowers seemed to enfold the chest, protecting it, it seemed, to conceal its secrets.

Determined to solve the mystery, Eva returned to her father's library and spent hours poring over his collection of journals, books, and maps. In one of his old, worn-out history books she finally found the clue she was looking for. "Nanban," it said, "referred to the Portuguese traders that arrived in Japan in the 16th century, bearing not commodities, but new ideas, art, and a new vision of the world." The chest was more than a treasure; it was a bridge between two worlds, a fusion of wood, mother-of-pearl, and gilded copper. Eva carried the chest to the lighthouse, sat on the rocks that overlooked the ocean, and remained there in the chest's presence, surrounded by night air, bathed in the glow of the full moon. She looked at it again, now bathed in silver

moonlight. The carved symbols seemed to take on a new dimension, almost coming alive in the ethereal glow. Then, she noticed something she hadn't seen before—a hidden compartment on its underside, faint but visible in the night. Her heart was in her throat when she gingerly opened the hidden panel to find a folded map, creased with age. The map was of the Portuguese coastline, marked near a distant beach with a small cross. Underneath it was a note from her father: "Follow the coastline, Eva, and use the stars to guide you, just as I used to guide myself."

The next day Eva traveled to the beach. The journey was long, the cliffs steep and rocky, yet she pressed forward, driven by the ocean wind. She arrived at last, and the isolated cove was just as her father had told her it would be, a place of concealment, a place sheltered from the rest of the world. In the center of the cove, half-buried in sand, was a chest. The lock was rusty and old, yet Eva's hand was unshakeable when she opened it. Inside was a compass, a lovely, ornamented one, with engravings of hares and cranes finely etched on it, just as on the chest. The compass was a Nanban compass, a reminder of when the Portuguese explorers first came to Japan. Beside it was a letter. "Eva, this is my final gift to you. This compass guided me on many voyages, and now, I hope it will guide you. But remember, the true journey is never about the destination. It is about the adventure, the discoveries, and the joy of uncovering the unknown."

Tears welled in Eva's eyes as she held the compass close. Her father's treasure had never been gold or jewels. It was the lesson he had left behind—the lesson of exploration, of seeking, of embracing the journey itself.