

Veil of the Dancer

In the city of Iravati on the world of Skardu, there lived a scholar who had three daughters, and they were the light and comfort of his elder years.

Greatly did the scholar rejoice in his two elder daughters—golden-haired Humaria; Shereen with her tresses of flame—both of these born of the wives his father had picked out for him when he was still a young man. Surely, they were beautiful and possessed of every womanly grace, the elder daughters of Scholar Reyman Bhar. Surely, he valued them, as a pious father should.

The third—ah, the third daughter. Small and dark and wise as a mouse was the daughter of his third, and last, wife. The girl was clever, and it had amused him to teach her to read, and to do sums, and to speak the various tongues of the unpious. Surely, these were not the natural studies of a daughter, even the daughter of so renowned a scholar as Reyman Bhar.

It began as duty; for a father must demonstrate to his daughters that, however much they are beloved, they are deficient in that acuity of thought by which the gods mark out males as the natural leaders of household, and world. But little Inas, bold mouse, did not fail to learn her letters, as her sisters had. Problems mathematic she relished as much as flame-haired Shereen did candied *sventi* leaves. Walks along the river way brought forth the proper names of birds and their kin; in the long neglected glade of Istat, with its ancient sundial and moon-marks she proved herself astute in the motions of the planets.

Higher languages rose as readily to her lips as the dialect of women; she read not only for knowledge, but for joy, treasuring especially the myths of her mother's now empty homeland. Seeing the joy of learning in her, the teaching became experiment more than duty, as the scholar sought to discover the limits of his little one's mind.

On the eve of her fourteenth birthday, he had not yet found them.

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Well though the scholar loved his daughters, yet it is a father's duty to see them profitably married. The man he had decided upon for his golden Humaria was one Safarez, eldest son of Merchant Gabir Majidi. It was a balanced match, as both the scholar and the merchant agreed. The Majidi son was a pious man of sober, studious nature, who bore his thirty years with dignity. Over the course of several interviews with the father and the son, Scholar Bhar had become certain that Safarez would value nineteen year old Humaria, gay and heedless as a *flutterbee*; more, that he would protect her and discipline her and be not behind in those duties which are a husband's joy and especial burden.

So, the price was set, and met; the priests consulted regarding the proper day and hour; the marriage garden rented; and, finally, Humaria informed of the upcoming blessed alteration in her circumstances.

Naturally enough, she wept, for she was a good girl and valued her father as she ought. Naturally enough, Shereen ran to cuddle her and murmur sweet, soothing nonsense into her pretty ears. The scholar left them to it, and sought his study, where he found his youngest, dark Inas, bent over a book in the lamplight.

She turned when he entered, and knelt, as befit both a daughter and a student, and bowed 'til her forehead touched the carpet. Scholar Bhar paused, admiring the graceful arc of her slim body within the silken pool of her robes. His mouse was growing, he thought. Soon, he would be about choosing a husband for her.

But not yet. Now, it was Humaria, and, at the change of season he would situate Shereen, who would surely pine for her sister's companionship. He had a likely match in mind, there, and the husband's property not so far distant from the Majidi. Then, next year, perhaps—or, more comfortably, the year after that—he would look about for a suitable husband for his precious, pre-cocious mouse.

"Arise, daughter," he said now, and marked how she did so, swaying to her feet in a single, boneless move, the robes rustling, then falling silent, sheathing her poised and silent slenderness.

"So," he said, and met her dark eyes through the veil. "A momentous change approaches your life, my child. Your sister Hu-maria is to wed."

Inas bowed, dainty hands folded demurely before her.

"What?" he chided gently. "Do you not share your sister's joy?"

There was a small pause, not unusual; his mouse weighed her words like a miser weighed his gold.

"Certainly, if my sister is joyous, then it would be unworthy of me to weep," she said in her soft, soothing voice. "If it is per-mitted that I know—who has come forward as her husband?"

Reyman Bhar nodded, well-pleased to find proper womanly feeling, as well as a scholar's thirst for knowledge.

"You are allowed to know that Safarez, eldest son of Majidi the Merchant, has claimed the right to husband Humaria."

Inas the subtle stood silent, then bowed once more, as if an afterthought, which was not, the scholar thought, like her. He moved to his desk, giving her time to consider, for, surely, even his clever mouse was female, if not yet full woman, and might perhaps know a moment's envy for a sister's good fortune.

"They are very grand, the Majidi," she said softly. "Humaria will be pleased."

"Eventually, she will be so," he allowed, seating himself and pulling a notetaker forward. "Today, she weeps for the home she will lose. Tomorrow, she will sing for the home she is to gain."

"Yes," said Inas, and the scholar smiled into his beard.

"Your sisters will require your assistance with the wedding preparations," he said, opening the notetaker and beginning a list. "I will be going to Lahore-Gadani tomorrow, to purchase what is needful. Tell me what I shall bring you."

Mouse silence.

"I? I am not to be wed, Father."

"True. However, it has not escaped one's attention that tomorrow is the anniversary of your natal day. It amuses me to bring you a gift from the city, in celebration. What shall you have?"

"Why, only yourself, returned to us timely and in good health," Inas said, which was proper, and womanly, and dutiful.

The scholar smiled more widely into his beard, and said nothing else.

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Humaria wept well into the night, rocking inside the circle of Shereen's arms. At last, her sobs quieted somewhat, and Shereen looked to Inas, who sat on a pillow across the room, as she had all evening, playing Humaria's favorite songs, softly, upon the lap-harp.

Obedient to the message in her sister's eyes, Inas put the harp aside, arose and moved silently to the cooking alcove. Deftly, she put the kettle on the heat-ring, rinsed the pot with warm water and measured peace tea into an infuser.

The kettle boiled. While the tea steeped, she placed Hu-maria's own blue cup on a tray, with a few sweet biscuits and some leaves of candied *sventi*. At the last, she added a pink candle, sacred to Amineh, the little god of women, and breathed a prayer for heart's case. Then, she lifted the tray and carried it to her sister's couch.

Humaria lay against Shereen's breast, veils and hair disordered. Inas knelt by the end table, placed the tray, and poured tea.

"Here, sweet love," Shereen cooed, easing Humaria away from her shoulder. "Our dear sister Inas offers tea in your own pretty cup. Drink, and be at peace."

Shivering, Humaria accepted the cup. She bent her face and breathed of the sweet, narcotic steam, then sipped, eyes closed.

Shereen sat up, and put her head scarf to rights, though she left the *ubaie*—the facial veils—unhooked and dangling along her right jaw.

"Our young Inas is fortunate, is she not, sister?" Humaria murmured, her soft voice blurry with the combined effects of weeping and the tea.

"How so?" asked Shereen, watching her closely, in case she should suddenly droop into sleep.

"Why," said Humaria, sipping tea. "Because she will remain here in our home with our father, and need never marry. Indeed, I would wonder if a husband could be found for a woman who reads as well as a man."

Shereen blinked, and bent her head, fussing with the fall of the *hijab* across her breast. Inas watched her, abruptly chilly, though the night was warm and no breeze came though the windows that stood open onto the garden.

"Certainly," Shereen said, after too long a pause. "Certainly, our father might wish to keep his youngest with him as long as may be, since he shows no disposition to take another wife, and she knows the ways of his books and his studies."

"And certainly," Humaria said, her eyes open now, and star-ing at Inas, where she knelt, feeling much like a mouse, and not so bold, so bold at all.

"Certainly, on that blessed day when the gods call our father to sit with them as a saint in Heaven, my husband will inherit all his worldly stuffs, including this, our clever sister Inas, to dispose of as he will."

At her father's direction, Inas had read many things, including the Holy Books and domestic law. She knew, with a scholar's detachment, that women were the lesser vessel and men the god-chosen administrators of the universe the gods had created, toyed with and tired of.

She knew that, in point of law, women were disbarred from holding property. Indeed, in point of law, women were themselves property, much the same as an ox or other working cattle, subject to a man's masterful oversight. A man might dispose of subject women, as he might dispose of an extra brood cow, or of an old and toothless dog.

She knew these things.

And, yet, until this moment, she had not considered the im-pact of these facts upon her own life and self.

What, indeed, she thought, would Safarez the merchant's son do with one Inas, youngest daughter of his wife's father? Inas, who read as well as a man—a sinful blot so dire that she could not but be grateful that the Holy Books also stated that the souls of women were small, withered things, of no interest to the gods.

Humaria finished the last of her tea, and sat cradling the blue cup in her plump, pretty hands, her eyes misty.

"There now, sweet, rest," Shereen murmured, capturing the cup and passing it to Inas. She put arm around Humaria's shoulders, urging her to lie down on the couch.

Inas arose and carried the tray back to the cooking alcove. She washed and dried the teapot and cup, and put the biscuits back in their tin. The *sventi* she left out.

She was wise in this, for not many minutes later, Shereen slipped into the alcove, veils dangling and flame-colored hair rippling free. She sighed, and reached for the leaves, eating two, one after the other, before giving Inas a swift glance out of the sides of her eyes, as if Shereen were the youngest, and caught by her elder in some unwomanly bit of mischief.

"Our sister was distraught," she said softly. "She never meant to wound you."

"She did not wound me," Inas murmured. "She opened my eyes to the truth."

Shereen stared, *sventi* leaf halfway to her lips.

"You do not find the truth a fearsome thing, then, sister?" she asked, and it was Inas who looked away this time.

"The truth is merely a statement of what is," she said, re-peating the most basic of her father's lessons, and wishing that her voice did not tremble so. "Once the truth is known, it can be accepted. Truth defines the order of the universe. By accepting truth, we accept the will of the gods."

Shereen ate her leaf in silence. "It must be a wonderful thing to be a scholar," she said then, "and have no reason to fear." She smiled, wearily.

"Give you sweet slumber, sister. The morrow will be upon us too soon."

She went away, robes rustling, leaving Inas alone with the truth.

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The truth, being bright, held Inas from sleep, until at last she sat up within her *chatrue*, lit her fragrant lamp, and had the books of her own studies down from the shelf.

In the doubled brightness, she read until the astronomer on his distant column announced the sighting of the Trio of morning with his baleful song.

She read as a scholar would, from books to which her father, the elder scholar, had directed her, desiring her to put aside those he might wish to study.

The book she read in the lamplight was surely one which her father would find of interest. A volume of Kenazari mythology, it listed the gods and saints by their various praise names and detailed their honors.

Nawar caught her eye, "the one who guards." A warrior's name, surely. Yet, her mother had been named Nawar. A second aspect of the same god, *Natesa*—"blade dancer"—in the Kenazari heresy that held each person was a spirit reincarnated until perfected, alternatively took the form of male and female. The duty of the god in either aspect was to confound the gods of order and to introduce random action into the universe, which was heresy, as well, for the priests taught that the purpose of the gods, enacted through mortal men, was to order and regulate the universe.

Inas leaned back against her pillows and considered what she knew of her father's third wife. Nawar had been one of the married women chosen as guardians of the three dozen maiden wives sent south from Kenazari as the peace tithe. Each maiden was to be wed to a wise man or scholar, and it had been the hope of the scholars who had negotiated it that these marriages would heal the rifts which had opened between those who had together tamed the wildlands.

Alas, it had been a peace worked out and implemented locally, as the Holy Books taught, and it had left the mountain generals unsatisfied.

Despite the agreement and the high hopes of wise men, the generals and their soldiers swept through Kenazari shortly after the rich caravan of dowries and oath-bound girls passed beyond the walls of the redoubt. Fueled by greed, bearing off-world weapons, they murdered and laid waste—and then dispersed, melting back into the mountains, leaving nothing of ancient, wealthy Kenazari, save stone and carrion.

The priests of the south found the married escorts to be widows and awarded them to worthy husbands. Reyman Bhar had lately performed a great service for the priests of Iravati, and stood in need of a wife. Nawar was thus bestowed upon him, and it had pleased the gods to allow them to find joy, each in the other, for she was a daughter of an old house of scholars, and could read, and write, and reason as well as any man. Her city was dead, but she made shift to preserve what could be found of its works, assisted gladly by her new husband.

So it was that numerous scrolls, books, and tomes written in the soon-to-be-forgotten language found their way into the house of Scholar Bhar, where eventually they came under the study of a girl child, in the tradition of her mother's house...

The astronomer on his tall, cold column called the Trio. Inas looked to her store of oil, seeing it sadly depleted, and turned the lamp back 'til the light fled and the smoky wick gave its ghost to the distant dawn.

She slept then, her head full of the myths of ancient Ke-nazari, marriage far removed from her dreams.

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Their father sent word that he would be some days in the city of Lahore-Gadani, one day west across the windswept ridges of the Marakwenti range that separated Iravati from the river Gadan. He had happened upon his most excellent friend and colleague, Scholar Baquar Hafeez, who begged him to shed the light of his intellect upon a problem of rare complexity.

This news was conveyed to them by Nasir, their father's servant, speaking through the screen in the guest door.

Humaria at once commenced to weep, her face buried in her hands as she rocked back and forth, moaning, "He has forgotten my wedding! I will go to my husband ragged and ashamed!"

Shereen rushed to embrace her, while Inas sighed, irritable with lack of sleep.

"I do not think our father has forgotten your wedding, sister," she said, softly, but Humaria only cried harder.

As it happened, their father had not forgotten his daughters, nor his mission in the city. The first parcels arrived shortly after Uncu's prayer was called, and were passed through the screen, one by one.

Bolts of saffron silk, from which Humaria's bridal robes would be sewn; yards of pearls; rings of gold and topaz; bracelets of gold; *ubaie* fragile as spider silk and as white as salt; hairpins, headcloths, and combs; sandals; needles; thread. More bolts, in brown and black, from which Humaria's new dayrobes would be made, and a hooded black cloak, lined in fleece.

Additional parcels arrived as the day wore on: A bolt each of good black silk for Shereen and Inas; headcloths, *ubaie*; silver bracelets, and silver rings set with onyx.

Humaria and Shereen fell upon each new arrival with cries of gladness. Shereen ran for her patterns; Humaria gave the saffron silk one last caress and scampered off for scissors and chalk.

Inas put her silk and rings and bracelets aside, and began to clear the worktable.

Across the room, the guest screen slid back and a small package wrapped in brown paper and tied with red string was placed on the ledge.

Inas went forward, wondering what else was here to adorn Humaria's wedding day, even as she recognized her father's hand and the lines that formed her own name.

Smiling, she caught the package up and hurried, light-footed, to her room. Once there, she broke the red string and un-wrapped the brown paper, exposing not a book, as she had expected, from the weight and the size, but a box.

She put it aside, and searched the wrapping for any note from her father. There was none, and she turned her attention back to his gift.

It was an old box of leather-wrapped wood. Doubtless, it had been handsome in its day, but it seemed lately to have fallen on hard times. The leather was scuffed in places, cracked in others, the ornamental gilt work all but worn away. She turned it over in her hands, and rubbed her thumb along a tear in the leather where the wood showed through—gray, which would be ironwood, she thought, from her study of native product.

She turned the box again, set it on her knee, released the three ivory hooks and lifted the lid.

Inside were seven small volumes, each bound in leather much better preserved than that which sheathed the box.

Carefully, she removed the first volume on the right; care-fully, she opened it—and all but laughed aloud, for here was treas-ure, indeed, and all honor to her father, for believing her worthy of so scholarly a gift. She had read of such things, but this was the first she had seen. A *curiat*- a diary kept of a journey, or a course of study, or a penance.

These... Quickly, she had the remaining six out and opened, sliding the *ubaie* away from her eyes, the better to see the handwrit-ten words. Yes. These detailed a scholar's journey—one volume dealt with geography, another with plants, another with minerals, still another with animals. Volume five detailed temples and univer-sities, while volume six seemed a list of expenditures. The seventh volume indexed the preceding six. All were written in a fine, clear hand, using the common, or trade, alphabet, rather than that of the scholars, which was odd, but not entirely outside of the scope of possibility. Perhaps the scholar in question had liked the resonances which had been evoked by writing in the common script. Scholars often indulged in thought experiments, and this seven volume *curiat* had a complexity, a *layering*, that suggested it had been conceived and executed by a scholar of the highest learning.

Carefully, she put volumes two through seven back in the box and opened the first, being careful not to crack the spine.

"Inas?" Shereen's voice startled her out of her reading.

Quickly, she thrust the book into the box and silently shut the lid.

"Yes, sister?" she called.

"Wherever have you been?" her elder scolded from the other side of the curtain. "We need your needle out here, lazy girl. Will you send your sister to her husband in old dayrobes?"

"Of course not," Inas said. Silently, she stood, picked up the box, and slipped it beneath the mattress. Later, she would move it to the secure hidey hole, but, for now, the mattress would suffice.

"Well?" Shereen asked, acidic. "Are you going to sleep all day?"

"No, sister," Inas said meekly and pushed the curtain aside.

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The days of their father's absence were a frenzy of needle-work. At night, after her sisters had fallen, exhausted, into their beds, Inas read the *curiat*, and learned amazing things.

First, she learned that the geographical volume mislocated several key markers, such as the Ilam Mountains, and the Sea of Lu-kistan. Distrustful of her own knowledge in the face of a work of scholarship, she stole off to her father's study in the deep of night, and pulled down the atlas. She compared the latitudes and longi-tudes given in the *curiat* volume against those established by the Geographical College, verifying that the *curiat* was off in some areas by a league, and in others by a day's hard travel.

Next, she discovered that the habits of certain animals were misrepresented—these, too, she

double-checked in the compendium of creatures issued by the Zoological College.

Within the volume of universities and temples were bits of myth, comparing those found in Lahore-Gadani to others, from Se-likot. Several fragments dealt with the exploits of the disorderly Natesa; one such named the aspect Shiva, another Nawar; all set against yet a third mythic creature, the *Coyote of the Nile*.

Then, she discovered that the whole of volume five had been machine printed, in perfect reproduction of the fine hand of the scholar. So the *curiat* was not as ancient as it appeared, which gave her cause to marvel upon the scholar who had created it.

Minerals—well, but by the time she had found the discrepancies in the weights of certain ores, she had made the discovery which explained every error.

She had, as was her habit, waited until her sisters retired, then lit her lamp, pulled up the board under the carpet, and brought the box onto her *chatrue*. She released the three ivory hooks, opened the lid—the box overbalanced and spilled to the floor, books scattering every which way.

Inas slipped out of bed and tenderly gathered the little volumes up, biting her lip when she found several pages in the third book crumpled. Carefully, she smoothed the damaged sheets, and replaced the book with its brothers inside the box.

It was then that she noticed pieces of the box itself had come loose, leaving two neat, deep, holes in the wood, at opposite corners of the lid. Frowning, she scanned the carpet, spying one long spindle, tightly wrapped in cloth. The second had rolled behind the *chatrue*, and by the time she reached and squirmed and had it out with the very tips of her fingers, the cloth covering had begun to unravel.

Daintily, she fingered it, wondering if perhaps the cloth held some herb for protection against demons, or perhaps salts, to insure the books kept dry, or—

There was writing on the inside of the cloth. Tiny and meticulous, it was immediately recognizable as the same hand which had penned the *curiat*.

Exquisitely careful, breath caught, she unrolled the little scroll across the carpet, scanning the columns of text; heart hammering into overdrive as she realized that she had discovered her nameless scholar's key.

Teeth indenting her bottom lip, she unrolled the second scroll next to the first, and saw that she had the complete cipher.

Breathless, she groped behind her for the box, and extracted a book at random.

Slowly at first—then more quickly as her agile mind grew acquainted with the key—she began to read.

Illuminated by the cipher, it was found that the volume geographical did not concern itself with mountain ranges and rivers at all, but was instead a detailed report of a clandestine entry into the city of Selikot, and a blasphemous subterfuge.

I regret to inform you, oh, brother in arms, that our information regarding this hopeful world was much misleading. Women are not restricted; they are quarantined, cut off from society and commerce. They may only travel in the company of a male of their kin unit, and even then, heavily shielded in many layers of full body robes, their faces, eyes and hair hidden by veils. So it is that the first adjustment in our well-laid plans has been implemented. You will find that your partner Thelma Delance has ceded her route and her studies to Scholar Umar Khan. And a damnable time I had finding a false beard in this blasted city, too. However, as you know to your sorrow, I'm a resourceful wench, and all is now made seemly. Scholar Khan is suitably odd, and elicits smiles and blessings wherever he walks. The project continues only slightly impeded by the beard, which itches. I will hold a copy of this letter in my field notes, in the interests of

completeness.

Farewell for now, brother Jamie. You owe me a drink and dinner when we are reunited.

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Inas was slow with her needle next morning, her head full of wonders and blasphemies.

That there were other worlds, other peoples, variously named "Terran" and "Liaden"—that was known. Indeed, Selikot was the site of a "space-port" and bazaar, where such outworlders traded what goods they brought for those offered by the likes of Merchant Majidi. The outworlders were not permitted beyond the bazaar, for they were unpious; and the likes of Merchant Majidi must needs undergo purifications after their business in the bazaar was concluded.

Yet now it seemed that one—nay, *a pair*—of outworlders had moved beyond the bazaar to rove and study the wider world -and one of them a woman. A woman who had disguised herself as a man.

This was blasphemy, and yet the temples had not fallen; the crust of the world had not split open and swallowed cities; nor had fires rained from the heavens.

Perhaps Thelma Delance had repented of her sin? Perhaps Amineh, the little god of women, had interceded with his brothers and bought mercy?

Perhaps the gods were not as all-seeing and as all-powerful as she had been taught?

Within the layers of her at-home robes, Inas shivered, but her scholar-trained mind continued its questions, and the answers which arose to retire those new and disturbing questions altered the measure of the world.

"Truth defines the order of the universe," she whispered, bending to her needlework. "When we accept the truth, we accept the will of the gods."

Yet, how if accepting the truth proved the absence of the gods? Why had her father given her such a gift? Had he read the *curiat* before sending it to her? Did he know of the hidden—

Across the room, from the other side of the guest screen, Nasir's voice intruded.

"The Esteemed and Blessed Scholar Reyman Bhar is returned home and bids his daughter Inas attend him in the study."

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-Her father was at his desk, several volumes open before him, his fingers nimble on the keypad of the notetaker. Inas waited, silent, her hands folded into her sleeves. The light of the study lamps was diffused into a golden glow by the *ubaie*, so that her father seemed surrounded by the light of heaven. He was a handsome man, dark, with a masterful beak of a nose and the high fore-head of a scholar. His beard was as black and as glossy as that of a man half his age. He wore the house turban, by which she knew he had been home some hours before sending for her, and the loosened braid of his hair showed thick and gray.

He made a few more notes, turned a page of the topmost book, set the notetaker aside, and looked up.

Inas melted to her knees and bowed, forehead to the carpet.

"Arise, daughter," he said, kindly as always.

She did so and stood quiet once more, hands folded before her.

"Tell me, did my packet arrive timely?"

"Father," she said softly, "it did. I am grateful to you for so precious a gift."

He smiled, well-pleased with her. "It is a curiosity, is it not? Did you mark the pattern of the

errors? Almost, it seems a farce—a plaything. What think you?"

"Perhaps," Inas said, her breath painfully short, "it is a test?"

He considered it, black brows knit, then nodded, judiciously.

"It could be so. Yes, I believe you have the right of it, daughter. A test devised by a scholar of the higher orders, perhaps to teach discipline." He paused, thinking more deeply. Inas, waiting, felt ill, wondering if he knew of the hidden scholar's key and the blasphemies contained in the revealed text.

"Yes," he said again. "A test. How well the scholar must have loved the student for which it was devised!"

"Yes, Father," Inas whispered, and gathered together her courage, lips parting to ask it, for she *must* know..

"As you progress in scholarship, you will learn that the most precious gifts are those which are more than they appear," her father said, "and that hidden knowledge has power." He bowed, seated as he was, scholar to scholar, which was a small blasphemy of its own, face as austere as a saint's.

And so, Inas thought, she was instructed. She bowed. "Yes, Father."

"Hah." He leaned back in his chair, suddenly at ease, and waved her to the stool at his feet.

"Sit, child, and tell me how the arrangements for your sister's wedding progress."

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The *curiat* bouyed her, frightened her, intrigued her. She spent her nights with it, and every other moment she could steal. She stored it now in the long-forgot sand-wood drawer—the hidden pass-through where it stood long out of use—where she could, if she wished, reach it as easily from the garden or her room.

Thelma Delance—she heard the woman's voice in the few hours of sleep she allowed herself—a loud, good-natured, and un-womanly voice, honest as women could never be, and courageous.

Inas read, and learned. Thelma Delance had been a scholar of wide learning. There were recipes for medicines among her notes; recipes for poisons, for explosives, and other disasters, which Inas understood only mistily; and lessons of *self-defense*, which held echoes of her mother's name. There was other knowledge, too—plans for establishing a *base*.

And there was the appalling fact that the notes simply ended, and did not pick up again:

They're on me. I've got one more trick up my sleeve. You know me, Jamie Moore, always one more trick up Thelma's wide sleeve, eh? We'll see soon enough if it's worked. If it has, you owe me—that's my cue. They're shooting...

There was nothing more after that, only the box, and the wound it bore, which might, Inas thought, have been made by a pellet.

She wondered who had wished to kill Thelma Delance—and almost laughed. Surely, that list was long. The priests—of a certainty. The scholars—indeed. The port police, the merchant guild, the freelance vigilantes...

And Inas realized all at once that she was crying, the silent, secret tears that women were allowed, to mourn a sister, a mother, a friend.

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The day before Humaria was to wed, Inas once again attended her father in the study, where she was given the task of reshelving the volumes he had utilized in his last commissioned research. By chance their proper places were in the back corner of the room, where the convergence of walls and shelves made an alcove not easily seen from the greater room.

She had been at her task some time, her father deep in some new bit of study at his desk, when she heard the door open and Nasir announce, "The Esteemed and Honorable Scholar Baquar Hafeez begs the favor of an audience with the Glorious and Blessed Scholar Reyman Bhar."

"Old friend, enter and be welcome!" Her father's voice was cordial and kindly—and, to his daughter's ear, slightly startled. His chair skritchd a little against the carpet as he pushed away from the desk, doubtless rising to embrace his friend.

"To what blessed event do I owe this visit?"

"Why, to none other than Janwai Himself!" Scholar Hafeez returned, his voice deeper and louder than her father's. "Or at the least, to his priests, who have commissioned me for research at the hill temple. There are certain etched stones in the meditation rooms, as I take it?"

"Ah, are there not!" Reyman Bhar exclaimed. "You are in for a course of study, my friend. Be advised, buy a pair of night-sight lenses before you ascend. The meditation rooms are ancient, indeed, and lit by oil."

"Do you say so?" Scholar Hafeez exclaimed, over certain creaks and groanings from the visitor's chair as it accepted his weight.

Inas, forgotten, huddled, soundless and scarcely moving in the alcove, listening as the talk moved from the meditation rooms to the wider history of the hill temple, to the progress of the report on which her father and Scholar Hafeez had collaborated, not so long since.

At some point, Nasir came in, bearing refreshments. The talk wandered on. In the alcove, Inas sank silently to her knees, drinking in the esoterica of scholarship as a thirsty man guzzles tea.

Finally, there came a break in the talk. Scholar Hafeez cleared his throat.

"I wonder, old friend—that *curiat* you bought in Hamid's store?"

"Yes?" her father murmured. "A peculiar piece, was it not? One would almost believe it had come from the old days, when Hamid's grandfather was said to buy from slavers and caravan thieves."

"Just so. An antique from the days of exploration, precious for its oddity. I have no secrets from you, my friend, so I will confess that it comes often into my mind. I wonder if you would consider parting with it. I will, of course, meet what price you name."

"Ah." Her father paused. Inas pictured him leaning back in his chair, fingers steeped before his chin, brows pulled together as he considered the matter. In the alcove, she hardly dared breathe, even to send a futile woman's prayer to the little god for mercy.

"As much as it saddens me to refuse a friend," Reyman Bhar said softly, "I must inform you that the *curiat* had been purchased as a gift for a promising young scholar of my acquaintance."

"A strange item to bestow upon a youth," murmured Baquar Hafeez, adding hastily, "But you will, of course, know your own Student! It is only that—"

"I most sincerely regret," Scholar Bhar interrupted gently. "The gift has already been given."

There was a pause.

"Ah," said Scholar Hafeez. "Well, then, there is nothing more to be said."

"Just so," her father replied, and there was the sound of his chair being pushed back. "Come, my friend, you have not yet seen my garden. This is the hour of its glory. Walk with me and be refreshed."

Inas counted to fifty after the door closed, then she rose, reshelved the two remaining volumes, and ghosted out of the study, down the hall to the women's wing.

Humaria's wedding was blessed and beautiful, the banquet very grand to behold, and even the women's portions fresh and unbroken, which spoke well for her new husband's generosity.

At the last moment, it was arranged between Reyman Bhar and Gabir Majidi that Shereen would stay with her sister for the first month of her new marriage, as the merchant's wife was ill and there were no daughters in his house to bear Humaria company.

So it was that Scholar Bhar came home with only his youngest daughter to companion him. Nasir pulled the sedan before the house and the scholar emerged, his daughter after him. He ascended the ramp to the door, fingering his keycard from his pocket—and froze, staring at a door which was neither latched nor locked.

Carefully, he put forth his hand, pushing the door with the tips of his fingers. It swung open onto a hallway as neat and as orderly as always. Cautiously, the scholar moved on, his daughter forgotten at his back.

There was some small disorder in the public room—a vase overturned and shattered, some display books tossed aside. The rugs and the news computer—items that would bring a goodly price at the thieves market were in place, untouched. The scholar walked on, down the hall to his study.

Books had been ripped from their shelves and flung to the floor, where they lay, spine-broke and torn, ankle deep and desolate. His notepad lay in the center of the desk, shattered, as if it had been struck with a hammer. The loose pages of priceless manuscripts lay over all.

Behind him, Scholar Bhar heard a sound; a high keening, as if from the throat of a hunting hawk, or a lost soul.

He turned and beheld Inas, wilting against the door, her hand at her throat, falling silent in the instant he looked at her.

"Peace—" he began and stopped, for there was another sound, from the back of the house—but no. It would only be Nasir, coming in from putting the sedan away.

Yes, footsteps; he heard them clearly. And voices. The sudden, ghastly sound of a gun going off. The scholar grabbed his daughter's shoulder, spinning her around.

"Quickly—to the front door!"

She ran, astonishingly fleet, despite the hindrance of her robes. Alas that she was not fleet enough.

Baquar Hafeez was waiting for them inside the front hallway, and there was a gun in his hand.

*

"Again," Scholar Hafeez said, and the large man he called Danyal lifted her father's right hand, bent the second finger back.

Reyman Bhar screamed. Inas, on her knees beside the chair in which Scholar Hafeez took his ease, stared, stone-faced, through her yell, memorizing the faces of these men, and the questions they asked.

It was the *curiat* they wanted. And it was the *curiat* which Reyman Bhar was peculiarly determined that they not have. And why was that? Inas wondered. Surely not because he had made it a gift to a daughter. He had only to order her to fetch it from its hiding place and hand it to Baquar Hafeez. What could a daughter do, but obey?

And yet—*hidden knowledge has power*.

"The *curiat*, old friend," Scholar Hafeez said again—patient, so patient. "Spare yourself any more pain. Only tell me who has the *curiat* and I will leave you and your household in peace."

"Why?" her father asked—a scholar's question, despite his pain.

"There are those who believe it to be the work of infidels," Scholar Hafeez said smoothly, and yet again: "The *curiat*, Reyman. Where is it?"

"It is not for you to know," her father gasped, his voice hoarse from screaming, his left arm useless, dislocated by Danyal in the first round of questions.

Scholar Hafeez sighed, deeply, regretfully.

"I was afraid that you might prove obstinate. Perhaps something else might persuade you."

It happened so quickly, she had no time to understand—pain exploded in her face and she was flung sideways to the floor, brilliant color distorting her vision. Her wrist was seized and she was lifted. More pain. She tried to get her feet under her, but she was pulled inexorably upward, sandals dangling. Her vision spangled, stabilized—Danyal's face was bare inches from hers. He was smiling.

Somewhere, her father was shouting.

"Your pardon, old friend?" Scholar Hafeez was all solicitude. "I did not quite hear the location of the *curiat*?"

"Release my daughter!"

"Certainly. *After* you disclose the location of the *curiat*. Such a small thing, really, when weighed against a daughter's virtue."

"Inas—" her father began, and what followed was not in the common tongue, but in that of her mother, and they were uttered as a prayer.

"It opportunity comes, daughter, be stout and true. Honor your mother, in all her names."

Scholar Hafeez made a small sound of disappointment, and moved a hand. "The *ubaie*, Danyel."

Inas saw his hand move. He crumbled the fragile fabrics in his fist and tore them away, unseating her headcloth. Her hair spilled across her shoulders, rippling black.

Danyal licked his lips, his eyes now openly upon her chest.

There was a scream of rage, and from the corner of her eye she saw her father, on his knees, a bloody blade in his least damaged hand, reaching again toward Hafeez.

Danyal still held her, his attention on his master; Inas brought both of her knees up, aiming to crush his man-parts, as Thelma Delance had described.

The villain gasped, eyes rolling up. His grip loosened, she fell to the floor, rolling, in order to confound the aim of the gun, and there was a confusion of noises, and her father shouting "Run!"—and run she did, her hair streaming and her face uncovered, never looking back, despite the sounds of gunfire behind her.

*

The house was in the merchant district of the city of Harap, a walk of many days from the prefecture of Coratu, whose principal cities, Iravati and Lahore-Gadani had lately suffered a sudden rash of explosions and fires and unexplained deaths. There were those who said it was a judgment from the gods; that Lahore-Gadani had become too assertive; and Iravati too complacent in its tranquility. The priests had ordered a cleansing, and a month long fast for the entire prefecture. Perhaps it would be enough.

In Harap, though.

In Harap, at that certain house, a boy crossed the street from out of the night-time shadows and made a ragged salaam to the doorman.

"Peace," he said, in a soft, girlish voice. "I am here to speak with Jamie Moore."

The doorman gave him one bored look, "Why?"

The boy hefted the sack he held in his left hand. "I have something for him."

"Huh." The doorman considered it, then swung sideways, rapping three times on the door. It opened and he said to the one who came forward, "Search him. I'll alert the boss."

The search had discovered weapons, of course, and they had been confiscated. The bag, they scanned, discovering thereby the mass and material of its contents. Indeed, the search was notable in that which it did not discover—but perhaps, to off-worlders, such things mattered not.

The door to the searching chamber opened and the doorman looked in.

"You're fortunate," he said. "The boss is willing to play."

So, then, there was the escort, up to the top of the house, to another door, and the room beyond, where a man sat behind a desk, his books piled, open, one upon the other, a notetaker in his hand.

Tears rose. She swallowed them, and bowed the bow of peace.

"I'm Jamie Moore," the man behind the desk said. "Who are you?"

"I am Inas Bhar, youngest daughter of Scholar Reyman Bhar, who died the death to preserve what I bring you tonight."

The man looked at her, blue eyes—outworlder eyes—bland and uninterested.

"I don't have a lot of time or patience," he said. "Forget the theatrics and show me what you've got."

She swallowed, her throat suddenly dry. This—this was the part of all her careful plans that might yet go awry. She opened the bag, reached inside and pulled out the *curiat*.

"For you," she said, holding it up for him to see, "from Thelma Delance."

There was a long silence, while he looked between her and the box. Finally, he held out his hands.

"Let me see."

Reluctantly, she placed the *curiat* in his hands, watching as he flicked the ivory hooks, raised the lid, fished out a volume, and opened it at random.

He read a page, the next, riffled to the back of the book and read two pages more. He put the book back in the box and met her eyes.

"It's genuine," he said and gave her the honor of a seated bow "The Juntavas owes you. What'll it be? Gold? A husband with position? I realize the options are limited on this world, but we'll do what we can to pay fair."

"I do not wish to marry. I want..." She stopped, took a breath and met the bland, blue eyes. "My father was a scholar. He taught me to be a scholar—to read, to reason, to think. I want to continue—in my father's memory."

He shrugged. "Nice work, if you can get it."

Inas drew herself up. "I speak five dialects and three languages," she said. "I am adept with the higher maths and with astronomy. I read the mercantile, scholarly and holy scripts. I know how to mix the explosive *skihi* and—" The man behind the desk held up a hand.

"Hold up. You know how to mix *skihi*? Who taught you that?"

She pointed at the *curiat*. "Page thirty-seven, volume three."

He whistled. "You found the cipher, did you? Clever girl." He glanced thoughtfully down at the box.

"You wouldn't have used any of that formula, would you? Say, back home or in Lahore-Gadani?"

Inas bowed, scholar to scholar. "They killed my father. He had no sons to avenge him."

"Right."

More silence—enough that Inas began to worry about the reasoning going on behind those blue outworlder eyes. It would, after all, be a simple thing to shoot her—and far more merciful than the punishment the priests would inflict upon her, were she discovered dressed in a boy's tunic and trousers, her face uncovered, her hair cut and braided with green string.

"Your timing's good," Jamie Moore said abruptly. "We've got a sector chief checking in tomorrow. What I can do, I can show you to the chief, and the two of you can talk. This is sector chief business, understand me?"

Inas bowed. "I understand, Jamie Moore. Thank you."

"Better hold that until you meet the chief," he said, and the door opened behind her, though she had not seen him give a signal.

"We'll stand you a bath, a meal and a bed," he said, and jerked his head at the doorman. "Get her downstairs. Guard on the door."

He looked at her once more. "What happens next is up to you."

*

She sat on the edge of the *chatrue*—well, no she didn't. Properly a *chatrue*, a female's bed, would be hidden by a curtain at a height so that even a tall man could not see over. This was hardly a bed meant for a woman...

She sat on the edge of the bed then, with the daybreak meal in dishes spread around her, amazed and appreciative at the amount of food she was given to break her fast.

But, after all—she had come to the house in the clothes of a boy, admitted to taking a son's duty of retribution to herself; and agreed to meet with the sector chief. These were all deeds worthy of male necessities; hence they fed her as a male would be fed, with two kinds of meat, with porridge of proper sweetness and with extra honey on the side, with fresh juice of the gormel-berry -- and brought her clean boy's clothes in the local style, that she might appear before the sector chief in proper order.

She had slept well, waking only once, at the sound of quiet feet in the stairway. Left behind when she woke then was a half-formed dream: In it she had lost her veils to Danyal, but rather than leer, he had screamed and run, terrified of what he had seen revealed in her face.

Too late now to run, she thought as she slipped back into sleep, both Danyal and her father's false friend had fallen to her vengeance. And the *curiat* was in the hands of the infidel.

Inas ate all the breakfast, leaving but some honey. There had been too many days since her father's death when food had been scarce; too many nights when her stomach was empty, for her to stint now on sustenance.

"Hello, child!" A voice called from outside the door. There followed a brisk knock, with the sound of laughter running behind it. "Your appointment begins now!"

*

The name of Jamie Moore's boss was Sarah Chang. She was small and round, with crisp black hair bristling all over her head, and slanting black eyes. Her clothing was simple—a long-sleeved shirt, open at the throat, a vest, trousers and boots. A wide belt held a pouch and a holster. Her face was naked, which Inas had expected. What she had not expected was the jolt of shock she felt.

Sarah Chang laughed.

"You're the one pretending to be a boy," she commented, and Inas bowed, wryly.

"I am an exception," she said. "I do not expect to meet myself."

"Here, you're an exception," the woman corrected, and pointed at one of the room's two chairs, taking the other for herself. "Sit. Tell me what happened. Don't leave anything out. But don't dawdle."

So, she had told it. The gift of the *curiat*, the visit of Scholar Hafeez to her father; Humaria's wedding; the violation of her father's study, and his brutal questioning; her escape into the night, and return to a house of the unjustly murdered—father, books and servant. Her revenge.

"You mixed a batch of *skihi*, blew up a couple buildings, disguised yourself as a boy and walked away from it," Sarah Chang said, by way of summing up. She shook her head. "Pretty cool. How'd you think of all that?"

Inas moved her hands. "I learned from Thelma Delance. The recipe for *skihi* was in her *curiat*. She disguised herself as a man in order to pursue her scholarship."

"So she did." The woman closed her eyes. "Any idea what I should do with you?"

Inas licked her lips, I wish to be a scholar."

"Not the line of work women usually get into, hereabouts." Sarah Chang's eyes were open now, and watching carefully.

"Thelma Delance—"

"Thelma was an outworlder," the boss interrupted. "Like I am. Like Jamie is."

This woman possessed a man's hard purpose, Inas thought; she would do nothing for pity. She raised her chin.

"Surely, then, there is some place where I, too, would be an outworlder, and free to pursue my life as I wish?"

Sarah Chang laughed.

"How old are you?" She asked then.

"Fourteen winters."

The boss tipped her head. "Thirteen Standards, near enough. Regular old maid. And you've got a nice touch with an explosive.

"*Skihi*, for your information, is an extremely volatile mixture. Many explosive experts have the missing fingers to prove it." She bounced out of her chair and shook her head.

"All right, Inas, let's go."

She stayed in her chair, looking up into the slanting black eyes. "Go where?"

"Outworld," the boss said, and moved an impatient hand, pointing upward, toward the sky—and beyond.