

Arabian Nights Adventures

The Tale
of
Zubaidah
& the Three
Qalandars



Retold by
Kelley Townley



Illustrated by
Anja Gram



Arabian Nights Adventures

Many moons ago a great king sentenced his innocent wife to death, but every night she tells the king a story, leaving the tale unfinished until the next night so that the king would spare her life to hear the ending. This lasted for one thousand and one Arabian nights, until the king finally released her. This is just one of those tales ...





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*The Tale
of
Zubaidah
& the Three
Qalandars*

Kelley Townley
Illustrated by Anja Gram



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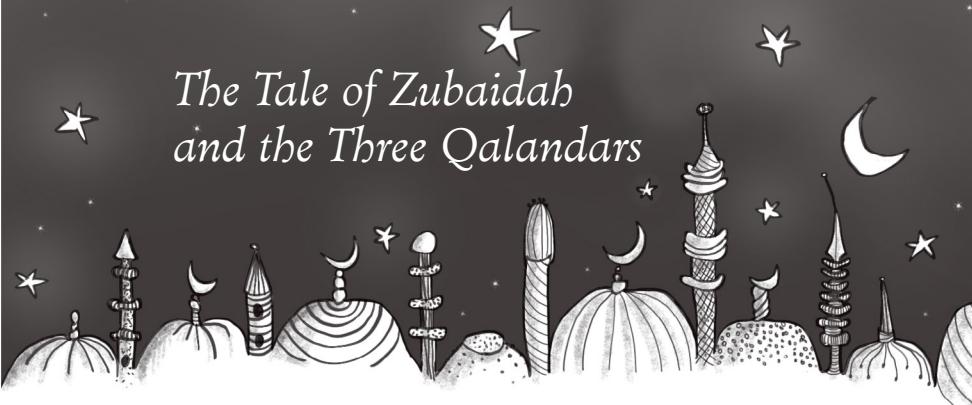
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The Tale of Zubaidah • & the Three • Qalandars



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*The Tale of Zubaidah
and the Three Qalandars*

Once upon a time, in the bustling city of Baghdad, a lady walked through the marketplace. Her name was Sadie and she was young and well dressed in a saffron-yellow tunic and trousers with orange embroidery, which was bright against her long black hair. She rarely got to go out on her own and she hummed merrily while she sauntered through the many colourful stalls.

It was mid-morning and the market was very busy, selling fabrics and fruit, medicine and homewares; almost

anything you could think of could be found here. A group of porters were sitting in their usual place waiting for someone to hire them to carry their shopping. One of the porters watched the lady. She seemed so different from everyone else, with a secretive spring in her step and an all-knowing eye. Indeed, she knew he was watching her. She came over.

‘Pick up your basket and follow me,’ she said with a confident smile.

Delighted, the porter jumped to his feet and said goodbye to his friends.

All morning the porter followed the lady around the market stalls where she made purchase after purchase and placed the items in his basket. The woven tub became heavier and heavier:

apples, apricots, peaches, lilies and jasmine ... They went to the butcher’s, the grocer’s, and the poultorer’s, until at last the porter exclaimed in mock despair.

‘My good lady, if you had only told me you were going to buy enough provisions to stock a town, I would have brought a cart not a basket!’

The lady laughed. ‘Not long now.’

After the perfumer and the spice merchant they walked a little way to a magnificent house of delicate white stone and many arches where fantastic medlar trees grew outside and there was a scent of jasmine throughout. The porter felt nervous approaching the front door of this respectable home in his raggedy clothes. The lady did

not seem to worry and knocked with confidence. The porter swallowed nervously; he hoped the owner would not look down on her because of him.

The door opened and he was surprised to see not a servant in the doorway but another young lady, in an elegant magenta-pink sari. She had the same build and features as the younger lady yet her black hair was cut short so that it swung just above her shoulders, which was very unusual.

‘Ah, Sadie,’ smiled the short-haired lady. ‘You have returned, dear sister.’ And she stepped aside so that they might enter.

The porter continued to stand still in surprise so Sadie turned to him and said, ‘Come on then, before you

drop something.’

The porter followed open-mouthed as the two sisters led him past richly decorated rooms to an inner courtyard filled with sweet-smelling plants and a sparkling water feature that filled the air with tinkling music. There was a platform for entertaining with plump silk cushions and an elegant gold and marble table with lions’ feet. Beautiful lanterns of coloured glass hung all around so that at night it would be a private oasis of tranquillity.

The porter stared in wonder, never had he seen such a delightful space.

‘Zubaidah, dear,’ called the short-haired lady. ‘Sadie has returned.’

It was only then that the porter noticed a third lady, curled up upon the

cushions, who now moved to see what he had in his basket.

The porter guessed this third and most noble-looking lady must be the eldest sister. She was quite astounding to look at in her deep blue gown of silk and organza, embroidered in heavy gold and green thread like a regal peacock. And on her head she wore a golden band that held back her long black hair in a style he had never seen before.

‘Sadie, you have done a very good job,’ she said as the ladies quickly emptied the basket of goods. Zubaidah herself then drew forth a purse and handsomely paid the porter for his work. The porter just stared back at her. Zubaidah smiled at him. ‘Are you

expecting more?’

Broken out of his trance, the porter looked at the amount she had given him: it was certainly more than enough and he blushed in apology.

‘O madam,’ he said, ‘not at all. And I fear I am guilty of much rudeness in not taking my departure at once but I find myself astonished by this place. Where are your servants and where are the men?’

Zubaidah smiled. ‘I know it sounds unusual but we find ourselves in need of neither.’

‘Really?’ said the surprised porter. ‘But, if you will pardon my saying so, a company of women without men is surely as dull as a company of men without women.’

The ladies were rather amused at the porter's comment and a look was shared between them.

'Well then, my friend,' Zubaidah said, 'we should like to invite you to lunch so that you might entertain us and prove your theory right.'

The porter's face brightened in delight.

'But,' Zubaidah said sternly, 'you must accept that all here are beyond judgement. You must behave with utmost politeness at all times and question no one about their behaviour or ways. You see here, above the door where we have carved: "Whosoever meddles in the affairs of others, should expect to be meddled back."

'Ladies,' the porter bowed, 'it would

be my greatest honour to entertain you this afternoon and never once presume to judge anything you may do or say.'

'Then it is agreed,' clapped Sadie in delight. 'I will bring some food.'

'And I will bring the wine!' said Aminah, the short-haired sister.

It was a pleasure indeed to share an afternoon with the porter. He had so many amusing tales to tell about his work and his friends that the sisters felt their cheeks ache from laughing so much. Much food was consumed and much wine too until at last Zubaidah stood and claimed an end to the festivities.

'It has been a true delight,' she said to the porter. 'But the hour is late and it is now time for you to leave.'

‘O madam,’ he replied, ‘I would be happy to show my deepest gratitude to you and your sisters for such a blessed afternoon, but I’m afraid my legs will not carry me yet for I fear I have drunk just a little too much wine.’

Sadie and Aminah laughed merrily while Zubaidah rolled her eyes.

‘Let him stay,’ said Aminah. ‘There are many hours before midnight yet.’

‘Yes, don’t worry,’ said Sadie. ‘There is no hurry.’

Zubaidah looked less sure but nodded in agreement and returned instead with her lute so that they might sing the porter awake with a jolly tune. Inspired, Aminah and Sadie fetched their instruments also and soon their house flowed glorious music out into

the darkening skies.

It was not very much later when there was a knock at the door.

‘Who could that be?’ asked Sadie.

“Tis very late for callers,’ frowned Zubaidah.

‘I will go and see,’ said Aminah, getting to her feet.

The porter and sisters listened as the door was opened and voices floated in, quickly followed by the excited return of Aminah.

‘They are three qalandars!’ she said. ‘Mystical wise men, all bald and clean shaven, and all blind in the right eye! They say they have been travelling all day and after hearing our music wondered if we might have a bit of food and drink to spare. They say they can

entertain us with their acrobatics
in return!'

'O, let us admit them!' squealed Sadie.
Zubaidah frowned. 'I do not see how
this is sensible.'

'O, we have plenty of time,'
said Aminah.

'Yes, they will be fed and watered and
on their way long before midnight,'
said Sadie encouragingly. 'And we are
having such a wonderful party.'

Zubaidah huffed but relented,
as she too was having a lovely time.
'So be it, but they must be gone
before midnight!'

Aminah rushed to admit the three
gentlemen who appeared in their dusty
travelling robes and bowed before
Zubaidah as head of the household.

As Aminah had said, they were all
bald and clean shaven including
their eyebrows, which was normal
for a qalandar, but each one was also
curiously blind in the right eye.

'Greetings, friends,' said Zubaidah.
'You are welcome here to share
our food and drink, but only under
the condition that you make no
judgements on any here present and
behave with utmost politeness at all
times, questioning no one about their
behaviour or ways. See above the door
where we have carved: "Whosoever
meddles in the affairs of others, should
expect to be meddled back."

The three qalandars turned to look
and nodded their acceptance.

One said, 'We too are often

considered different from others and are delighted to have found a dwelling that so matches our own values.'

'Then we are both blessed,' said Zubaidah.

The three qalandars bowed low and came to sit upon the cushions where they saw the reclined porter still merry with drink.

'Who is this who sleeps upon the ladies' silk cushions in clothes so worn?!' asked one.

The porter, angered by the words, cried out, 'Sit down and mind your own business! Did you not just read the inscription above the door? Everybody is not obliged to live in the same way!'

'Do not be angered, my good man,' replied the qalandar. 'I meant no harm,

merely a question.'

'Questions can imply judgement,' said Zubaidah, 'so we shall have none of those either. Just pleasant entertainment.'

The qalandar bowed his apology and so the quarrel was smoothed over. Sadie and Aminah brought out dishes for supper consisting of hot rice and fragrant honey chicken. When the qalandars had satisfied their hunger and thirst they proceeded to demonstrate their many acrobatic skills with twists and tumbles and miraculous balancing acts. The ladies were delighted and many times had to stop to indulge their laughter which threatened to choke them in its voracity.

And in the midst of it all there was

another knock at the door.

Now earlier that evening the great caliph of the city had secretly left his palace in disguise. With him was his trusted Grand Vizier, Ja'far, and the chief of the guards, Masrur, and all three were wearing the clothes of wealthy merchants so that they might pass through the city with ease and not draw too much attention. The caliph liked to do this to check how things were really going in his lands and make sure everyone was justly looked after.

Passing down the street, the caliph had heard the riotous laughter and music coming from the sisters' house and was mightily intrigued. He asked Ja'far to knock at the door.

'But whatever shall I say?' Ja'far frowned.

'Just say you need to use the bathroom,' said the caliph, pushing Ja'far onwards. 'And then Masrur and I can have a look at what's going on.'

'But I want to have a look too,' sulked Ja'far.

'Yes, well, then I will offer up some wine and then we may be asked to join them,' said the caliph. 'Now go, knock!'

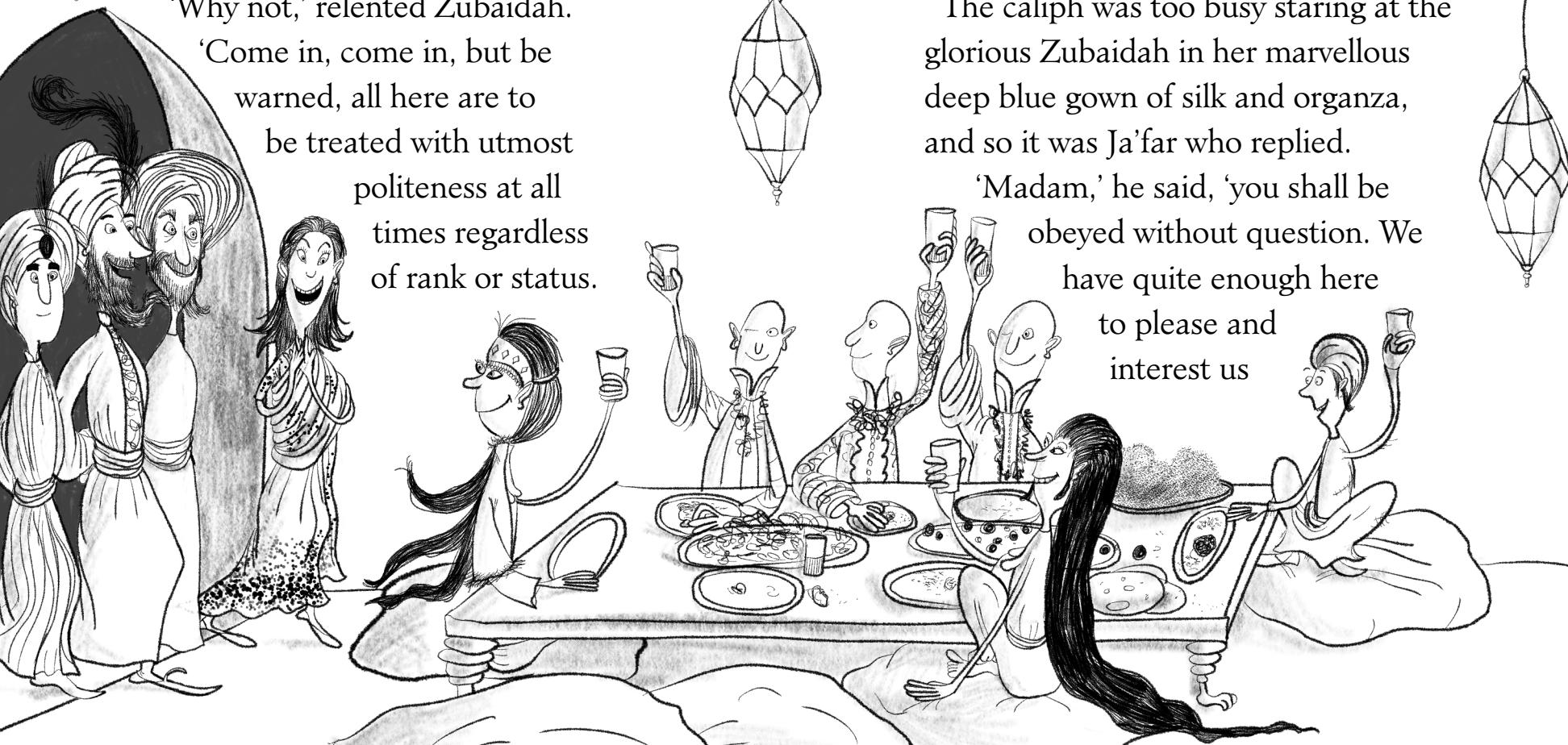
This was the knocking that the three sisters, the porter and the three qalandars had heard from inside.

It was Aminah who opened the door and as she was so full of jollity already she gaily led the men inside with their offer of more wine and presented them to Zubaidah.

'Look, sisters,' she cried. 'More guests! Isn't this just the best party?'

The merry gathered group all raised their glasses and a cheer at the dumbfounded newcomers who stared around at the little oasis of silk cushions and coloured lanterns with awe.

'Why not,' relented Zubaidah. 'Come in, come in, but be warned, all here are to be treated with utmost politeness at all times regardless of rank or status.



No judgements made and no questions asked. See above the door where we have carved: "Whosoever meddles in the affairs of others, should expect to be meddled back."

The caliph was too busy staring at the glorious Zubaidah in her marvellous deep blue gown of silk and organza, and so it was Ja'far who replied.

'Madam,' he said, 'you shall be obeyed without question. We have quite enough here to please and interest us'

without troubling ourselves about that with which we have no concern.'

The three newcomers were seated and served and the merriment continued. The caliph, however, was a curious man and he was frowning at the three qalandars and their identical missing eyes. He was burning to ask them about it but was bound by the enchanting Zubaidah's rules against it, so he tried to distract himself with the current conversation which was very lively and entertaining. Indeed, the talking was so good that time went on turning without being noticed until Zubaidah suddenly rose from her seat, a little pale.

'What time is it?' she quickly asked.

Aminah and Sadie looked at each other in guilt, hoping they weren't too late.

"'Tis nearly midnight,' the caliph said in concern. 'Do you wish us to leave?'

Zubaidah knew she really should end the party here but they were all having such a lovely time, especially since this particularly charming merchant had arrived.

Aminah and Sadie began to collect up the dishes, glasses and musical instruments. They were so loyal, which made it all the more sad to end the most fun they had had in a long time.

'No,' she finally said. 'Nobody is required to leave, but remember if you stay, whatever you see here must not be questioned. Do you agree?'

The porter, the three qalandars, and the caliph and his court disguised as merchants, all nodded their agreement.

So Zubaidah said, 'Sadie, go and fetch the dogs.'

Sadie bobbed in reply and went through the back door only to return a moment later with two black dogs that cowered and whined.

The guests tried to not seem terribly interested, but it was impossible not to watch. Aminah held one dog and Sadie held the other while Zubaidah went to a special chest and brought out a harsh-looking whip. The dogs sank low and looked pitiful.

With a deep breath Zubaidah called for the first dog and then proceeded to whip it. Any conversation amongst the guests was stopped as they witnessed the dog howl in misery and poor Zubaidah rain tears of despair as she hit the dog again

and again.

When she was finished she kissed its trembling snout and the poor beast limped back to Aminah. Then it was the turn of the second dog. Again the guests watched in horror as Zubaidah whipped the poor animal and cried tears of grief as she did so, finally kissing it goodbye when she was finished.

With both dogs soundly beaten Zubaidah wiped her wet cheeks and replaced the whip back in its chest. Sadie and Aminah led the sombre dogs back outside, but, nervous of the audience, Aminah didn't look where she was going properly and tripped; her dress caught on a lantern, tearing open the back to reveal truly horrendous scars

on her soft, young skin.

The guests gasped to see such injuries, which were often linked to punishment for a terrible crime, but they quickly looked away, mindful of their promise to question nothing and make no judgements. However, the caliph had to bite his tongue to restrain himself.

The two sisters hurried out and Zubaidah returned to her place upon the cushions.

‘Pray, do let us continue with the merriment,’ she said a little shakily, brushing back her long black hair that had fallen out of place.

The porter ploughed straight in, starting a loud and humorous story to distract from the awkwardness. The three qalandars and the caliph’s men

listened intently, eager to move on, but the caliph could only look at Zubaidah as she secretly dabbed her eyes with shaking hands. He did not like the way that she looked so sad and weary.

Soon Sadie and Aminah returned, Aminah in a new dress, and with them they brought dessert to lighten the mood: frozen sorbet flavoured with rose water and saffron; various biscuits made from rice and chickpeas mixed with walnuts, figs, raisins and pistachios; deep-fried dough swirled into spirals and sweetened with honey; and even some sugar-coated almonds. What a feast! The guests sampled them all with relish and complimented their pleasant tastes until soon the jollity was back and the party was once again in

full swing.

Alas, the caliph could not contain himself for long.

‘What do you make of all that?’ he whispered to Ja’far.

His Grand Vizier simply frowned and ignored him.

The caliph groaned. ‘But how can I not question what I have seen when what I have seen is in need of questioning!’ he wailed quietly.

‘You made a promise not to question or judge when you were invited to stay here,’ grumbled Ja’far.

‘And what say you, Masrur?’ the caliph said to his chief of guards. ‘Would you not like an explanation for this madness?’

‘I admit I am curious,’ said Masrur.

The caliph leaned over to speak to the qalandars while the sisters were distracted.

‘What say you, sirs?’ the caliph said. ‘You know these women more than we. What is the meaning of it all?’

‘Truly, sir,’ said one, ‘we know no more than you, arriving only an hour or two before you did.’

‘This man was here first though,’ they whispered, pointing to the porter who returned their look with one of equal ignorance.

‘I too know nothing,’ he said, ‘arriving just an hour or two before the qalandars.’

The men all looked around and at each other and frowned in confusion. Why did the pretty woman beat

dogs she loved? Why was the other lady, Aminah, covered in the scars of punishment? Why did they live alone with no servants or men?

‘I must know!’ declared the caliph at last, and rose to his feet to question the women who were currently clearing away the dessert dishes ready to bring out more wine.

Ja’far pulled him back down. ‘No, sire! You promised,’ he said crossly.

Suddenly Zubaidah turned round at their hushed conversation and, putting her hands on her hips, glared at them.

‘What is the matter?’ she said. ‘What are you all discussing so earnestly?’

The men all looked innocent and shook their heads. Zubaidah turned her attention to the porter who squirmed

under her gaze.

‘Please, mistress!’ he wailed. ‘It was not me! I was strong until the last, but these men did question what they have seen here tonight despite their promises!’

‘Is this true?’ stormed Zubaidah. ‘Is this the return you offer for the hospitality we have shown you? Have you forgotten the one condition on which you were allowed to enter this house?’

The six culprits all hung their heads in shame and the caliph especially regretted his impertinence at the beautiful lady’s outrage.

‘Do you all recall what is written above our door?’ snapped Zubaidah as her sisters reinforced her cold, hard

stare from beside her. The men nodded meekly. 'It says: "Whosoever meddles in the affairs of others, should expect to be meddled back." So now it is our turn to ask the questions,' she snapped. 'Why have each of the qalandars lost their right eye? And why do two of the merchants talk in subservience to the youngest one, as if he is royalty of some kind? Speak now or forever be cursed by the breaking of your oaths!'

'I don't have to do any such thing!' declared the caliph, who was not used to being told what to do, but his Grand Vizier thought otherwise.

'Alas, my liege,' he said to his caliph, 'we have only got what we deserved.'

At this the men all looked at each other in resignation; they had indeed

broken their promises to ask no questions. To redeem themselves they would have to tell their own secret stories, but which of them would go first?

'If you will permit me, madam,' said one of the qalandars. 'I shall willingly tell you my tale, although you may think it one of fiction as it is so bizarre. You see, in truth, none of us three qalandars are what we have said we are. In fact we are not men of low birth at all, but are all of us sons of sultans.'

The caliph and his men looked at the qalandars with renewed interest and the three sisters settled back onto the cushions to hear his tale.

With a nod of her head Zubaidah said, 'Proceed.'



*The Tale of the
First Qalandar*

I was born the first son to a sultan many miles north of here. My father's only brother had married the daughter of the neighbouring sultan and was now sultan himself in those lands.

The brothers lived next to each other in perfect peace. My uncle and his wife had many children but their son, Aftab, was of a similar age to me and we became very good friends, more like bonded brothers ourselves.

Over the years I would often visit my uncle's court and found great joy in this large family. Aftab grew to be a true

dreamer, in love with the idea of love and very romantic in his thinking. We teased him of course but his thoughts were so high amid the clouds and stars that he rarely noticed.

The last time I saw him he said to me, 'Dearest cousin, I am in love! And I have a secret plan to be with my love forever. Will you help me?'

I guessed then that the lady he was in love with was not someone a future sultan would be allowed to marry and if he wanted to be with her it would have to be in secret.

'I have had a building constructed without my father's knowledge,' he said, 'and wish for you to get my lady love there under cover of darkness. But it must forever remain a secret! Do

you promise?'

I did not mind helping out my cousin in his quest for romance and so I agreed to this role in his scheme, although I bitterly regret it now.

That night, by the light of a full moon, I secretly led his lady love to a white, marble building in some well-kept grounds. I led her willingly inside where Aftab was waiting. I smiled as the two embraced, hoping one day I too might fall this much in love.

'Help me, cousin, to lift this stone,' he said to me, and foolishly I obeyed, pulling up a hefty stone slab in the floor to reveal some stairs that led down into darkness. My cousin took a pretty little bottle, some candles and his lady friend with him, down the steps.

'Cover the hole back up,' he smiled.
'But how will you get back out?' I
asked with an innocent smile.

'That won't be a problem,' he
reassured me. 'Farewell, my cousin.'

I did as I was asked and, having left
the two young loves alone,
wandered slowly back
to the palace, admiring
the wonderful evening.
I returned to my room
and went straight to
bed wondering how
both Aftab and I would



be able to contain our amusing secret over breakfast the following morning.

The next day, however, I found the palace and its people in a state of anxiety.

‘Aftab is missing!’ worried his father, the sultan. ‘Do you know where he is?’

I shook my head. Technically it was no lie: I did not know where he currently was. But I prayed he would return soon so that I might not be questioned further. By late afternoon he had still not returned and so for fear of more questions I returned home on the pretext of getting out of the way of the search.

I worried endlessly. Had they run away together? Was it my fault? Should I have told my uncle what I knew even

though Aftab had sworn me to secrecy? I was baffled and upset so when I at last arrived at my father’s palace I did not see until too late the changes that had occurred there.

A large detachment of guards encircled us and drew their swords.

‘Whatever is the meaning of this?’ I asked, and was horrified to learn that my father’s Grand Vizier had in fact proved false and taken control of the country!

The traitorous man had sent my mother and sisters away and had executed my father! Not only that but I was to be next!

I have to say that this Grand Vizier had hated me from boyhood when, while out shooting at the inexperienced

age of eight, I had loosed an arrow too soon and struck him quite by accident in the eye. He was blinded and I, of course, had apologised profusely, but every day I saw that burning hatred he had for me in his remaining eye – a hatred I now knew burned for my entire family.

In true monstrous form he did visit me in my dungeon cell and tore out my eye in bloody revenge! And that is how I lost my right eye, but it is not the end of my tale for how am I here with you today if I was about to be executed by the traitorous Grand Vizier?

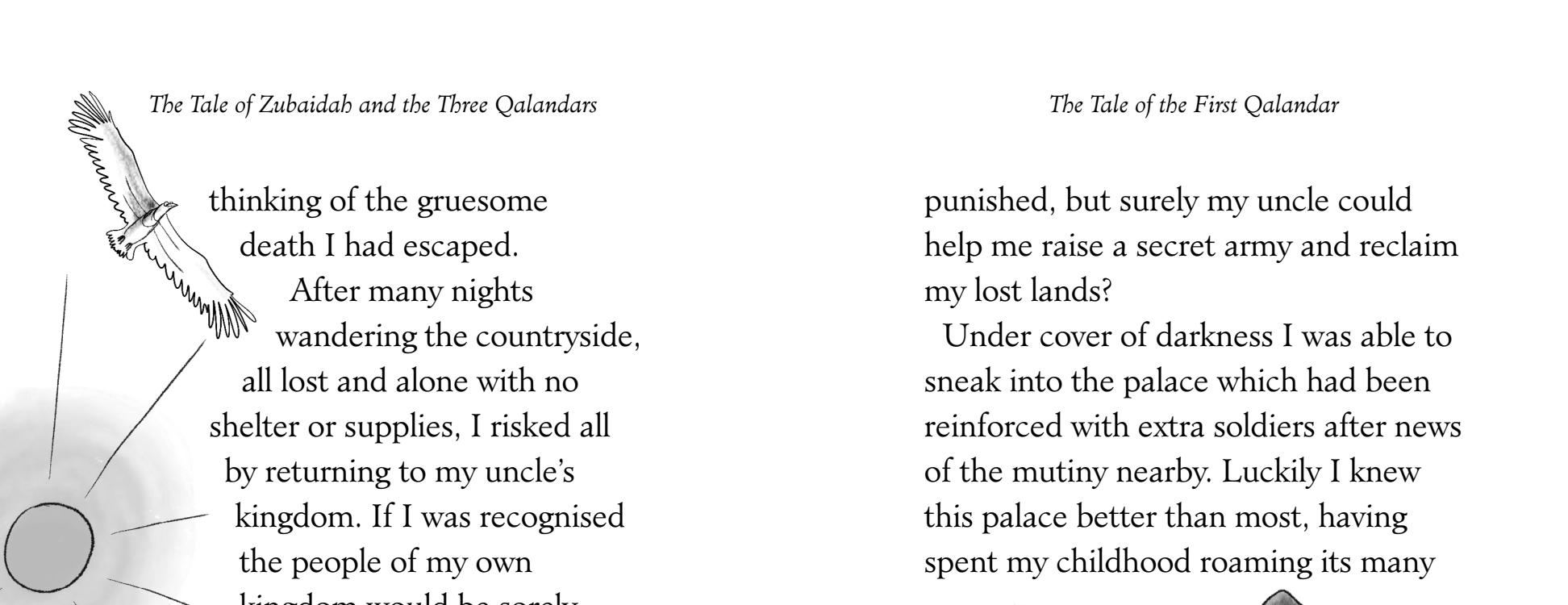
It would seem that my execution would not be a simple beheading on the palace grounds. Instead my persecutor wanted me to suffer much

more than that and so I was taken out into the desert and tied up so that my death would be a long time coming, fading away from lack of food and water and left for the animals to devour.

An example of just how much the people cared for my father's kingdom, however, was shown when one man risked all to come out and free me.

'Forsake this kingdom immediately,' he said to me fearfully. 'And take care never to let it be known that you have survived, for the Grand Vizier will be mad with anger at your faked death and take it out on all of us who remain under his power.'

I thanked the brave man wholeheartedly and tried to console myself for the loss of my eye by



The Tale of Zubaidah and the Three Qalandars

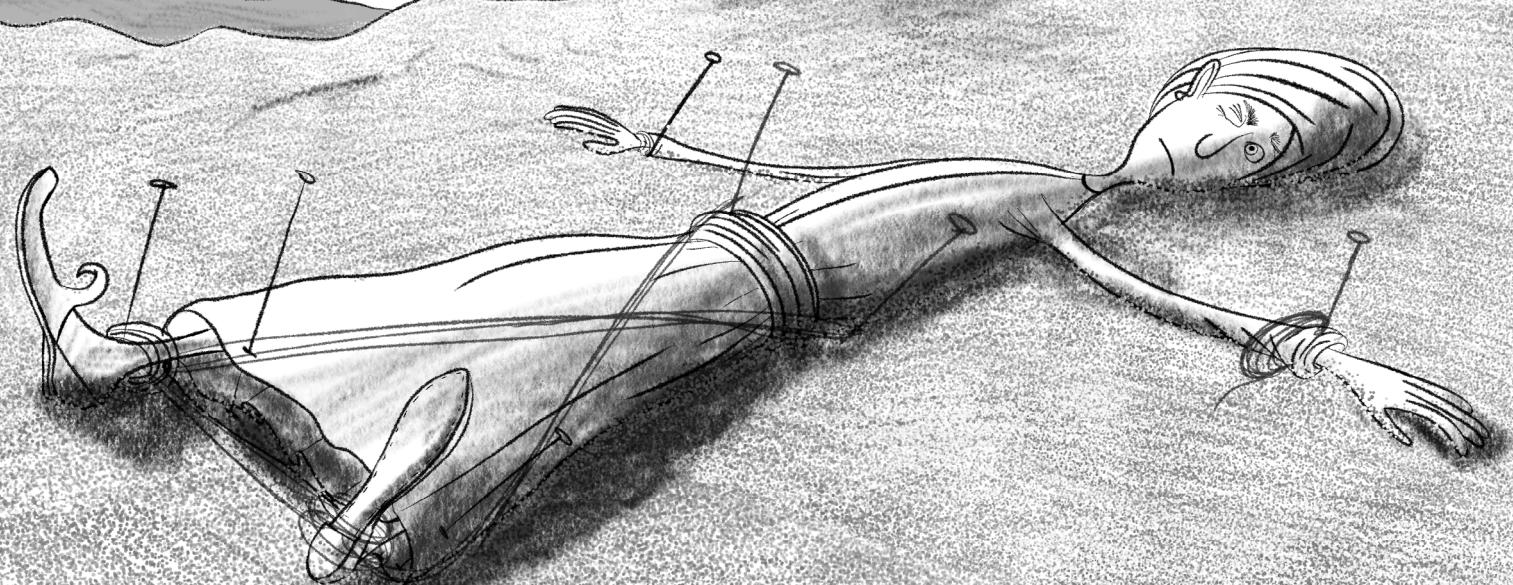
thinking of the gruesome death I had escaped.

After many nights wandering the countryside, all lost and alone with no shelter or supplies, I risked all by returning to my uncle's kingdom. If I was recognised the people of my own kingdom would be sorely

The Tale of the First Qalandar

punished, but surely my uncle could help me raise a secret army and reclaim my lost lands?

Under cover of darkness I was able to sneak into the palace which had been reinforced with extra soldiers after news of the mutiny nearby. Luckily I knew this palace better than most, having spent my childhood roaming its many



halls. I slipped into my uncle's study and awaited him there.

When he first saw me he mistook me for Aftab, who had never returned, and embraced me with the love of a father. This broke my heart and I admit that I did then break my sacred oath to Aftab and told his father all that I had seen and done. Together, in disguise, we set out to find that little marble building in the well-kept grounds.

'But this is a burial ground,' my uncle worried as I led him to the place Aftab had sent me.

I could see now that he was right and a deep fear spread throughout my insides.

We found the marble building,

which, as I now feared, was indeed a tomb, and lifted up the stone door in the floor. Down the steps we went and were met with the most upsetting scene: my romantic cousin and his lady love, unable to be together in this life, had decided to drink poison together so that they might remain together in the afterlife.

My uncle collapsed and wept bitterly the loss of his first born.

'You have lost a father and a home while I have lost my only son,' he said to me. 'Fortune at least gives us each other and I would be proud to welcome you into my home and name you heir to my kingdom.'

His words touched me greatly and together we stumbled out of the

accursed tomb into the bright sunlight – only to hear the alarm being raised. We raced back to the palace to learn that the traitorous Grand Vizier was in my uncle's lands now too. I was immediately sworn in as heir to my uncle's kingdom and we prepared soon after for battle.

Unfortunately this peaceful city was utterly unprepared for war and with such short notice it crumbled easily to the mighty force attacking it. My uncle fought hard for his people and their liberty but soon he was overpowered. I knew the battle was lost and so I retreated to avoid capture – for the sake of my people, who the Grand Vizier would punish if he ever realised I was still alive, and also for the people

of my uncle's kingdom who now also belonged to me as their rightful sultan and protector.

There was nothing I could do to help so I escaped through a secret passage and took refuge in the woods. I shaved my head and face including my eyebrows and put on the dress of a qalandar. This way I could travel without risk of exposure for I had a plan. I would travel to the city of Baghdad and meet with the great and respected caliph Harun al-Rashid who I was sure could be persuaded to help me win back my lands and liberate the poor people who even now suffer under the tyranny of the traitorous Grand Vizier.

‘Your story does move me greatly,’ said Zubaidah, ‘and you are excused your indiscretion at asking us questions you had promised not to ask.’

The qalandar bowed in humble acceptance while the disguised caliph looked at him with interest and awe. Next to him another of the qalandars spoke up.

‘If it pleases you, madam, I shall tell my tale next,’ he said.



Born in a land far to the east of here, I was scarcely more than a baby when the sultan, my father, began to think I was unusually gifted. I could read and write from a very young age and was quick and clever. My father presented me with the finest tutors who taught me history, poetry, geography, mathematics and science. But what I liked best of all was writing, and in this I soon surpassed my masters and gained a reputation that reached as far as India itself.

Now, a maharajah of the East Indies,

upon hearing this news, was curious to see a young prince with such talents and he sent an ambassador to my father laden with rich presents and a warm invitation to visit his court. My father, who was enthusiastic to secure the friendship of so powerful a monarch, was delighted and, besides, held that a little travel would greatly improve my manners and open my mind. And so I gladly accepted the maharajah's invitation. In a short time myself and a small entourage set off in a caravan with ten extra camels all carrying rich presents for the maharajah. It was to be a great adventure, but maybe more so than I expected.

We had been travelling nearly a full moon's cycle when one day we saw a

cloud of dust moving swiftly towards us. As soon as it came near we found that the dust concealed a band of fifty robbers! Our group barely numbered half of that and none of us were fighting men so there was no use in defiance. Instead we tried to impress them with our credentials. The robbers, however, only laughed and declared that they cared not who we were or where we were going and proceeded to attack us brutally.

A royal hostage can be a powerful tool and so against my wishes my guards made me escape. O how I loathed to leave my friends and subjects to these foul brutes, but I did as I was told and put spurs to my horse, riding away as fast as I could until I had no idea where

I was any more.

Lost in an unknown country I had to sell the few belongings I had with me for food, and then with much regret I had to sell my horse. My future was looking very bleak indeed when at last I stumbled upon a beautiful city. Hopefully there would be someone of status here who could help me return home. However, I was painfully aware that I would not be able to get anywhere near such a person in my current state: my face and hands were black with dirt, my clothes were all rags and my shoes had fallen apart long ago.

Thus my first stop in the city was at a tailor's shop. I was lucky to find the owner a sympathetic man and he listened to my whole story. I had hoped

he might lend me some clothes with the promise of payment later but alas, instead of giving me good news, his response only increased my troubles.

'Beware,' he said, 'for the prince who governs this kingdom is your father's greatest enemy! And he would rejoice to find you in his power.'

I admit I cried then. I was so tired and afraid, I had no idea what to do next. The tailor was truly a kind man and gave me food and a bed for the night.

'You must work and earn enough money to travel home yourself,' he suggested. 'What is it you are skilled at?'

Eagerly I told him of all my accomplishments as a grammarian and a poet, but that my greatest gift was writing. But the man only shook his

head sadly.

‘I am afraid there is no work here of that kind. Can you sew or smith or carve?’

I shook my head. ‘No.’

‘How about brewing or tanning?’

I shook my head again and suddenly felt rather useless. In real terms I had no practical skills at all. When the tailor had exhausted his list of suggestions he sighed and said, ‘That just leaves chopping. All men can do that, all it takes is a strong arm.’

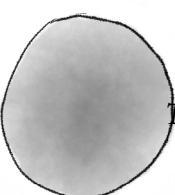
I considered my pale, thin arms. I had spent my entire youth at a desk learning letters and thoughts. I felt miserable but not as miserable as I did after my first day of work. By the sweet heavens I did so ache all over after

that full day in the hot sun sinking my axe into wood. The next day was even worse as I ached before I had even started. The third day was worse still and I nearly gave up.

‘You cannot expect to be good at something new straightaway,’ said the tailor. ‘You must persevere; keep going and you will get better, I promise you.’

That tailor was wise as well as kind, for he was right. After the fourth day I got into a rhythm and my skills increased every day. I became a good woodcutter, and then a very good woodcutter, but alas cutting wood will only earn you so much and I was still a long way off from affording the journey home.

I had been a woodcutter for more than a year when one day I decided



The Tale of Zubaidah and the Three Qalandars

to wander further into the forest than I had ever done before. I discovered the most glorious green glade and sat down to enjoy a peaceful moment in the dappled sunlight. I was in the middle of composing a poem when my eye caught something glinting in the grass.

Intrigued, I went to investigate and there found an iron ring fastened to a trapdoor hidden in the dirt. Any distraction was a joy and I had soon cleared away the earth



The Tale of the Second Qalandar

and pulled up the heavy door to reveal a staircase. I hesitated. Should I go down? Should I go and fetch some others? In the end my curiosity got the better of me and I proceeded to go down by myself with my hatchet as protection. When I reached the bottom of the steps I was surprised to find myself in a huge palace. It was surely enchanted as it was as brilliantly lit by sunlight as it would be above ground.

About this series

The Arabian Nights tales are some of the most enduringly entertaining stories ever written. Compiled in Arabic during the Islamic Golden Age, numerous tales depict legends, sorcery and magic intermingled with real people, places and events. Some tales are framed within other tales while others are perfectly self-contained. The result is a superb collection of richly layered narratives; whether adventure, historical, tragic, comic or romantic, they have delighted audiences for centuries.

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About Kelley Townley

Kelley Townley trained as a teacher and gained her MA in creative writing with distinction from Bath Spa University. She may be found either writing children's stories – happily losing herself in the dream world of the human imagination – or plotting new ways to engage readers, which are the same things really. Kelley lives near Bath with her family, the writer's obligatory cats and an ever growing number of woodlice.

About Anja Gram

Anja Gram has illustrated numerous children's books and magazines. Her highly distinctive style captivates and endears readers around the world. She lives and works in Copenhagen, Denmark.

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A brass horse and rider sit atop a dome at the peak of a magnetic mountain, drawing passing ships to a certain doom along the rocky shores of its base. A young woman arrives at a coastal town to find its inhabitants motionless, petrified in stone. Wild imaginings and outlandish plots are hallmarks of these tales that chart the adventures and fortunes of Zubaidah, her sisters, and three qalandars, sons of sultans forced by fate and folly to roam the earth as impoverished beggars. Prepare to be spellbound by breathtaking tales of treachery and revenge, evil enchantments and epic battles, justice and redemption.



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