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# The Sultan's Library of Forbidden Tales

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## Introduction

When the southern monsoon split a seam in the palace's oldest wall, the rain wrote a secret upon the stone. Behind a ribbon of collapsed plaster we found a door without hinges, its face inlaid with lapis and walnut, sealed in wax impressed by a signet no one had seen in three generations. Within, dust rose like a congregation at prayer, and our lanterns found shelves upon shelves of manuscripts—some bound in humble palm fiber, others in silk dyed the color of midnight tea. The Sultan's discreet crest flickered on the first folio: not a decree, but a dedication—to those whose stories the law has not learned to hold. Thus began the unsealing of a library that had hidden itself in the heart of power for decades, waiting for readers brave enough to meet it halfway.

These pages were called forbidden not because they were cruel, but because they were tender in ways our edicts did not understand. They crossed the borders of rank and ritual; they asked what might happen if a vow could be reshaped without breaking; they bared the courage it takes to claim a name, a body, or a future that was not previously permitted. Some tales follow lovers who build kinship beyond blood or gender. Others honor those who desire differently, or rarely, or not at all, yet live lives dense with devotion. There are unions that span languages and lifetimes, friendships that ripen into home, and compacts rooted in consent, care, and mutual transformation. Desire here is not a spectacle; it is a way of arranging freedom.

The former Sultan, it seems, was a collector of such transgressive tenderness, commissioning and sheltering writings that censors would have burned and courtiers would have mocked. Scribes wrote in the margins when they dared, and readers left petals pressed into paper where words once met their breath. I have preserved these traces alongside the tales, not as curiosities but as proofs: the human hand guiding the script, the tremor in the ink when a sentence risked too much truth. Though each chapter stands on its own, together they form a conversation across eras and customs, a chorus that refuses a single melody.

I do not pretend that opening these shelves has been simple. In the weeks after the discovery, whispers threaded through the corridors. A guard asked for a volume for his sister, who had been told her heart was an error; a noblewoman requested a tale where age was not treated as an ending; a cook tucked a story into her apron and read it to her wife by the oven's blue light. There was also resistance—accusations of decadence and decay, as though compassion were a contagion. Yet the pages kept moving hand to hand, and with them moved a slow, stubborn change: the understanding that the palace is a city, and the city a world, and none of us are served by silences that make us small.

The forms in this collection are many. You will find letters smuggled inside fruit skins, a fable told by a river, a legal petition that becomes a poem, a scholar's proof that turns into a vow, a song transcribed from the lips of a statue that walked for one night only. You will encounter djinn who bargain ethically, queens who retire rather than relent, mathematicians who lay out the geometry of care, and travelers who map tenderness like a coastline. Genre is a door we open and close as needed; sometimes two doors at once lead to the same garden.

Taboo is a tool. It can protect us from harms we have already named, but it can also be misused to keep us from the futures we need. This library does not ask you to abandon your discernment. It asks only that you read with your whole attention, that you measure power as carefully as passion, and that you consider desire as a craft that can be learned, unlearned, and remade. If the old myths did not make room for you, may these pages suggest new architectures of belonging.

Read them in order, if you like, to feel the tide pull from secret to city-wide sun. Or wander as you would through a market at dusk, following scent and song. Keys recur; so do pomegranates, mirrors, and maps. Consent appears not as a clause but as a chorus. If you listen closely, you may hear the paper itself exhale. The door has been opened. The shelves are lit. Take what you need, and when you can, return with a story of your own.

## CHAPTER ONE: The Key Beneath the Mosaic

Zaydan had not intended to discover a secret library; he had merely been trying to prevent the entire south wing of the Sultan's ancestral palace from collapsing into a very expensive heap of rubble. As the royal Architect-General, Zaydan bore the unique burden of maintaining structures designed by ancestors who had apparently believed that beauty justified severe structural deficiencies. The monsoon had been particularly vicious that year, and the wall near the Hall of the Silent Singers—so named because its acoustics were atrocious—had finally surrendered, sloughing off centuries of plaster.

The exposed stone was not the smooth limestone Zaydan expected. Instead, a peculiar pattern of dark green and gold mosaic, previously concealed, had been revealed. It depicted a highly stylized, almost geometric pomegranate, split open, its seeds represented by small, oddly shaped brass inlays. Zaydan, whose passion for engineering was only matched by his meticulous eye for historical anomalies, knew this pattern did not belong to the recorded aesthetic of that era. It was foreign, or perhaps, deliberately hidden.

He sent the apprentices away, citing the danger of falling debris, and returned later that night with only a single, oil-burning lantern and his most trusted set of small tools. The brass seeds in the mosaic were not uniform. One, positioned near the fruit's stem, was slightly darker and felt looser under his touch. It was less a seed and more a handle.

With a soft, metallic *click* that sounded impossibly loud in the empty hall, the brass seed came free. Attached to a thin, silver chain, it was a perfectly crafted, miniature key—ornate but functional, cold against his palm. Zaydan felt a prickle of professional excitement, mixed with the distinct, unsettling knowledge that he was trespassing on generations of royal secrecy.

The key was small enough to be useless for the massive locks of the treasury or the public archives. Zaydan systematically began searching the exposed section of the wall, tracing the pattern of the mosaic until he found a barely perceptible seam—a walnut-and-lapis door described in the Introduction, perfectly flush with the wall. The artisans who had installed it had been masters of illusion.

The lock was not in the center, but low, near the floor, concealed by a carved floral boss. The miniature key slid into the mechanism with silent precision. He turned it, the tumblers falling with a soft, hungry sigh. Pushing the door inward required a serious effort; the humidity and age had made the wood sticky in its frame.

When the gap widened, a cool, dry air rushed out, carrying with it the scent of aged paper, cedar, and something faintly floral, like dried jasmine. Zaydan lifted his lantern. It was not a storage room, nor a vault for jewels, but a library—long and narrow, shelved floor to ceiling, stretching into the gloom. The silence within was profound, an absolute negation of the world outside.

Zaydan, the engineer who specialized in the rational measurement of load-bearing walls, stepped across the threshold and became, momentarily, an archaeologist of intimacy.

The room, it turned out, was built entirely beneath the Hall of the Silent Singers, supported by its own intricate system of arches that explained why the main structure had not yet collapsed. The former Sultan, a man known publicly for his severity and piety, had clearly possessed a private life of remarkable contradiction. He had not just collected books; he had engineered a secret sanctuary for them.

The Architect-General spent the rest of the night walking the aisles, lantern held high. The books were arranged in an order he couldn't immediately decipher—not by genre, nor date, nor color, but perhaps by theme or even, he wondered, by degree of perceived danger. Many bindings were worn smooth by handling, suggesting they had been read frequently before the library was sealed.

He didn't dare remove anything yet. His purpose was to understand what he had found, to assess its scope and its potential impact. He noted titles written in elegant scripts, some in languages he didn't recognize, beside annotations in the Sultan's own hand, confirmed by comparing them to state documents.

On one high shelf, he found a codex bound in soft, faded scarlet leather. It was thin and looked more like a diary than a collection of stories. Zaydan, using a wooden step-stool, carefully pulled it down. The pages were brittle, rice paper overlaid with careful ink drawings. The title, in a looping, feminine hand, read: *The Mapmaker's Desire to Be Still*.

Intrigue overcame caution. He sat on the cool marble floor, shielded the lantern's glare, and began to read the first entry.

The manuscript detailed the life of Firuz, a royal mapmaker in a distant century, renowned for his accuracy and his relentless travel across the empire's shifting borders. Firuz, it was established in the first paragraph, was physically male but used a feminine name and presented as a woman in every city except the capital, where such presentation was forbidden by the old laws. The journal was written from the perspective of their partner, Leila, a scholar left behind in the capital.

Leila wrote of the unbearable weight of separation, not just by distance, but by identity. "Today, a messenger arrived with a parcel of sketches," Leila wrote. "Among the geographical grids were small, hurried portraits of Firuz wearing the desert silks, her hair braided with river pearls, smiling as a woman entirely at ease. The irony is terrible: the closer she gets to the edges of the map, the closer she gets to herself. Here, in the center, she must wear the heavy coat of someone else's definition."

Zaydan found himself mesmerized. These were not the bombastic epics or dutiful genealogies he usually cataloged. This was a private grief, beautifully articulated, dealing with a complexity of gender and expression that the official court transcripts simply ignored.

The next section of the journal detailed a clever system of coded correspondence. Because the state monitored all mail for treasonous content, Firuz and Leila developed a language embedded within cartography. Geographical features, road junctions, and the shading of mountain ranges were used to convey emotional states, reassurances, and expressions of desire.

For instance, the inclusion of a newly discovered hot spring on a remote map meant "I miss your warmth." A sudden, exaggerated bend in a river meant "I am struggling with my mask." And a series of small, meticulously drawn, non-existent islands in the Great Salt Lake indicated a specific sequence of embraces they looked forward to upon reunion. Their intimacy was, literally, a landscape.

Zaydan, the Architect, understood mapping. He saw the technical brilliance in their system, a secure channel of communication hidden in plain sight. It wasn't merely romance; it was cryptography woven into bureaucracy. The risk they took, however, was profound. Discovery would mean certain ruin, perhaps execution, for defying the dictates of gender and public conduct.

The manuscript grew more urgent as Firuz's scheduled return date approached. Leila wrote: "The city waits for the famous male cartographer to return with his completed surveys. I wait for the woman who remembers my name when the sun sets. The dissonance is a sharp tool in my ribs. I do not know how we will reconcile the two."

The solution, detailed in the final pages of the codex, was audacious. Firuz did not return to the capital. Instead, she completed the map, drew a deliberate, fictional sea on the northwestern border, and sent the completed work with a junior apprentice. She then moved to the coastal city of Aethel, a place known for its liberal customs and booming trade, where anonymity was cheap and self-definition was currency.

Leila did not flee immediately. She stayed, maintaining her position, using her influence to slowly sell off assets and prepare for her own departure. For five years, their primary form of contact was the quarterly delivery of updated maps of the

empire. Leila would study the maps, looking for the tiny, hidden islands and the exaggerated streams, confirming Firuz was safe and still waiting.

The very last entry, written on thick vellum tucked into the back cover, described Leila's final act in the capital. It was a note addressed to the Sultan's chief censor, a man Leila despised.

The note was brief: "Your walls are thick, but the sea is wider. The map you hang on your palace wall is beautiful, but inaccurate. It depicts an empire of certainty, while I have traveled to one of fluidity. My truest north is found at Aethel, longitude and latitude withheld. I enclose the only true compass."

The compass mentioned was a small, crudely drawn sketch of Firuz's face, rendered in the desert silks. Leila had left, following the fictional sea on the map to find her true lover.

Zaydan closed the scarlet codex, a strange warmth spreading through his chest. He was accustomed to calculating the cost of granite and the stress on a beam. He was not accustomed to calculating the cost of personal liberty, or the stress of living a lie. The story wasn't just a romance; it was a manual on escape, a treatise on resilience, disguised as a love letter.

He returned the book to its shelf, his hands slightly trembling. This library, he realized, was not a collection of frivolous or scandalous tales; it was a blueprint for lives lived outside the prescribed perimeter. It offered strategies for survival and methods for carving out authentic spaces in an oppressive world.

The immediate problem remained: what to do with the library. Zaydan was, above all, loyal to the current Sultan, a young man named Kamal who was still finding his footing and who had, to Zaydan's relief, expressed a modern willingness to consider reform. But revealing this library of 'forbidden tales'—tales concerning same-sex devotion, varied gender identities, polyamorous relationships, and challenging power structures—could destabilize the young Sultan's rule entirely.

The discovery was too important to hide, but too dangerous to reveal recklessly.

Zaydan stood and paced the length of the narrow chamber again. The lantern cast long, flickering shadows. He considered sealing it up again, restoring the plaster, and waiting for a better time. But the weight of the stories, the implied trust of the former Sultan, prevented him. The rain had cracked the plaster for a reason; perhaps the time for secrecy was over.

He approached the walnut-and-lapis door and slid the little key back into the lock, leaving it open, though the door itself remained closed. He was buying time, ensuring

access, but keeping the location secret until he had a plan.

Before leaving, Zaydan allowed himself one final indulgence. He reached out and touched the spine of a book bound in humble palm fiber, selecting it almost at random. It was untitled on the outside. He opened it briefly, just enough to glimpse the first line before sealing the door.

The line read: "I promised the sea that I would not name myself after the shore, for the shore is too quick to judge what the waves carry."

He closed the door, pressed the key back into the brass pomegranate seed, and replaced the mosaic piece. It locked into place with the same faint *click* as before. The Hall of the Silent Singers looked just as silent, just as mundane, and just as structurally unsound as it had hours ago. Zaydan extinguished his lantern and slipped back into the palace's ordinary darkness.

He left the key beneath the mosaic, knowing that sooner or later, Sultan Kamal—or someone Kamal trusted completely—would have to find it. Zaydan knew he couldn't shoulder the moral burden of this vast collection alone. He returned to his rooms, not to sleep, but to compose a highly technical, deliberately confusing, and utterly vital memo to the Sultan.

The memo was titled: *Emergency Report on Load-Bearing Anomalies in the Southern Wing, Section Delta-Nine*. Within the dry prose detailing required reinforcement, Zaydan included a cryptic instruction: "The Architect suggests personal inspection of the unusual seismic crack near the Pomegranate Mosaic. Note the singular, loose brass inlay. Recommendation: Address this *key* structural weakness immediately."

Zaydan sealed the dispatch. The library was secure for now, the secret held in the intersection of architecture and desire. The true key to the library was not the metal object itself, but the willingness to look for a weakness in the official narrative—a weakness that often hides precisely where the pressure is greatest. He hoped the young Sultan was ready to find it.

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