

THE CAVE OF WONDERS

IF THERE WAS a moon or sun in the sky, it didn't matter at all.

Underneath the tallest tower in the palace was the deepest pit in Agrabah, the bottom of which was lit by a single torch. No sunlight, moonlight, or starlight had ever touched its depths. The bottommost chamber had been excavated in the dead of a black night by workers who were then murdered and buried under the very stone steps they helped lay—to preserve the secrets of the palace dungeons.

There was only one door that led in: it was windowless and triple-barred. Beyond it were a dozen skeletons still shackled to the wall, left there even after they had decomposed like a forgotten detail in a fairy tale. Scurrying

around these were rats that had never seen the light of the sun and probably had something to do with the creation of the skeletons.

Aladdin had only been there for a few hours and hadn't quite let the obvious *finality* of the place get to him yet. He was still shocked by the events that had led up to his being there.

"The *princess*," he muttered to himself for the fortieth time. "I can't believe she was the *princess*. I must have sounded so *stupid* to her."

But . . . maybe . . . just maybe . . . she liked *him*? A little?

And for a moment, in the chilly, foul-smelling dungeon where he was chained, Aladdin let himself dream of the life he would have if *he* was a prince. Then they could be together. He would have the girl of his dreams and they would all live happily ever after.

Of course, the fact that she was a princess was the reason he was in a dungeon.

It was obvious: his imprisonment had nothing to do with the bread he had stolen. Somehow Jafar had seen them, had *known* a Street Rat was coming close to desecrating the royal daughter . . . leading her into a life of poverty, crime, and villainy . . . and had stopped it.

"Aww, she was worth it, though," Aladdin sighed, thinking about her eyes, remembering the soft warmth of her hand. For a moment he had touched greatness.

The tiny echoes of chittering interrupted his thoughts.

“Abu?” he asked incredulously, looking up.

Very faintly he could see a tiny shadow of a monkey as it hopped from beam to beam, from stone to stone while he made his way down to the bottom, where Aladdin was.

“Down here!” Aladdin called excitedly.

Abu dropped onto his shoulder. The boy petted him as best he could by rubbing his head into Abu’s furry belly. “Hey, boy, am I glad to see you! Turn around!”

After enjoying a few more moments of their cuddly reunion, Abu did as directed. Using his teeth, Aladdin carefully extracted a needle he had pinned into Abu’s little vest for an occasion such as this. The little monkey wasn’t just a distraction while Aladdin swiped things; the two had many, many other routines they had worked out over the years for getting out of—and into—trouble.

Aladdin turned his head and strained his neck as far as he could, working the needle into the keyhole of his right-hand manacle with his teeth and lips. It was a simple, crude lock; obviously if you were thrown to the bottom of the deepest dungeon in the palace, extreme measures weren’t needed to keep you there.

Which was rapidly bringing Aladdin to the next part of his problem. Once his right hand was free, he easily undid his left . . . but where was he going to go from there?

Abu chittered angrily. Monkeys obviously did not like

being underground or in dungeons. It sounded like he was saying *he* had done *his* part; now it was his human friend's turn to figure out the rest. Fast.

"Yeah, yeah, we're going. Let's get away from the palace as fast as we can. I'll never see her again . . ." he said wistfully, more concerned with that than their immediate escape. He thought about how she had looked standing on the rooftop, pole in her hand, the wind blowing tendrils of her hair out of her eyes. "She can only marry a prince. I'm a fool."

"You're only a fool if you give up, boy."

Aladdin spun around.

There was nothing but shadows and rats. But the voice was creaky and weak—*human*, not ghostly. One of the other prisoners must still have had a little life left in him.

"Who are you?" Aladdin called out to the shadows. "Show yourself!"

There was the rattle of chains and the light scuffling sound of something bony and hard against the floor. An ancient man hobbled out of the dark. He seemed barely to have the strength to stand, much less move. There were no manacles binding him. There *was* a light left in his eyes—a crazy one.

Aladdin found himself a little afraid of the strange specter.

“I’m merely a lowly prisoner like yourself,” the old man continued, revealing that he still had most of his teeth—but they pointed in every direction, thin and yellow with age, like toothpicks. He used an ugly old piece of firewood as a cane and forced himself sideways with the shuffling motion of a crab. “But together, maybe we can be more.”

He rubbed his fingers together suggestively, as if he was counting gold coins. Aladdin found himself relaxing. A man with the craze of *greed* in his eyes was something Aladdin was used to.

“I’m listening,” he said.

“There is a cave. A cave of *wonders*, boy, filled with treasures beyond your wildest dreams!” He stuck a gnarled hand into his threadbare robe. When he pulled out his closed fist, shoved it into Aladdin’s face, and opened it, the boy almost fell back in surprise.

Rubies.

Three of them. Huge. Dusty and old, with the facets of one chipped and in need of the hand of a skilled jeweler. But rubies nonetheless. Those three would have bought most of the Quarter of the Street Rats—and the people who lived there, as well.

“Treasure enough to impress even your ‘princess,’ I would wager,” the old man said with a crafty smile, taking them back and hiding them again.

Aladdin felt a blush wash over his face quickly before disappearing.

The rubies . . .

He started to smile. That was more wealth than he had ever seen up close. Enough to buy horses, fancy clothes, servants . . .

. . . and then his smile faded. Until that moment Aladdin never would have imagined that *limitless treasure* wouldn't be enough for him.

"It doesn't matter how much gold or jewels I get," he said morosely. "She has to marry a *prince*. I have to come from a noble family, a line of princes. Or be granted the title and lands, which I can't really see the sultan doing anytime in the near future."

The old man struggled for a moment, frowning and wheezing as some undefined pain bothered him. Then he took a deep breath and stuck his face into Aladdin's.

"You've heard of the Golden Rule, haven't you? *Whoever has the gold makes the rules!*" The man laughed—perhaps insanely; perhaps he genuinely thought himself funny. Aladdin noticed as the old man's lips were spread wide with mirth that his only healthy-looking tooth was gold.

"All right," Aladdin said cautiously. It was true: money bought almost anything. All the guards could be bribed to look the other way with enough gold or gifts. All the guards

except for Rasoul, of course. He was like a big, stupid rock of morality. Maybe sultans and kings could be bribed, too . . . or haggled with. Maybe with enough gold, the title of *prince* could be bought.

“But why would you share all of this *wonderful treasure* with me?”

Catches—like perfect girls turning out to be unattainable princesses—Aladdin was used to. Free treasure, he was not used to—and highly suspicious of.

“I need a young pair of legs and a strong back,” the old man said, tapping Aladdin’s legs as solicitously as a camel buyer. Aladdin squelched a shiver of fear. Was the man a sorcerer who meant to literally *take* Aladdin’s back and legs?

No, that was foolish, Aladdin told himself, shaking his head.

Right?

“Because the treasure is in a *cave*. In the *desert*,” the old man spat. “I’m . . . not quite as nimble as I used to be. I need you to go get it for me and bring it out. Now, do we have a deal?”

“Oh, sure,” Aladdin laughed. If it wasn’t for the existence of the rubies, he would have thought the old man was completely mad. “Except for one thing. The cave is *out there* and we’re *in here*.”

The old man cackled.

“Things aren’t always what they seem!”

He tapped a stone in the wall several times with his cane. It slid aside, slowly, grindingly, but somehow under its own power.

“So, I repeat,” the old man said as if enjoying the taste of every word. He put his hand out. “Do we have a deal?”

Aladdin hesitated. Perhaps the old man really was a sorcerer after all. Or an ancient, angry djinn.

But then again, *treasure* . . .

Aladdin squared his shoulders, set his jaw, and shook the old man’s hand.

After he crawled through the narrow space, Aladdin found himself in a pitch-black cave. Strange subterranean winds blew frigid one moment and searingly hot the next. The walls suddenly flickered with an evil red light, and a gust of hot air burned the side of Aladdin’s face.

Abu screamed and clutched Aladdin’s neck.

“The very blood of the earth comes up through here,” the old man explained, leading the way with his crabby shuffle. As they rounded a corner, they came upon the source of the flickering red light: a slowly bubbling pool of molten rock that burned hotter than the inside of a smithy’s kiln. “We are deep beneath the palace now, in the living stone upon which it was built.”

“I had no idea anything like this existed,” Aladdin said, full of wonder. And also full of ideas. Caves that led under the city and into the palace? That sounded like a *very bad* security hole. He wondered if they were anywhere near the vaults that were filled with royal gold.

“Nobody does. Nobody *living*, that is,” the old man cackled.

Aladdin again felt the stirrings of fright. But then, what would a ghoul want with treasure? This man was surely alive. And secretive. And insane. Perhaps it was all an act to protect his secrets. They went on.

The old man occasionally mumbled and muttered to himself and made squawking noises like a bird. Having conversations with the long dead, probably. Aladdin noted with interest how very few splits and turnoffs there were, and how smooth the corridors were. Now and then he flicked out his knife to scratch an outcropping or put an arrow on a wall when the old man wasn't looking. Who knew when such a route would be useful again?

“Listen, boy,” the old man said as they went. “When you do go down into the Cave of Wonders, you must *not touch anything* except for an ugly old brass lamp you will find down there. There will be rooms of gold and chests of rubies and ancient treasures worth a thousand kingdoms. Touch nothing but the lamp, or you won't come out of it alive.”

“Wait, I’m just supposed to walk by piles of gold?” Aladdin scoffed. “You promised me riches, Grandfather.”

“*Imbecile,*” the old man muttered, for just a moment sounding like someone younger. “The lamp gives one power . . . over the Cave of Wonders and its treasures. If you touch anything before it’s in hand, you will die. Bring the lamp to me and I assure you, you will get what you deserve.”

“If you say so,” Aladdin said, shrugging.

When they finally arrived at the surface, it was night. The passage ended in a rather inglorious drain hole near where the workhorses and camels were stabled in the back side of the palace, beyond the outer wall. It reeked of animal piss, and Aladdin had to let the old man clamber onto his shoulders to get out. On the bright side, no one was around to see them.

Aladdin leapt out and took a deep breath of the fresh air. Although the sky was clear, the stars twinkled madly with desert sand and dust that was blown across them. He frowned. Not a good night to go adventuring in the desert. But fortune favored the brave, and he certainly wanted a fortune.

He looked at his companion with a critical eye. The old man seemed like he was going to collapse in a pile of bones right there.

Aladdin murmured softly to the animals in the stable.

He picked out an unflashy, sturdy little horse and lifted the old man onto it.

“The stable boy whose charge is this horse will receive fifty lashes for losing him,” the old man said, cackling in delight as he gripped the reins.

“We will be back before dawn if your stories are true, Grandfather,” Aladdin said, dislike for his partner growing. “And I will tip the poor boy well.”

In the desert the winds swirled the sand into choking dust devils, and Aladdin had to cover his face with his vest. His feet kept slipping into the shifting dunes. The horse was slightly more accustomed to the terrain but whinnied and protested constantly.

It was not an easy trip.

The old man looked up at the stars. He muttered into the hump on his back, as if confirming his calculations. Eventually Sirius rose like the eye of a baleful ifrit over the chill desert and they arrived at a solid cliff of bedrock. Below it was a wide bowl—a valley of sand, beautiful in the starlight, but desolate and deadly. There were no plants here, no lizards, not even stray stones.

Aladdin helped the old man down off the horse. Muttering and murmuring, the man drew something out of his rags, cupping his hands as if it was alive. As if it was

something that might escape. Finally he spread his fingers and revealed his prize.

A golden scarab rested in his palm. At first Aladdin thought it was a piece of jewelry or a statue, maybe with a treasure map on its back.

Then it opened its golden outer wings to reveal a set of flight wings—also made of gold.

It sparkled and glowed and flew into the air with a heavy buzzing sound.

Aladdin jumped back.

The beautiful, frightening thing flew off into the valley with the directness of something not entirely insect-like. It circled around a large mound as if deciding what to do and then plunged deep into the sands.

Almost instantly the dunes slid forward in a disturbing way. Something large, something very *unnatural* was rippling and rising to the surface. A giant stone head of a tiger emerged, moving and growling and tossing like it was alive.

Aladdin prepared to run, but no more of the tiger appeared: just the head. It did not seem able to move and lacked the body of a sphinx.

Its eyes glowed like twin suns.

“Who disturbs my slumber?”

It was hard to say if the words were actually spoken aloud; the ground rumbled, the sky thundered, the tiger roared.

Aladdin backed away, almost tripping over his own feet.

This was *not* what he had signed up for. A dangerous trip into a deep, dark cave, yes. A jaunt into the middle of the desert at night, sure. *This* was too much. There had been no mention of a giant talking stone tiger with the voice of an ancient god.

The old man made an impatient *go ahead* movement with his hands.

“*What?*” Aladdin demanded. “Are you crazy?”

“You want the princess, boy?” his companion asked with a sneer.

Yes. Yes, he did.

Aladdin took a deep breath and tried to steady his nerves.

“Uh . . . it is I! Aladdin!” he shouted, feeling more than a little foolish.

The tiger was silent for a moment.

Aladdin got ready to run for his life.

“*Proceed.*”

The rumbles were softer, as if it was less angry.

“*Touch nothing but the lamp.*”

Its mouth snapped open, revealing a wide golden gullet. Down its tongue traveled a golden staircase. Aladdin couldn't see to the bottom. He took a tentative step forward.

“Remember, boy, just fetch me the lamp!” the old man

shouted, unconsciously imitating the tiger. "Get me the lamp and I shall make sure you get your reward!"

Aladdin thought of Jasmine.

He set his jaw.

"C'mon, Abu," he said, and began to go down the steps.

The golden stairs very quickly revealed themselves to be disappointingly normal stone, only lit golden by whatever was below. But the sheer number of them was breathtaking: the path dipped and curved through the darkness as far as the eye could see. Several times when Aladdin thought they had reached the end, the stairs began again into a deeper descent.

Into—Aladdin was more than a little relieved to see—an absolutely enormous, *normal* cave. Not a stomach.

At the far side of the cave was a somewhat anticlimactic stone doorway that glowed so brightly from whatever was in the room behind it that Aladdin had to cover his eyes as he went in.

"Would you look at that," he said, when he passed through to the other side, a wide grin growing across his face.

Gold. Ridiculous, ludicrous, unimaginable piles of it. Entire hillsides of coins, cups, urns, and statues. Giant golden cauldrons stuffed to overflowing with necklaces, rings, bracelets, and other trinkets. Golden thrones. Golden tables. Golden bric-a-brac shaped like fruit for no conceivable purpose other than to look at.

And among all this, rugs of indescribable beauty and size and chests full of jewels shaped like berries and flowers.

“Just a *handful* of this would make me richer than the sultan,” Aladdin sighed.

Abu chittered. Light sparkled on the closest chest, bouncing off a ruby the size of an apple.

The little monkey made a beeline for it.

“*Abu!*”

Aladdin ran desperately after the little monkey and did something he never normally would have. He grabbed the monkey’s tail and pulled him back.

Abu squawked at the indignity and tried to stop himself by digging his hind claws into the rich purple-and-blue rug they were standing on.

“Don’t. Touch. *Anything.*” Aladdin chastised, shaking his finger at his friend. “Remember what that big, scary cat thing said? Whose stomach we are currently in? We gotta find that lamp. First. *Then* we’ll get our reward.”

He plucked the monkey off the ground and set him securely on his shoulder.

“It’s got to be around here somewhere. . . .”

He wandered the path around the treasures carefully, making certain never to come too close to any of them. He kept one hand on Abu, just in case.

The monkey chittered irritably.

“I don’t know,” Aladdin answered, as if it was a real

question. "A little oil lamp, I guess. The old man obviously thought we could carry it out easily. I see cups and pitchers and plates and vases and other house-y stuff, but no lamps yet. . . ."

The monkey chattered again. He sounded nervous this time and kept glancing behind them.

"Sorry, I'm looking as fast as I can," Aladdin said, continuing their imaginary conversation. "It's not like I can *touch* anything to move it aside. . . ."

Abu screamed and clawed Aladdin's neck.

"What *is* it?" Aladdin demanded, turning around to see what was bothering his friend. There was nothing behind them, just the path they were on. And also a carpet that looked suspiciously like the one near the entrance, by the chest Abu had almost touched. It even had the same golden tassels, one on each corner.

"Huh," Aladdin said. He turned and began walking again.

Abu was silent for a good ten seconds before beginning to screech in fear.

Aladdin whipped around.

Again, nothing.

Except for the carpet.

Which was right behind them.

Again.

Aladdin frowned, looking at the thing.

As he watched, the carpet rose hesitantly off the ground. Like a fish, or something used to swimming in the air.

Aladdin's eyes widened in wonder.

"A *magic carpet!*" he said with a whistle. "Mom used to tell me bedtime stories about djinn and their magical treasures."

He put a hand out to it, delicately, slowly.

The carpet responded, sliding forward as if propelled by an invisible breeze. Its rear flapped gently like a flag. Aladdin found himself scratching and ruffling its nap as he would a cat's fur.

"Good . . . *carpet*. There's a boy. Good boy. Hey . . . may we get on you?" he asked politely, getting an idea. It would be *much* faster to scour the cave from above, gliding among the dangerous piles of gold without needing to go near them.

The carpet sensed what he wanted and lowered a little, like a trained elephant going down on one knee to enable a rider to easily jump up.

Aladdin grinned.

He stepped on carefully. It was a strange feeling; the rug both gave and held under his feet, like he was walking on a pile of flax waiting to dry. He crossed his legs and settled in, putting Abu in his lap. The monkey was not entirely happy

about this turn of events, but since Aladdin didn't seem scared, he remained relatively calm.

Whether or not he won the princess, this was the best adventure of his entire life.

"We're trying to find a lamp," Aladdin said. He felt a bit like an idiot talking to a rug. But then again, the rug was flying. Who knew what it could understand or do? "A . . . *special* lamp?"

The rug rippled for a moment, as if thinking. Then, without a sound, it began to drift higher and higher into the air, picking up speed. Soon they were dipping and gliding around the mountains of treasure as easily as an eagle through the clouds. Abu gripped Aladdin's arms until his tiny claws drew blood, but the boy just laughed.

Following a series of tunnels and passageways he would never be able to remember full of treasure he would never forget, they eventually came to a cave even larger than the first one. Aladdin couldn't see the far walls; it all drifted into darkness. The bottom was filled with a lake of perfectly still, pellucid water. Rising out of the middle was an island made up of boulders that looked like mushrooms, one on top of another, with steps carved out of their middle. At the very top, a single shaft of light from somewhere high, beyond sight, illuminated a small bronze object.

The lamp.

The carpet didn't fly to it, however; it gently set itself down on a rocky outcropping on the near wall. A narrow causeway led from there to the mound. An ancient, idolatrous golden shrine guarded the way; some unknowable god who looked like an ape with too many teeth. It held aloft a ruby the size of an orange—as if it was a lamp lighting his way.

“All right, here we go,” Aladdin said, adjusting his vest and trying to put the image of the angry god out of his mind. Something about the place, whether it was the size, the silence, or something else, kept him from just running across the causeway. Something demanded *silence* and *respect*. He found himself walking quickly but carefully, as if he was in a procession he couldn't quite see.

He slowly and solemnly climbed up the stone steps on the island. When he finally made it to the top, Aladdin picked up the lamp carefully with both hands . . . but it was as solid and sturdy as any modern household lamp. Morgiana decorated her hideout with dozens of these.

“This is *it*?” Aladdin swore, an incredulous smile on his face. He turned to Abu and the carpet. “Look at it, guys. *This* is what we came all the way down here to—”

He was just in time to see Abu grab the giant scarlet gem and try to wrest it out of the golden ape god's hands.

“Abu! *No!*” he cried.

“INFIDELS!”

The very ground itself spoke; the air, the earth.

“You have touched the forbidden treasure!”

Aladdin watched in horror as the ruby melted like so much dust in Abu’s tiny hands. The monkey screamed as if it burned him, and scampered away from the golden statue, which tipped forward, also melting.

“Now you will never again see the light of day!”

The light shaft that had illuminated the lamp in gold now turned a bloody red.

The cavern began to shake.

Aladdin made a beeline down the steps back to the causeway. Stones fell away under his feet. What had been a stairway quickly dissolved into a ramp he slid down, barely keeping his balance as the whole cave shuddered and began to collapse. He pitched forward.

A deadly heat hit him from below. He chanced a look down and saw to his horror that water no longer filled the bottom of the cavern—now it was all lava.

That one look was enough to throw him entirely off balance. As if the cave could sense his instability, a particularly big quake sent Aladdin flying toward the red-golden furnace below.

“Carpet!” he cried.

Aladdin windmilled his arms and legs, trying to slow

his fall. He felt the heat singe the hairs on his legs, the roar of the molten stone rushing up to meet him . . .

. . . and then the soft, firm cloth of the magic carpet beneath him.

He didn't have time to relax: in a panic Abu had tried to run toward Aladdin and was now stranded on the last of three remaining stones in the causeway. The tip of his tail was smoking.

Sensing Abu's need, the carpet dove toward the monkey. Aladdin grabbed Abu by his poor burning tail and swung him aloft.

The carpet flew up away from the heat and through the air, picking up speed. A hot wind surged against their backs. Aladdin turned around. The lava had pulled back into one huge roiling wave that rose above their heads, ready to crash down on them.

"Faster!" Aladdin urged.

The magic carpet doubled its speed and ducked them through the cavern's doorway. A split second later the wave crashed behind them. Lava exploded through the door and kept coming, boiling up from some immense pit as if it had no end.

They dove through each of the incredible burning caverns of treasure like a falcon hurtling toward its prey. Aladdin and Abu both ducked as the carpet shot through

the final door that led into the first treasure room.

Aladdin started to sigh with relief.

And then the giant piles of gold began to explode.

Each priceless hill swirled into a molten pile of fire and ash that shot toward the ceiling—and at the carpet. Aladdin helped steer, torn between fear for his life and heartbreak at the destruction that was being wrought there. As the explosions hit the ceiling, it began to cave in, boulders and square stones that had shaped the giant cat head now falling like bombs. The earth screamed in anger, frustration, and pain. Lava began to shoot like blood from every tear in its surface.

Aladdin covered his face and let the carpet find its way to the top. It followed the rapidly disappearing stone staircase up the cat's throat, keeping close as if it was safer.

They had almost reached the top when a falling stalactite caught the back of the carpet. It plunged down with the stone. Aladdin threw himself and Abu off and managed to catch the end of the stairs at the edge of the cat's mouth. The cave was shaking too much for him to be able to pull himself up and over the side.

Like a miracle, the old man appeared.

"Help me out!" Aladdin cried.

"Throw me the lamp!" the old man demanded.

Aladdin could barely process what he had said, it was so insane.

“I can’t hold on! Come on! Give me your hand!”

“First give me the lamp!” the old man insisted, a wild look in his eyes.

Survival won out over logic. Aladdin managed to reach into his sash, where he had stashed the lamp, and pulled it out with his free hand, holding on desperately with the other.

The old man grabbed it and cackled triumphantly. “Yesss!” he screamed. “At last!”

Aladdin managed to get one leg up into a crevice. Abu scampered off his head, making it easier.

The old man came forward to the edge, a menacing gleam in his eye.

He began to hammer at Aladdin’s fingers with his cane.

“What are you doing?” Aladdin cried.

“Giving you your reward. Your *eternal* reward.”

The old man—now standing strangely straight—pulled out an evil-looking black dagger and raised it above his head.

Abu bit the man on the toe.

He screamed—but managed to kick Aladdin’s fingers.

Aladdin tumbled back into the cavern, falling into the darkness and lava.

A soft *thump* let him know the carpet had managed to find and catch him. A quick monkey scream meant he’d

gotten Abu, too. Slowly and shakily, as if the magic carpet was tired and beat-up itself, it lowered all three of them to a cliff high above the lava. Aladdin watched in dismay as the cavern above them, the stone cat's mouth, yawned and screamed one last time before snapping shut and settling down beneath the sands.

Aladdin was stuck, sealed hundreds of feet belowground, with no way out, no treasure—
—and *no lamp*.