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Glass Garden of the Moon

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Introduction

There is a garden that is not a garden, a hush of paths and pools stitched together by panes so fine that moonlight mistakes them for water. Jasmine braids through lattices of blown glass; every petal wears a pale reflection, every leaf keeps two colors—the world and its echo. The gates are invisible unless you listen. They open with the sound of breath on a mirror, the small fog of a promise. Step through, and the night becomes tender enough to carry in your palms.

We met there, as if the garden had been waiting for our footfalls to rhyme. One of us arrived from the stony throat of a port city where gulls argued with the wind; the other came by caravan, a ribbon of bells and tired camels dissolving into velvet dunes. We did not share a mother tongue, but we shared the thirst that makes strangers linger under the same lamp. When the moon rose—round and careful, like a host laying plates—we found ourselves bartering stories the way merchants weigh figs, each tale pressed into the other's hand to be savored, doubted, loved.

There are cities in this book that will feel like the smoke of cardamom, like a map burnt at the edges; there are oceans that pour from a blue jug and deserts that keep the footprints of every goodbye. Here, the wind wears anklets; here, jinn lean their foreheads against the cool of night and learn to listen; here, names are seeds sown on the tongue and watered with courage. If you know the old nights and their thousand doors, you know how a story is also a key. We have chosen keys that open not only jeweled chambers but also quiet rooms where two people can breathe the same air without fear.

We learned, in that glass-limned paradise, that intimacy is a craft. It requires lamp oil and patience, the trimming of wicks and the cleaning of sooted chimneys. We stitched trust from small mercies: a cup refilled before it emptied, a glance that did not look away, a question asked without the expectation of conquest. Across the divides that had been scribed on us by family, by country, by the stories we thought were the only ones allowed, we built a bridge so thin it could have been a song—yet it bore our full weight.

The garden taught us to see how love can be both mirage and oasis: something shimmering that appears just out of reach, and then, suddenly, the cool at the center of the hand. Queerness, in these pages, does not need to argue for its place; it is present as water is present, as moonlight is present—real and reflective, changing the face of everything it touches. We do not write from a balcony above the world but from the courtyard, our feet dusty, our hearts loosened by the evening call that makes the sparrows settle and the lamps bloom.

Each chapter you will read is a coin we placed on the table between us, filigreed with myth and nicked by use. Some are fables passed down and rethreaded through our mouths; others are true as a pulse, worn smooth by the telling and telling again. In their company walk those we chose and those who chose us: a found family lit by lanterns that have no single owner. Their laughter is the border of this book. Their grief is the ink that refuses to fade. Their courage is the bridge between our two shores.

Do not look for a single road. Look instead for crossings: a door borrowed from one house to finish another, a river hidden in the weave of a carpet, a mirror angled to catch the moon as it travels. If you listen closely you will hear glass singing, not from shattering but from the way night cools and contracts it. That song is the measure of our care, the fragile, resilient music of lives that meet and, against every prediction, stay. We offer it to you now. Hold it as you would a lamp cupped from the wind. May its light find you, wherever you enter.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Moon in a Bowl of Glass

The first thing I learned about the garden was that it held sound like a cup holds water, perfectly and without spill. Not silence, exactly—silence belonged to the high deserts and the empty courtyards of abandoned queens—but a quality of quiet that amplified intention. If you hummed, the glass panels hummed back, a faint, crystalline echo. If you wept, the sound felt heavier than tears, as if the air itself grew thick with pity.

I had entered the garden not by design, but by accident. My name is Samira, and until that evening, my life had been measured in the metallic clatter of the docks of Akkar and the shouted prices of freshly caught fish. I was a cartographer of water, tracing the shifting silt of ports, charting the dangers of tidal bores, and dreaming of oceans that were only visible from the top of the highest mast. I carried with me a small, brass sextant and a profound cynicism regarding anything described as 'magical.' Magic, in my experience, was just the clever misdirection of coin or the skillful manipulation of fear.

The night I found the garden, I was following a rumor: a shipment of exceptionally fine Persian charts, smuggled to avoid the harbor tax, was being stored near the old Pasha's ruin, a place known for its crumbling, sandstone elegance and its general disuse. I was searching for the intersection of Street of the Twelve Vipers and the Lane of the Blind Weaver. I found, instead, a dense, bewildering hedge of star jasmine that seemed impossibly lush for the dry season. The air here was several degrees cooler, scented with something cleaner than the usual port musk of salt and sweat.

I pushed through the hedge, expecting a hidden storehouse or maybe just an especially dense patch of overgrown foliage. What I received was a breathtaking collision of architecture and botany. The garden stretched out like a colossal, multi-faceted jewel, protected from the harsh Arabian sky not by a dome of stone or canvas, but by acres of delicate, interlocking glass panes. They were stained in places with rose and saffron, filtering the harsh moonlight into a kind of gentle, aqueous glow. It was a space built to capture the impossible light of the cosmos and tame it for terrestrial eyes.

I stepped onto a path paved with dark, smooth river stones, instantly feeling the shift in the atmosphere. It wasn't just temperature; it was pressure. Here, the world felt less demanding, less urgent. It smelled of wet earth and something else—a spice I couldn't quite place, perhaps ground cardamom and frankincense, long buried.

I wasn't alone.

The other occupant of the Glass Garden was seated beside a circular pool, where the moon lay fragmented and silvered like a broken mirror. They wore robes the color of old wine, finely embroidered at the cuffs with motifs that looked like ancient, forgotten constellations. Their hair, braided with strings of tiny, dull silver bells, was the rich, startling black of volcanic obsidian, pulled back to reveal a neck that was long and graceful. They were leaned forward, observing the water with an intensity that suggested profound contemplation or perhaps merely profound boredom.

I hesitated, ready to apologize for my trespass and retreat, but they looked up, and the moment froze. Their eyes were startling—the shade of smoked honey, large and lined with kohl, and they held an expression of utterly unreadable stillness. There was no surprise, no anger, only an acceptance of my presence as if I had been invited days ago and had simply arrived fashionably late.

“Welcome, traveler,” they said, their voice a low, melodic texture that reminded me of water running over polished pebbles. The language was High Farsi, not the coastal Arabic I usually spoke, but I understood enough. “The gates only open for those who truly need rest, even if they don't know it yet.”

I shifted the leather pouch containing my sextant and charts. “I apologize. I was looking for the Pasha's old storage house. I seem to have taken a wrong turn.”

The figure smiled, a slow, gentle unfolding that transformed their face from serene contemplation to warm invitation. “The Pasha's storage house is dusty and full of greedy rats. This is better. I am named Rian. And you?”

“Samira,” I replied, moving closer now, unable to resist the pull of the place. The glass walls surrounding us weren't mere windows; they were complex, layered panels filled with shallow pockets of water, magnifying the garden's own beauty. It felt like standing inside a kaleidoscope.

“Samira. A lovely sound,” Rian murmured, gesturing toward the edge of the pool. “Please, join me. It is poor hospitality to leave a newcomer standing at the threshold of comfort. Are you hungry? I have dates and a small jug of incredibly potent tea.”

I sat, letting the cool stone of the path penetrate the worn fabric of my trousers. The exhaustion of the search—and the general exhaustion of my life among demanding sailors—suddenly hit me like a physical weight. I realized I hadn't properly rested in weeks, driven by the need to map, to document, to escape my own stagnation.

“I am fine, thank you,” I lied, though my stomach rumbled slightly. Rian seemed to hear the lie and the rumble equally well, and they produced a silk kerchief holding plump, sticky dates and a small, silver flask.

“The tea is made from spices that only flower in the mountains, under the deepest snow. It burns away the fatigue of travel, no matter how long the journey,” Rian explained, pouring a thick, amber liquid into two tiny ceramic cups.

I took a sip. It was potent, sweet, and fiercely hot, infused with ginger and something floral and sharp. It felt like warmth spreading from my throat all the way to my fingertips, chasing away the chill of the evening.

“You do not belong to the caravan, I think,” I observed, noting their expensive fabrics and the absence of the typical dust that coated everyone who traversed the interior roads. “You seem... remarkably clean for a traveler.”

Rian laughed, a sound that was surprisingly low and resonant. “Ah, Samira, that is because I am the receiver of travelers, not necessarily the traveler myself. I am a curator here, a keeper of this small, glassed-in wonder. I tend the jasmine and the pools, and I wait. Many people wander into the Glass Garden, seeking different things. Merchants seeking silence, scholars seeking forgotten texts, lovers seeking a place to whisper without walls. And you, Samira, you seek clarity, I believe.”

“I seek charts,” I corrected dryly. “Practical things. The flow of commerce. The depth of the harbor.”

“Those are merely tools,” Rian countered, peeling a date and offering half to me. “Clarity is what you wish the tools to give you. You want to see past the immediate horizon, to know what is coming. Is that not true?”

I chewed the date slowly, conceding the point with reluctance. As a cartographer, I lived by precision, but Rian was right; what I craved was not just the line on the map, but the certainty that the line led somewhere better than where I currently stood.

“And what do you receive from these wanderers?” I asked, meeting their gaze.

“Stories,” Rian said simply, dipping their fingers in the pool and swirling the water, making the fragmented moon dance. “We trade. The Glass Garden offers rest, safety, and silence. In exchange, the wanderer offers a narrative—a history, a dream, a secret. It is a fair exchange. Stories are the true currency of the world, Samira. They are the boats we use to cross time.”

“I don’t know if I have any stories worth your time,” I admitted, feeling suddenly awkward. My life had been primarily numbers and directions, the hard truths of the ocean. My dreams were pragmatic: a larger ship, a commission to map the rumored archipelago of the Spice Isles.

Rian's expression softened with amusement. "Every life is a book, Samira. Even a tide table tells a story of rising and falling, of promise and withdrawal. Tell me about your maps. Tell me about the sea."

And so, encouraged by the potent tea and Rian's absolute, unwavering attention, I began. I told them not of the excitement of travel, but the frustration of accuracy; the hours spent squinting through the sextant, calculating latitude by the unforgiving stars, battling drunken ship captains who insisted they knew better than the instrument. I spoke of the loneliness of being the only woman on the crew, of having to be twice as sharp, twice as cold to earn a measure of respect.

Rian listened without interrupting, their posture relaxed, yet radiating a profound sense of engagement. The silver bells in their hair did not move; they were entirely focused on the sound of my voice. The Glass Garden, I realized, was designed for this—for the unhurried, gentle transfer of intimacy.

When I finished, I felt lighter, as if I had shed a heavy coat. The moon, framed by the intricate glasswork above us, seemed to be watching, too.

"That is a fierce story, Samira," Rian said finally. "A story of borders and the effort required to cross them. You are a navigator of both water and will. Thank you. I shall keep it here, in the pools, where the moonlight will clarify its difficult edges."

"And now, your part of the bargain," I prompted, curious. "What story do you offer me in return for mine?"

Rian turned to face the pool entirely, leaning close so that their reflection merged with the shattered moon. "I will offer you the story of how the Glass Garden itself came to be. It is a tale of ambition, obsession, and the curious geometry of love."

They took a deep, deliberate breath, and the air seemed to settle around us, anticipating the narrative.

"The Glass Garden was built three centuries ago by a man named Al-Khayyal. He was neither a king nor a sage, but a merchant of extraordinary means who dealt only in fine sand and rare dyes. His great passion, however, was light. He believed that light, captured and contained, was the truest expression of divinity, and he grew obsessed with the idea of building a vessel that could hold the entire moon."

"A fool's errand," I muttered, the pragmatic cartographer momentarily resurfacing.

Rian acknowledged my skepticism with a knowing tilt of their head. "Perhaps. But Al-Khayyal was a peculiar kind of fool. He spent years searching for the perfect artisan—one who could work with molten glass as if it were spun sugar, yet imbue it

with the strength of iron. He found her far to the north, in the cold mountains where fire and ice meet. Her name was Laila, and she was a master of the craft, her hands bearing the delicate scars of a lifetime spent near the kiln.”

“Laila did not believe in Al-Khayyal’s madness, but she believed in his coin, which was plentiful. More importantly, she believed in the challenge. She told him, ‘I can build you a garden that reflects the moon, but I cannot build you a house strong enough to hold the moon itself.’ Al-Khayyal accepted the compromise, eager to begin.”

“For ten years, Laila supervised the construction. She taught the local workers how to blow glass thin as a wasp’s wing and how to temper it to withstand the relentless heat of summer and the sudden cold of the desert night. The panels were designed to refract light, bending it down into the dark corners of the courtyard, ensuring there was never a true shadow here. The pools were dug deep, lined with black obsidian so the reflection of the sky would be stark and unblemished.”

“But Al-Khayyal’s initial ambition—to trap the moon—never faded. He became consumed by the project, spending every waking hour within the garden walls, trying to calculate the perfect geometric structure that would, on one perfect night, capture the silver light and hold it hostage within the glass.”

“Laila, meanwhile, fell in love with her own creation. She spent her days designing the internal landscape, cultivating the jasmine and the fragile desert roses, creating small, private nooks where one could hide from the world. She built a series of narrow, almost secret paths woven with pebbles, which guided the wanderer not to the center of the garden, but to its edges, where the light was most subtle.”

“The trouble, as always, began with the heart. Al-Khayyal did not love Laila, the creator; he loved the light she created. Laila, conversely, grew to love the garden—the place where her labor met the sky—and, increasingly, she grew to despise Al-Khayyal’s obsession, which she saw as a profound disrespect for the art of reflection.”

“On the night of the full moon, on the tenth anniversary of their agreement, the garden was complete. Al-Khayyal stood at the center, beside this very pool, watching the enormous silver orb rise into the sky. He believed his geometry was flawless. He had constructed an elaborate mechanism of mirrored glass designed to converge the moonlight into a single, blinding point at the heart of the garden, believing that this compression would physically trap the moon’s essence.”

“Laila was perched on the high, glass roof, observing him. She saw not a man achieving his dream, but a man trying to conquer beauty. And she understood, suddenly, the fundamental flaw in his desire: you cannot possess the moon; you can only marvel at its reflection.”

Rian paused, reaching out to touch the surface of the pool, where the moon still lay in pieces.

“As the light converged, just before the moment Al-Khayyal believed he would achieve his goal, Laila acted. She did not shatter the glass; she was not so crude. Instead, she used her knowledge of the structure’s balance. She shifted one single, crucial pane—the master pivot above the main pool. It wasn’t much, perhaps the width of a finger, but it was enough.”

“The convergence was broken. The collected moonlight did not compress into a point; instead, it scattered. It rebounded off the pools and the countless glass facets, filling the garden with a dazzling, diffuse brilliance. The light was captured, yes, but not in a single cage; it was dispersed, made democratic, reflected in every jasmine petal and every drop of water.”

“Al-Khayyal raged. He saw his decade of work ruined by a millimeter of displacement. He ran to the roof, shouting his fury at Laila, demanding she fix the flaw, restore the convergence. Laila simply looked down at him and said, ‘I have given you what the moon demands, Al-Khayyal: reflection, not possession. You have a garden of light. Be satisfied.’”

“In his anger and his pride, Al-Khayyal descended to the courtyard and tried to restore the original angle himself. He worked for hours, sweating, cursing the beautiful precision of Laila’s work. When the sun finally rose, casting the first shadow across the eastern glass, Al-Khayyal was dead, slumped over the edge of the pool, defeated not by Laila, but by his own grasping ambition.”

I was silent for a long moment, absorbing the tale. It was not a fable of jinn or monsters, but a story of human failing—something I understood well from the docks.

“And Laila?” I asked.

“Laila stayed. She buried Al-Khayyal on the western edge of the garden and took up residence in the structure he had paid for but failed to appreciate. She realized that the garden, designed to trap the moon, was in fact, the perfect space to observe it—and to observe people. She opened the gates, implicitly, and waited for those who understood the difference between capturing and reflecting. She became the first curator.”

Rian lifted their cup again, their eyes holding mine. “The garden continues her legacy. It is a place for scattering, Samira, not for hoarding. Here, we scatter our grief, our history, and our desires, and in return, the garden offers us reflection. That is the true exchange.”

I felt the last of the tea settle in my belly, warm and slightly dizzying. The story had been an unexpected mirror, reflecting my own desire to "capture" success and certainty, rather than accepting the fluidity of life.

"It is a fine story, Rian," I said, genuinely moved. "One I will keep."

"It is yours now," they confirmed. "But you have had a long journey, even if it was only a few streets. The garden requires its guests to rest, not just to barter. There is a small room on the far side, near the reservoir. It is clean and cool. Sleep until the sun is high and fierce. When you wake, we will speak of horizons again."

I nodded, standing up, feeling the strain ease from my shoulders. The Glass Garden was working its quiet magic, wrapping me in its protective, luminous shell. As I walked the narrow, pebble path toward the quiet sleeping quarters, I looked back. Rian was still seated by the pool, the dark wine of their robes blending with the obsidian, the silver bells silent. They were not watching me retreat; they were simply holding the space, guarding the gentle, captured light.

I realized then that this was not merely a magical place, but a carefully tended sanctuary—a safe harbor crafted from human skill and tenderness. And for a cartographer who spent her life battling the untamable elements, that was a kind of magic far more profound than any whispered enchantment. I fell asleep under the roof of glass, the moonlight filtering down not as an objective measurement of time, but as a soft, silver blanket.

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