

Excerpt from *Shadows in the Shining City*
by John D. Cressler

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The single-mindedness of his search propels him through the door before he realizes the room is occupied, his sudden surprise jerking him to a sliding, awkward stop. His startled exhale of “Ahhh!” skips across only three heartbeats before settling into irritation at the interruption of his hunt.

Her eyes are white with terror as they leap from the page to join the explosion of curls launched by the recoil of her head. Her quick, muted gasp suggests a child caught red-handed in some calculated act of willful disobedience. Unnerved, she rises from her floor pillow, then involuntarily takes a step back.

The strained silence of guarded appraisal stretches out.

Finally, his accusatory, “Who are you?”

She straightens her back. “Who are you?”

He frowns, lifts his chin a notch, then announces, “I am Zafir Saffar, Royal Translator. I work for the Royal Librarian.” A honed edge of conceit lies loosely buried somewhere under these last words. He widens his eyes into a mocking query.

The flare of her nostrils is barely perceptible. Her eyes narrow. “I am Rayhana Abi Amir.” She lacquers on her own conceit. “My father is Muhammad ibn Abi Amir. Of the Caliph’s Vizier Council. I was told I would not be disturbed.”

His frown returns. “Not disturbed? What are you doing here? The Rare Books Library is forbidden to visitors.”

Her expression hardens. “I have permission to be here.”

An incredulous, “Permission? From whom?”

Her stare is challenging. “Master al-Tayyib, of course.”

Intense skepticism. “I was just with him. He made no mention of you.”

She shrugs with a fake casualness. “Nevertheless, he brought me here.”

An impatient, “Why would he bring you here?”

She quizzically tilts her head just so, her half-smirk somehow unmistakably questioning his intelligence. “To read?”

The line of his exaggerated sigh precisely marks the standoff. As he considers his options, his eyes track to the table and the two splayed codices. Decision made, he

adjusts his tone to be more welcoming. "I am sorry to have startled you." She nods her acceptance. "What is it that you are reading?"

Satisfied, she matches his tone. "Master al-Tayyib started me on the *Ambrosian Iliad*."

In spite of himself, he smiles. "I love the *Iliad*."

The dam inexplicably breaks, the water streaming through the thin cleft with a mighty gush. "I have only just started, but it is a complete joy!" Her enthusiasm is instantaneous and contagious, her Arabian beauty magically flaming up as if lit by a thousand candles. He is struck dumb, mesmerized by her transformation. His emerald eyes cling desperately to her lovely face in a feeble attempt to steady his legs. She is running full-stride now. "Homer's poetry is so different from anything I have ever read! Exquisite! Nothing in Persian compares." She grows more animated, her hands beginning to adorably lift and dance in time to her accelerating words. "The Muses! How clever! And how interesting that the Greek gods enter the plot and mold events to suit their whims. And Achilles ... I love the way he stands up to Agamemnon to end the plague. But poor Briseis!" She stops for a breath, and as her grin widens dimples suddenly dive into her cheeks, completely unanticipated, taking his breath away. His eyes have not left her face, but he hasn't heard a word she has said.

He shakes his head to clear the cobwebs. "Sorry ... Achilles?"

She shakes her head, confused, oblivious of the hex she flings about so casually. A second later her dimples return. She waits for him to catch up.

He focuses. "Yes. The *Iliad* is ... uhh ... an ancient ... mmm ... story." He clears his throat. Never once has he been at a loss for words. He takes a deep breath and searches for footing. "But its many themes are so remarkably contemporary. It is as if it were written yesterday." Thankfully, some solid ground. He presses on, his words carefully meted. "Homer explores the nature of glory and respect and wrath; and the ultimate tragedy of war. He speaks of homecomings, and man's fate in the world. Homer has much to teach us about living. Samuel may have told you that the *Iliad* comes from an oral tradition. Homer's recited version predates by hundreds of years the written version. And as you say, his verse is exquisite ..."

He stops as he becomes acutely aware that she has been studying him. They share strained smiles, locking eyes for an instant longer than necessary.

He clears his throat again, something he never does. "When I ... interrupted your reading, I was searching for a book for Samuel. Master al-Tayyib. Theon of Alexandria. A book on geometry and optics. I was not able to find it in the mathematics room or the

Egyptian collection. I think it may be here ...” She nods, amused. “Samuel is waiting for it ...”

“I see. Please, continue your search. I will rejoin Achilles.” They both try for casual smiles, but don’t quite get there.

As he steps past her, the hint of citrus spice presents itself. Her perfume is subtle but impossible to ignore; regal somehow, yet utterly feminine, his beloved bitter orange blossoms buried somewhere beneath her clothes, dabbed upon her warm olive skin. Sublime, weak-kneed intoxication. He swallows hard, inexplicably woozy as his heart begins to race. He slows to steady himself then methodically slides the ladder toward the center of the bookcase, directly behind her. He begins to climb, ridiculously self-conscious, wondering if she is watching, but afraid to turn around. He forces himself to begin perusing the bindings, resuming the search for his elusive quarry.

She has taken her seat on the floor pillow and leans in over the codex, elbows on the table, chin glued to her folded hands. She finds her place. Five minutes later she is still on the same sentence.

“Ahhh ... Found you!”

She stands and turns to watch as he descends, codex in hand. She is beaming.

He laughs as he shows her the book. “An Egyptian caught hiding among the Greeks.”

“I am glad you were able to find it.”

“Yes. Samuel will be pleased.”

Silence. They each hold their positions, seemingly afraid to break the trance.

“Well, I should be going. It was nice to meet you ... Rayhana.” He offers a warm smile.

“The pleasure was mine ... Zafir.” She blushes.

With a pleased nod, he turns.

As the door snaps shut she stands motionless for several moments, the quick exchange of expressions almost comical; amused grin to confused grimace to satisfied smile, then back again. She sighs deeply then takes her place on her pillow once more, elbows on the table, chin on her folded hands. But this time she stares straight into space, ignoring the siren’s call of the ancient codex.