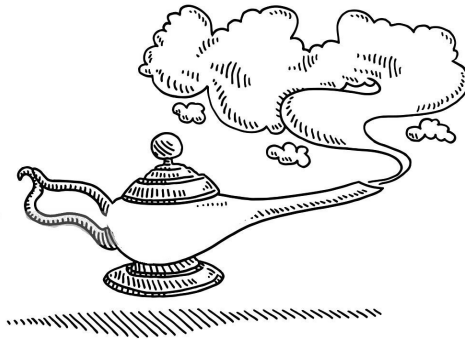


THE MAGIC PALACE



STORY BY

CHRYS ROMEO



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Zaki sat on the chilling damp floor of the dungeon. The air smelled of humid stones, rusty, heavy iron locks and appalling silence. The barred window was too high up to see anything except the night sky: a small vault opening in the thick stone wall where the moon was absent. That night the sky was completely dark, covered by clouds.

There were only a few hours left until dawn. Zaki had been told he would be executed at first morning light. He didn't know how that was ruled to happen and was

waiting in the dark, counting the seconds and listening to his breath that suddenly seemed precious as life itself. He kept rolling over and over in his mind the moments, the steps and decisions that had ended up with him being thrown in the dungeons.

It had started the day he had been chosen to work for the Palace stables. He was a blacksmith's son, so he knew how to forge hooves, tools and weapons of all sorts: spears, swords, shields and helmets for soldiers. Although his skills were diverse, he was hired to take care of the royal horses, which he considered himself fortunate to do.

Life at the Palace stables was much better than his former shed: he could get food and money for his work and he could also get to see the vast yards, smell the fresh air and the orange blossoms. Beyond the walls of the Palace there was almost a small town: many guards in the towers, countless servants and gardens that were full of flowers, trees and fountains. And lucky for him, he could see the harem windows in the eastern wing. Sometimes, veiled creatures, softly swinging while they walked, would cross the yard from the eastern wing to the southern one, passing

through the mosaic vaults and leaving behind the subtle fragrance of rose or jasmine petals.

Zaki knew he wasn't allowed to talk to any of them or even glance at them for more than a second. They rarely got out in the sunlight, but when they did, sometimes they would stop by the springing fountain, giggling and playing with their hands in the water for a few minutes. Then they would quickly run inside laughing, when the guards would approach, like doves fluttering their wings in haste. It was a spectacle worth watching for young Zaki, who had only seen peasant girls in plain clothes of dusty colors. Meanwhile, the harem nymphs were wrapped in silky veils of the most amazing hues, brightly adorned with golden threads and sparkling jewels, while their eyes had long eyelashes and mysterious contours. They were fascinating to him. However, they were forbidden. They all belonged to the emir. Zaki knew he could lose his head if he talked to them. For a few months, he was pleased just to steal a glimpse of the floating veils whenever they passed through the yard.

But then he met Yasemin.

First, Zuleyha came to the stables with a request. Zuleyha was the woman who took care of the girls and brought them everything they needed. She was a middle aged wise servant of the Palace, very clever and honey spoken, who could spin the guards on her fingers with her sugar coated words. Her deep brown eyes examined Zaki thoughtfully from the first moment she saw him. She smelled of rose oil and spices. He wiped his hands on his trousers and grinned at her. Her eyes squinted in the light.

“Are you the stable boy?”

“I'm the blacksmith, but you can consider me stable boy if you wish. I don't mind. It's my job to tend to the horses.”

Zaki couldn't stop smiling. It had been a long time since he had spoken to a woman. At the Palace he only had short conversations with soldiers who came to request new hooves. She didn't show her face, but her eyes were fixed on him, evaluating his ability to understand the important task that was requested.

“I'm Zuleyha, the harem messenger. One of the girls needs a horse for tomorrow. The emir wants to take her for

a ride outside the Palace walls. You must choose the most peaceful horse. Don't bring her a wild stallion, or you'll lose your head. Make sure it has a good saddle and everything. Don't make any mistakes, if you know what's good for you."

Zaki winked.

"I won't make any mistakes. But what do I get in return?"

She shook her head.

"Boy, you're asking for trouble. What do you want to get in return? You're working for the Palace, that's enough."

"I mean, from you. Do I get a favor from you?"

Zaki knew talking to her was an opportunity that could open other paths he wanted to explore.

She seemed reluctant to continue the conversation, but answered nevertheless:

"What kind of favor have you got in mind?"

Zaki lowered his voice and leaned over to whisper in her ear:

"Can you sneak me inside the Palace? Just once, to see the girls closer."

Zuleyha took a step back and shook her head.

“You really want to end your life, boy? This is out of the question and you know it! There are guards everywhere. We’ll both be in trouble! Harem girls are only for the emir’s eyes. I’ll forget you ever asked me! *This* is the favor I’m doing you.”

She turned to leave, but he grabbed her sleeve and insisted, hoping she would eventually agree:

“Come on! I’ll pay you! I can sneak in at night when they’re having a party. The guards won’t see me. You don’t have to do anything, just let the door unlocked...”

“I won’t do such a thing!”

Zuleyha yanked her arm away and left immediately, glancing around to see if anyone had seen or heard them.

Zaki stared after her, watching her shadow in the blinding sunlight.

He was determined to make his wish come true: to see the girls without their veils. There had to be a way in.

Looking up at the narrow barred window of the dungeon, he sighed. He didn’t even regret the day he had decided to get in the Palace to see the harem girls. Even though the cold stone floor underneath him made his bones

shiver, even though he knew there were only a few hours until dawn, he didn't regret anything. He only regretted trusting Yasemin. He sighed again: half the moon appeared from behind dark clouds, shining brightly, partly shadowed in doom. That was a beautiful troubling sight he didn't know if he would ever watch again.

Yasemin was beautiful, perhaps even more than he had expected. She had hazel eyes with long eyelashes and curly hair that fell from behind the veils, sparkling and scented, dazzling altogether. When she walked, she looked as if she stepped on clouds. She had the agile movements of a gazelle. She was rather tall and slender. There was something mysterious about her, something insinuating, something captivating, like a trail of stardust she spread around her. When she climbed in the saddle and Zaki held her hand, helping her up, she seemed fragile and vulnerable, which made his heart beat faster and a sudden wish to protect her swelled inside his veins, running to his head, pounding his temples. He helped her take the harness in her delicate fingers.

“Keep your hands on the saddle if you lose balance”,

he told her.

“Enough talking”, the guards mumbled and took the horse away from him, heading towards the gate, where the emir was waiting on a black pure bred stallion.

Zaki watched Yasemin ride away, side by side with the luxuriantly dressed emir, followed by two soldiers with spears. He instantly vowed to get inside the Palace and find Yasemin, take her away and live happily ever after somewhere distant, where nobody could find them. His mind was full of plans and imagination: they could retreat in the desert, live in a tent next to an oasis. They could go to another land, find work in another palace. He could start a workshop in a village, make the best of his skills, while she would only have to sit around and be beautiful all day long... for him to see when he got home. He had so many plans available for the future... but he knew he needed one good plan to sneak inside and ask her to run away with him. It was the only thing to do.

Zuleyha didn't want to be complicit, at first. She considered his plan dangerous. She was too wise to take part in such a risky action. However, she had a soft side that

Zaki could persuade. She had some sort of sympathy for him, a connection he was sure she felt, for some reason. After a few more encounters with Zaki, she finally agreed to tell him which corridor led to the harem's quarters. But it wasn't enough. He had to figure out the rest by himself.

Zaki was wondering how to get inside the Palace without the guards noticing, when he had another visit. This time, it was a girl he didn't know. She was wearing peasant veils, but her gestures and speech were far from simple. She looked noble and cautious.

“Have you come for a horse?” he asked, while she seemed to ponder on what to say, glancing around the stable at the iron tools as if searching for something.

“I heard you're a blacksmith”, she finally said, and her voice had a tone of respect for his skills that he wasn't used to.

He nodded seriously. Something about her big brown eyes was direct and honest, yet shielded at the same time.

“I'm a blacksmith, but now I tend to the horses, mostly. What can I do for you?”

He didn't understand the girl's interest, which

obviously was not in the horses. She was there for something different.

“Can you mold iron into anything?” she inquired, staring in his eyes without any fear.

He shrugged.

“Sure, I could. I can do anything with iron. Do you want some kitchen stuff?”

He tried to guess what she wanted, where she came from. He wondered if she worked as a cook and needed some dishes or pots... or maybe a coffee kettle. However, her refined hands didn't look like a servant's.

“I don't want any kitchen objects. There's something more important I need from you.”

She looked at him again, fearlessly. Her deep eyes made him calm and he could only speak with the same respect that she had in her attitude. At that moment a guard started walking towards them.

Zaki looked a bit worried that the soldier would interrupt them. The girl turned her head, barely looked at the guard and signaled slightly with her hand. The soldier instantly bowed and backed off.

Who is this girl, Zaki asked himself, surprised at the way in which the guard had obeyed her.

He looked at her attentively.

“So, what is it that interests you?”

“I want you to build a telescope for me.”

He remained speechless for a few seconds.

“A telescope?”

“Yes. Do you know what it is?”

“I think so. It's something that helps you see in the distance. There were stories about such magic objects that armies used to defeat their enemies.”

The girl smiled.

“You might be right, but not exactly. I want a telescope so I can look at the stars and planets. I want to study astronomy. My father ordered some glass lenses from a distant country, but I don't have the metal frame for them. Can you build it in your workshop?”

Zaki was a bit confused by her words. She seemed determined in her wish, as if there was nothing she wanted more except that mysterious magic device... to study what? The sky... that much he understood.

“I think I can build anything. If it's made of metal, I can do it.”

He heard himself seriously promise her something that he didn't even have the slightest idea what it was... but he just knew he wanted to do that for her. He couldn't even explain why, there was no other motive than the noble gesture of granting her wish, just as noble as her presence seemed to him.

She nodded and revealed her face to show her smile, letting down the veil for a second. Her beauty was astounding, but her demeanor was even more surprising to him. Her eyes the color of roasted coffee glistened warmly when she spoke in a kind and steady tone:

“Thank you. I'll bring a drawing of a telescope tomorrow. You'll be paid for your work.”

And then she quickly left.

Zaki stood in the door, watching her walk by the fountain and towards a back door that led inside the castle. He didn't even notice Zuleyha who had somehow appeared nearby, apparently eavesdropping from behind some rose bushes.

“You don't know who you've just talked to, do you?”
she said with a sly smile.

Zaki was lost in thoughts.

“Who was she?”

“That was Guzel, the emir's younger sister.”

“She's very beautiful... just like her name.”

“Yes, and very smart. She's also very much engaged
to the emir's cousin.”

Zaki frowned.

“She was wearing peasant clothes”.

“She prefers to disguise so that she can walk around
without drawing attention to herself.”

Zaki suddenly looked at Zuleyha, struck by an idea.

“Can you get me one of those colorful veils?”

Zuleyha blinked suspiciously:

“What for? What are you up to?”

“Don't ask me. Can you get it for me this afternoon?”

“I don't want any trouble.”

“I won't tell anyone!”

“I suppose I can lend you something... if you promise
to give it back undamaged.”

“Don't worry, I won't ruin it.”

“Is it for a girlfriend of yours?”

“No. You wouldn't guess.”

Zaki was suddenly euphoric. He had figured out a way to get to Yasemin.

After Zuleyha brought him the mint green kaftan and a matching niqab, he waited for nightfall.

There was indeed a party at the Palace that night. The sky was clear. Moonlight spread on the water from the fountains in the garden, dancing in reflections, a soft glow on the mosaic. The orange blossoms filled the air with perfume and music could be heard from the chambers in the southern wing. Zaki slipped in the kaftan and put the niqab on his head. Then he sneaked under the orange trees, to the Palace door, with a jug of water in his hands. The guards stopped him at the entrance, but he simply showed them the jug, making a gesture towards the kitchen corridor. The soldiers put the spears down and he walked past them.

Finding himself in the corridor, he knew he had to move quickly. The tall ceiling and the marble floor echoed

heavily under his steps. He followed the sound of strings and laughter. The harem girls were having a party. When he reached the door, he stopped to breathe. *How do these girls wear these veils all day*, he wondered, adjusting the cloth away from his face. It felt uncomfortable and annoying. He felt stifled in it. He decided to push the door open and peek inside.

There were many harem girls dancing in a circle, swinging their exposed white skin and round shapes, sensual hips dangling golden strings of coins. The sparkling clothes they wore hardly covered them and Zaki felt thrilled to finally see the harem without veils. He stared at their dancing for a while, enjoying the show, until he noticed Yasemin in a corner, sunken lazily in fluffy silky pillows. He moved through the room. Nobody paid any attention to him, since everyone was watching the group of dancers in the middle. Zaki advanced to the corner where Yasemin was laying, casually sipping from a glass. Her stunning curly hair was exposed in the light and she looked like an Egyptian goddess. That was Zaki's impression: she absolutely took his breath away. He thought he had never seen any girl so

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