

In the Realm of Demons

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 juggernaut

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To Javed Masud

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The Night of the Red Moon

Early memories of my cousin Koyel lingered in my mind like old flower petals pressed in the leaves of books, memories that were severed by unbelievable tragedy and subsequent greater events. I remember sitting with her in the jharokha of the palace as we played with her dolls. Don't get me wrong. I am a boy. But I enjoyed playing with her so much that I didn't care what the game was, and she would make it very interesting. I was twelve then and she a few months older. We were sort of kindred spirits, thrown together in that magnificent, venerable and haunted palace. Well, maybe it's not haunted in the regular sense; it is just that there is a curse on our family and what happened that dreadful and tragic night was indeed supernatural and undoubtedly my worst nightmare.

I better introduce myself. I'm Mehranullah Hashtpuri – Shahzada, mind you – son of Rani Sobia, the younger sister of Nawab Kaisar Khan of Hashtpur, and Koyel was the daughter of the nawab himself, from an earlier marriage. My father was not frugal with money and had died penniless in a hunting accident. The nawab had graciously taken in my mother and me so I could have the upbringing that befitted my lineage.

However, in the palace I found myself a second-class citizen, since the *enfants de roi* were Shehzad and Shehbaz, the sons of the nawab's principal wife, Shahzadi Lailat-u-Nisa, who belonged to the royal family of King Zahir Shah of Afghanistan. I was made acutely conscious that everything in the palace, the arras from France, the 'Goordner' (Gardner) crockery from Afghanistan, the beautiful porcelain figurines from Europe, the sensual statues from Italy, the Chinese vases and resplendent hand-cut glass from Russia, all belonged to the real heirs and I was only there on their sufferance. If Shehzad or Shehbaz told me to polish their shoes I would have to do it if I wanted to continue to enjoy my royal status. Often I felt rebellious, but my mother would quickly hush me. I could bear my own demeaned position, but when the members of the house put down or criticized my mother I couldn't stand it.

The rani was a haughty woman who believed that authority has to be asserted if it is to be retained. Maybe

she had other intentions as well, but I was too young to understand these intrigues at the time. Not that she was wilfully nasty. Quite the opposite, instead. She was courtesy itself when talking to us personally, but her attitude and directives were tyrannical otherwise. Nobody was allowed to disagree with her opinions and sometimes her remarks were very barbed and hurtful. Her inaccessibility at crucial moments was insidious. Perhaps she did feel a bit threatened by the favour the nawab showed us. Under her administration even the servants assumed airs of self-importance and often controlled various facilities like the food that was served to us or the clothes that were to be stitched for us. I remember reading how Aurangzeb had served the head of Prince Dara Shikoh to Shahjahan on a platter. Well, comparing our situation to that may be an exaggeration, but I definitely felt it was only a difference of degree when often we would be served our meals and under the ornate dish cover would be only one kebab or a small smattering of saalan. The alternative in order to get a full meal from that royal larder was to eat in the main dining room with Her Majesty, where the food was always lavish, but that was another source of indigestion. Nobody could start before her and she always took her time to come. Even after she arrived, nobody could have as much as a glass of water till she had drunk some, or touch anything till she had helped herself. The slightest

hint of bad behaviour by the children would lead to them being rebuked and sent off from the table before they could eat. I would often think about how people outside probably envied us living in this grand palace. Little did they know of the unhappiness within.

I also felt bad about the way Koyel was treated; sometimes I'd privately seethe with anger but would have to keep quiet. Nobody talked much about her mother. The shahzadi always spoke of Koyel as if she was the illegitimate daughter of a concubine, and this always hurt the poor little girl grievously. She was brought up by a faithful ayah and a spinster grand-aunt, Begum Quratul-Ain, whom we called Badi Baaji. She was half mad. I equated Koyel's fate with my own, but her story is more dramatic and romantic than mine. I vaguely remember hearing about my mamoon, the present nawab, having a secret love marriage before his ascension. Koyel had been born in a hospital; we were all born in the palace. When the old nawab Mahmud Khan found out my mamoon had run away with his wife, he sent his guards after them. They were caught and brought back. Even then Kaisar Khan had refused to divorce his wife. It was said the old nawab had the nikahnama burnt and the entry in the Eidgah register deleted. As for the wife, an evil courtier suggested that they lock her for one night in the old pavilion outside the compound of the palace. It was supposed to be infested with snakes and people

didn't even venture there in the day. However, in the morning the guards could not find her body. Apparently she somehow managed to escape during the night. The nawab sent people to search for her and bring her back but they could find neither hide nor hair of her. That was the last we heard of her. Maybe there was foul play. All great families have skeletons in the cupboard, especially kshatriya royalty.

Nawab Kaisar Khan seemed very fond of his daughter. He was also fond of my mother and me and always treated us kindly, making it a point to check that we were being given our due, but he was busy most of the time. He ruled the kingdom outside, but the proud rani ruled the household. The nawab thought it politic not to interfere in the domestic hierarchy.

As for my afternoons in the jharokha with Koyel, they were like luminous stained-glass images in the kaleidoscope of unsatisfactory, incomplete, sometimes happy, sometimes not, memories of my childhood – literally bathed in a dim, coloured radiance because the jharokha had coloured glass windows that muted the heat of the long and unending summer afternoons. I found a sort of magic in the company of my gentle cousin. She had commandeered this place as her private nook. It had a balcony that overlooked the elephants' courtyard, not that we had elephants any longer. Now we kept only one that was used to be weighed against a

mountain of metal coins on the nawab's birthday, which were then distributed among the poor. In the olden days it used to be bricks of silver.

There the two of us would sit together. She had a large collection of dolls and we would select some to make a doll family – a mother doll, a father doll and several smaller ones designated as children. Koyel had another set of puppet dolls, the kind that hanjan* puppeteers make. They were all Mughal royalty, and of these one was her favourite – a female doll that was supposed to be Anarkali. Using chairs, boxes, a veil and bed sheets, Koyel would build a charming abode that not only housed the dolls but had enough space for us to sit and have tea with the doll family. Then she would take out her *pièce de résistance*, a miniature tea set, complete with shiny cutlery and fancy cups. Sitting with her in the facsimile of domestic bliss she had built, I was able to identify her natural body odour. It was a light, musty smell, like that of groundnuts. Though not of any perfume, I found it exceedingly appealing, as it sort of embodied her very essence – her delicate, smooth-skinned presence. As the afternoon would draw on, I would take secret sniffs of her, trying to take in as much of her scent as possible. She also had incredibly shapely hands and feet, and eyes that I could get lost in. Nobody can imagine how enchanting I found it just to be with her. When I look

*Gypsy

back on that time, it seems those afternoons never ended.

It must have been August 1945 when the trouble started. The daughter of a scythe was said to have become possessed by a demon. Her cries, shrieks and violent fits were disturbing the peace of the lower servants' quarters. They could be heard even in the upper storeys of the palace, which is when the rani decided to settle the matter. She had the girl summoned to the palace to show her to a doctor. He was the MS in charge of the charitable hospital of the state. The shahzadi considered this talk of possession to be superstitious nonsense and wanted to prove her benevolence to the servants by curing the girl in a proper medical manner. She was brought into the main hall of the palace and all of us – womenfolk and children – huddled behind the curtains of the pillars to witness the macabre presence. I remember her face well. She was only a young girl, hardly twelve. She was frail, unkempt, had sharp features heightened by undernourishment and wild eyes that I found frightening. Of course, she was innocuous and insane, but to us her behaviour seemed a treasonous disregard for the regal rani. A rational person would be moved to pity at the sight, but I was terrified to see her, knowing that this person could do terrible things to herself and maybe others. Pity made the situation seem more of a travesty. I would rather face a raging tiger than confront her in her passion.

The rani showed great magnanimity, ignoring the

snarls, terrifying sounds and lewd gestures the girl made. However, when the doctor tried to examine her, she struggled so much that her parents could hardly hold her down. She let out a deep, ululating, petrified cry and the next moment she was in the air, as if somebody had flung her upwards, and when she landed on the ground, her head hit the hard marble floor with a resounding crack. I was sure she must have fractured her skull. As she lay there spasmodically jerking her limbs, frothing at the mouth, rolling her eyes and uttering animal sounds, I remember thinking that the demon must have thrown her upwards and these must be her dying convulsions from having broken her head. The doctor quickly gave her an injection and she calmed down. The rani looked pleased, as if this meant that the girl had been cured. The doctor examined her, wrote down several medicines for her and the servants carried the poor girl out on a charpai.

After that evening I was always careful to avoid the part of the hall where she had fallen. The way she had burbled just before she was thrown up seemed to indicate she had seen something ghastly, and I was scared it might still be lurking somewhere there, invisible. Later we learnt that the medicines had no effect on the girl and the parents had to send for a local amil to perform an exorcism.

That was the night it happened, and I am convinced the source of the dreadful occurrence was the demon released by the so-called exorcism. It had been a very

hot and stuffy day and sunset didn't seem to settle the dust of the afternoon, in fact there was a thunderstorm brewing on the horizon with distant flickers of lightning. The rani had forbidden us to go to the servants' quarters, but one servant companion of mine, Amin, my tutor's son, took me there, thrilled by the event.

It was very smelly with the buffalos tied nearby and all the servants milling around in the hot night. The place was lit by lanterns, since the compound of the quarters was unlit, and a big fire was burning. Amin explained to me that it was a demon of fire and the flames would coax it out. An assistant of the amil was beating a drum. The girl was standing unbound in front of the exorcist. I must say he had greater control over her than the doctor had had, because though she growled, spat, snarled and made dreadful faces at him, sometimes lunging at him with clawed hands, when he would command her to stop she would hold back, showing him utter hate but desisting from attacking him. Sometimes she would start to slink backwards, away from the amil, but again when he would tell her to stop she would halt. Once in retaliation to his command she ran towards him with a hideous expression on her face and I was certain that this time she would attack him, but the amil stood his ground and ordered her to stop. She squirmed and twisted threateningly but didn't attack him, behaving like some vicious animal bent on causing mayhem but fettered by some invisible leash. Perhaps the amil would

prove more efficacious than the doctor. There certainly seemed to be some inexplicable rapport between them. It couldn't have been a tacit understanding, because then the amil began to burn chillies around the girl and even though we were watching from a distance our eyes started smarting. He was blowing the chillies right into the girl's face to make it so uncomfortable for the demon that it would be forced to leave the girl. She let out unearthly bellowing howls that surely her young female vocal chords could not have been capable of producing, and her hate seemed to increase.

However, if I had in any way felt that this amil was going to cure the girl, when I looked at his face I suddenly felt differently. There was no kindness in his eyes. He had deep furrows down his cheeks, such that it was difficult to tell his age, or even determine if he was young or old; his pointy beard was hennaed a violent red and his eyes, dark and intense, seemed to mask sinister knowledge. I got a wave of adverse vibes; he looked completely evil. Some people looked on very seriously. I heard that after communing with the demon (I missed that part), the amil had warned everybody that when the entity left the girl, before it was banished, it could descend on anyone around. So we were not without danger. When the amil began threatening the girl with a live snake I could stand it no longer. I told Amin I was leaving and went back to the palace.

There I found everybody on the balcony overlooking

the quarters, watching the exorcism with curiosity. However, the activity had made our spinster grand-aunt, the half-mad one, more perturbed than usual.

‘Child, do not believe them. They are not what they seem. There is something very wrong,’ she said conspiratorially to me. ‘I’ll tell my nephew when he returns; he always listens to me.’

‘Who are not what they seem, Badi Baaji?’ I asked.

But she didn’t answer my question because the next moment she gasped. ‘Look at the moon! It’s red!’

We looked up at the hazy sky and saw the moon was indeed red. It did not just have a chromatic red outline – its luminous surface was not silvery, but a swirling, dusky red.

With the macabre goings-on below, this terrified us more than anything else. Of course, in retrospect I realized that this was probably some refractive phenomenon caused by the red dust of the ground in the air. At the time, however, my grand-aunt became almost hysterical. ‘The curse! The curse! Call the rani! Get the taweez and send Shehbaz away from here! Save him! Save him!’

My mother also became worried. Everybody was ushered inside from the balcony. The rani came in frantically and rushed Shehzad and Shehbaz to her room, ordering a servant to call the chauffeur to get the car out. My instinctive reaction was to look at Koyel, but her ayah and the grand-aunt were protectively leading

her away as well.

My mother looked at me. She too was scared and said, 'Come, son. We'll also lock ourselves up in our room.'

'Wait, Mother, I think the nawab is coming back,' I told her, because through the trees I could see some car lights coming up the long driveway.

This reassured her somewhat. She stepped back on to the balcony to take a look.

'What is the curse, Mother?' I asked.

'I'll recite it for you,' she said.

When the moon is red,
Sana hath said,
What thou doth dread,
Shall rise from the dead,
And Hashtpur's heir behead.

'Who is Sana, Mother?'

'Don't you know? He was your ancestor from Chandullah's side of the family, your relatives who live in the old quarters. He used to be the nawab ages ago. Ranjit Singh defeated him in 1845. He placed Sanaullah's brother Farhatullah on the throne of Hashtpur. Our side of the family stems from Nawab Farhatullah and we have ruled Hashtpur since then. Sanaullah was beheaded. On the day of his execution, Sanaullah pronounced this curse on his brother's

family. Nawab Farhatullah died a short while after under mysterious circumstances. He was found with a broken neck and they say when they tried to lift him his head flopped downwards. Following this incident, on a night when the moon was red, his son Sabqatullah disappeared. His younger brother Raghbatullah became the ruler. It seems the curse falls only on the firstborn. The British beheaded Raghbatullah's son Syedullah. They say the moon was red on that night too. However, your great-great-grandfather Faizullah ruled for many years. He died fighting the Ghakkars and since he had no heir his cousin Janullah was made the nawab. When the first full moon was red, he was found with his head ripped off in the old pavilion. Thereafter, it is said, Janullah's son got a powerful taweez made by a powerful pir, which has since protected the family from the curse. It is handed down from generation to generation. In the past three generations, only one eldest son was found decapitated, so we had hoped the curse had been lifted.'

'So you and I are safe, Mother,' I said relieved.

'I suppose so. We are not the heirs. But there are tales of other deaths too. Let's pray Shehbaz is safe. Come, we better lock ourselves in our room till the nawab comes,' she said anxiously.

My mother says I have a strong sense of smell. Suddenly I sniffed a strange and beautiful scent. Most perfumes have familiar smells, of roses, lavender, oodh

and such. But this perfume was completely alien; I couldn't identify it with anything. It caused a nice sensation inside me with a fragrant twist.

'By the way, that's a beautiful perfume you're wearing, Mother,' I said.

'No, that's not my perfume. I smell it too,' she answered.

The next moment there was a loud wail from the quarters below and at once all the lights and lanterns went off. The lights of the palace also flickered, before everything plunged into darkness. I thought I saw a deeper blackness swirl up from below and then the quarters were filled with shrieks and screams.

'What's happened? What's happened?' my mother cried, clasping me tightly.

'I don't know! Maybe the demon is loose,' I answered. Huddled together, we rushed through the dark doorway of the balcony. The full moon and dusty haze outside gave the sky a luminescence and we could make our way through the familiar rooms with the help of the slight light coming in from the windows.

'Where is everybody?'

'Let's go towards the main hall,' I suggested. Nawab sahib must have arrived by now.'

Holding each other's hand tightly, we crept through the darkened rooms, panic rising inside us. We wondered what was happening. Why were the servants screaming?

Why had the electricity gone off? Was there some real danger?

As we passed the long side gallery adjacent to the main balustrade, I saw the curtains at the end leap up with a glow and catch fire. I couldn't believe this was happening. The curtains were definitely blazing. This was no hallucination, and then in the light, I saw a monstrous form. It seemed humanoid with the legs of a goat, but its shape appeared to twist and change as it came leaping towards us.

'Run, Mother!' I shouted, not paying attention to any obstacles on the way as I pulled her along by her hand. Thank goodness she didn't trip while I half dragged, half carried her with me.

Desperately we reached the alcove above the balustrade. The lights from below made it easier for us to see. The nawab and several of his men were in the hall holding lanterns and torches. The creature seemed to have disappeared, maybe due to the light, but there was still a glow where the curtains had been burning. We rushed down the stairs.

'Sobia bhan! Where are the others?' the nawab shouted anxiously.

'Kaisar bhai! Kaisar bhai! Thank heavens you've come. There is something awful behind us!'

At once two men with spears and guns started to rush up the stairs, but the venerable Zamurrad Shah

told them not to go, because there was nothing they could do about what was up there. Zamurrad Shah was the nawab's astrologer and spiritual adviser.

'Everybody is hiding in their rooms,' Sobia told the nawab, looking anxiously at the alcove above the main hall.

The nawab had the dinner gong sounded to summon everybody, but it wasn't necessary because hearing that he had arrived all the members of the royal family began to emerge from their rooms and enter the hall, carrying candles and fancy lanterns. The diwan came out of the nawab's study. 'Here is the taweez, Your Highness,' he said, handing him a large gold necklace.

'The curse! The curse!' the shahzadi uttered anxiously. 'The moon was red. Save your heir Shehbaz, Nawab sahib!'

'Shehbaz sahib, Shehbaz sahib, come forward,' a servant said officiously.

'Yes, I saw the moon too,' the nawab said. 'That's why I rushed back. Everybody, stand near the taweez. Where is Koyel?' he asked, looking around and holding the taweez high in the air.

'Mehran beta, come close to us,' he said to me, since I was standing a little away.

I was still looking up at the alcove, hoping the creature wouldn't attack us with all these people and lights. I thought I saw a shadow move behind an arch.

'Sir, there is something up there,' I told the nawab.

‘Yes! Yes! I know. There’s nothing we can do about that right now. Come here, you’ll be safer,’ he said earnestly. Concerned, he looked around again and repeated, ‘Where is Koyel? Somebody get Koyel!’

Now I began to worry about Koyel. She and Badi Baaji were the only people who weren’t here yet. The diwan quickly set off towards the passage leading to the grand-aunt’s suite on the ground floor, his gas lantern casting monstrous shadows.

‘Nawab sahib! Nawab sahib! Here is Shehbaz!’ the shahzadi said anxiously, coming up to him. ‘Put the taweez on him.’

‘Shahzadi, he is not my heir! He is in less danger!’ the nawab practically exploded. ‘My heir is my eldest child, Koyel. Get her quickly!’

At this moment, we saw three forms coming through the passage – the diwan ushering the smaller figure of Koyel and the grand-aunt hurrying behind them as fast as she could.

‘Here I am, Daddy,’ she said and came running forward.

‘Quick! Come and put on the taweez,’ the nawab said, bending down and opening his arms to hold her.

I thought somebody had opened a vial of perfume because suddenly I smelt a strong whiff of an enrapturing scent, like a breath of fresh, fragrant air, reminiscent of stars and the stratosphere. For a second I was relieved that Koyel was safe. But the next moment a palpable

darkness swept through the hall, engulfing all of us, and as the nawab clasped the young girl to his bosom, he found he was only holding her Anarkali doll. I heard a sigh disappear into an unfathomable distance, and then the lights came on again.