In the name of Allah, the compassionate, the all-merciful, I tell my tale.
For there is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is his Prophet.
Know then that this is a tale of Baghdad, the Heavenly City, the jewel of Arabia; and that this was in the time of Haroun Al Raschid, King of Kings, Prince of the Faithful.

There was no court that was like to Haroun Al Raschid's. He had gathered to him all manner of great men from all corners of the world.

There were sages and wise men, and alchemists, geographers and geomancers, mathematicians and astronomers, translators and archivists, jurists, grammarians, caliphs and scribes.

In his court were the greatest teachers of the Hebrews, who were the first of the three people of the Book...

...and the greatest monks of the pale Christians (a dirty folk, who will not bathe, and who venerate the dried dung of their leader, whom they call the Pope)... and, as you must realize, he had with him the greatest scholars of the Qur'an, the word of Allah, as revealed to his Prophet Mohammed, one hundred and eighty years before.

Thus his palace was the palace of Wisdom.
There were women in his harem: concubines from every land, infidel and faithful, with skins white as the desert sand; skins brown as the mountains seen at evening, skins yellow as smoke; skins black as obsidian.

All of them adept at the arts of pleasure.

Also there were many beautiful boys, their chins still hairless, their dark eyes wanton and lustful, savory as apricots plucked in the dew.

Thus his palace was the palace of pleasure.
There were magicians in his palace: astrologers, who could interpret the will of Allah from the high dances of the distant stars;

Enchanters from China and the Mongol lands, with high fur hats and long sleeves full of secrets;

Ascetic Bedouin sorcerers, who knew the secrets of angels and of djinn and of men.

And there were poets and musicians, and men of high wit and perfect taste.

And there were strange prodigies in that place—men with the heads of animals,

And animals that spoke like men,

And marvelous mechanical wonders that counterfeited life, and sang, or moved, when they were spoken to.

Thus his palace was the palace of wonders.
For those were the days of wonders.

And Haroun Al Raschid was a wise king. When he sat in judgment even his sages were astonished at the sagacity of his verdicts. Under him the city prospered, and the whole of Arabia flowered and blossomed.

But Haroun Al Raschid was troubled in his soul.

Ramadan
And at these times, when the darkness would descend on his brow,

He would go out of a night into the city of Baghdad,

Taking with him only his friend and vizier Jakir, and Harur, his executioner.
And, dressed as merchants from a far off land, they would travel through the city, sampling its delights and tasting its wares, enrobing the virtuous and entertaining and casting down the wicked and the dull. And in this way they encountered stories stranger than any hitherto told, even in the marketplace of Baghdad.

It was then that Haroun Al Kaschid raised a poor Beggar to the Caliphate for a day of dreams; and then that the Great King witnessed the death of the hunchback, and wondered at the seven strangers who admitted his murder.

Though the poor fool had but choked on a fishbone.

And it was in Baghdad, city of cities, city above cities, that the King and his vizier witnessed the only flight of the winged horse, made all of glass, but for its eyes, which were bone.

But still the king was troubled.
And one day, Allah so willed it that it came to pass that the Defender of the Faithful stood on a balcony high above the city at midday.

And it was given to him to see all the city spread out below him, like a tapestry. He saw carpets fluttering in the skies, and the markets filled with sweetstuffs, and rare spices, and cunningly crafted jewelled birds that sang more sweetly than any bird that hatched from an egg.

He saw a caravan crossing the desert into his city, camels laden with silks and costly perfumes, diamonds and rubies as large as a man's fist, and Kohl-eyed dancing girls, their faces veiled and their feet hemmed.

He saw sailboats making their way into harbor, laden with grain and pomegranates. He saw the bathhouses, and the tapering spires of the mosques, heard the muezzin calling the faithful to prayer.

He saw the craftsmen and the porters, and the merchants; he saw the warriors and the city guards, and strangers from all nations who had come to Baghdad, the jewel of cities.

Incomparable.

All this he saw, but his heart was troubled within him.

It was Ramadan, the most holy of months; for it was in Ramadan that the angel Gabriel first gave the word of Allah, the one, the only God, to the Prophet.

His wife Zubaidah came to him.

**My husband, and my King?**

**Yes, lady?**

**I see you are troubled.**

**You see correctly.**

**Come with me. Let me anoint your forehead with warm oil, and stroke you with my soft hands. I can make you forget your troubles between my breasts; I can smooth away the darkness in your soul, between my thighs.**

**Thank you, my lady, my queen, but I must decline.**

And she left him then.
His vizier—his friend, Jafar the Khwarazid—came to him.

Soon we will undoubtedly encounter a young noble under some enchantment;
or three women, slim as gazelles, imprisoned in a house built all of white jade;
or a wandering madman with a tale to tell of desert ghouls and...

Come, let us disguise ourselves and walk the city.

No.

Then let me call for wine and food, and send for storytellers, and let us proclaim that he who has the strangest true story to tell will...

But--

No, old friend.

It is Ramadan, Jafar, when we fast from sunrise to sunset, and the prophet has spoken against wine.

Look at our city. Is it not wonderful? Will there ever be another like it?

Ah, but the will of Allah is not meant for man to know.

If Allah wills it--

He stood there until dusk fell, and the first star of evening glittered over the spires of the city.
GREETINGS, WORD-SPINNER.

MY KING, YOU ARE TROUBLED. CAN I PLAY FOR YOU, OR SING?

NO. THERE IS A WEIGHT ON MY CHEST, AND ON MY BROW, BUT ART AND PRETTY WORDS WILL NOT LIFT IT.

AYE ME.

NO, GREAT KING.

HAS THERE EVER BEEN A CITY LIKE MY CITY, OR A PEOPLE LIKE MY PEOPLE?

AMBASSADORS COME HERE FROM THE ENDS OF THE EARTH TO SEE THIS MIRACLE; AND THEY RETURN TO THEIR KINGS, SAYING, WE HAVE SEEN THE PERFECT CITY, THERE CAN BE NONE LIKE IT, AND THEIR KINGS ARE THEN DISSATISFIED WITH THEIR OWN SMALL FIRES AND DOMAINS, FOR THEY KNOW THAT NEVER CAN THEY COMPARE TO BAGHDAD, THE JEWEL OF CITIES.

THIS IS SO.

BUT ALL THINGS PASS...

LEAVE ME. I NEED NO POETS.

And he stood there on that balcony and gazed down on the greatest city on the Earth.
It was then that the king took a golden key from around his neck, and descended into the depths of his palace.

He passed through the place of women, where no man save he could go and retain his manhood.

He passed down further, through the place of justice and torture, where those who waited on the king’s mercy sat in anguish.

He passed still below, past theoubliettes, where those whom the king’s mercy had forgotten waited in vain, their faces pale, their beards white, their eyes desperate and mad.

After some time he came to a door. huge it was, of black iron, and carved on its face were many symbols and patternings.

And he opened it with the key of gold.

And he went down.
Now the steps were narrow and damp, and the air swarmed with half-seen figures and faces.

And the king thought he heard the voices of those he had loved and had killed, over the years: the pale girl from the northland with hair like spun silver; the boy from the desert who had brought him a rose carved from palest pinkest quartz, and had stayed in the palace for a year and a day; the captain of the palace guard, who, save for only the king, was the finest Bowman, and swordman, and spear, in the city, but who had, perhaps, coveted the throne...

Voices he heard.

But he paid them no mind.

Sarun Al Rashid came to the door of bronze, bound with green copper, and inset with mother of pearl.

And he opened it with the key of gold.

And he went down.

Threaded his way through the labyrinth then, eyes half closed, counting steps and half, and right, and left, and right in his head.
The door was of wood, unornamented, and this too he opened with the key of gold.

Candles flared and blazed as he entered, casting a flickering radiance overall.
He looked neither left nor right.

Diamonds and rubies, emeralds and sapphires, amethysts and pearls were piled in promiscuous heaps uncounted; perhaps uncountable.

There was a room hung high with enchanted swords; Another filled with lamps and rings and goblets of strange virtue and power; Another that contained nothing but eggs...
eggs of all shapes and sizes, from a vermilion egg as big as a child's smallest fingernail to an egg larger than a man. The egg of the Rish, the bird that nests on mountaintops and carries off bull elephants to feed its young.

And there was also in that room the Other Egg of the Phoenix. For the Phoenix when its time comes to die lays two eggs, one black, one white.

From the white egg hatches the Phoenix bird itself, when its time is come.

But what hatches from the black egg no one knows.

Farouk Al Raschid passed through these rooms, and his gaze did not flicker, neither to one side nor to the other.

It seemed to him that he had been walking for many miles in the silence beneath the palace, when he came to one last door, and this was a door of fire.

And this door too he opened with the golden key.
There was nothing in this room but a glass ball, resting on a satin pillow.

Inside the ball colored mists swirled and drifted.

Set into the glass was a seal.

Haroun-Al Raschid took the ball and he left that place. He carried it with care, and his breath was shallow and rapid.

There were paths through the palace that none but Haroun-Al Raschid knew; and this was because those who had drawn up the plans, and those who had built the paths, had all long since gone to their final reward: for it is seldom healthy to know the secrets of a king.

Up steps and up steps he went, forever darting glances to the globe in his hands.

He touched one brick lightly, though it looked like every other...

and the wall swung aside...
And Haroun Al Raschid stepped gently onto the highest rooftop of his palace. Imagine a thousand thousand fireflies of every shape and color; oh, that was Baghdad at night in those days. And ships still plied the river with lanterns on their masts, and the night sounds of the city rose up into a sky hung with stars and blazing fireballs. And softly, softly, the king began to speak.

As one king to another, I call you, King of Dreams, Lord of the Sleeping.

Are you there?

I demand that you present yourself before me, here, in a form neither threatening nor unpleasant to mine eyes.

Come, O King.


I summon you, O King of Dreams, Prince of Stories, Lord of the Sleeping Marches.

Be here for me.

There was no sound, save the whisper of the wind, and the deep lost call of a night-bird in the desert.

Faroum Al Raschid shivered.

Very well.

In my hands I hold the globe of Sulaiman Ben Daoud, King of the Hebrews. It was in this globe, near the end of his life, that he imprisoned nine thousand and nine spirits, Dunin, and Demons.
These were the darkest of spirits, the greatest and the most powerful.

And one by one he bound them in this crystal globe, and sealed it with his seal.

That was nearly two thousand years ago.

"Over the years that these Irises--their hearts blacker than jet--have been imprisoned, they each have sworn a mighty oath to wreak vengeance on the children of Adam! Our father, to destroy our work and our minds and our dreams."

This is a globe of finest glass, and when it shatters they shall emerge, as ravening beasts of destruction.

If you do not come to me, I shall shatter the globe.

Very well.
You have called me. And I have come.

You know whom you have called, Haroun Al Raschid.

Are you, then, the Lord of Sleep, the Prince of Stories, he to whom Allah has given dominion over that which is not, and was not, and shall never be?

Wine!

Wine for our visitor!
This month is Ramadan, O King, when the faithful fast from dawn until sunset, and has not the prophet spoken against wine?

And are you of the faith, my pale companion?

I am of all faiths in my fashion, Haroun Al Raschid, and I have no wish to take wine with you.

Now, perhaps you should tell me why I should not leave this place, now, taking with me your ball of little nuisances?

And also, I might add, taking the recollection of being summoned, peremptorily as one might summon a steward.

I am no steward, O King. And I mislike summonings.
In the tale he talked the genie back into the bottle. But the genie was foolish, and boastful, and lonely.

I am none of these things.

You have called me here, Haroun. It is unwise to summon what you cannot dismiss.

There is a tale they tell of a fisherman who caught a jade bottle in his nets, who opened the bottle and released a genie...

I do not threaten. I merely advise caution.

Aye, your point is well taken. Why have I called you here?

I have called you here... I suppose, to make a bargain. If you will bargain with me.

We are bargaining? In the palace of the Leader of the Faithful? Bargains are the business of the south, the marketplace.

Aye. Perhaps they are, at that.

Very well, let us then take ourselves to the marketplace.

In my sleeping quarters is a casket that was my father's, and his father's before him. Bring it to me.
They brought to him a casket of sandalwood, inlaid with strange designs, both of ivory and mother of pearl, and they laid it on the ground before him.

The king opened the casket with his own hands, and from it he took a small carpet, threadbare in appearance and unimpressive. And with his own hands he spread it upon the ground. He stepped onto it, carefully, even reverently, although it was not a prayer carpet, and motioned the Lord of Dreams to take his place beside him.

Haroun Al Raschid said one word three times...
LOOK AT MY CITY, DREAM LORD.

I see it.

IT IS A CITY OF MARVELS, OF WONDERS. THESE ARE THE DAYS OF WONDERS.

IT IS MY CITY.

I AM RESPONSIBLE FOR IT--

AH! THE SOUKH.

DESCEND, O YOU, MY CARPET.

LET US ATTEND TO THE BUSINESS OF THE MARKETPLACE.
Now, wait you high above the souk, my carpet. I shall call you, if I have need of you.
I have a slave here for sale, of the most exotic kind. Firstly, examine her skin, is it not of consummate whiteness? Next, I draw your attention to her eyes.

He is a thief and a liar, and a magician to boot. A month ago he sold me an ass, which sat in my stable and ate fine hay and grain and green fruits, and then one day this son of a she-goat (who would sell you the city of Baghdad and your wife's mother, and tell you your left hand were you to give him the opportunity) came to my house and told me that the ass he had sold me was in fact a beautiful maiden who had been ensorcelled by her jealous sister, who was indeed a witch, and that he wished to buy her back from me.

"Now, then, can this ass be changed into a woman again?" I asked him, and threw him out.

I'll give you a dirham for these miserable grapes.

One dirham?"
FOR THESE GRAPES -- EACH PERFECT GLOBE SO FINE THAT, WERE IT MADE INTO WINE IT WOULD ONLY BE SUITABLE FOR OUR CALIPH HIMSELF, HAROUN AL RASCHID, WHOM ALLAH PROTECT AND ENLIGHTEN!

There is, as it happens, a tale that accompanies these plums...

I'm sure there is, and I thank you for it. But for now, I have certain matters to attend to.

A grape, dream king?

In Ramadan? Between dawn and dusk?

It is no matter. Look around you, dream king.

What do you see?

I see a remarkable place.

Indeed -- it is a land of miracles.

Will you buy it from me?
I have no desire to be king of any mortal land.

NO... YOU MISUNDERSTAND ME.


AND THIS AGE IS THE PERFECT AGE.

HOW LONG CAN IT LAST? HOW LONG WILL PEOPLE REMEMBER?

I HAVE SEEN THE WORLD, DREAM KING.

I HAVE ROVED THROUGH THE DESERTS, AND SEEN THE ROCKS AND OLD MALS AND STATUES BREATHED UP BY THE DESERT WIND IN THE EMPTY WASTES OF SAND;


"AND then this good as its going to be, isn't it?"

"But Allah alone knows all, indeed!"
I am Harun ibn Mohammed ibn Abdullah ibn Mohammed ibn Ali ibn Abdullah ibn Abbas, Caliph of Baghdad. I propose to give you this city. My city. I submit that you purchase it from me: take it into dreams.

And in exchange? In exchange I want it never to die, to live forever. Can you do this thing?

And what needs to happen to make it so? Is there some spell you must perform? Is there a quest I must go on, to some far country?

Is there some grand deed?

All you need do is tell your people. They follow you, after all. And yours is the dream.

Very well.
HEAR ME, MY PEOPLE! I, YOUR CALIPH, HAROUN AL RASCHID, OF THE HASHIMI BLOODLINE, PROCLAIM ON THIS DAY, IN THIS PLACE, THAT I HAVE GIVEN THE GOLDEN AGE OF BAGHDAD, OF ARABY, TO THIS ONE WHO STANDS BY MY SIDE.

IT IS HIS FOREVER...

... PROVIDING THAT AS LONG AS MANKIND LASTS...

... OUR WORLD IS NOT FORGOTTEN.
GREAT KING, YOU WERE GONE FROM THE PALACE. WE HAVE BEEN LOOKING FOR YOU.

WHAT HAPPENED? WHY DID YOU COME HERE, TO THE MARKETPLACE?

I... I DO NOT KNOW, MASRUR. I HAD A DREAM. I THINK, BUT ALREADY IT IS FADING.

HEATSTROKE, PERHAPS, SIRE. IT CAN DO MANY STRANGE THINGS TO A MAN.

Perhaps...

LET US RETURN TO THE PALACE, LORD.

Indeed.

HOLA! STRANGER, WHAT IS THAT YOU CARRY?
A city in a bottle.

Most ingenious of devising, and execution. Did you construct it? Is it for sale?

I did not construct it. It was given to me.

And it is no longer for sale...

It is very beautiful.

Yes.

Sire, we must return to the palace.

Yes, maskar.

And that is how they say that it occurred. But allah alone knows all.
HIS QUESTION UNANSWERED, HASSAN STUMMLES HOMeward, PICKING his way IN A SERIES OF CHILD’s SHORTCUTS ACROSS THE BOMB SITES AND THE RUBBLE OF BAGHDAD.

AND, THOUGH HIS STOMACH HURTS (FOR FASTING IS EASY, THIS RAMADAN, AND FOOD IS HARD TO COME BY) HIS HEAD IS HELD HIGH AND HIS EYES ARE BRIGHT.

FOR BEHIND HIS EYES ARE TOWERS AND JEWELS AND DJINN, Carpet AND RINGS AND WILD AFREETS, KINGS AND PRINCES AND CITIES OF BRASS.

AND HE PRAYS AS HE WALKS (CURSING HIS ONE WEAK LEG THE WHILE), PRAYS TO ALLAH (WHO MADE ALL THINGS) THAT SOMEBODY, IN THE DARKNESS OF DREAMS, ABIDES THE OTHER BAGHDAD (THAT CAN NEVER DIE), AND THE OTHER ESS OF THE PHOENIX.

BUT ALLAH ALONE KNOWS ALL.