

Mind palace

By Zofia Skowrońska

Buckingham was on fire and it wasn't my fault. Maybe that's what happens when you walk into the queen's house without knocking. But I was assured that nothing bad would happen. *You will go in and out without any suspicion*, that's what he said. Someone granted safety to me. Now feeling the cold of chains on my wrists, I was beginning to doubt it. But I should probably go back to the start, if that miserable story really has it.

It was a windy autumn morning, 28 of November 1857. The wind blew the leaves on the London sidewalks, snatching umbrellas from the hands of the ladies and stealing top hats from the heads of the rich. Steal, is a proper word here, but I should introduce myself firstly – my name is...

–Watch where you go, peasant! – yelled someone from the cab, which nearly ran me over. I moved out of his way, ignoring the argument that had arisen on the road.

It was obvious they will not let me in. The guards eyed me suspiciously when I was passing them. It's good that the palace is in external renovation – no one will notice one worker more or less. I left my coat in the bushes and jumped over the wall to enter the courtyard. Staying unnoticed I flitted through the gardens to be in front of the entrance. By one quick move I broke the padlock. A shadow of a smile crossed my face when I pushed the giant doors. A cunning, wicked, vicious smile of a thief. Without hesitation I went inside.

The palace was completely empty. No guards running around, no officers in tailcoats, no queen drinking morning tea. Only overwhelming wealth. Gold and silk literally flowed down the walls. Persian carpets on the floor, French frescoes on the ceiling, marble pillars supporting a roof that will never collapse anyway. Hundred-year-old furniture and paintings of old kings looking from every corner. A huge chandelier of pure crystal hung over me like an executioner's axe. But none of this was the one I came here for.

As I was walking along the corridor, looking at all this greatness, I heard a voice suddenly. I strained my ears – someone was chanting. Clear and melodic tone. I slowly approached to the door of the Great Hall. The sound was coming from inside. I gently pushed the door so it wouldn't creak, and I never expected to see, what I saw then.

I was completely stunned. I couldn't get a word out. In the middle of the Great Hall I saw someone sitting on a throne. A raven-haired man in a queen's crown. He looked at me apparently glad he sees me. His eyes were irrationally green.

–How...how did you get here? – I asked a little bit confused.

–The same way as you, noble thief. Through the front door. – he replied, waving his hand carelessly.

I didn't know what was going on. Questions were piling up in my head. I had no idea who might he be, or what might he want. He was just sitting like an owner of this place and did as much as nothing. I looked at him very carefully. He was wearing a long black coat, a suit and a green waistcoat. He didn't look surprisingly rich, but he certainly wasn't poor. For sure he wasn't one of the guardians. He looked more like a conqueror.

–Who are you? – I spoke again, still lost in thoughts.

–It's not important now. The biggest mystery is who YOU are, Mr. Blake. – he answered, straightening up on the throne – The petty London thief, who wants to rob his queen, but he doesn't even know where to look.

He smiled in strange, overpowering way. Mischief was painted on his face. Whoever he was – he was playing with me like a cat with a mouse and he knew too much about me. A wave of anger flooded me as he mentioned my name. He shouldn't know it.

–You want to take over it? – I inquired pointing the throne.

–This? – he ran his hand over the armrest of the king's chair – Who knows? Maybe, someday. But not now, don't worry. Now I just want to help you.

–Help me? – I laughed – With what?

–You want to steal something, don't you. Something that once belonged to your forefather. I know you do. And that's what I will help you with.

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It was almost midnight when I came again to the palace. This time I didn't have to mess with breaking in. A weird man, whom I met at the morning, assured me that I would stay invisible. *You will go in and out without any suspicion*, he said when we were parting. With this assurance I entered the queen's house, the second time.

The enigmatic benefactor was where I left him – in the Great Hall. When I walked in, he clapped his hands as if he was pleased.

– There you are! I thought you changed your mind. – said he smiling again.

I didn't understand what made him so happy. Guessing, he was just having fun. I began to consider the possibility that I was dealing with a madman. Or worse – that I had gone crazy. Yeah, it wouldn't be a surprise. Especially that my great-grandfather was a...

– So tell me more about you, Mr. Blake. – he asked suddenly, snapping me out of my thoughts, when we were walking along the corridor.

– Don't call me that. – I mumbled, boiling with anger.

– How? – he was teasing me – Mister? Or maybe Blake?

– Both. – I cut. I didn't have the energy to let this topic continue. Besides, we were running out of time. As if that was not enough, I really didn't know where to look. The diary could be anywhere!

We passed the royal dining room, library, and room 1844. I walked just right behind black-coat gentlemen. He knew this place as if he really lived here. As if he exactly knew what and where he was looking for. Abruptly, he stopped in front of a closed door. I was about to ask how we'd get inside, but then he took a key out of his pocket. He unlocked the door and got us inside the regency room.

The chamber was hardly any different from the previous ones. Richness, in one word. But there was something that seemed not to fit. The 18th-century wooden, hand-decorated desk. Looked a little bit outdated. The green-eyed guy came closer and began to examine it from all sides. Finally, he found what he was looking because he smiled again. He gave me a quick glance and pressed some sort of a button. A wave of heat washed over me as I saw the notebook in a drawer. I couldn't believe it! My ancestor's property in the queen's desk! So close from the beginning. Never in my wildest dreams had I imagined that, and yet it happened! After all these years, the diary was found and returned to the owner. I carefully picked the journal up. I stared at it like enchanted and there was no way I could have predicted what happened next.

Suddenly something clinked. A familiar sound. A strange gentleman was standing behind my back and playing with a lighter. Definitely it wasn't a good sign. Carpets, books everywhere and a couple of flames – not a pleasant combination.

–Hey, stop it! – I shouted nervously – You’re going to burn us!
But he was as calm as the sea.
– Oh, don’t worry – he solaced me – That is meant to be.
And then he dropped the lighter.

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Three days passed since I had been arrested. The palace was still burning, and the firefighters could not put it out. My sentence was clear – life imprisonment for breaking and setting fire to Her Majesty's property and for destroying the symbol of the England. There was no mention of the theft. The diary was probably lost forever, just like the real guilty party. I remembered only flashes from the fire. Flames and dust surrounded me. Green eyes were all I saw before I lost my consciousness. At least, I was still alive, but what comfort was that? As I sat in my cell lamenting my miserable life, I heard a well-known, hushed voice behind me.

– Psst! – someone was calling me. I turned around to see the same pair of green eyes. The enigmatic gentleman from the palace was now standing in front of me. It was the pinnacle of mockery! I didn’t even ask how he got to my prison but, honestly, I didn’t even care. All I dreamt about was just kill this liar! – Swing down your sword, noble chevalier – said he apparently amused by my rage – I will get you out of here. But firstly, you need to do something for me.