

The Magpie Maze

In the desert city of Lenar, there was a rope-maker named Jaya who crafted the strongest ropes in the region. Her ropes secured merchant caravans, anchored desert sails, and even hoisted the palace's golden chandelier. But for all her skill, Jaya had one relentless enemy: the sand magpies.

These clever black-and-white birds stole strands from her ropes. They unraveled the fibers, cackling as they carried them away to line their nests. Jaya tried everything — nets, spikes, even painting her ropes with bitter cactus juice. The magpies always found a way.

"Thieving pests," Jaya grumbled. "If I could weave a rope to catch the wind, I'd tie you all to the tallest dune."

One evening, after hours of futile repairs, she stormed into the desert. The moon bathed the sands in silver. Jaya threw a frayed rope to the ground and shouted, "Curse you, magpies! May you choke on my threads!"

The wind shifted. From the shadows emerged a figure cloaked in sand-colored robes. "A harsh wish," the stranger said. "Are frayed ropes worth such venom?"

"They ruin my work," Jaya snapped. "They take without asking."

The figure knelt, tracing the broken fibers in the sand. "What you give in anger returns in kind," the stranger said. "What you give in kindness... well, who can say?"

Before Jaya could respond, the figure placed a smooth, amber bead in her palm. "Tie this into your next rope," the stranger said. "But choose the rope's purpose with care."

The figure vanished like a desert mirage.

The next morning, Jaya examined the bead. It shimmered faintly, as if a breeze swirled inside. Curiosity overrode caution. She wove the bead into a rope she was making for a merchant's camel harness.

That night, a furious knocking shook her door. The merchant stood outside, breathless. "What magic have you put in that rope?"

"What do you mean?" Jaya asked.

"My caravan was ambushed," the merchant said. "The bandits cut every tether — except the one with your rope. The knot held firm as steel. My camel stayed, my goods were safe." He pressed a pouch of gold into her hands. "Your ropes are beyond price!"

Word spread. Orders flooded in. Jaya grew wealthy but so did her bitterness toward the magpies. "If magic can hold a caravan," she thought, "perhaps it can do away with those thieving birds. I have a mind to create a magpie noose to get rid of these blasted birds!" she exclaimed.

Suddenly the robed stranger stood in her doorway. Magpies were of course cavorting around her shop, causing still more mischief. “Why hurt the magpies when you can redirect them harmlessly instead?” With that, the stranger disappeared. So, after some thought, Jaya wove another rope with the amber bead, this time fashioning it into a twisted, dangling labyrinth and hanging it from the rafters of her workshop. “Let’s give this a try,” she muttered.

The rope shimmered in the desert sun. The next morning, the magpies clustered around it, hopping from strand to strand, heads tilting as they tried to navigate its twisting patterns. For hours they played, chattering and cawing, too enthralled to steal fibers.

Jaya was astonished. “They’re... playing,” she murmured.

The next day, customers arrived to find the magpies still enchanted. Word of the strange rope-puzzle spread, and soon people came not just for Jaya’s ropes but to see The Magpie Maze. Children giggled as they watched the birds try new paths; merchants asked if Jaya could make smaller versions as gifts. Jaya began crafting custom labyrinth ropes for courtyards and gardens.

Her business flourished as never before. More surprisingly, Jaya found herself laughing along with the visitors. The magpies were no longer thieves — they were partners in a kind of dance, their cleverness now a source of wonder rather than frustration.

One evening, as she locked her workshop, a warm breeze stirred the sands. The robed stranger stood in her doorway once more.

“I see you chose compassion over anger,” the figure said.

Jaya smiled. “Turns out magpies are more fun — and profitable — as allies and not adversaries.”

The figure inclined his head. “What you give freely returns tenfold, even if it wears black-and-white feathers.”

And with that, the wind shifted, and the figure was gone.

— *William Zeitler*

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