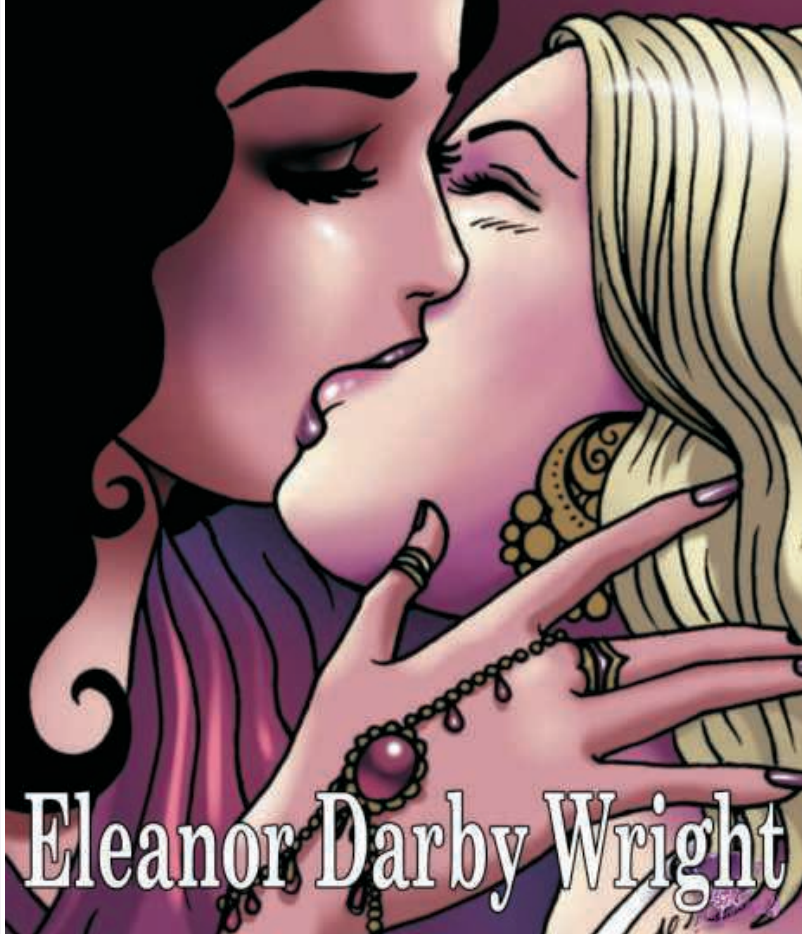


In Service To Her Majesty



Eleanor Darby Wright

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IN SERVICE TO HER MAJESTY

by Eleanor Darby Wright

******THE SHIP ROOM******

The Travellers' Club has never been well known by the media or the general public. It isn't now and it wasn't in the past. Those who have been aware of it have used its name as a byword for exclusiveness, a trait that has lasted even to this day and age. It was there that I met Captain Rodney Arthur Rayfield, late of the Ordnance Survey.

"Maps," was what he said when we asked him what he did. "Maps." We'd settled back for the expected war stories but there were none. So, someone else, Bunny most likely, began to talk about his 'fabled exploits'. Rayfield just sat and listened, a faint

smile on his thin-nosed, clear-skinned face, as he watched me serve drinks to everyone at the bar. He had a shock of fair hair that was longer than regulations allowed but then you expected that in officers. He had no eyebrows to speak of and if asked to describe him, I would have said 'effete'.

So, when Bunny Gorton began a conversation on homosexuality, I noted how fidgety Rodney became and tried to head Bunny off. Now, Bunny is slender, like Rayfield. He's also very, very English and was nominated for the Travellers' Club after being part of White's Antarctic explorations.

I don't think that Bunny is really gay but he does often make 'queer' jokes that upset the older, more traditional members of the Club. The newer, younger ones just smile and nod and wink as they listen to Bunny's affected voice and his limp-wrist gestures. It's a shame as Bunny is always enjoyable to listen to even if he is totally unfair in who he picks on.

"Now, among the Lakithi," Bunny said airily to those of us gathered in the wood-panelled Ship Room, "they have an initiation ceremony for everyone who wants to try it. Anyone who succeeds is considered to be a warrior and they're awarded a sort of codpiece, with an appendage like, well, like the one Willie has."

Most of us had had too much to drink then and so we chortled at that. In the men's lavatory was a portrait, moved there when we took in our first female member six years before. She hadn't lasted but the picture had stayed. William Polley had travelled naked the length of the Zambezi and portaged across to the Congo. The artist had taken liberties I am sure in depicting the naked Polley. Either that or

the poor man had crossed Africa in a state of constant erection.



“The codpiece is called an ugatha,” said Bunny, downing his Scotch and bitters and handing me his glass for more. “Anyone who wears one can carry a spear and a knife and sit in the Council of Men.”

“I don’t understand,” said Paul Gardiner, the yachtsman. He’s the kind of member who gives the Club its reputation of upper class snobbery. While Bunny Gorton would deserve a place in the Club for his exploring and writing accomplishments, Paul has money to pave his way. He’s made several large donations to our General Fund and is thus a mainstay in keeping our Club running along in the same fashion that it has for over one hundred and fifty-three years.

“Does everyone take the, er, the initiation in the Kithli?” Paul asked. “And what happens if someone fails?”

“They make it easy enough,” said young Tom Scully, our resident skeptic, “so that no-one ever fails.”

Even Bunny laughed as he was shaking his long, wavy hair. He waited while I filled the glasses again with Martell brandy for most of the club, Armagnac for Paul, who claimed a more refined French palate.

“Not so,” said Bunny amiably. “And the clan’s name is Lakithi. They’re distantly related to Johnson’s Unlith.” We all looked blank. We aren’t a very intellectual group on the weekends, I’m afraid. “The Stone Age people,” Bunny prompted us.

“Oh, of course,” said Tom Scully, exaggerating Bunny’s frightful accent. “The Stoners. How could I forget?” We all sniggered together then. Rayfield smiled at me familiarly, as if he was a real friend of mine. There was something familiar about him but,

for the life of me, I couldn't place him in any group but this one, at an Explorers' Meeting at the Travellers' Club.

Bunny waited for the laughter to stop. "Several women do pass the initiation," he said, returning to his subject, "but most, of course, don't enter in the first place. They don't want to be warriors."

"So the women who passed the initiation became men?" I asked with a smile. Rayfield's smile grew broader as he nodded, pleased by what I'd said.

Bunny's smile was larger than both of ours. "Why, David, old fellow, how intelligent of you," he said as if there had been some doubt in the past. "Of course they became men, and the reason for the codpiece now becomes evident, I expect."

"They hunted?" asked Paul, aghast.

"And cut their hair into crests as they were men," Bunny affirmed. "They carried weapons and took wives and wore the ugatha."

"Pretty liberated conduct, it seems to me," guffawed Tom Scully.

Paul Gardiner's forehead was creased in a frown. "But after this initiation," he persisted. "What about the men who failed? Were they killed?"

"Oh no, dear boy," drawled Bunny. "Failing the initiation just proves that you are not a man at all, doesn't it? That's all the initiation was for, to sort out the roles of the adults."

"But," began Paul, as we all tried to figure that out. "The men who failed ...?"

"They became women," sighed Bunny in mock exasperation. "They couldn't cut their hair. They had to braid it and blacken their eyes, redden their

lips and wear the long skirt like the women do. They even wear halter-type imitation bras and were the prettiest of all the Lakithi women, probably because they don't have to put up with childbearing though most of them seemed to be nursing other women's children, at least the ones Warner and I saw when we were there. The chief had two wives like that."

"Wives?" asked Paul, shocked. I glanced at the stunned faces of all of my colleagues and that's when I noticed that Rayfield was just glancing at Bunny and smiling to himself, not disturbed at all. Yes, I'd seen that expression before somewhere but I still couldn't place it.

"What else could they do in a society that said they were women?" asked Bunny, his eyes gleaming at the outcry he'd stirred up with one of his little stories again.

"But that means," said a red-faced Tom Scully. "The ugatha."

"Of course," said Bunny, his smile now positively wicked. "A lot of the real men had wives whom we would call men. And the warriors we knew were women, all had wives who were male to us. Ilithin, a warrior woman, had the prettiest wife, Janna. It was funny because Ilithin looked fat and we never saw another fat Lakithi. Warner whispered to me when I remarked on it that Ilithin was pregnant and I mustn't notice it.

"When we came back on the return half of that trip, we found that Ilithin had died in childbirth and the cute, adorable Janna had been remarried to the chief's son who had just become a man, a husband and a father to Janna's new little girl. He was really affectionate to her in public, hugging her all the

time, much to the amusement of the other men and women.

“That’s when we learned that the Lakithi can blush as well as Janna used to blush all the time, especially when she had to put the ugatha on her husband for the Council meetings. Most of the men just let their wives give them a peck before the women were sent on their way. Janna was one of the few we saw who was really kissed passionately by her husband.. The chief complained that seeing how affectionately his son treated his wife was making all the women jealous and the men were feeling compelled to compete.”

“Oh, Bunny,” cut in Joe Adair, who’d been quiet up till then. “You’re just being preposterous as usual.” At some time in our formal dinners, Old Joe, an ex-general, could be relied upon to become apoplectic at somebody. “No society is ever going to tolerate a horde of men taking on women’s roles. It just isn’t, isn’t natural!”

Bunny just smiled, I noticed, and Rayfield smiled just like him, but his was directed at me, as hubbub and argument burst out all over the small audience around the Ship Room bar.

There were perhaps just seven of us left when Rayfield, by himself at one end of the bar, signalled to me to come and refill his glass. I stared at him, at his clean, clear face and something tickled at my memory but I couldn’t make it come to the surface.

“It’s surprising what a society will tolerate, isn’t it,” Rayfield whispered to me, “when it is the gods who command what they must do.” I know I gaped at him. He flushed and nodded. “I mean, Bunny’s story is very likely to be true,” he added.

The group sort of broke up then. I was left with just Rayfield, leaning on the bar, clearly wanting to say something more to me.

“Did something similar to what Bunny described happen to you on your travels, Captain?” I asked him, more to give me time to think where I had seen Rayfield before, other than the meetings he’d begun to attend again, after a five-year hiatus.

“Well, it wasn’t precisely the same story,” said Rayfield, swirling the last drops of his brandy in the large snifter.

When Old Joe had stalked off to the Common Room and, grinning, Tom Scully and Bunny Gorton had gone after him, the others left their glasses all over before following them. I sighed and went to retrieve them. I wasn’t the barman. I was actually an archivist for the Club but I was around so often that I helped out wherever I could.

“Would you like to talk about it?” I asked Rayfield. There were only the two of us left in the bar. “For the archives?” I added with a smile. We’d had a lively discussion going on earlier that night that no-one ever read the archives of the society any more. The planet had become too well known.

The Captain was reluctant. “Well, I did come here tonight to talk to you about something else,” he said, watching me as I collected glasses. I brought up a Cognac from beneath the bar that he hadn’t seen before. He tasted it and a smile of pleasure lit up his thin, patrician face.

“It wasn’t an exploit that I’m terribly proud of,” Rayfield said quietly, staring down at his long, clean fingernails, almost womanish and effeminate, I noticed, but which he hid from me when he saw me

notice them. “I guess I can tell you about it first. I haven’t told anyone this real story ever before. I’ll tell you, and you can understand me better, if you want to, but I’d appreciate it if, this time, you didn’t put this one into your records.”

Then he told me all about his strange journey to the city of Subbujah and the girl, Anisoyya, who was the handmaiden of the Kon, ‘the Living God’, who ruled one of the most ordered cities I had ever heard of, a handmaiden who wasn’t a woman.

*******TRADE GOODS*******

I had no definite reason to make the trip up to Subbujah. My colleague and junior by a few months, Lieutenant Martin Davenport, was against us taking the time for a side trip up the isolated valley. We were mapping the Upper Intra system and the Dallah was an important tributary of the great river. We’d been out for so long that I felt the need for contact with people, any civilized people, and so I ordered our party to divert just a little to the city of Ahdallah.

The marketplace at Ahdallah was one of the most incredible sights I’ve ever seen. We stabled our horses and pack mules, found rooms for ourselves and our assistant, actually my batman, Cochrane, and headed out to see the sights through streets of vendors of every conceivable product. Davenport even got to smile and relax himself and say that it wasn’t such a bad idea to stop for a day or so but I knew that he was really preoccupied with getting back to his lady friend before she moved on from her stay in the cool foothills and the tea plantations to Singapore. I knew because he told me that every

time we made a side trip to make our records accurate.

“We don’t have to go all the way up to Subbujah,” he told me. “Let’s leave something for Hedges and his mob.”

“Subbujah, sir,” one of the vendors exclaimed, jumping in front of us. I’m short and Davenport is even shorter than me but this dirty, brown-skinned man was even smaller than either of us. He had a dirty, red cloth about his head and a lank, black hair hung about his face. He had a straggly growth of black beard like so many other people milling about us. He seemed more Turkmen in origin, I thought, than most people in that part of the Himalayas.

“Sedrip Golapal at your service, honored sirs,” the wiry, little man said making a deep salaam, adding another culture to the myriad I was trying to place him in. “Is it that the honored gentlemen are contemplating a caravan to Subbujah?”

Up to that moment, I hadn’t been entirely sure of what I wanted. Beggars swarmed about Martin and me, babbling away in Urdu, Kashmiri, Punjabi and all the other dialects of Northern India. I tried to ignore them.

“You’re from Subbujah?” I asked the little man, Golapal, who was smiling most obsequiously and showing a mouth full of yellow, peglike teeth.

“Born there, sir,” said the little man, bobbing his head. “And ready to return as guide if the honorable gentlemen so desire.”

“We don’t have time,” said Martin.

“Never been an Englishman, ever, to have set foot in the City of Splendor,” said Golapal with a bright smile.

That made up my mind. In all my travels, I’d never set foot in a place where an Englishman hadn’t set his foot before me. I looked at Martin and smiled.

“And, if I go with this man as my guide, an Englishman still won’t have set foot in Subbujah,” I said to Martin, who scowled at me. Since the War was over, I’d taken advantage of my British heritage, even though I was American, to be one of the few officers loaned to the Ordnance Survey which had been trying for eighty years or more to get accurate maps of the Northern frontier states.

We weren’t volunteers exactly. We were loans to an understaffed, allied armed service, from an army that was reducing itself in size as isolationist forces took over American politics. Working in India was a good way to blood up and coming officers, or so it was put to me when I ‘volunteered’.

It had been thrilling to start out to be in so many strange and wonderful places and to correct the work of people whose names had been legends to us. Now we had a chance, if we believed Golapal, to put our own names on a map, maybe even declare where the border was. The Rayfield Line, I thought smugly. Then I looked at my partner.

“The Rayfield-Davenport Line?” I asked and he considered it.

“The Davenport-Rayfield Line,” he suggested, knowing exactly what I meant and why I’d suggested it.

“I would like to go up to Subbujah,” I told Martin. “Wouldn’t you like to see the Palace of Splendor?” We’d heard the name of Subbujah’s wonder, at least.

“Oh, that is marvellous, sir, absolutely marvellous,” said Golapal gleefully, jumping up and down and rubbing his hands together while he gave us both sly looks. “We shall need supplies, sir, yes, sir. Yes, many supplies, honored gentlemen.”

I was amused by the little man’s enthusiasm. I allowed myself to be led all through the Ahdallah bazaar while Sedrip Golapal suggested what supplies were necessary for the diversion into the foothills up the Dallah River to its junction with the Subbah and the city of Subbujah.

“What can we trade for in Subbujah?” I asked our guide as we fingered delicately-designed, yet hard-wearing, Pushtun rugs. The thin-faced dealer looked at our white faces and uniforms with surprise and kept watching us as we moved on to finely-wrought brassware. All about us, brown-skinned people, of short stature, milled about gesticulating and arguing. Bargains were struck and there were smiles but often the customer stalked off in a huff. Young children passed in front of us with trays of aromatic, roasted meat, thrusting their trays at anyone who looked to have money.

“The silk you can get in Subbujah is finer than anything in this market,” Golapal told us. “Leave it to me, honored sirs, and I will find the right products for you to take up to Subbujah. I know exactly what will trade well.”

I smiled to Martin. “Well, that settles it. We can’t pass on acquiring the finest of silk for Dorothy and

Enid, can we?" I was referring to Davenport's lovely sisters who had asked him for that in their last letter to him, three months on the road reaching us after a month at sea.

Martin nodded in resignation. I gave Golapal a generous advance for 'trade goods' and his eyes widened in pleasure.

"Do you think we'll see him again?" Martin asked with a smile.

"If we don't, we'll head right back to Delhi," I promised him.

But the next morning, in a marketplace almost devoid of people, Golapal was waiting with packs and packs of stuff, ready to be loaded onto our mules.

"Strewth," said Cochrane, my English batman. He'd paid off the helpers who had been with us across the north as Golapal had said that we would only need another groom besides him and he would get someone. "How much did you give him, sir? I think he's bought up the 'ole bleeding market."

There was even a line of small, tough mountain ponies and near to the brazier, two small, dark, robed figures, warming their hands. A slim youth, his dark hair covered by a burnoose, watched us approach.

Cochrane spat in the dirt as the youth looked insolently at him, clearly making him out to be a servant to us, the officers. "Papers?" asked Cochrane and surprisingly the youth had them.

"Ghani," said Cochrane to us. "Says here he's nineteen. Don't look it, does he?"

“Well,” said Davenport to me as Golapal brought up one of the ponies and began to put a load onto its back. “I guess he can be trusted with gold at least.” He, like Cochrane, was staring at the two figures in what appeared to be black chadors. One lifted his head to look at us. His face was framed by the black robe that covered his hair but not his face. He was beardless like Ghani. His eyes were large and framed by the curliest, dark eyelashes I have ever seen.

I knew then why Davenport and Cochrane were distressed. We had heard and seen the custom of ‘caravan’ wives before all across the North. Women were not travellers at this time. When the men went out on long, trading expeditions, young men served the older men in ways that were ‘not nice’. Such boys were treated as women.

I noted that neither made any move to help with the ponies or loading them. We had seen them before, Davenport and me, boys in lipstick and jewels, earrings visible if their hair was not, riding while their husbands trudged beside them, the ‘wives’ occasionally giving a gentle caress of encouragement to the men who provided them with food and employment.

Golapal frowned at the paper in Cochrane’s hand. Cochrane snapped his finger at him and so he produced three battered identity papers, similar to Ghani’s. “Dajir and Adi Allal,” said Cochrane as Golapal looked shocked as our batman read the documents with ease. His abilities with written and spoken language were the reasons why he’d been assigned to me in the first place. “Says here that they both turned eighteen at the beginning of the year.”

Golapal indicated to Ghani to assist in bringing up the ponies and lightly laden mules and began putting more packs onto the ponies as they arrived.

“What’s in all the packages?” asked Martin.
“What goods are we taking to trade?”

Cochrane moved over and opened one pack as Golapal called to him to stop.

“Blimey, sir,” squawked Cochrane to me. “There ain’t nothing in here but women’s clobber.” He held up a woman’s white, whalebone corset, taken from the bundle, a black and a red soon following.

I began to laugh at the incongruous sight while Martin blushed. Cochrane dropped the parcel. Golapal moved to tidy it up as Ghani just stood, holding the pony, watching Cochrane opening more packs.

“Women’s dresses,” he said, turning to another. “Women’s undies and shoes,” Cochrane reported, showing me a dainty high-heeled shoe he pulled from that pack.

My laughter died as I saw all the packs had nothing but women’s wear, and cosmetics for women, in them. There was one pack just with stockings.

“Golapal!” I snapped at him. He stopped his re-packing and came to me. He stopped on the way just enough to tell the two figures to assist him. They both stood gracefully and flowed over the ground in their dark robes like wraiths.

“What are you doing?” I asked him. “Is this what you are trading for in Subbujah?” I looked at the youths who seemed taller, older, now that they weren’t huddled over the fire. “And those two. Slav-

ery is absolutely forbidden.” I didn’t want to mention that I thought they were ‘caravan wives’.

“Oh, honorable sir,” said Golapal, rolling his eyes so that the whites showed. “How could you think that of me, Sedrip Golapal, son of Golapal the moneylender? Have I not shown you how you can trust me with your gold and returned to you that which I did not use?” He had returned a few silvers and a small bag of what looked like copper washers. “These unfortunates,” he indicated the boys, “I return to Subbujah as a favor to their father, my cousin, in exile over a small matter in regard to money. He wishes them to learn the life of the Ajji from the monks at Kejja.” He shrugged.

“And him?” I asked, pointing at the slim youth holding the ponies’ reins.

“Ghani?” asked a seemingly puzzled Golapal. “He is a groom. I bought him here in Ahdallah since you have so many mules and horses.”

“Bought?” asked Martin in distaste at the word.

“I paid the family well, honorable sir,” said Golapal indignantly. “In truth, sir, it is to you whom he belongs since it was your coins that purchased him.”

I saw Martin’s jaw clench and I knew he wanted to dispute more with the bewildered little man. I had long ago learned, however, that observing and respecting local customs gave us the least grief in the long run.

“We can return the lad and his ponies to his family when we return,” I told Martin Davenport. “Perhaps we can get our old grooms back.”

Martin wasn't mollified but at least we were able to get under way. Golapal packed the horses and mules with a shrewdness that boded well for his acumen in other things. I began to think that, if he felt there was a market for women's clothing in Subbujah, then there probably was a fortune to be made. I hoped so as I hadn't told Martin that it was our reserve funds that I had mistakenly given to Golapal instead of our travel and trade fund, golden guineas instead of silver shillings. Well, I couldn't tell the difference by weight. I just hoped Golapal had chosen well enough for us to recoup most of our money in this strange city of Subbujah.

Along the way, I raised the matter of our strange 'trade goods' and Golapal smiled sheepishly at me as he explained. "As for the trade goods, sir," he said, "the Kon's sister, that is our ruler's sister, sir, wishes to travel. She needs proper clothing like your women use. So do the womenfolk of many noble families who have said that they would like to travel as well."

I was pretty doubtful of that explanation but, since I had trusted him so far, I decided in the end that I should just carry on doing that. What an idiot I was!

*******THE CITY OF SPLENDOR*******

It took us five days to reach Subbujah after we forded the slow-moving Dallah and headed north-eastwards across dry, yellow-grass plains into the foothills. An abrupt turn of the river as it flowed out of a sandstone gorge and we were headed due north and off normal trade routes.

Subbujah had not been visited before, not because it wasn't worth it. The city and valley were not poor. We could see that. Simply, it was off the beaten track. The High Khirani Mountains stood beyond the Dallah valley like a wall. The gorge route was magnificent but daunting. We mapped the route as we went, adding a day to our travel by all the stops that we made for Martin and I to do our work.

As we'd found throughout our work, the distances on the maps we had were woefully out of kilter. Subbujah itself was nearly thirty-five miles further north than the last expedition had placed it. I might never have gone up there if I'd known it was so far away.

Golapal and his nephews and the groom stayed out of our way and behaved with remarkable patience as we set up our instruments with Cochrane wherever we could. It inevitably meant a long wait in the hot sun for the boys. I noticed they never took off the chadors, I thought it the wrong word as it was a word for a woman's form of dress, but I used it because that's what they looked like to me.

At night, I did notice once or twice, a gleam of color at times as the boys quietly ate their food and the robe opened just a little. They would clutch the robes to themselves when that happened and I thought at the time that I had seen the neckline of a pretty, girl's dress and the sparkle had been from a necklace. But it was covered so quickly that I thought I was seeing things. I should have paid more attention. Then, perhaps, we wouldn't all have paid so dearly for our visit to Subbujah as we finally did.

On the fifth day, we caught our first sight of Subbujah. It was built into the point made by the

junction of the two rivers. We stayed on the eastern side so that we went past the town to the ford across the flat, slow-moving river just north of the city. At the pinnacle of the rock that stood high and on guard over the widespread city, stood what Golapal called the Palace of the Kon, the ruler of the city.

“A derivative of ‘khan?’” suggested Martin to me but Golapal, at our elbow as guide immediately denied any connection between the long-ago Moslem invaders of Northern India and the rulers of Subbujah.

The high, sandstone towers of the Palace took on a golden glow in the evening as we splashed across the Dallah, pausing to water our horses, ponies and mules. There was a sprawl of buildings along the low shore where we could enter freely, Golapal said. The bridges we’d seen on the far side were toll bridges, he told us, where ‘greedy’ guards would demand payments for letting our trade goods into the city.

Golapal urged us on as the sun began to set through the beggars’ town, as he called it, though, strangely, we saw none. He said we should hurry and get inside the city walls for the night where we would all be under the protection of the gods of Subbujah.

“You mean under the protection of the Kon,” said Davenport, echoing Golapal’s short, flat pronunciation of the word.

Golapal rolled his eyes again. “The Kon,” he stated, giving me a sideways’ glance as well, “is a God.” Then, he went off way in front of us so that we didn’t have the chance to ask him what that meant.

Not that we would have understood anyway that his words meant exactly what he'd said.

We followed him through a high, narrow gate in the sand-brick wall. The sentries, in sand-colored uniforms, stared at us on our horses. They spoke rapidly to Golapal as we sat on our big mounts and he shrugged several times at them. Several went to the packs and checked them but then they ignored everything but our sidearms. They jabbered at me and wanted my revolver but I shook my head in refusal and finally they shrugged and just gave up.

With cursory waves of brown arms, we were permitted, to my amazement to ride into the narrow streets of Subbujah. We had no tolls to pay and no-one, no beggars at all crowded about us. Oh, people stopped to look at us. Many looked down, solemn-faced from four and five storey buildings.

“Have you ever seen so many pretty girls, sir?” remarked Cochrane, smiling and waving as the girls in their gorgeous dresses, very much like saris, but not exactly the same. They had long, black hair down their backs and, even from horseback, we could see that the girls of Subbujah wore a lot of makeup, their lips like strings of red roses as we rode by.

There were few people actually on the streets and the girls watched us solemnly, not waving back at all. Our caravan seemed finally all alone as we made a sudden turn under an archway and followed Golapal into a stable yard.

Two stocky, bearded men came forward and argued with Golapal. It must have been about the price of our lodging for suddenly they shrugged, headed to our ponies and mules and began to take

the packs off the animals before leading them off to various stalls in another yard past and through another archway.

“This is an inn of my cousins, honorable sirs,” said Golapal, bowing low to us as we dismounted. “Please follow me, sirs, to a most welcome evening meal. My cousins will prepare a room for you while you dine. It is quite safe, I assure you, as everyone here is a member of the landlord’s family.”

I was wondering which of the men were Golapal’s cousins and why he made a point of mentioning our safety; but our guide darted off into the building and so we had no choice but to follow. We stepped through a curtained doorway into a scented room, long and brightly lit. Low tables were spread about the room and many people sat in groups cross-legged on the cushions and low divans that surrounded the tables. There were no chairs as we knew them.

On the low tables were set out dishes which were the source of the spicy, mouth-watering aromas that made my mouth salivate. There were meat stews, breads, and steaming vegetables covered with spices and sauces. Beside each of the men, who looked up at us in varied degrees of surprise, there were little pots of a steaming brown liquid that couldn’t have been just tea the way it seemed to induce much lip-smacking and shuddering when it was imbibed.

Beside each man, as well, a beautiful girl sat, a pretty picture in her colorful, silk sari. Each wore a great deal of golden jewellery and a great deal of makeup. Many of the girls had her long hair taken up or piled at the back of their heads in a bun. I had never seen so many attractive girls in one room in my life. It was funny, though, how demure they all

were. They all tended to look away, and many seemed to be blushing, though the makeup made it hard to tell, whenever one of us men looked at them.

The babble of conversation died as Martin and I entered and went to where Golapal and one of the bearded men were plumping up cushions arranging them beside several low divans. Cochrane had stayed with our packs and belongings. He had insisted, quite rightly, that our survey instruments were too precious to be allowed to fall into the hands of those only searching for weapons. And he was certain that we would be searched for small arms.

“Here, honored sirs,” said Golapal, bowing and showing us where to sit. As soon as we did, the conversation around us resumed again. His taller, thinner cousins disappeared through curtains at the end of the room.

“The best inn in Subbujah,” proclaimed Golapal as he sprawled on one divan, smiling as we were interrupted by the sudden appearance of a long-legged, dark-haired girl. She walked barefoot over the carpet, her anklets tinkling, announcing her passage. She sank gracefully in her long, silk skirts and placed dishes on the low table before Martin and me.

She was followed by more girls who looked like her sisters who brought us pots of the steaming drink, a hot, spiced tea with some alcohol also added to it, and plates to eat from, painted with scenes of the gods at play, or so Golapal said. He gestured to the fine tapestries that descended the walls from the beams that supported the ceiling. Several I noticed with interest seemed to be of woven silk. They would have brought a fortune back in San Francisco if we could ever get them there.

The girls, heavily made up and scented, long hair pinned up in large, colorful ribbons at the backs of their heads, moved on about the other tables replacing cold pots with warm ones, flashing long fingernails of painted reds and golds. They moved so gracefully, like dancers, that it was almost a shame to see them leave. Not one of them. I noticed, had smiled at us or at any of the other men in the room.

Our table groaned at the weight of the succulent foods they had brought us down the long, narrow room. "Your cousin has very beautiful daughters," I told Golapal who was greedily shoving food into his mouth as if he had not eaten in a year.

Golapal shook his head and glanced at me with narrowed eyes. "The landlord has no daughters," he said. I recalled what he had said earlier about all being members of the family. I should have pursued that. It might have made us leave right away to learn the truths about Subbujah at the beginning but a line of musicians suddenly entered from the far end of the inn, moving past us to an empty set of tables where they set up with their instruments.

Several moved around the room with guitar-like instruments stopping at what I had begun to think of as family groups at the various tables at the innermost end of the room. The strolling players stopped at the pretty daughters in almost every family who smiled at their serenades which clearly seemed to be aimed at them. I guessed that they were complimenting the girls on their feminine beauty which made it quite odd that most of the people, I noticed, looked quite glum as the music progressed.

The musicians finally settled in the middle of the room, seated in a circle about the tables now cov-

ered in a fine cloth. Then the girls I had thought were the landlord's daughters entered again in a procession of glittering, bejewelled, silk-dressed women. I had thought them as graceful as dancers and that is what they were. They formed an inner ring with the musicians outside them.

We watched in fascination as they danced, swirling out their skirts over the heads of the musicians. I would have liked to be closer as I saw so many skirts of so many different colors swirled by. Then each girl took a turn on the table to dance most gracefully, many wiggling their hips and shaking their covered breasts most suggestively to the music.

The dancing girls were as serious as the audience that watched them. I felt a tension rise unbearably as one of the musicians set down his stringed instrument and stood up with the last dancer, a girl in purple skirts. What made her dance so sensual was that she didn't look at him, even though he held her tightly about her waist and spun her about him, his chin caressing her soft shoulders and hair as he ran his hands all down her body, touching her in places that I wouldn't have liked my daughter to be touched.

As I observed the girls, I noticed little differences between them. Each had long, black hair now worn loosely as it fell below their shoulders. Their eyes were outlined in thick, black lines and their upper eyelids were also covered with black 'kohl'. Their eyebrows were very thin and outlined in kohl as well while their skins were lightened by some kind of cream or powder. Their cheeks were rouged softly unlike the vivid slash of red paint on their lips.

Each wore a wide vest with puffed sleeves over their arms. A fringe of small tassels hung down over their bare midriffs. The skirts they wore came down to mid-calf, exposing their anklets that matched the bracelets and necklaces adorning them in abundance. They wore so many skirts that they rustled as they danced and their skirts caught those of their neighbors. In one dance, they all put on high heels and the click of their high heels on the wooden floor reminded me of Spain.

The girls then turned in invitation to the audience and several men got up slowly and joined the other male dancer who was holding onto the girl he had danced with. The tension seemed to rise even more as the girls did a dance and weave about the tables and one or two men got up and joined the line.

More men slipped in each time the girls passed a new table until it seemed to me that each girl was partnered. Then the lead girl led the dancing line into the far, dark part of the inn, away from the bright lights and the line disappeared behind the curtains.

Several of the musicians got up and left. Just a couple remained, playing lightly. The tension evaporated and the conversation resumed. Our cold pots of tea were replaced by the landlord and another of the bearded cousins, or so I supposed.

It was on the tip of tongue to ask where the girls and the men had gone and what they were up to. I didn't. Well, after all, I really am not that naïve. I really didn't have to ask what a pretty girl and a handsome man would be doing in a dark room somewhere in a roadside inn. I only wondered if we

were going to be introduced to the custom some time later in Subbujah.

“That was excellent, very good,” I said. “The dancing,” I added as the little man didn’t seem to be exactly listening to me. Golapal’s thoughts seemed to be miles away. I was about to try another compliment about the number of pretty girls in the inn when he sat down the spiked tea he was sipping on and glanced at me.

Our guide pulled a face. “Real girls are better,” Golapal finally said, standing and going over to the landlord, his relative, talking away to him, while the other looked at him very grimly.

I was about to go after him when my progress was halted by the arrival of one of the most gorgeous women I have ever seen. She joined the musicians and began a solo, graceful dance that stilled conversation again. Her long hair stretched down her back to her derriere. Her hair was garlanded with what looked like fresh roses and other pink and yellow flowers. She wore a veil, but it was transparent, showing off her heavy makeup and womanly figure, like those of the other dancers.

She wore flimsy skirts, several transparent, like the other girls, hers all varieties of pink and red. She swirled and we had a view of her lovely legs, so bare save for the anklets. Martin and I could see that she wore red, silk panties.

Martin glanced at me and winked. “Seems like our guide knows his trade goods,” he said disparagingly. The girl was now swirling about the tables, rustling her skirts over the heads of the older, grey-bearded patriarchs at each table. She didn’t smile or complain as different men reached out and

touched her, stroking her legs. She hovered and flipped her skirts over the men who touched her before moving on gracefully to the next table. So low was her skirt, exposing her midriff, that we could see her jewelled navel and see her hips gyrate, particularly when men touched her rear end so familiarly.

Finally, she came to our table, the first of the dancers to do so. She glanced at Golapal and Martin. Then her eyes, so dark and beautiful, rested on me. She danced past the others and her scented skirts touched me. I saw her high, little bust rising and falling from her exertions. She twirled beside me and I saw the bows and ribbons across her back.

Her hip brushed against me. I put up a hand to steady her quite involuntarily just as she raised her skirts and was touching her legs, so smooth and lovely. She lowered her body, her skirts hiding from everybody that she'd settled her panties right onto my hand. My fingers were trapped by warm, hairless skin and then she was gone, a musky scent lingering on my fingers.

She did other dances as musicians came and went from the group. She quivered and shook before the group in her high-heeled sandals. Her retirement from the circle released a sigh of pent-up, tense emotion from me and the same emotion seemed to have affected every man in the room.

“Now she was very, very good,” I said to Golapal as the musicians played on. “Even you have to admit that.”

“No, honorable sir, I would not admit that,” said Golapal, looking me directly in the eye. “I would not say that she was very good.”

I was shocked. “Well, Mr Golapal, what would you say?” I asked him huffily.

Our guide made a wry face. “I would say, honored gentlemen,” Golapal said to Martin and me, “that he was very good.”

*******THE LIVING GOD*******

“It can’t be true,” exclaimed Martin for the umpteenth time. I stood in the window of our upper floor room and looked over the tiled roofs of the city to the huge, impassive walls of the Palace of Subbujah. We had taken our regimental dress uniforms, I had honorary rank in the British Army, from Cochrane and put them on, feeling somehow more protected, I suppose, in the uniform of a great power, reassurance against the strangeness of this place.

“The Living God may do as he pleases,” said Golapal, sitting on the floor, his back to the wall by the door.

I couldn’t see Martin’s face as we hadn’t shuttered the windows or lit the oil lamp yet so that we could study the Palace in all its vastness. Martin was likely as flushed as me as we tried to make sense of what Golapal was telling us.

Kamara, the dancer, he said, had once been one of his stable boys, like Ghani, but the easy living provided by the inns of Subbujah had proved too tempting.

There was no point me lecturing Golapal who had already admitted that the two robed boys he had brought with him into Subbujah were his ‘caravan wives’. I tried to be casual, Martin couldn’t manage it, to different ideas about sexual congress

between genders, and within genders, that seemed to be so different to ours.

It was easy, in the abstract, on the boat ride through the Mediterranean and across the Indian Ocean through the Bay of Bengal to Calcutta, to state principles that one would adhere to in all circumstances. Here, confronted by a man in a culture that didn't have any idea of sin as we knew it, the topic of conversation, the gender of the spectacular 'female' dancer, made me feel queasy all over.

"You would like Kamara to share your bed?" Golapal asked us then. "She'll be truly disappointed if not one of you white gentlemen sends for her quite soon. Well, if you gentlemen will not indulge, perhaps I might reward her for entertaining you gentleman so well. After all, it should not be that only Sar Cochrane indulges with the dancer, Liara, should it? Rather reflects on the masculinity of our party."

"Why," I asked our guide grimly, meaning to castigate Cochrane when I saw him next, "do the rulers of this place, yes, the Living God," I said testily as Golapal was about to launch into another explanation of how the city was ruled, "allow such despicable practices to exist in the inns of this city?"

"It is not just in the inns, honored sirs," said Golapal with a sigh. "You see, here in Subbujah, there is no distinction between religion and political rule. The Kon is not a high priest or a lama to us. He is not a holy man. He is much more. He is a god, the Living God."

"But he is born a man?" I asked skeptically.

"Yes," agreed Golapal. "But when the Kon ascends to the ruler's chair, he is taken and secreted for one month all alone in the God Tower," Golapal

indicated the highest, lonely tower, tall and thin, isolated from the main mass of the Palace, looking over the junction of the rivers, “to allow one of the gods to take possession of him to rule over us poor replicas of them.



“When he leaves the God Tower, the Kon is infused with the spirit of one of the gods. The monks of each god’s service pray fervently, of course, that it will be their god who chooses to invade the Kon’s mortal frame. The Living God takes up the rule of Subbujah until he tires of it. Sooner or later, the God does begin to find our petty complaints tiresome and returns to what we call Heaven, leaving the husk of the Kon destroyed. But the spirit of the one who called the god has now gone on to live forever as part of that god. Ah, how glorious that must be, to be part of a god.”

Golapal had seemed quite enraptured by that thought.

“So, who is the Living God now?” asked Martin as I was still thinking about it. “Which of your gods do you think is currently residing here as the Living God of Subbujah?”

“When the Kon is cast aside,” said Golapal after a long pause, “the next male relative of the last Kon ascends the God Tower and a new God takes up residence in the city of Subbujah to the glory of the city.

“Ah, it was so wonderful when Attalal, whom the Hindus worship as Krishna, was in power. I cried when the city was forsaken by Attalal after so many years. But I was just sixteen years old at the time. It was terrible after that when Shotti came among us. He is the god of death and the city became a charnel house. I can barely think about it without recoiling in horror, oh honorable sirs. No-one cried when Death finally cast aside his red cloaks in boredom and left us for greater mayhem elsewhere.

“The reign of our new god started out auspiciously enough. Some even thought that Attalal had returned, but since the god never reveals himself outright, it was only gradually that the priests realized that Attalal had not become the first of the gods to return to Subbujah. Many thought, and some still do, that it was Pellar, god of illusion and dissimulation, who had begun a reign though he has never shown an interest in Subbujah before.

“The purification ceremonies ordered by the Kon, carried out by white-dressed ‘maidens’ who were then found out to be young boys and not girls, was the first important sign of the identity of our new god. Then came the attack on the ruling families of Subbujah and the whole valley. All the handsome young men of marriageable age, eighteen here, were captured and brought to the Palace where the Kon chose many for his harem, dressing them all as women. The priests told us then that the Living God was the two-faced goddess, Ellatti-Pita, perversity itself, whom some say is a twin deity. Ellatti-Pita now ruled us and we must obey her as we had Allatal and Shotti.”

“This can’t be happening,” protested Martin, his lower lip trembling. “You can’t believe such, such weirdness, not in this day and age!”

I looked up at the huge palace as Martin persisted, trying to argue with Golapal. It seemed to me though, as I looked at the Palace that modern times had not yet reached Subbujah. The Living God had kept out all such corrupting influences for which the Ajji, the people of the rivers and valleys, seemed grateful by Golapal’s account.

“Why us, Mr Golapal?” I asked him. “Why did you bring us into this world?”

There was a creak as the little man rose. He came over to the window and I was astounded by the change in him. All deference in his manner was gone. He looked almost haughty as he looked out over the city. Then he pointed to a high dome, against the Palace, piercing the skyline, far to our left, the south.

“That was my birthplace,” Golapal said softly. “Once I had a family there. But I was reckless. I wanted to see the world out of the valleys. I left the family in the first days of the rule of the new Attalal. You have not mentioned that I speak English well.” He glanced back and smiled at me. “No matter. It is part of your conceit as British that you will find someone everywhere who will understand you. I do believe that I understand you well.

“You will be called to an audience in the Palace. The Kon will be very amused by your trade goods. He will acquire them all for his growing harem of catamites.” Golapal’s mouth twisted as he used such a word. “See. I even know your most gruesome words. If you like, you may even take Dajir and Adi with you as gifts. You were right that I bought them in the slave market in Ahdallah. The Kon will love them.” He smiled grimly at me. “Now there’s a market that still grows and flourishes even under the rule of the Raj, doesn’t it?”

“See here,” I began angrily to the little man who clearly thought me an influential British officer. I hated the practice of slavery of all kinds, in any case.

“You must kill the Kon,” stated Golapal without further ceremony. My blood ran cold and I heard Davenport gasp from the bedside where he sat. “I shall conceal weapons for you.” He drew out a small,

snub-nosed Derringer from his belt. “Dajir, I shall dress as an English girl. No-one will dare to touch him like that until the Kon has seen him, not until the Kon gives leave anyway. It is your duty as officers of Her Imperial Majesty to free her subjects from tyranny.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. Hold on there,” I snapped. “British officers are not exactly in the business of murder.” Yes, I included myself there.

Golapal was very still and then he sighed. As he expelled air, he seemed to reduce in size, returning to how we had first seen him as a poverty-stricken guide and trader. “No, honored sirs, no,” he said gently, his eyes cast down in deference. “That was too much to expect, was it not, from honored gentlemen like yourselves.”

I looked hard at him but there didn’t seem to be any expression of sarcasm on his face.

“So, honored sirs,” Golapal went on in his wheedling tones. “I beg you. Please keep your eyes open as you visit the Palace of Splendor. Much, I fear, will be concealed from you. But, if you should leave alive, I pray you, honored sirs, in the memory of my young and ravished son, please bring back the might of the Raj to punish these people for what they have done.”

There was a catch in his voice as he suddenly left the window and darted off to the doorway. I shouted to Martin but he was too slow to prevent the guide from slipping out of the room and disappearing into the gloomy passageway. As I stepped away from the window, my foot crunched on something. I bent down and picked up the snub-nosed revolver from

where Golapal had dropped it. I stuck it into the money pocket of my uniform to get it out of sight.

“What did he mean,” gasped Martin anxiously, “if we get out of here alive?”

I had caught that as well and cursed myself for being such a fool. For six days, I had been congratulating myself on what a wonderful judge of character I was. I ought to have known better.

“We’d better talk to Cochrane,” I said. The older sergeant was a typical scrounger, his last officer had said, and he was quite right. If there was something we had to do to survive, Cochrane would know what it was. He had prevented us from putting our foot in it several times already on our meandering through the tribes of northern India. I was realizing now that I was way in over my head in being the first Englishman, I suppose that was Martin and Cochrane, really, in Subbujah.

*******THE MORNING AFTER*******

We spent a restless night, watch on and watch off, but nothing untoward happened and dawn came with anything unusual having occurred. I shaved in cold water from the previous evening while Martin, being so fair, didn’t need to. We ventured slowly down the gloomy passages only to meet one of the waitresses from the previous evening, carrying a tray of dishes from one of the rooms. She was already heavily made up, her thin frame in a white dress that hugged what appeared to me to be a very feminine figure. She flashed us a smile, looking very pretty for a moment, and then she was gone, darting down the stairs ahead of us.

From below on the stairs, we heard a shouting, low and harsh, and several voices raised and calling out in whatever language it was that the Aji, the people of Subbujah, spoke. Golapal came racing up the stairs, crashing right into us. I took out my Service revolver.

“Ah, honored sirs,” said Golapal laughingly, retreating and bowing low. “Maka said that you were coming from above. Breakfast has already been served to the other guests but I have insisted that Jinnal prepare a late breakfast for the representatives of Her Imperial Majesty.”

I should have corrected him. But it just didn't seem to be worth the time and trouble. The word of Queen Victoria's death nearly thirty years before seemed not to have reached this part of the world.

I holstered my sidearm and followed Golapal down the stairs and into a huge kitchen area, a fire roaring in the hearth, women cooks ordering young girls about just like the 'Maka' we had met on the stairs.

A flat japati was dropped on my hand by a girl whose black, madeup eyes winked at me impishly as she darted away, avoiding a swing of the hand from one of the fat cooks. The girl smiled and brought me a ladle of hot, spicy meat that she put onto the japati and then showed me how to roll up the flat bread, her long nails pricking my hand.

I hurriedly pulled up the edges of the pancake as another girl, with flowers in her hair, was shyly doing the same for a very nervous Martin. I couldn't decide if these were boys or girls serving us but they looked so much like girls I decided that Golapal must be wrong.

I was hungry as well. I licked the sauce as it ran out of the japati. It was delicious but I had more pressing business than eating. Golapal waved us to a table where he was pouring hot liquid into the pots like those we had drunk from the night before, taking one himself.

“Cochrane,” I said hoarsely, setting the japati onto one of the dishes Golapal set at the table. “Where is my batman?” Golapal looked at me blankly. “My valet? My manservant?”

“He is not with you?” asked Golapal, bewildered.

“You said he was with Liara,” I told him, taking a drink of tea without alcohol. It was very good.

Golapal spoke rapidly to the girl with the saucy smile who answered him with a pout and a flashing smile. “But he came back to join you last night,” said Golapal, smiling. “He had a very good time, says Liara, but he left her most regretfully at dawn to attend you.”

“We haven’t seen him,” I said, my concern rising immediately.

All humor had drained from Golapal’s face. He thrust his pot back onto the table, jumped up and raced away out of curtained door that led to the common room we had been in the night before.

“These are good,” said Martin as he chewed on the japati and the girl who had served him came over to refill our glasses, deliberately swaying her dresses into Martin as she leaned over him and her long hair fell onto his shoulder and cheek. He jerked away nervously and the girl returned to the others who regarded us both coquettishly over their shoulders as they were scolded by the cooks as they were supposed to be washing dishes.

There was a commotion at the doorway where we had come into the kitchen. Several of the girls called out greetings to the sleepy-eyed woman who came into the kitchen, more girls coming behind her, laughing and skipping, hugging long, colorful robes about themselves.

I recognized the sleepy woman as Kamara, the dancer that Golapal had said was his former stable-boy. I felt quite ill at ease as she rubbed her eyes, not seeing us, I think, right away, her green silk robe rippling as she moved. A green ribbon secured her long hair at her back. Several girls took her feminine hands in theirs and propelled her to another table in the kitchen away from us beyond the fire. Kamara was given delicacies to taste by eager girls and she smiled at them all and seemed to compliment them which made them all smile even more.

Kamara saw us then, laughed and spoke with the girls. She picked up the dish the girls had loaded and her pot of tea. She swayed femininely across to us and sat daintily in the cushions without spilling a drop. She looked at me in amusement as I recalled how she had finished her dance with me with my hand clamped on her red silk panties.

Kamara wore no makeup and yet she seemed so female. Her skin was soft and unblemished. She was still wearing bangles about her arms and large, heavy earrings at her ears. She wasn't at all disturbed by my looking at her painted toenails and fingernails. Mostly, I think, she seemed to be trying to communicate with me what it was I'd missed in not spending the night with her.

Golapal returned, his face stricken. I knew with a sinking feeling just what to expect. "Your man is

dead, honorable sir,” Golapal said in a harsh, strangled tone.

Kamara looked up at him haughtily as he approached, her expression the same as when she had danced in the inn’s common room. She rose with great dignity and would have stalked off past Golapal, her head in the air, a female sway to her hips, if he had not gripped her arm. He snapped a few words at her and she froze, looking at him in great concern, her hand on his arm, exposing all of her long, red-painted nails. If Golapal had been with her the night before, I don’t think that things could have gone well between them.

“He resisted a patrol that was checking a disturbance in the stables,” said Golapal grimly. “Or at least that’s what I was told. The guard sentries at the gates have been tripled.”

Golapal turned to Kamara and spoke angrily to her in Ajji. She looked at the other girls, who seemed to have gathered into a tight group and were staring at her and Golapal. Kamara shook her lovely hair, relaxing under Golapal’s grip against him. Her brown eyes, darkly fringed, glanced worriedly to us and then even more anxiously at Sedrip Golapal.

“Hey,” I said as Golapal shook Kamara and her dresses swished as she moved. She did not resist the way he treated her at all.

Golapal grinned mirthlessly as he looked up at me. He did not relax his grip on Kamara as he continued to question her. She responded quickly, imploringly, her lovely eyes pleading with him over something.

Eventually, Golapal seemed satisfied and let her go. Kamara made no leave to move from him or to remove her hand from his chest.

“You will soon be called before the Living God,” Golapal said calmly. “I must go with you, for your sake. When I am taken away,” his eyes became quite remote, almost black, “you must ask for the monk, Rasuvajji, as interpreter. He has travelled and can speak English. He is high now among the Slaves to the Gods, as we call our priests and monks.”

Golapal turned and snapped at Kamara, but she put both her arms about him, her eyes bright with tears. Golapal raised his hand to her and one of the young girls shrieked. Golapal’s hand stiffened and did not fall. He turned and roared at the cooks and serving girls watching him. Kamara tried to pull him after her but he refused and took her hands from his chest. With a pout, she turned then and stalked out of the kitchen, resentment in every sway of her rounded, feminine hips.

Golapal had relaxed visibly. “Honored sirs,” he said with a smile at us, his nervous employers. “Why wait in here? Let us take our ease in the serving room.” He put a cloth about his hand and took a large pot from the hearth and led us towards the long room we had been in the night before.

“Cochrane’s body,” I said as we numbly followed our guide out of the kitchen and away from what seemed to be a group of twittering girls.

The long, serving room was deserted. Golapal instantly sank into a pile of cushions beside a low table. He smiled and indicated we should sit with him.

“Where is ...?” I began. I never finished the sentence for at that very moment, the outer door, where

we had entered the night before, was suddenly flung open and several heavily armed men came bursting into the room. The rifles pointing at me left me with no chance to unholster my revolver.

Golapal sprang to his feet, conversing rapidly in Aji while several dark-bearded men, scars on their faces as if they were veterans of many battles, casually pointed Lee Enfield rifles at us.

"It's all right," said Golapal in English. "These are Erenta, Palace Guardians. This is the officer in charge." He indicated the most scarred of all the soldiers, hefting an Enfield at the hip just like the others.

"Kuvujji," grunted a voice suddenly from the doorway. An older man who had entered was pointing to the man who had called himself Golapal. "Kuvujji," breathed the man, his neater, darker clothing seeming to indicate rank.

With a snap, the rifles jumped from us and pointed at Golapal. The little guide murmured an English obscenity. "Just remember, honorable gentleman," he said through gritted teeth as he got to his feet, "that I do this for you."

The thin man moved forward, a sword appearing in his hand. The scarred veteran impassively searched Golapal, taking away two knives and two Derringers from our supposedly 'unarmed' guide.

Then, we were shepherded from the inn. A party of Lee Enfield toting infantry veterans, many with grey in their beards, awaited us in the courtyard. We were quickly marched, in a sort of informal formation, through the city. I was impressed by the informal march in which the troops subtly shifted so that none ever had their lines of fire blocked. Hard-

ened, experienced troops, I judged, and a glance at Martin's pale, ashen face told me that he must have come to the same conclusion.

Golapal was kept ahead of us. He walked proudly as if he was at the head of a procession. Girls lined the upper windows of the buildings again as we were hurried along, past silent pedestrians who pulled back into doorways to let us pass through narrow streets.

The houses gave way to high, sandy walls, the street ascending, curving until suddenly we came out in a square directly in front of the Palace. We were faced by more armed guards while the walls soared up to dizzying heights. We went in through metal studded doors up well-worn, smooth granite steps into an antechamber, dominated by musky odors.

A colonnade of granite pillars led to more steps, richly covered in dark green, leading up to a platform at eye level. Tapestries of green silk covered the walls and concealed entrances to the platform. Metallic braziers on either side were the source of the odors or so it seemed until a line of thin, shaven-headed men in dark-green robes moved between us and the platform and the musky smell increased dramatically.

"Monks?" Martin asked beside me.

The thin-faced commander of the troops that had brought us scowled as Golapal said, "Slaves of the Living God, a new addition to the swelling ranks of the new priesthood."

Chanting began long before another line of gong-playing monks entered the hall, a rhythmic, sibilant sound that grew in intensity as the monks

crowded the platform and then moved to line the steps leading up to the throne that was moved into position above us.

“Now we’re in for it,” said Martin, and I couldn’t have agreed with him more.

****THE REAL RULER OF SUBBUJAH****

We stared at the silent monks who stared back at us. The Kon’s entry was anti-climactic. He was a small man, plainly dressed in a brown, gilt-buttoned jacket and baggy white pants. He walked out from behind the tapestries and paid no heed to anyone as he sat on the throne and peered around as if looking for someone else.

Then, the Living God smiled as a dark-robed girl emerged from behind the tapestries. At first, I saw only the long, black, shining hair. But then she turned and took my breath away. I stared at her in awe. I had seen some pretty women in my time, and some pretty boys, if you thought of Kamara and her maids, if they were as Golapal had said that they were, but this girl outshone them all.

Her features were perfectly formed and she wore no makeup, or none that I could see, to enhance herself. She moved more gracefully than any of the girls we had seen, her thin, green dress hugging a figure that would have made any man’s mouth water. Her midriff was bare and she glistened with jewels across her forehead, at her neck and along her arms, at her navel and at her ankles. She didn’t smile, the Kon was doing enough of that, as she moved across the platform and sat at the feet of the Kon, delicately arranging her dark green skirts about her painted toes.

The chanting began again and the Kon, looking distinctly bored, began to stroke the girl's hair as she paid him no mind. Another group of people entered and more chairs were grouped on the stage. A thin woman, her chin held high seemed to be at the center of this group. She was richly dressed in red silk. She sat on the left of the Kon, gesturing to the red, silk-dressed girls who had demurely followed her to gather about her in a pretty circle. These girls I noted were all heavily madeup and they must have been girls, I noted, as they had definite feminine busts. Their skimpy, upper tops were low-cut to reveal that almost all had impressive cleavages.

The older woman motioned to the man with the sword who had led us to the Palace. He stepped forward and all the chanting stopped as if on cue. The man bowed low to the Kon and then to the grey-haired woman before he spoke. At the mention of the name 'Kuvuji', I sensed an intense stillness descend on the whole group. Even the Kon stopped playing with the hair of his favorite and seemed to pay attention at last to the spectacle in front of him.

The older woman's black eyes glittered as she looked at Golapal, who smiled in amusement at what was being recited about him, it seemed. Then her eyes moved and fell upon us for the first time. I shivered as she looked at me, thinking about what must be going through a rat's mind as he was studied by the cobra.

She finally spoke and we were thrust forward and up the steps and onto our knees. Hands behind us jerked us to our feet. I was right in front of the Kon. He seemed to have seen nothing and was touching the earring of the girl who sat so stoically

in front of him. He playfully teased it against her lovely, slim neck.

So close, I could sense a different fragrance in the air, one of orchards and blossoms. It must have been coming from her. I looked at her and she swallowed as she looked at me and for the first time I noticed the Adam's apple in her lovely neck. It wasn't me that had made her gulp, however. It was Golapal that was riveting her attention. No, I should say his, not her, attention as I could now see clearly that this most attractive feminine figure was a man, enduring another man's public caresses of him as if he was a woman.

One of the monks came up the steps past us. He bowed to the Kon, and to the older woman and turned to face us. "You come to Subbujah. Why?" he asked me in thick, heavily accented English.

Golapal looked as astonished as I was to hear English after so many words in Aji. I immediately launched into an account of the mapping survey we were on, Martin and me, on behalf of the British Army. I stressed that in my nervousness, even as I protested about our treatment and the disappearance of Cochrane, apparently killed. I kept on with my protests even when it was clear that the interpreter was not up to the task of understanding or explaining what I had said.

The old woman made an impatient gesture. Her eyes glittered and she pointed at Golapal. He shrugged, went up a step in front of us, making an emphatic obeisance to the Kon. The 'Living God' at last seemed to notice us. Head bowed, the first interpreter left and Golapal addressed the woman, seated in the circle of girls and women about her, all I noticed wearing red silk chokers about their

throats, disguising the proof I needed to know if they were girls or boys.

Golapal addressed the woman and I presume he was translating what I'd said. She spoke rapidly back to him. "The sister of the Kon, Honored Jegsayya, bids the representatives of the Living God over the Seas, welcome to the Palace of Splendor," Golapal said without changing expression. "I have told her, sir, how you forced me here on your reconnaissance mission – that's how Bunure translated what you said – prior to the arrival of your army here."

Both Martin and I reacted in alarm. "How dare you?" gasped Martin, echoing my own sentiments.

"Softly, softly, honored gentleman," said Golapal in the same flat voice as if translating still, the warning clear. "Your life here hangs by a thread. The Honored Jegsayya is the real ruler of Subbujah. She understands power and corruption. I have to let her know how corrupt you gentlemen are and how, if she is clever enough, she might have you report back to your superiors in terms that will keep them from sending an army here. She knows that corruption has been the greatest weapon in keeping the Raj out of Subbujah up to now."

"How dare you!" I blustered. "Our honor as officers and gentlemen ..." Yes, I had become more English than the English in being one of the Raj, the Indian term for the British rulers of its Indian Empire.

Golapal turned back and spoke again to the Kon's sister. As he spoke, a look of surprise crossed her face and she smiled cynically. I was outraged. She motioned to the officer who had led us there

and he departed from the audience room with quite a clatter, his squad following him.

“I have told them of the bribes you have brought from Ahdallah,” said Golapal.

“Bribes?” gasped Martin, his face pale and trembling with shock.

Golapal smiled. “The trade goods,” he explained. He inclined his head to the circle of pretty girls about the sister of the Kon. “Don’t you think that Dajir and Adi will bring more grace and beauty to the Kon’s wives?”

I felt myself getting quite sick. I eyed the pretty girls with long, braided hair and painted faces. I looked at the cleavages on them and one or two, noticing my interest, moved to show off more clearly their womanly attributes. The Kon’s sister noticed where I was looking and how the girls reacted and smiled knowingly at me. “These girls,” I said weakly, my stomach wanting to heave.

“Are not girls at all,” said Golapal, devoid of expression. “Apart from Jegsayya, there is no female in this hall. All of these pretty creatures are brides of the Kon. Jegsayya was the one to go to the God Tower to release her brother. Perhaps now you can see why, with this sister and brother partnership, the people believe that Elatti-Pita, Perversity, reigns in Subbujah.”

I gulped. I swore. I tried to think clearly. “You called the trade goods you secured, bribes?” I managed to ask.

“It makes you corruptible,” said Golapal, a gleam in his eyes. “You have come to bribe our officials with trade goods while you spy on the sources of our wealth and assess our strength. But you can also be

bribed. The test will be how you react to Cochrane's death and the gift you are offered," I shuddered at the look on the little man's face then as he indicated the smiling 'girls', "in recompense."

I could not argue any further because the officer was returning, ushering in three of the smartest dressed young ladies that I had yet seen. Each wore Western clothing and caused quite a stir as they clicked in their high heels across the stone floor. They must have been preparing for an age as each was fully made up, hair pinned up, flowered hats with flowers pinned in their hair. Their faces were powdered so much that they looked much fairer as girls than they did when they were two caravan wives and a horse groom.

Dajir's figure was extraordinarily feminine. His waist must have pinched in several inches by a tight corset to achieve such an hour-glass figure. He moved easily, carrying a parasol, in a long, black and grey, striped dress. It was lace-trimmed at the collar and cuffs.

Dajir seemed to have high, firm breasts. His black hair was curled and held up in pins and combs. A little veil covered his face as it did those of the other 'girls'. Dajir's long earrings were exposed on his long neck. He wore lace gloves and, with his bustle, looked for all the world like a young London debutante out to call upon prospective husbands back in Victorian England. He was gorgeous despite the fact that his costume was forty-fifty years out of date.

Beside him, Adi smiled from reddened lips, wobbling on buttoned, high-heeled boots. He also had a bustle in his grey skirt that made him look as womanly as the other. He would have been a perfect, lit-

tle, English lady but for his dark skin. He smiled, extending his pink parasol, as everyone was looking at him.

Ghani did not look up as he minced along. He wore a short, fringed dress, stockings and high heels, exposing his bare, hairless legs. I was amazed at the female figure he showed. He was so much in style and could have passed at the Cotton Club as one of the showgirls or dancers, I was sure. Golapal said something and I guessed that he was explaining how girls' dresses had changed from the days of Queen Victoria. Ghani's eyebrows, too, had clearly undergone a remarkable change as well, so much so that, with makeup, he looked pretty and female like his feminized companions, though his hair was not long, like theirs.

The girls around the Kon's sister cooed and giggled at the appearance of what they might not know were boys like themselves. The Kon's sister gestured and the three passed us as they mounted the stage and went to stand with Kon who immediately drew Ghani to him and put his hand on his legs and began to stroke him. That made all the girls titter even more while Ghani stood there as the Kon exposed the tops of his stockings and his garter belt, stroking his legs with great pleasure. I saw, in revulsion, the reaction in Ghani's panties as he was caressed.

Jegsayya said something to Golapal.

"She thanks you for the gifts, so differently and attractively packaged," Golapal said woodenly, his eyes grimly following Ghani who would not look at him as the three minced over to be inspected by Jegsayya. "You are invited to follow the honored sister of the Living God into the Palace where she will find a like gift for you. I may have life, you must

know, as long as I translate truly and conceal from you both her real intentions as well as the nature of the Kon and his brides.”

*******ANISOYYA*******

From the moment I first laid eyes on Anisoyya, I was dumbfounded by her grace and beauty. She made the strange, would-be females that surrounded the sister of the Kon appear to be what they were, ungainly, grotesque, simpering catamites. I was aware of course that I had been fooled many times since I had come to Subbujah. The presence of a real girl, Anisoyya, convinced me that I could never be fooled again.

It was in the dining room of the Lady Jegsayya that I first saw Anisoyya. One of the Kon's brides was entertaining with a dance that mostly seemed to involve wiggling her hips and rotating the tassels on her tiny bra. Yes, she did have breasts. She showed Martin and me the evidence, leaning forward to flaunt them in our faces as she smiled and wiggled her hips, the jewel at her navel dancing with her. We would both have been enthralled by her performance, I know, if we hadn't known that she was a man. How could she have breasts like that, I wondered, and yet be a man?

Martin and I sat on cushions while Golapal stood behind us. The wives served us most gracefully and with pretty lipsticked smiles. I had to think of them all as women. When you did that, it was easier to respond with gracious thanks that Martin had difficulty conjuring up. Golapal translated and I'm sure that he added much to our bare thank yous.

Most of the food was overspicy for my taste. The brides of the Kon plied me with delicacies, however, bending into me to reveal the mounds on their chests, the aroma of costly perfumes reaching me from each even though they acted demurely and moved on when Golapal invented some compliment to their feminine charms that I was supposed to have said.

The divan opposite us remained empty well into the dance by Hallara, the fourth wife of the Kon according to Golapal. Hallara performed just a foot in front of me, her midriff bare, smooth and well curved. There was a smirk in her darkly, outlined eyes as I looked up into her petite features. She was doll-like and I would have picked her out as the girl if Golapal had said there was one there. As it was, he said that once she was the eldest son in one of Subbujah's richest and oldest families, unfortunately now extinct and so, thankfully, no longer opposed to the Kon.

As Hallara danced for me, I realized that she did not know that I knew that she was a man. She smiled at me, her reddened lips compressing in a womanly pout. She turned her derriere to me, gyrating faster as she leaned forward, her buttocks almost in my face, her eyes gleaming at me as she looked at me over her shoulder. The Kon's sister said something loudly to Golapal then.

"If you like Hallara," said Golapal sardonically, "she is yours."

I grunted and turned away. Martin was choking on his water as Hallara left me and sashayed over to him to do the same routine. I tried to think of a discreet way to let the Kon's sister know how disgust-

ing and distasteful I found the whole meal. That was when I saw Anisoyya.

My mouth fell open in astonishment. Unlike so many of the women I'd seen of late, she wore only the lightest of makeup, her dark hair fastened up in a high top knot, garlanded with yellow flowers. A thick strand of black, shiny hair fell onto the white silk of her dress, modestly high at the neck, though bare at the midriff like the others. She was so femininely curvy.

It was her face that attracted me, however. Her features were delicate, a thin upturned nose, full, attractive, pink lips, a tiny, pointed chin and wide, darkly fringed eyes, the curl of her eyelashes evident to me across the room.

An older, grey-haired woman sat beside Anisoyya, holding her hand tightly as the two regarded the antics of the 'wives', trying their female hardest to arouse Martin and me.

I had not seen Anisoyya enter and sit with her older companion on the empty divan, so much had Hallara diverted me. "Who is that?" I asked, stunned by the girl's sudden appearance and her great beauty.

"Please," said Golapal quietly. "Please, honored sir, make no fuss of Anisoyya, nor her mother, the sister aunt of the Living God. Her father and her brother once fought against the Kon and he destroyed them. It is said that the Kon will soon permit her to marry. Then the Gods may grant her a son to herald the end of the reign of Elatti-Pita."

Golapal glanced at Bunure, the erstwhile translator, who stared impassively at the ornate tapestry on the opposite wall depicting a bacchanalian feast

of what seemed an array of half-man, half-animal figures. "She is our last hope," Golapal concluded. "But her life is at the whim of Honored Jegsayya, who is determined that her brother will rule forever."

Jegsayya motioned to Hallara to seat herself on the cushions beside her. Hallara did so giving me a flirting pout over her shoulder as she did so.

"Anisoyya," said the sister of the Kon. No-one had explained what had happened to the Kon and his green-dressed woman, nor to Ghani, Dajir or Adi. They had disappeared as we had been brought for this interminable lunch.

The girl released her mother's hand and stood. I felt a marked rise in tension as the girl went slowly and gracefully up to Jegsayya and bowed over her hand, even kissing it.

The look on Jegsayya's face, her lips smiling but her eyes hooded, as the girl knelt before her, frightened me. I could almost feel the animosity pouring out of the Kon's sister as a palpable thing. Anisoyya's lips brushed the hem of the woman's dress as many of the wives of the Kon had done before they had performed for us.

The music of the group of strange instruments shifted as Jegsayya signalled to the leader. Anisoyya stiffened and rose slowly, head bowed. Her long hair fell from the twisted braid on top of her head down her back.

Golapal's voice was a murmur behind me. "She wants Anisoyya to dance the Aqqvi," said Golapal, the anger barely repressed in his voice. "It's the temple dance used to excite supplicants into holy mating during the ceremonies of Chaya, the fertility goddess. She is saying that Anisoyya must instruct

the wives of the Kon how to do this so that they will become fertile and bear many children. This is an abomination!”

I could scarcely contain myself. “Anisoyya is being insulted?” I asked Golapal, mirroring his anger. I felt Jegsayya looking at me. I turned to face her, trying to be as expressionless as she. But those hooded eyes filled me with terror.

“Be calm,” said Golapal. “Anisoyya has faced many indignities before with great courage.”

Anisoyya had already begun to dance, the skirts swirling about her lithe, graceful figure. Her arms reached above her in a graceful bow and she pirouetted. She had closed her eyes as she swayed to the different, throbbing rhythms of the strange cacophony from the combination of wind, drum, and string instruments.

The drums ceased and she danced on, so graceful and feminine, with just the stringed instruments being plucked in a pulsating rhythm that was increasing in speed. Anisoyya undid a pin at her shoulder and placed it in her hair braid. She pulled across the fabric and her dress began to come apart in front of us. It took two more rhythm changes before the silk wrapped about her body came totally free and we could look at her beautiful body as she dropped the silks in her mother’s arms. The old woman could not look up at her daughter at what her sister was forcing her niece to do.

Anisoyya wore white, silk bindings across her small breasts and upper body and white, silk panties about her hips and lower parts. She was soft and rounded, thin at the waist and wide at the hips, a perfect young woman to my eyes. She pirouetted,

closed her eyes and seemed very flushed to me as she reached for the bands about her breasts but Jegsayya stopped her and the music with a wave of her hand. Anisoyya then stood with bowed head as the old woman berated her.

“She blames her for not filling out, not becoming a woman yet,” said Golapal beneath his breath. “She says that Anisoyya will be like her worthless mother, still unmarried even though she is eighteen. She’ll be sold for half her bride price as her mother was.”

How long the harangue would have gone on, I didn’t know, because suddenly the Kon came bounding into the room, the little English miss named Dajir, smiling and clinging to his arm.

The Kon had a surprisingly deep, guttural voice. He spoke harshly to his sister, ignoring the bowing wives and his nearly naked cousin. His sister began to scream back at him, making the frightened Dajir move his bustle rapidly in retreating behind the Kon. I could not imagine how Dajir had achieved such beautiful ringlets. He must have been up all the night doing that to his hair.

Surprisingly, the Kon whined and groaned at his sister. He put his arm about Dajir’s tiny waist and hugged the boy hard. He lifted Dajir and swung him with surprising strength, showing off Dajir’s high heels, stockings, pretty petticoats and bloomers to the giggling ‘ladies’ of his court.

Jegsayya turned her back with a contemptuous gesture and several harsh words. The trade goods were in the corner in the packs they had arrived on. The Kon waved at them and the wives descended on them like a pack of hyenas. They shrieked and giggled as dresses were hauled out and held against

bodies, along with corsets, stockings, even wigs. Each discovery seemed to send the wives into a frenzy as the Kon clapped his hands and made appreciative noises.

Finally, the Kon's sister could stand it no longer. She stood and began flailing out with her hands. The recipients of the blows squealed and began immediately to fall to the carpet and lay prone as the old woman vented her wrath.

"Anisoyya," snapped the old woman as red-dressed women lay all about her and Martin and I sat, watching the proceedings aghast, Golapal's hands hard on our shoulders holding us in our places.

Jegsayya motioned to one opened box. Slowly, the beautiful girl walked over to it. Hesitantly, Anisoyya picked up a modern dress, a very short, blue silk dress, a cocktail dress.

The Kon protested but Jegsayya bade him to be silent. Then, she spoke at length. Her words frightened Anisoyya, alarmed her mother, amused the Kon and astounded Golapal.

"She can't do it," he gasped as the Kon clapped his hands and smiled like a little child. He held on to Dajir, who was snuggling close to him now, looking up adoringly in the Kon's face, puckering his lips as Dajir received his expected kiss which he accepted like a girl.

"Do what?" I asked.

Golapal was watching the Kon open-mouthed as the Kon pointed at Hallara and another of his wives. With Dajir still in his arms, the Kon then left, the two wives scampering after him as the Kon's sister lashed out with fists and feet after them.

The Kon's sister then called to an officer outside the door and a squad that had clearly been stationed there filed in quietly. Golapal was separated from us almost right away. I got up and called after him but Jegsayya swept out as well. The squad had their weapons pointed at Martin and me.

I tried to go after our guide but an impassive veteran clubbed me in the stomach with the butt of his rifle and I could do nothing. I rolled on the floor for a minute or so. When I got to my feet and looked for Martin to speak to, he was gone.

I was escorted to a courtyard somewhere in the Palace complex and there I found Cochrane's body. He looked strangely peaceful and reposed atop a small funeral pyre. The monks in attendance chanted and sang what I thought must be funerary prayers and I was presented with a lit torch. It was as good a place as any to be interred, I thought, lighting the pyre. Soon there would be no evidence at all that Cochrane had ever come to Subbujah. I knew that Martin's and my time in Subbujah could end just as summarily.

"Where is my fellow officer?" I asked and mimed to the men who pointed rifles at me but if any understood me they didn't let on at all.

*******ANISOYYA'S WEDDING*******

Golapal was resplendent in dark brown silk jacket and pants as he came to me that night in the jail cell where I was being kept. He was, however, extremely angry about something as the guards who accompanied him pulled me to my feet and brought me the uniform jacket they had taken from me.

I was marched to another room in the palace, a long chamber with silver figurines in alcoves along the length. At one end, a dais contained a throne again, like the first one. The Kon smiled cynically at me as I was marched to the steps in front of him and directed to stand there. Beside the Kon, on a low divan, sat the girl who had lain at his feet and whom I had thought so beautiful until I had seen Anisoyya. This girl sat before me in a gown of silver thread. She wore silver nose rings and silver sparkles glittered from her thickly painted eyelids. Her lips also had a silvery pink shade while her hair was braided and bound with long silver ribbons.

I stood where I was brought, beside Golapal, a line of monks dividing us from the Kon.

“What’s going on?” I asked Golapal anxiously wishing that I had had at least some time to take a bath after standing about in the same clothes all day. It had been such a boring day, confined as I was.

“The honored lady, Anisoyya, is to be married,” said Golapal in a very low tone. He was staring at the beautiful girl in front of us, at the Kon’s feet, but she seemed to be paying him no mind at all

“Oh,” I said, hating the thought of Anisoyya being married to any man. “But isn’t that what you wanted? If she has a child, well.”

“She is going to be married to you,” Golapal cut in savagely.

“To me,” I gasped, suddenly feeling wonder and delight at such a prospect.

“Yes,” snapped Golapal, trying to control the rage in his voice. “And no child of foreign blood has ever

been accepted for the God Tower before. You are the ruination of our last hope.”

I blanched at his words. “I won’t go through with it,” I began, looking at the assembled people, older folks, men and women together, a pretty daughter in each family setting. The setting was large and growing more so by the minute as more and more families, all with pretty daughters arrived.

“All, all these pretty girls with these families,” I began to say to Golapal.

“Insurance,” our erstwhile guide said. “When the Kon does as he does, it is wise for the major families to follow suit. I’ve brought many a pretty boy here from Ahdallah to save a friend from suspicion and ruin.”

I could not get words out. My throat felt as if I had a huge something wedged in it. I could scarcely breathe. “You bring them to be daughters?” I asked.

“Or wives,” said Golapal coldly. “The boys soon learn the pleasures of the marriage bed or they become the pampered daughters of overindulgent parents. Sometimes, the Kon will even notice them and they will bring rewards to their house as they become a bride to the Living God. The remnants of Hallara’s family, a niece and her husband, stand high in society now.”

“The family of that girl at the Kon’s feet must be the highest,” I said, looking at the girl who was regarding us with no expression in her kohled, glittering eyes.

“No,” said Golapal briefly. A procession began from the far end of the long, silvery chamber. The Slaves of the Living God led the rest of the wives of the Kon to the top of the chamber. One of the wives,

Hallara, prostrated herself before the Kon. He came down from his throne, tenderly lifted her up as she hung onto to her multitude of soft skirts, leading her to stand beside his throne. She smiled triumphantly at the other brides who smiled back as if they were contestants in a beauty contest.

But then each wife did the same and the Kon lifted each up tenderly to his throne.

“Some of the men here,” said Golapal, indicating a handsome, slim, well-dressed man, clean-shaven unlike his peers, “like Osajji there have been daughters to their households and even brides of the Kon. Osajji was once Osayara and chief wife before the Kon found someone even more beautiful.”

“You call yourself cultured!” I blurted out.

Jegsayya then entered, escorting a silver-dressed girl, her hair glittering with jewels. I would scarcely have recognized Dajir as he lay at the feet of the Kon who clapped in delight and scurried to raise the erstwhile caravan wife to his feet to add Dajarra to his harem. She smiled so prettily and flounced up into the line like a bride on her wedding day, I thought.

“Oh, this is ridiculous,” I snapped at Golapal. “I’m going to stop this!”

Golapal held onto my arm as I started to move. “Please, Captain,” he said, elevating me in rank. “I left word in Ahdallah where you are and how an army must come if you do not return. But if anything happens to you and Anisoyya now, many plans will be destroyed.”

There was a stirring in the crowd then and Golapal stiffened beside me as a taller guard came and stood beside him, partially blocking my view.

Jegsayya was leading another woman up to the Kon's throne. This girl was taller than the others and she was dressed in European style. She tottered in her high-heeled boots, wobbling a little as if unused to wearing them. Her dark hair was covered with a white muslin veil that obscured her face. The dress she had chosen had a tight, corseted waist and a bustle and a high, prominent bust that jiggled a little as she walked.

"I never thought that they would do this!" Golapal hissed, the anger and loathing clear in his voice as the girl sank to her knees and prostrated herself before the Kon.

"What is it?" I asked fearfully, thinking it must be Ghani or Adi, but the girl was too tall.

"Look," said Golapal and I looked. Jegsayya turned and was staring at me, an enigmatic smile on her face. The veiled girl sank to her knees, showing off her stockings and then I realized how pale-skinned she was. I felt the blood pounding at my temples as the Kon raised her up, put his hands on her veil and pulled it back.

The girl was heavily madeup like the other brides but she was clearly European. Her lips were red with lipstick, her cheeks rouged, her eyes darkly outlined, her eyelids silvery. Her eyebrows were thin and darkly painted. She smiled timidly at the Kon which shocked me to the core. The Kon touched her cheek and then took her hand in his and brought her to sit as decorously as she could at his feet, her skirts spreading out before him. She smiled at him as he touched her long hair and earrings and she did not look at me, her superior officer, though she must have known I was there.

I had worried all day about what had happened to Lieutenant Martin Davenport and now I knew. I swayed on my feet and Golapal squeezed my arm hard as if to tell me to make no fuss.

“Your gift has been accepted, as the gift of the Osajji was,” Golapal murmured to me. “And you have been given the greatest gift of all, Anisoyya. Remember, I said no child of foreign blood accepted before. I did not say, will never be accepted.”

A torrent of rage rose silently in me. I fought hard to control it. I looked at Jegsayya who was staring at Golapal and me, a frown on her face, almost as if she heard the seditious words he was uttering.

“No,” I said weakly, looking at Martin and how he seemed to be welcomed by the brides of the Kon as one of them and what was even worse, how he smiled and held onto the Kon’s hand, his fingernails as long as any of the girls and painted just like theirs, the same color as his lipsticked mouth.

“Concentrate on her,” said Golapal, as another little procession of three women entered. Two older women flanked Anisoyya. One was her mother, the other unknown to me. I hardly cared what was happening to Martin Davenport when my eyes rested on the beautiful features of Anisoyya.

On her head, she wore a round, golden crown, a yellow veil descending from it over her lovely, long dark hair. Her dress was also yellow, gathered at her breasts tightly and then falling loosely about her body. She wore heavy makeup unlike the first time we had met. Her eyes were particularly well painted but she held them down demurely, her eyelashes thick and curled.

Anisoyya stopped short of the steps, in a rustle of skirts. Golapal urged me forward, the people about us parting and making way for me to stand beside her. She looked up, just once, her eyes full of apprehension. My heart lurched and I forgot all about Martin, the wrongness, the perversity of Subbujah.

Anisoyya's delicate face showed a great deal of intense fear. I wanted just to take her in my arms and console her. I wanted nothing bad ever to happen to one so fragile and so beautiful. I caught her fragrance and was intoxicated with the thought that she could really be my wife.

Jegsayya uttered a command and Anisoyya nervously placed a light, soft hand in mine. I glanced at Anisoyya and beyond her downcast, demure frame saw her mother's disapproving face. Beside me, I felt Golapal's tenseness but at that moment as the beautiful Anisoyya touched me and I touched her, I didn't care at all. I hardly remembered the ribbons binding our hands and then our bodies together. All I could recall when they led us back to my jail cell was the touch of her soft-skinned hand and how she never looked up at me.

We were separated. She was whisked off by her mother. I wondered if in fact I had been married or had I merely been betrothed. Golapal was separated from me by a guard and I couldn't ask him. I couldn't believe that I was now married as I had been hustled so quickly out of the silver chamber and back to the cell where I lay on a hard board and thought of Anisoyya. I dozed, dreaming of how it would be when and if I was her husband, how she would admire my manliness and cling to me, how making love to her for the first time would be the finest thing in my eventful life so far.

Oh, what a nightmare it all turned out to be.

*******A LITTLE INDIGNITY*******

Golapal came at the head of a line of monks, Slaves of the Living God. They were armed with short, rounded clubs and looked as if they knew how to use them. Golapal escorted me to a bedroom, shushing me as I was marched along by such a different squad of men to any I had already seen.

Jegsayya came into the room and looked at me as I took the warm water bath Golapal had said that I should. She had two of the wives with her, Hallara and another, who both smiled at me mockingly. I got a strange feeling at the pit of my stomach as they approached me in the bath tub.

“Please don’t fight this,” said Golapal as the girls poured some sort of fragrant oils into the bath with me and then their soft hands began to wash me all over again.

“What’s going on?” I asked for about the hundredth time.

Jegsayya said something. “The Kon’s sister says that your trade goods are not for us,” said Golapal straightfaced. “She says that she will not wear any but her own clothes when she travels and neither will any of the wives who accompany the Kon to the great council in Delhi. She returns the clothing to you. In fact, she insists that since you brought it here, you must wear it here yourself.

“Please,” Golapal said rapidly, seeing the horror that I must be showing on my face at his odious suggestion, “please, be still, honored sir. You will suffer a little indignity but you will still have a

chance to bring down this evil regime if you will just do as Honored Jegsayya commands for a little while.”

Do as she commanded? What she was commanding me to do was to dress as a woman! I refused utterly and the Slaves stepped forward. They were each, I think, stronger than me. Five together worked silently on me while the wives snickered behind their hands as I was held down and shaved. I don't mean that my face was shaved. My body was shaved, my legs were shaved, methodically, strong hands holding down my naked body and I couldn't move as my armpits, chest and back were lightly razored.

The girls then slathered my face with some waxy substance and even spread it over my eyebrows. I protested and two of the slaves held my head with fingers that felt like steel vices as a smiling Hallara smoothed lotions on my face. Whenever they wiped me with a cloth, hair seemed to come off me.

It was so undignified to be lain on the bed and to have the women work on my face with brushes and fragrances. The Slaves held me down easily as the women worked. My mouth was covered in lip paint. My cheeks and eyes and eyebrows were powdered and a wig of long, blonde hair, taken from the trade goods Golapal had brought, was pinned to my own hair.

Earrings were clasped to my ears, a cold, silvery necklace put about my neck and bracelets, anklets, even rings attached to me. My nails were cleaned, manicured and painted as were my toenails. I trembled under the weight of the wig, the feel of hair at my neck and on my face and forehead absurd.

It was more absurd to be tightly laced into a figure shaping corset and then to have the bosom part padded with what seemed to be animal linings that were packed with heavy liquid. The monks pulled the corset strings tight and I cried out in pain but they wouldn't stop. Hallara adjusted the frontage and when she had finished, my chest muscles were pushed in front of me and I seemed to have cleavage and two well-formed breasts.

I had to wear stockings but they wouldn't give me bloomers, the long trouser-like pants that might have made me feel a little like a man. No, I was given small panties that barely fit over me and what was worse, I had begun to have an erection with all the fondling of my legs, the feel of the black, silk stockings on me and the attaching of them to the corset.

Was it any wonder when Hallara slipped on dainty panties that I was growing as I would have if I had removed or caressed any of this feminine stuff on a real woman? A bustle was attached to me and a dress, midnight blue and very rustly was put on me. The bodice clung to me tightly, thin straps over my shoulders, the same colors as the straps from my corset.

Skirts billowed out from my hips and over my bustle. I felt so weird as I moved and the silky dress rustled about me. Then I had to sit and Hallara put high heels on my feet. I couldn't walk in them at all. The girls babbled on, put on heels themselves and showed me how to walk like a woman while Jegsayya looked on and smiled.

She said something to Golapal. "What did she say?" I asked furiously, having to mince and sway in the ridiculous shoes, the skirts swirling about me.

Golapal put a blue wrap about my shoulders. “She said that you were a fitting husband for Anisoyya,” he said bleakly as the two girls took down the cloths from the mirrors and I got a look at myself.

I had expected a strange parody of a woman to be looking back at me. I had expected to be humiliated in a hundred ways. Well, I was humiliated and shamed and embarrassed and disgusted. I looked like a pretty woman. I could have walked into any military dance I’d ever been to and been besieged with men asking me to dance and suggesting as well that I accompany them to their quarters for an intimate encounter.

Golapal stood beside me and put his arm under mine as if I was his woman and he my escort. “Now, you can enter the women’s quarters and meet your bride,” he said, glancing at Jegsayya who was smiling at me. She shooed me out of the room then, laughing, and I wanted to kill her. Hallara and the other girl were giggling and I knew it was me that they were laughing at and yet they were men like me.

The Slaves of the Living God moved silently and showed no emotions as Golapal insisted on holding my arm as if I was a woman. He slowed the pace to accommodate my walking and I could hear the click of my heels and feel the swishing of my dress as I moved. And I knew how I looked. I looked like a woman. I felt like a woman. I was mortified. I did not want Anisoyya to see me like this.

The Kon was in his bedroom as I was presented to him. He was on top of his first wife, the girl in the green dress, kissing her, her legs about his waist as his naked body was between her legs. Her lovely

breasts were bare, her mouth devoid of makeup as she pulled the satin bed covers over their backs with some attempt at modesty. I think there was sympathy in her eyes as she looked at me and then glanced stonily at the grimacing Golapal beside me.

The Kon and the Kon's sister argued. "The Kon thinks that you are a pretty English rose," said Golapal. "He wants you to dance for him as a woman and then he wants you in his bed. He says he is partial to English roses now after the first delicate blossom who amused him so much earlier tonight."

I felt my stomach heave, both at the suggestion and the hint at what might be happening to Martin. But here I stood beside the Kon's bed, to all the world a blonde woman. There could not have been many like me in this part of the world though Martin and I had seen many half-castes and 'Circassians' on our trip about the north.

I wondered what it would be like to dance for a man like the Kon, what it would be like to be treated like a woman, even in bed. The Slaves of the God who had been standing at the corners of the room as we entered seemed to be oblivious to what was going on in the great bed as the Kon gave up talking and began to kiss his beautiful wife ardently. She raised her legs about him and he began to do something to her with his manhood beneath the cover she held tightly about them.

I was shaken as we retired from the room, picking up our phalanx of monks and we were marched to a huge, gold inlaid door where Golapal let go my hand. "The women's rooms," he whispered to me. "Another invention of the present Kon. With help, you might escape into the city from there."

And how do I get out then? The thought raced through my mind but I got no chance to answer it as Jegsayya took my hand and pulled me, still wobbling on my high heels into the perfumed women's quarters. She made some motion then to the Slaves of the God. I heard a noise behind us but I couldn't turn quickly enough to find out what had happened in the hallway on Jegsayya's orders. Hallara and her companion were giggling as they followed us. Some women's quarters, I thought.

It was awful to meet Anisoyya and her mother dressed, perfumed and painted as I was. Jegssayya thought it was amusing to have me wait on the other women as if I was a maid, Hallara showing me how I had to serve tea to the ladies, miming how I had to sit with my dress and skirts smoothed beneath me, my arms pulled in. Then she crossed my legs for me and I felt the pull of the corset garters on my stockings and I felt the shaping of my body everywhere. I shuddered and that was worse as I felt my heavy pinching earrings swinging at my ears and felt the soft touch of the wig on my face.

Only Anisoyya seemed to show any sympathy for my predicament. As I sat on the divan, she put out a hand and took mine, a parody of how delicate and feminine hers was, how long her nails. Jegsayya had me rise and curtsy to her as she must have heard somewhere that European women do. She had me curtsy to the aggrieved mother of Anisoyya and I quite agreed with her annoyance and anger as she looked at me, the feminized husband of her beautiful daughter.

How could she let her daughter be married to a man like me who looked and dressed like a woman, I wondered? There were mirrors and marble walls



along the walkway as I was conducted, Anisoyya holding my hand, our dresses rustling femininely, deeper into the so-called women's palace. I hated to see myself, so femininely dressed, so absurd to be humiliated in this way, while Anisoyya glided so

gracefully beside me as together, two women, we entered a great bedchamber, clearly prepared for just this occasion.

A great bed, silk cushioned, seemed small in such a great room. Jegsayya led us to it. I saw upon the bed matching nightdresses of white silk with white panties and white breast bands beside them. Anisoyya's mother had brought a tray with her. There were drinks on the tray that she set down nervously beside the bed. All the cups were different. She gave one with a woman bathing embossed in silver to Anisoyya. The older woman looked at me uncertainly then as she held the cup with a warrior on it.

Jegsayya saw the emblem and laughed aloud. She put out her hand and demanded it imperiously and so Anisoyya's mother, her face in anguish, had no choice but to hand it to her. Anisoyya handed me a cup of a woman dancing and smiled at me. She was so beautiful. Even though I was dressed so much like a woman, she didn't look at me with anything but sympathy for my predicament.

We, Anisoyya and me, had looked like women as we had minced daintily as women do together down the hallway, she so much more graceful than me in her high heeled sandals. I longed to put my arm about her, as any man would, but she had kept my hand beside her and treated me, to tell the truth, like a girl friend of hers.

Anisoyya's mother gave her hugs and a very strange look as we stood by the bed. She spoke to me, looking up and down at me. Her feelings were very clear about the man in the dress that I was and I felt exactly as she did. I hated myself to be this way. This wasn't how I had dreamed I would be

when I was alone with Anisoyya and took her in my arms.

Jegsayya then took Anisoyya's mother by the arm and turned her to the door but the older woman kept turning back with more and more advice for her daughter. I rustled up to Anisoyya as the great door closed. She put her hand to her lips and tip-toed over to the doors. She shifted a divan in front of the door and then wedged it under the door lock. No-one could get in which I thought a very good thing.

Anisoyya smiled at me as she went to the wine her mother had left. She poured more from the bottle into my cup and took up her own, bringing both to us. I had had enough of wine but Anisoyya smiled at me so prettily, miming me drinking it and so I did, a sip anyway.

Anisoyya studied me sitting there. I wondered how we would go on as she looked at my madeup, feminized face and seemed to like what she saw. I was quite unprepared for her to shift up to me, her dress mingling with my skirt as she put her arm about me and, surprisingly, she began to kiss me. She kissed me as if I was the girl and she was the boy, attacking my lips as if she had never kissed anyone before.

Being like a princess locked in a castle, I was sure that she hadn't kissed many men before and so, even one like me, might seem like manna from heaven to her. I put my arms lightly about her waist and we fell back on the bed and kissed, my lipstick covering her face as she shivered and pressed her real breasts into my fake ones.

Despite the way I was dressed, it was a kiss that had everything in it that I had ever expected from a woman. She kissed me softly on the cheek. I responded in kind and we played a delicious game of follow the leader. She kissed my neck until I cringed into her and I kissed her neck until she did the same.

I would have rushed and taken off my wig and dress but she stopped me, her smile so beautiful as she got up and dimmed the lamps to nothing. She kissed my bare, hairless shoulder and moved my dress strap over to my arm, making me shiver in delight, despite being in a woman's dress. I did the same to her. She kissed her way across the top of my chest and, with a giggle and a shudder, I did the same to her and more. She reacted by clinging tightly to me as I caressed her breasts.

Of course, Anisoyya then had to caress mine and it was funny how it felt to have her soft mouth in my cleavage, her tongue caressing me, her arms about my bare back, caressing silk and soft, female under-clothing against me. She kissed me so softly as she rolled on top of me in a rustling and swishing of dresses as we kissed and kissed.

Finally Anisoyya sat on me and looked down at me, smiling and undoing her hair and letting it fall about her shoulders as I caressed her breasts still trapped in her breast bands.

We snuggled together, she lightly touching my earrings and smiling even more at me. I wanted to remove my makeup and hair and my dress but she wouldn't let me. She began to kiss me and her tongue entered my mouth which I found delightful. I usually kissed pretty girls that way and it was so

different and charming to be made love to in that way.

I released her breast bands, undoing her dress fastenings and she undid mine. She let me kiss her lovely breasts and insisted on kissing mine as well, my chest so flat when the pressure of my corset was released. My head swam as I relaxed from the pains and discomforts I had been feeling. I slipped off my high heels and she caressed my legs with hers, my stockings and her dresses making a wonderful slippery noise, making me feel so wonderful as this wonderful girl wanted me, no matter how humiliated she must be to see her husband, me, like this.

I smelled her wonderful fragrance and felt her mouth on mine, pressing me down, filling me with such wonderful emotions. I felt myself slipping away as she lay on me, pressing her breasts into mine, holding me intensely as I held her silk-wrapped body. It was my fragrance I was enjoying, I recall thinking, laughing at how we were like two girls trying to make love to one another. I kissed her breasts and felt ecstatic as they hardened to my mouth and she tried to do the same to me. I felt so wonderful.

I awoke feeling euphoric and refreshed. I heard brushing and turned to see Anisoyya, seated by a window whose shutters had been opened, brushing out her long, dark hair. Only when I got up to join her did I find that I was wearing the white nightie, breast bands, my artificial breasts in place and the white panties about me. I shook my head and found that I had hair at my shoulders. It was dark hair like Anisoyya's. Then I saw the wig I had worn the previous day on a block beside the bed. It was brushed and a pink bow was placed in it.

Anisoyya got up from her chair and gave me the most beautiful smile. She came over and we met, our bodies pushing together as she kissed me again. She was in an identical nightie to mine. I felt her bare thighs against mine and mine were as bare as hers. She was so beautiful that it hurt me to look at her, her dark lashes so curled and thick and full.

I would have changed but it was soon apparent that I had no male clothes. The women's clothes that Golapal had bought as trade goods were set out in a wardrobe and, by signalling to me, Anisoyya soon made it clear to me that I had to dress as a woman again.

The divan was gone from blocking the door and Anisoyya had started making me up, fighting with a smile and soft words at my reluctance to have her make me into a woman again. My blonde wig was back in place, however, when Jegsayya, Anisoyya's mother, a host of older men and women, monks and soldiers came flooding into the bedroom.

I had been washed and changed in the tiled bathroom, appalled at seeing how feminine my face was with my eyebrows so altered. It was easy for Anisoyya to re-construct me as a woman and so I was sitting in stockings, panties and corset, when the crowd came in.

They ignored me as Anisoyya smiled and put a robe of red silk about me. There was an exclamation from the bed and the discovery of something. Anisoyya blushed as she looked at me and looked away demurely. She was approached by one person after another, the women hugging her and the men bowing to her.

The people looked at me and didn't know what to do. I didn't either. Some just sniffed their disapproval. The words they used might have approval or blame. I didn't know. I couldn't understand a word. Anisoyya's mother smiled at the girl and hugged her, blinking back tears. Jegsayya came last and smiled cruelly at the girl and said something disparaging about me. Anisoyya reached over, blushing again, but she firmly took my hand.

Jegsayya looked at me and the smile of triumph on her face filled me with despair. She went over to the rack and brought out a white linen and lace patterned dress. It was very frilly and feminine. It was clear that Anisoyya had been told to dress me in it for she nodded and looked at me in distress. I looked back at her and couldn't even think how to talk to her, never mind how to escape from such perversity as was the city of Subbujah.

*****GIRL FRIENDS*****

I have to tell it like it was. We became girl friends, Anisoyya and me. She dressed in European clothes with me. The corsets made her figure seem more shapely and curvaceous than ever before. She was even more desirable to me every moment of each day as we dressed together, waxed together, with many a giggle, did our hair, makeup and fingernails as I got an insight into womanhood that no man before me, I swear, could ever have envisaged.

Anisoyya toured me as well about the Palace, Slaves of the God following us everywhere but into the women's rooms, where I could go even though I was a man and everyone knew. I wasn't pretending like the wives of the Kon that I wasn't a man. I was

after all married, I think, to the most beautiful woman in the Palace. And, weirdly, she seemed intent on making me as beautiful a woman as she was. She covered me with scents and lotions and taught me how to stand, sit and walk like a woman.

We held hands out of our rooms. I felt so girlish as I moved just like her, beginning to feel so much like a girl after many days of dressing so prettily. Out of our rooms, holding hands and dancing along hallways in our high heels that was all she would permit. But inside our rooms, it was quite different.

There, Anisoyya kissed and pressed me down on the bed or on a divan all the time, loving to run her hands over me and have me do the same to her. She loved me to stroke her breasts but it often got her so excited that she would stop and run off to the bathroom. She would come back mopping her face and refusing to get overheated again until night time.

There was always that, the promise of our night together. Anisoyya showed me how to clean away the makeup and prepare myself for bed in our nighties. She showed me how to curl my eyelashes as we relaxed and drank wine. She giggled and showed me that she was wearing stockings and a garter belt to bed as I had on our first night. I hope she enjoyed the way that our legs entwined in our stockings and whatever else we did in bed because I relaxed too much with the wine I think.

Relaxing from the intensity of the day, people smiling at me and having to curtsy to them all the time, not knowing when further indignities would be hurled upon us, made me become sleepy so quickly. Anisoyya seemed to tell me with her laughs and kisses that she didn't mind and that I was a great lover.

It was lucky that we didn't speak the same language. I would have felt like such an idiot, having to admit to her that I couldn't remember loving her. I just hope I hadn't behaved like an animal in taking her the times that I did, as our bedclothes and nighties seemed to show by the blood specks on them.

It seemed like days before we met Anisoyya's mother again. She immediately began to cry as she saw us, dressed so alike, two women holding hands and coming towards her, our short dresses swirling as we moved gracefully in high heels that I had learned how to walk in.

Anisoyya released my hand to go and talk to her mother, looking askance at her Western style of dress. She comforted the old, weeping woman as I stood sheepishly by, in a dress like my wife's, my hair, a wig of course, as long and dark as hers and our jewellery identical. In some ways, I thought with a flutter of my heart, I was her mother's daughter as well.

That made me shiver and my dress float about my stockings even more airily than before. I could understand, however, why so many boys seemed to be so ready to become wives of the Kon. It was rather nice to be pampered and treated like a girl all the time. Then there was Anisoyya, so delighted as well when I did something correctly as a woman. I loved delighting her.

It took time for Anisoyya to reassure the woman, her mother, that all was going well for her. Eventually, the woman looked up almost guiltily at me. I felt a little uncomfortable, no, very uncomfortable indeed, that Anisoyya was praising me to her mother and I understood not a word. What could

she be telling her about our life together? That I liked wearing the same dresses as she did? That we were girl friends? I shuddered as I thought about it. I had to get my male clothes back from somewhere, but how?

We left Anisoyya's mother in the hallway, looking anxiously after us. But Anisoyya seemed to be eager to get away for breakfast. She might not have been so anxious if she had known that we would be confronted in the breakfast room by the Honored Jegsayya and the translator, Bunure. Jegsayya sent someone every day to check on us, how we were dressed and what we were doing. It was often Bunure who looked us over as if he was trying to remember each button and each bangle on my arm.

I had received a package from Jegsayya on the first day in mid-afternoon. It had contained earrings and a necklace and the messenger, not Bunure, had waited stolidly in front of us until I put them on. Then he had brought out a lipstick and eyebrow pencil and Anisoyya had taken them and freshened my lips and my eyebrows until the man nodded and left us.

Since then, Anisoyya checked that I was wearing everything that I should and that my makeup was properly done. Oh yes, I was a perfect woman and for Anisoyya, I didn't mind. Well, I did, but she made it bearable, even fun.

"The honored inquires," said Bunure meticulously, "if the sleeping has been as expected?"

Jegsayya's hair flowed over her shoulders, her red robes loose. She looked almost handsome and was certainly the most relaxed that I had seen her as she looked at me most benignly. Perhaps as I was

dressed and primed as a woman, she now considered me no threat.

Perhaps Bunure had not meant the words in quite the way they had sounded. I held Anisoyya's hand still, it was rigid in mine, as I spoke, "The nights have been everything that I expected them to be."

Jegsayya nodded and smiled at the translation while, beside me, Anisoyya seemed to relax and her hand squeezed mine lovingly.

"English officer's wife learn to use your clothes, yes?" the sister of the Kon said through the interpreter. "She make fine lady when you leave?"

So I was intended to leave, I thought. I squeezed Anisoyya's hand back for she must understand the Aji side of the conversation.

"Anisoyya will be the perfect wife," I said, feeling her quiver at the translation. "If I am to leave, though, may I take my other companion with me? Davenport, the one who is not dead," I finished pointedly.

Jegsayya frowned and said something to Bunure who immediately rose and left the breakfast tables where we were normally alone. On this day, there were Jegsayya's entourage with us, staring at me, staring at Anisoyya's holding on to me, wondering about what kind of man I was, I'm sure.

Jegsayya began abruptly to question Anisoyya who blushed and answered in a mumble so that I guessed what the conversation had been about. I must start trying to learn this language, I knew, and quickly. I would get Anisoyya to teach it to me starting that day. I was missing so much as Golapal, I

was sure, didn't always tell me everything that was said exactly as it was said.

Bunure returned to the eating room with a woman in a European dress. It came just below her knees and rustled as she walked, clicking in her high heels just like ours. I looked over Martin in his pretty dress and he looked over me in mine. He studied my figure and my makeup as I squirmed and studied his. His dress had little vents in the side so that when he sat and crossed his legs I could see that his legs were bare inside his stockings and were slim and rounded like a woman's. Well, mine were the same, I suppose, and so I shouldn't judge her, him.

"Martin!" I snapped at him and he was startled, I think, by the masculine tone of my voice. I could easily have called him Victoria, for he looked just like his sister in his pretty dress. I had been prepared to see him embarrassed to appear as he did before me as I was so humiliated to appear before him in the guise I was in.

But Martin didn't seem to be the slightest nonplussed. He sighed, his thin eyebrow rising as he looked to the Kon's sister, smiling at him as if he had done something very special. I suppose that he had. While I had married Anisoyya, he had become the wife of a man, the so-called Living God of Subbujah.

In looking at him, I could see the bra straps beneath his light blouse. He could probably have seen mine. Like me, he wore a wig, in his case of red hair with a thick full fringe as mine had. He had pearls at his ears as his hair turned under at his neck in a waved pageboy, bouncing lightly at his neck.

“Rodney,” he said softly and it was almost impossible to hear a ‘he’ in the feminine tones he seemed to have adopted along with the lipstick at his mouth. “Why don’t you finish your breakfast with your wife? I already dined this morning with my husband.”

“M-Martin,” I stammered, knowing that I must look just like him in my corset, phoney breasts and vivid makeup and hair.

“Marasara,” said my former lieutenant friend in his womanly voice.

“What the heck has happened to you?” I asked him

The woman across from me smiled in a very womanly way. She swung her skirts back across her stockings but not before I saw the tops of her stockings and knew that she was wearing a garter belt just like me.

“Something wonderful has happened to me,” said the female Marasara, who was once Martin with a smile. “Hasn’t it happened to you yet, darling Rodarra? I am Marasara, bride of the Kon, who is making a woman out of me? He wants to make a woman out of you as well, Rodarra, and soon he will. Soon, you and I will be sisters again as we once were.”

My face must have shown my anger and dismay. “You little queen!” I said to him. “You, you, you.” Words failed me.

“Look at yourself, darling Rodarra,” said the gently modulated woman’s voice from Marasara, the woman I had known as my friend for the last six months. “Do you think that because you bed a

woman that you are a man? No, when I look at you, do you know what I see, I see a lesbian.

“But after you have spent a night or two in the arms of the Living God, you will give all of that up. You will become his wife and crave to please him as we all do. He has so many wives and tonight I will be given to one of his friends and I will please him, the Honored Osajji, because it will please the Kon if I please Osajji. Bunure tells me that this is my most honored duty as the wife of the Kon and he will have me again very soon as my reward for pleasuring his friend greatly.”

I was appalled. I was stunned. I felt like crossing the table and attacking him but how could I do that when I was dressed as girlishly as him. “Martin,” I appealed to him. “What about your father? What about Victoria and your other sisters? Look, once we’re away, I won’t tell. I couldn’t.”

I shivered as Marasara shook his red hair and laughed at me. “They know all about me,” he said. “They always have, darling Rodarra. It’s only been from you that I have concealed it all. But this is what I have always wanted to be, don’t you see? I have always wanted to know what it is like to be a woman. I’ve wanted to wear woman’s clothing and to be accepted for what I am.

“Here I am accepted as what I want to be, a woman. A man wants me as a woman in his bed and I am happy to go with him. He treats me totally as a pretty woman and I am so proud of my handsome husband as you will be, too, darling Rodarra. When he calls you to his bed, you won’t refuse and you will love him as I do, because, darling, he is the Living God.”

“This is desertion,” I whispered to him.

Marasara gave me a beautiful, womanly smile. “Now, really, Rodarra,” she said. “Don’t you like the beautiful, female name I have given you? Now, can’t you imagine me in uniform now that I have found out how much I want a man and how many ways I am finding out how to love him and have him love me? I could seduce an army, you know, just as I am. No, the army didn’t make a man out of me. Rather, the opposite is true, if you must know.”

Anisoyya sensed my agitation and stroked my arm while Bunure spoke in Ajji and Jegsayya leered at me, a sly smile on her lips.

“I’ve found a place where I can be just who I have always wanted to be,” said the woman, Marasara, in her lilting womanly voice. “And when the time comes for you, darling Rodarra, I will help you all that I can to be the woman that you should be. I am teaching my fellow wives how to be English ladies so that visitors from the outside do not have to go through the shocks that we have.

“You do look so lovely sitting there with your beautiful girl friend. I can see why you have a girlish crush on her. I would myself. But soon you must graduate to real men as must she. There will soon be many visitors to Subbujah from outside and they will need to be entertained by girls who speak English like you and me.”

I could guess that my former friend was saying that she had more than a teaching job for me. Marasara wanted to enlist me to teach the new English girls to fool every visitor into thinking how normal Subbujah was. She couldn’t expect me, a man like her, to be taking our former companions to bed

as if we were girls, could she? It was, of course, exactly what 'she' meant. The city of Subbujah was ruled by Perversity, with a capital P.

"The Army," I told her hoarsely but Marasara only smiled at me and shook her pretty hair. That couldn't be the man I had relied upon for so long, I thought. I remembered some of his affected mannerisms but I had just put that down to an upper class English upbringing. I couldn't believe how feminine he had become in just a few days. It was if he had blossomed from a bud to a bloom.

Jegsayya pointed at me and said something and Anisoyya looked alarmed. "Your voice," said Bunure. "You talk too much like a man. Honored Jegsayya says that you will fix that. Marasara will show you how. You will talk like a woman when you dress like a woman. You will be a woman."

I stared at Jegsayya, aghast, and then she smiled and said something else. "Or else you leave in three day," said Bunure serenely.

I was so shocked. I had only three days left with Anisoyya. Jegsayya stood and smiled sardonically at the quivering Anisoyya and me. She made a universal gesture to indicate to me what I should be doing as soon as I could to Anisoyya, pointing to our bedroom for us to retire. Marasara stood, smiled at me femininely, and slipped her arm through the older woman's, looking at her with great affection as she clicked away in her high heels with the older woman, the twitch in her walk attracting the eyes of each man in the bodyguard squad that exited the eating room with them.

Marasara smiled at the men as well and one or two smiled back. I saw a pair wink and smile at

each other. Oh, Martin Davenport was in his element all right, I thought. I just hoped he wouldn't come crawling back to me, I thought sourly, when one of the men got him pregnant.

***** **PERVERSIY*******

Anisoyya did not want to rush back to the bedroom and be impregnated by me as the Kon's sister seemed to have been indicating. She led me on another exploration of the great palace showing me rooms of such splendor in gold and silk that my breath was taken away. I forgot that I was dressed as a pretty woman, that my face was painted like a woman and that Anisoyya had her hand about my tiny waist as if I was her girl friend.

The hundreds of tapestries showed scenes of the gods working in the fields with the people or building the palace or even fathering hordes of children on many laughing women. Some I realized were from the interior of Subbujah and showed the palace off in the distance, some were from on high from the mountain wall beyond the city and one showed, shockingly, a silk and spice train of mountain ponies passing through a high mountain to a mountain meadow. Chinese people were greeting the traders with silk goods, the source of the wealth of the Subbah River valley.

"Khirannassi," said Anisoyya smiling as we went along a tapestry gallery like a portrait gallery in a house in England. We had to stop and kiss and cuddle as we went along. She was as tall as me and soon I saw why. She must have put on six-inch heels that day. No wonder she had clicked so loudly as we crossed the floor.

But she was as tall as me and if I could restlessly fondle her panties as we clinched, so could she do the same to me, sending feelings of incredible pleasure through me as our dresses pressed together and our stockinged legs as well. We kissed heavily and constantly and only, really, in the breast department did she have me outgunned but she still stoked me lovingly and pressed down on me even though there was little to support her loving attention.

I almost missed the tapestries with the neat rows of bushes along the hillsides. I had seen them before in other places but this was most unlikely and maybe they were across the high passes. They were definitely mulberries and the silkworms were definitely spinning their cocoons in the trees. They were being gathered and brought directly to the Palace of Splendor by strings of ponies. It looked like I had found the secret of Subbujah's great wealth.

I went to go on along the balcony at the end of the gallery but Anisoyya didn't want to. I giggled, surprised by how desperately she tried to turn me away and back into the tapestry gallery. I should have noted that there were no servants in that direction. I danced away from Anisoyya, my dress floating about me and I smiled and twirled, holding on to my skirts but still she would have seen my underwear.

Anisoyya wasn't smiling though. She was staring intensely at the little courtyard at the dead end of the balcony. Some bored soldiers were standing around, waiting for something to happen, it seemed to me. Anisoyya seized my arm and her doe-like eyes implored me to go with her, away from that place. I

would have if I hadn't suddenly glimpsed a movement at the corner of the wall.

There must have been a passage below us. A column of people suddenly walked out into the middle of the sand and all the soldiers suddenly became more attentive. I was tempted to call out and later wished I had done at least that. Anisoyya pulled on my arms, tears filling her large, brown eyes, spilling over kohl-outlined eyes and leaving tracks as they ran over her rouged, powdered cheeks.

The scrape of the metal as a sword was pulled from its scabbard riveted my attention on what I would have called a little parade ground. Anisoyya clung to me and buried her head in my shoulder refusing to look. I took in her scented hair and the little scene below. The soldiers had all moved away from the lonely figure of Sedrip Golapal, if that had ever been his name.

The swordsman I had seen before at the inn. He seemed to be paying no attention to the lonely figure but suddenly he moved like a striking cobra and his sword took off Golapal's head in just one strike leaving the headless body standing there for many moments before it too toppled and gouted blood into the sand.

I gasped aloud as I hung on to Anisoyya. The soldiers, even that far away, looked up then and saw us. One left the scene at the run. Sickened and totally shocked, I staggered, high heels clicking obscenely, with Anisoyya along to the gallery as Anisoyya wept openly even though I don't think that she had seen the body. She had only heard the strike but she had known who it was, who was being executed. She took my hand and tried to hurry me down the hallway but. in our high heels, neither

of us could run. Soon we were overtaken by running soldiers and whisked quickly to an apartment occupied by the Kon's sister.

Jegsayya was livid with rage at Anisoyya, who clung now to my arm, tears still spilling over her face.

“Leave my wife alone!” I yelled at Jegsayya and even though she did not understand the words, she understood my tone.

Jegsayya stared at me for a long time. I felt a sinking feeling in my stomach as I stood there, trying to be a man in a dress as Anisoyya clung to me. She looked at me in distress. I thought that there was no way that I was going to leave the Palace alive. I did not see the reason for it. But Golapal was dead. He'd said that he would be if he was discovered in Subbujah. He had been right and now he was dead.

Honored Jegsayya clicked her fingers and the guards withdrew silently like a disappearing mist. Jegsayya then spoke directly to Anisoyya. She gestured at me and waited. Anisoyya hesitated and then nodded, bowing her head in acquiescence. We were dismissed but soldiers dogged our footsteps, even entering our apartment with us and so we could do little in the way of affection save for short hugs and kisses.

Then Anisoyya left me and gathered her clothes in the bathroom to change. She was so naturally modest but she shocked me when she came out that evening in a veiled costume, her midriff bare, her feet in golden sandals, her toenails brilliantly scarlet like the jewels gleaming in her anklet, in her navel, on her arms, at her throat and on a golden chain

across her forehead. She came to our makeup table and used the liquid kohl to extend the lines above and below her eyes out to the corners of her eye sockets.

I thought that she was extraordinarily beautiful as she swirled her skirts about me and scented herself with the concoction of perfumes that she liked. I wondered why she wanted me to sit before her then on the padded chest in front of the mirror we used to do our makeup.

Anisoyya took out the pins from my wig and gently removed my dark hair. She took off my earrings and necklace and creamed my face, my very grotesque face. I shuddered and pulled a face at myself and she smiled at me. She had waxed me that morning so that when she ran her hands over me, I was as smooth as I had ever been, even when I shaved.

Anisoyya undid my dress then and I slipped it off, shivering at the light touch of the dress on my stockings. She took off her veil then and kissed me hard as I sat there in my corset and panties and stockings. As we kissed, she undid my stockings, her soft hands on my legs sending me into raptures. She helped to roll them off me and then take off my garter belt. She would not let me take off my corset. In fact she pulled it even tighter so that my waist must have gone in several inches.

Certainly my chest seemed to be pressed up tighter into the bra and her kissing me there saucily was really cruel. I had to kiss her in the same place. She had so much more soft flesh than me and was so aroused and agitated as I kissed her. She took my head in her hands and kissed me long and hard and we were both breathing hard. I wanted her to

come with me to the bed and make love with me but she took control of herself and refused.

Anisoyya smiled at me as she re-did my makeup. As she worked, I saw that she was making me up to look like her. I questioned her and she nodded. She powdered my face after the rouges and eye shadow had been placed. She painted my lips as scarlet as hers as she sat in my lap, the thin layers of silk all that there were between me and her. She attached dangling hoops to my ears and then put a dark wig on my head with hair as long as hers.

Anisoyya pinned it to me, arranging the dark hair so that I had a long pony tail just as she had. It fell down my back making me shudder. She fixed a jewel on my forehead and threaded the chain through my hair behind the pinned up knot where the pony tail came from. Then she worked more on my makeup as I shivered as I held her as she sat in my lap making sure that we looked so alike.

Anisoyya affixed a veil like hers to my face and we were very similar. I put on a vest like hers and fastened it, barely, in front of my padded bust, which made her smile wanly. Then she put gold high-heeled sandals on my feet and anklets like hers. I had bracelets at my wrists and along my arms and rings on my fingers to compliment the colors she had painted my finger and toe-nails. My skirt was the same pink color as hers and I had red panties on just like hers. I shivered as my skirt fell about me and moved so airily about my bare legs as I moved.

“Good grief,” I said in shock as I looked at the two of us together, the only difference between us being the shaping, red corset at my waist. Other than that we were girls. I was a girl and I felt like a

girl. I couldn't even kiss Anisoyya as we hugged and pressed our bodies together. She twirled gracefully about me and had me do the same.

Oh, it felt so weird to be twirling as my dress flared out and showed off my bare legs and my panties. I could feel Anisoyya's delight as I followed her dance steps and when she tried graceful moves of her arms, I followed them as well and I could see her smiling under her veil. Her eyes were gleaming as well and we hugged again as girl dancers might who have done well. And all the time, my skirt swayed about me and told me that I was a girl.

Bunure came for us, his eyes nearly popping out of his head as he walked us, one on each side of him to the great dining hall where the Kon, his wives and his friends, his sister and Anisoyya's mother, were gathered. I saw many people looking at us and smiling as we sat on the cushions on the floor and Bunure sat on the divan and we had to feed our lord and master. Anisoyya's expressive face told me what to do. There were grapes to be served and she placed one in her cleavage and Bunure reached down and took from there with his tongue and she, my wife, smiled and stroked his arm in gentle thanks.

Bunure looked at me then and my tight bosom. I wasn't going to do it but a laughing Anisoyya reached over and put a grape in my raised cleavage and Bunure leaned over and took it from me, his beard tickling my chest as he kissed me as well. I caught Anisoyya's eyes and like her I stroked Bunure's arm and smiled at him in thanks though inside I was trembling like a leaf. I felt eyes on me all of the time and wherever I looked someone was watching me, many with wonder on their faces.

They must have been shocked at how low a British officer would sink to preserve his own life. In a perverse way myself, I was glad that I was not British.

The Kon's wives began the evening's entertainment by dancing around the tables. They made their most sensual, female gestures in front of the Kon, who seemed highly pleased with the feminine tushes and panties exposed to him. Some went so close to him that he was able to touch and fondle them which always sent them into quivers of delight and ecstasy unlike the soft smiles and arch expressions they reserved for the other men who touched them, hands running over the feminine bodies as if such obscene fondling was the norm in this perverse city.

Marasara was the main entertainer of the evening, so it seemed, as the Kon and his sister called for her repeatedly to dance. She was dressed just like Anisoyya and me and the wives of the Kon, save that she wore a yellow skirt to match the blonde hair that she had found somewhere in Golapal's packs I thought. Sadness swept over me as I thought of the little man. Marasara was danced to near exhaustion, stumbling on her high heels, almost every man in the place having been able to touch her and fondle her before the Kon's sister relented and nodded to the musicians to rest.

Marasara stumbled to a table near to the Kon's and a dark-haired handsome man, beardless, pulled her down beside him, having her lie with her back to him, pressing into him, along a thin divan. He kissed Marasara's ear and she smiled as he stroked her waist and dipped his hand beneath the waist band. She looked wildly at the Kon's sister who made the slightest negative shake of her head. Osajji, it was him, only smiled and ravaged my for-

mer colleague and friend as if he was a woman, penetrating her tush in front of everyone. What can I say about it other than she appeared to love it, kissing him as ardently as I kissed Anisoyya and Anisoyya kissed me.

The musicians returned as we were all aware that Marasara's derriere was in motion against something of Osajji's and that he was enjoying himself stroking her and kissing her. The Kon was enjoying that performance as well.

The Kon's first wife had been perched on the same couch as the Kon. Jegsayya said something to the woman, who rose, her green skirts flowing about her. All about the room, conversation stilled as the woman just stood, a picture of feminine form and elegance.

"Aqqvi," said Honored Jegsayya and when the chief musician looked at her, aghast, she repeated what she had said.

It was the girl's lack of emotion that made her performance so special, I thought, trembling with emotion myself as she danced. She pirouetted as Anisoyya had done in her attempt at the fertility dance but the Kon's first wife was like a woman, not a girl. Her female grace, extending her slender arms with such tense femininity, dark eyes almost closed, was a gorgeous compliment to Chaya, the goddess of fertility.

Only with a start did I recall the Adam's apple in her neck and then the way the Kon had been making love to her. Skirts whirled about her legs and I couldn't think of her as a man. She slipped off the first covering and we could all see how feminized

and curvaceous she had become under the tutelage of the Kon and his sister.

I could see, as well, the blasphemy of the dance as the gorgeous woman I knew now to be a man gestured for the goddess to help her in conception and the production of her babies. The veils slipped away until only the briefest band over her breasts and between her legs were left. This time, there was no reprieve as the girl revealed her perfectly formed female breasts and, I was holding my breath as well, as she twirled in front of the Kon.

The girl put her hands on the Kon's shoulders, still expressionless as she looked at him and gyrated in front of him. She brought her face to within an inch of his, before straightening. Her breasts caressed his lips as she pressed the Kon back into his cushions on his wide sofa. She put her hands on her panties and still danced in rhythm as she slowly inched them down and the music grew louder.

Her lips were thickly covered with lipstick and she ran her pink tongue over them and there wasn't a man in that room who didn't want her, me included, even though I was dressed so girlishly and had my Anisoyya. She was watching the woman as avidly as I was. The first wife backed into the Kon, swinging her hips and the Kon put his hand on her rear. She held onto her panties as he lunged at them and then relented as the Kon, laughing, finally pulled them down and she was revealed as a male.

Yet, even though I shuddered at the revelation, I still looked at her and she seemed like a she to me. The music stopped and everyone breathed again. The so lovely girl pulled up her panties and there was no doubt that she was a woman then. She walked gracefully to the chief musician then and,

naked save for her panties, she put her slender arms about his neck and kissed him thoroughly to the consternation of the Kon and the Kon's sister.

Marasara's dance that followed could not possibly capture the intense passion of the Aqqvi as danced by the first wife whom several of the men and women about the Kon had hustled away, her stoic expression not changing at all as she was tugged and pulled out of the room. Marasara tried but the music also seemed a little off, the chief musician having been carried off as well.

As I expected, I had to dance as well with Anisoyya. It was a terrible experience as many of the people did not look at me at all. I wouldn't have either. Seeing how Anisoyya did a step in our room and copying it there was quite different from following her in a public room and repeating what she did, twirling when she did. Then there were the men's hands.

The Kon's first wife had not been touched but all the men seemed to want to get me. I was stroked everywhere on my legs. My fanny was fondled all the time. I was pinched, in the front of my panties, which was awful. I swirled in beside Anisoyya but Bunure separated us and hugged Anisoyya first and then me for our performance. He lifted her beside him on the divan in the crook of his arm. I had to sit on his other side, trembling in my female clothing, as he kissed Anisoyya but then he turned to me expectantly.

Bunure kissed me a lot longer than he had Anisoyya and he tongued me. He had his arm about both our waists and he spread out his legs and drew us right against him. It was crazy how I felt with a man kissing me, a man I had waited on and served

and who had fondled me throughout the supper. He was still treating me as if I was a beautiful woman and I loved that thought. It wasn't horrible as I thought it would be as I cuddled up to Bunure and let him kiss me and stroke me and all around I saw the wives of the Kon acting just as I was.

Anisoyya looked at me and then held up the drink. I saw that it was misty as wine should not be. As I lay my body against Bunure, I realized that I had been drugged and my thoughts were not my own. I think Bunure was drugged as well because he was so ardent. I felt his male erection against me and I was so proud of myself for having aroused a man so. If I had been alone with Bunure, I would have let him have me, I'm sure. Many of the men at different tables were getting up and taking women, more than one in some cases and disappearing into the Palace.

Anisoyya stroked Bunure and suddenly he was all wet against me as I couldn't resist pressing my body against him, his hand caressing my derriere. I didn't care as I felt an urgent need to kiss him intensely and with such feminine desire. I felt his desire for me as well as his tongue entered my mouth and he brought his hand free to put both of his arms about me and kiss me most firmly, holding me to him. I wouldn't have objected if he had rolled on to me and mounted me. It was so wonderful to be laying there being kissed by a man.

Anisoyya got me to my feet and we sauntered out, Bunure's arms about me. In the outer hall, the musky odor dissipated and so did my ardor. I realized what I was doing. I was kissing a man who wanted to make love to me as a woman and I was about to let him.

Horror began to rise in me and I looked at Anisoyya in agony. She led us to our room where I felt sure she wanted me to take Bunure to bed. He seemed to think so as well. But she insisted he drink the warrior cup of wine. He did so and changed almost right away. From mauling me intensely he went to slumber in seconds.

*******THE REAL ANISOYYA*******

I was shaking in nervous tension as I thought of all the feminine things I'd done with the man. We dumped Bunure unceremoniously on the floor and pushed him out of sight under the bed. Then we lay together and Anisoyya took over Bunure's role caressing me on the bed, kissing me ardently as if she was the man and I was the woman. It was wonderful as our legs caressed each other and her gentle tongue titillated my lips and mouth.

Anisoyya clung to me affectionately. If this was to be one of my last nights in Subbujah, and I had lost track of my days, I wanted this to be one of the times that I would remember being with her.

I refused the wine that Anisoyya always brought to us in bed and she looked at me in worried fashion but, when I kissed her, she clung to me as affectionately as she ever had. I buried my lipsticked mouth into hers and she giggled at the mess we made. She insisted that we clean our faces and we did and she casually gave me wine as we did it, sipping on hers.

I pretended to drink and didn't do more than wet my lips. Anisoyya climbed into bed then, taking off her jewellery and helping me with mine. We lay together and wrestled as we always did. I encouraged her to stroke my body all over and to kiss me ar-

dently as she rolled on top of me and looked down on me, smiling.

Here was where I normally relaxed and relaxed so much that I went to sleep. Having seen how Bunure was knocked out by what she had put into his drink, I had more than a sneaking suspicion about what Anisoyya, with the connivance of her mother at first, had been doing to me.

I pulled her over me and lifted her skirts and ran my hand on her soft, womanly thighs. Anisoyya smiled as she wriggled on me, smiling at me as if she knew that soon I wouldn't be doing that to her. I opened her little blouse and freed her from her breast bands and kissed them gently as she stroked my long hair and kissed my scented neck, twisting when I let my hands run over her and down her back.

Anisoyya reached over and took more of her wine and was surprised that mine was empty. I had poured it off into others. She was becoming more and more agitated as I caressed her and she began to kiss and caress me in the same way. She lifted my skirts and stroked my legs and I loved her doing that to me. I rolled with her and let her mouth take possession of mine as I kissed and stroked her breasts and she began to assist me out of my top, kissing the cleavage that tight lacing had made of me, her mouth so much more seductive than Bunure's and I rose like a man to the challenge.

Anisoyya felt my erection and sat up, smiling timidly at me. I yawned and settled back in the mass of hair she had released from my wig and had positioned at my shoulders. I yawned sleepily to her and it worked. She returned to making love to me and when I pulled her panties on top of mine, our

legs entwined, she hesitated and let it be, her kissed becoming more passionate as I rocked with her across the bed.

Beautiful Anisoyya closed her eyes and gave herself up to passion, letting me stroke her and kiss her while she did the same to me, stroking my derriere and pulling on my panties as I held her about her narrow waist and gradually mounted her. She was enjoying me as much as I was enjoying her, kissing her, holding her and letting my hair and earrings drift around her face.

Anisoyya suddenly realized that I was pressing on her very forcefully and through all of our feminine clothing, I was gently caressing her panties. She fought me wildly as I tugged on them but I was over her and didn't intend to let her up. It took both of my hands to slip down both of the panties she wore as she fought to keep them about her. I tore one pair and then my hands touched what she had been so frantically trying to conceal.

I found what I had begun to suspect earlier that day. Anisoyya might be the most beautifully featured girl in Subbujah but now it was clear to me that I had never made love to the most beautiful girl, that she was, despite all her efforts to make me think so. I could never have made love to a man and forgotten it. And if I had made love to Anisoyya, I would have been making love to a man.

Anisoyya lay stiffly beside me as I looked at her lovely, frightened features. We had started out being girl on girl and now we weren't even boy on girl. She moved, her face still so incredibly gorgeous and feminine, and she trembled as she pulled up her panties. Why she had taken the lead so often became clearer to me. She knew she was a man and she

must at times have seen me as a man like her as well. Though not like her. I reached out and touched her breasts and she looked pained. She shivered and held my hand in place there and I could feel her heart beating a mile a minute.

I had been thinking that Jegsayya had played a perverse joke on me, dressing me as a girl and having another man dressed as a girl marry me. Then I thought about Anisoyya and her mother and how they had striven to not let me know who Anisoyya really was. The Kon had killed off her male relatives and Anisoyya's mother must have seen dressing her son as a girl the only way to save that son's life. Perhaps she had a plan for getting Anisoyya out of the Palace, perhaps as the beautiful bride of another leading family.

Perhaps a plot was in place for Anisoyya, the next possible Living God, to ascend the throne but then I had come along with Martin Davenport, silly, girlish representatives of a power far away, easily corrupted by Subbujah's perversity. She couldn't have anticipated that nor what her sister, Jegsayya, would do to me and to her son, whom I now guessed that Jegsayya had thought was her sister's daughter.

No wonder Anisoyya's mother had been so relieved when Anisoyya told her that appearances were deceiving. I was only her girl friend. I was drugged at night time, preventing the calamity to all their plans that had just befallen them.

I stared at the delicate features of the girl beside me. She lay so silently, her black hair dishevelled like mine about her soft shoulders. How could a mother have taught her son to be so feminine? I

thought of all the tender kisses and the gentle caresses she had given me and I had given her.

Anisoyya adjusted her half-blouse about her breasts, drawing my attention to them and I stared at them, wondering how a mother could make her son grow such lovely breasts. I thought of the other girls I had seen and a cold fist grabbed at stomach. There was obviously much more to Subbujah than met the eyes. I thought of the drugs that Bunure had slipped to me as had so many men to their willing and unwilling male partners.

I shuddered. If it hadn't been for Anisoyya, I would be Bunure's woman by now and I would have been enjoying all the abuse he would pour on me. I felt so awful as I knew it was true. For a little while, I had succumbed to femininity as so many boys in Subbujah had done. Soon, I would have been wanting the drugs to give me breasts like the Kon's first wife or Anisoyya and the Kon would have given me off to more and more men.

And, with all the drugs in me, I would have enjoyed it, I knew. The Kon had had Martin as a woman and I had seen Martin and Osajji. His hand had been in her skirt, gripping her panties and buttocks as they began to bounce together on the divan as if they were man and woman. Martin hadn't moved the man's hand. Then, he'd uttered a shriek and I'd seen, like anyone else that Osajji had been inserting his manhood into Marasara's tush. She hadn't objected, either, wriggling instead to get the man deeper inside herself. Yes, she'd welcomed it, kissing the man as if he was the most wonderful man in the world and my lieutenant was a beautiful woman who deserved to be kissed as he was.

How hard it must have been for Anisoyya. She had had to think of herself as a girl. She had had to live entirely as a woman for so long right under the eyes of Jegsayya and his mother, a mother who had to discourage every masculine gesture and reward every female one that her son made.

I lay there contemplating it all, her side of the bed still and silent, when suddenly a hubbub began outside and we both sat up, wide awake. Armed men burst in, some with torches in their hands.

*******A NEW GODDESS*******

We were seized in our flimsy dresses and tops and hustled quickly from the room. In the dim hallway, all I could hear was a shrieking and wailing and cries that sounded like, “Kon-kuha! Kon-kuha!”

My skirts billowed out about me as I was hustled down a passageway and thrown almost contemptuously into a cell. The soft body of Anisoyya followed, falling on top of me. The door slammed and was bolted as the ruckus seemed to leave us and head out into the wider palace.

Anisoyya sat up from me, gathered her skirts about her and sat away from me. I got up and padded to the door. I could hear chanting far off and huge amounts of shouting. I tried the window but it had a metal base. Anisoyya looked up in the dimness at me, her thin eyebrows making her features again appear so wonderfully female. I reached out and touched her, sitting beside her on the bench that might serve one of us as a bed. I pulled her to me, miming that we should hold each other to stay warm. I was breaking out in goose bumps despite the long hair about my shoulders and upper body.

She shifted reluctantly against me. There was just one thin blanket on the bed form and I put it around her as she felt so cold.

Anisoyya looked at me and extended the blanket and so we cuddled together and tried to keep warm. She shuddered as I stroked her arms and encouraged her to stroke me. Our dresses were so thin and we had no shoes. All we had on our feet was similar toe-nail polish, I noticed. I put my arm about her slim waist and drew her tightly to me and cautiously she did the same, leaning back on the cold wall, her hair a cushion like the hair of my wig was for me.

Anisoyya shivered for a while and I stroked her. She put her head on my shoulder and without thinking about it I kissed her forehead. She lifted her head as if to look at me and without a thought, I kissed her on her lips. I hadn't expected the intensity with which she kissed me back. She was quivering and so was I as we broke apart. She sighed and moved as close to me as she could and she reached for my head and held me as she kissed me with increasing passion.

Anisoyya held onto me and shifted from sitting on the platform hanging from the wall to lie beside me. I lay beside her, her small, fleshy breasts pressing against me through our clothes. She kissed me again and while she was doing that she began to unfasten my clothes, the corset that had held me for so long. I should have objected. I knew exactly what I would end up doing but her kisses aroused such a desire in me.

I have never felt ecstasy like it as she lay beneath me and I felt her hand on my panties. She undid her top and her breasts were there for my eager hands

and mouth. She wiggled out of her dress and took off her panties.

I kissed and caressed her as if she was a woman and she slid my dress down and my panties as well, revealing my huge manhood compared to hers. She wriggled beneath me and her lovely, soft legs arose about me. I felt thrills shooting through me as she took hold of me and directed me into penetrating her. She squealed as I went into her just as I would have entered any woman.

I kissed her and stroked her breasts as she writhed beneath me. Before I knew it, I was pouring my male essence into her. I made love to her as if she was a woman. Oh, she was so fragrantly feminine. I'll always remember that. I'll remember how she looked at me and smiled so sweetly at me as I rode her, her hands caressing my hardened nipples as well.

Then, when we'd finished, the strangest thing of all happened. I'd meant to lie beside her and cuddle her but Anisoyya climbed on me and was smiling and smiling as she kissed me. She stroked me and she lifted my smooth legs, kissing them, and then I felt her little, stiff manhood against me. She touched the earrings that I still wore and my long hair on my shoulders as I quivered.

I was shaking then as Anisoyya ran her hands down my legs and she entered me. She took me as if I was a woman, stroking my soft legs as if I was as female as her. It was the strangest experience to be a woman for my woman. I could easily have fought her off but I didn't want to. I looked up into her gorgeous, womanly face and saw the flush spreading across her face. She looked like she was in ecstasy

as she had me, my hands fondling her lovely breasts as her real hair fell about us.

Anisoyya smiled at me and lay on me, quivering and trembling much more than when I'd taken her. We kissed and kissed. I felt her again as she lay between my legs. Her kisses along my legs raised feelings in me that I couldn't believe. I loved being made love to by her, my woman. She raised such feelings in me as she stroked me and kissed me. I only wished that I had real breasts like hers so that I could have felt what she did so ecstatically when I kissed her there. It took her longer to come, but I was well given over to bliss by the time that she did.

Anisoyya cruelly possessed my mouth and made me get all hard again. Then she sat on me and descended on me, making me penetrate her again as she laughed and smiled at me as she stroked my hips and legs which she knew made me wild.

We lay together, kissing and cuddling. I don't think I knew or cared which of us was the woman and which the man. We had to put our female clothing back on, panties, bras and dresses, wrapping ourselves in them beneath the blankets. Anisoyya took off one of my earrings and put it on herself. She took off one of the anklets she still had on and put it on me.

Anisoyya took my pins, did my hair into a feminine braid and re-pinned it so that only a small braid fell on my back. Her lovely eyes glinted as she smiled and mimed that I looked lovely. She moved against me, kissing me intensely, stroking my skirts and my legs with hers. I knew she was going to have me again. I lay back and let her kiss and fondle me as if I was a woman, loving every second of it.

Anisoyya raised her head before I heard it, the tramping feet of soldiers. She kissed me hurriedly, her tongue in my mouth, before she sat up, leaving me the blanket.



She looked incredibly beautiful, so adorably girlish, as she stood and faced the soldiers who burst in. I didn't recognize the leader with a sword but he gestured to us to stand. Anisoyya took my hand as I stood beside her, my dark pink skirt the same as hers. She put her arm about my waist and I put mine about hers and the soldiers didn't object.

We went out into a hallway filled with silent monks. A larger, stockier monk than the others stood at the head, looking at us. If he had had eyebrows, they would have gone up as he looked at the two of us.

"Kon-kuha," he said firmly to us. "Kon-kuha."

Anisoyya's arm tensed about me. "Kon-kuha," she finally whispered.

"Kon-kuha," the monk said again..... "Kuru manaj-Kon-ajji."

Anisoyya gasped and tried to step back, pressing herself into my arms as if for protection.

The larger monk smiled. He spoke in a murmur, respectfully, and my fear receded a little. I had thought us dead. I had thought myself surely degraded and killed. I had kissed Anisoyya and thought how sweet it was, that it wouldn't matter at all what we did, what little pleasure we got, well, what enormous pleasure we got, as we were dead anyway. Now, I felt guilt stealing back over me as I stood there in a dress having been made love to another man and having had him make love to me, me as a woman and having enjoyed the pleasures of both.

The larger monk finished speaking and waited for her. He frowned when Anisoyya turned to me and put her arms about me, hugging me, her hair loose

and floating over my face. The monk looked surprised and motioned to someone behind him. The line of monks parted and Anisoyya's mother burst forward, her face wreathed in smiles. She was crying, but in happiness, it seemed to me, as she flung her arms about her daughter. No, I think she flung her arms about her son, whom she tore away from me.

Now I understood some of what was going on. Clearly the Kon was dead. That had been the commotion that had led to us being thrown in the cell. The monks knew as well, it seemed to me, that Anisoyya was not the beautiful girl that she appeared to be. They would want 'him' to go to the God Tower, to become the new Kon, the new Living God, this man who was my lovely wife, and more.

Clearly, Anisoyya did not want to go with her mother and the monks. She turned and put her arm out to me but her mother pulled it back. Anisoyya had never looked so beautiful and so feminine as she was in that moment. Her dark-fringed eyes, her lashes so thick and femininely curved, showed her dismay as they coaxed her away from me, her mother giving me a look of total disdain.

Anisoyya – I wondered what her new masculine name would be – kept looking back at me as she was escorted away. I couldn't help notice the pronounced sway of her hips and the bounce of her chest as her mother took her hand and hurried her away from me. The monks closed ranks stolidly and I was left to face them alone, wondering how feminine I looked with my hair so neatly done by Anisoyya, just a little time before.

A soldier finally conducted me through the Palace to a new part. It was so big that I hadn't seen

even half of it with Anisoyya. I came, strangely, to a gleaming office with a table and real chairs. A different, taller monk was seated at the table. He stood and held the chair for me so that I could sit in my skirt opposite him. I had tightened my corset and so I was once more like a woman in my figure. I crossed my legs, my skirt moving sensually about me, reminding me that I was a woman, as did my pretty anklet and my scarlet toes.

“Good afternoon, captain,” the monk said, smiling at me. “I would also like to tell you what a lovely woman you are as well and I mean that in all sincerity, Mr Rayfield. If you wish me to call you Miss Rayfield, I certainly will.”

I stared at him in stunned surprise.

“I am Rasuvajji, Slave of the Living God, and a graduate of Cambridge, if you please,” the monk said pleasantly.

I was absolutely dumbfounded.

The monk smiled in understanding and waved away the soldier who had brought me to the room.

“What the heck,” I said angrily in my officer voice, so male. “You speak English.”

He winced at the tone of my voice. “The only native-born who is fluent here,” he sighed. “Poor Kuvujji is no longer with us while Bunure seems to have vanished after retreating to a bedroom with two very attractive young ladies last night.”

“Look under the bed,” I said, blushing as he looked at me quite frankly with admiration on his face. “Kuvujji was Sedrip Golapal’s real name?”

The monk nodded, rising and bringing clear glass goblets to the table and a bowl of fruits. He poured

wine from a bottle and sipped from his own glass before sitting down again. "The same," he said. He looked me over, at my padded breast, my earring and my arranged hair. I flushed again.

"I would have thought," Rasuvajji went on, "that Kuvujji might have told you about me, Captain Rayfield." Something did stir at the back of my mind then, something that Golapal had said about a person to ask for.

"Yes," I said uncertainly.

"Ah," said Rasuvajji. He smiled and raised his glass to me. "Such a bewildering and bizarre experience, your first trip to Subbujah. What?"

I shivered but the room was not cold, not like the cell. Braziers cast heat about the room as well as a faint aroma that I thought of as incense. "I don't understand this place at all," I said as the door opened and two trays of succulent snacks, some of them meat, were whisked in by a blushing servant girl, who didn't look at me as she set down the trays and almost fled from the room.

"My daughter," said Rasuvajji with a smile. "A real girl, not the kind that has inhabited this place for far too long. She has seen nothing of what she thinks of as the decadence of this place as she went with me into exile at Kejja."

Rasuvajji served himself from the two trays, eating with obvious enjoyment, handing me a dish with a spoon for me to select for myself. I was extremely hungry.

"I can help you out with your understanding," said Rasuvajji, smacking his lips as he downed more of the wine that I found vinegary. "The religion of Subbujah is rather quaint, don't you think? The

concept of a god investing his presence in a living person is quite an anachronism, isn't it, in this modern age.

“Can you imagine the penalty then that a person inflicts upon himself if he disobeys that divine presence? Can you imagine the penalty if, like last night, he takes it upon himself to destroy the receptacle of the Living God.”

I couldn't help the shock and surprise on my face.

“Yes,” said Rasuvajji softly. “I think Honored Jegsayya had quite forgotten that Kuvatta, she, or I should say he, danced the Aqqvi last night I am told, was the son of Kuvujji himself.” I gasped as I realized why the first wife of the Kon, so beautiful despite her Adam's apple, had always frowned at us. She had been Golapal's son. Rasuvajji eyed me speculatively as I re-crossed my smooth legs, re-adjusting my skirt femininely, my fingernails so prominent and so female, I realized, thanks to Anisoyya's ministrations.

“I don't know how she obtained one of those little guns that Golapal brought with him,” Rasuvajji went on. “Did you pass it to her the first time you were in an audience with the Kon? Jegsayya thought so. She wanted your head last night and Anisoyya's, whom she thinks is your wife. Luckily, the Erenta, the guardians of the Kon, would no longer obey her, not with her brother dead. They held you until I could return from Kejja and reveal to them the next Kon.”

My senses reeled. “Kuvatta?” I asked. “The first wife of the Kon was Golapal's son, the one he said was ravaged?” I could hardly say 'son' as I thought

of the calm features of the girl who had stunned us all as she danced the Aqqvi so beautifully. I recalled her face as she had been made love to by the Kon. He had loved to touch her all the time. How awful it must have been for Golapal to have seen ‘her’ near to the throne, his son being womanly caressed by the Kon.

“What a sacrifice,” sighed Rasuvajji and there were tears in his eyes, I saw with the greatest surprise. “Kuvatta became the bride of the Kon in order to have her father’s first decreed execution turned into exile. Now,” he shuddered, not realizing that he used the wrong pronouns for Kuvatta, “she goes to eternal damnation to avenge her father’s death.”

My throat was dry and my temperature was beginning to rise. I drank hastily from the wine, my lipstick on the glass, my painted fingernails gleaming femininely.

“Honored Animara, the mother of your,” Rasuvajji hesitated and smiled, “wife, met me on the steps of the Palace to proclaim to me that a son of Farujji yet lived.” He sighed. “So, we monks are restored to power.” He shook his head. “Under wise Attalal, we monks lost our will to direct the Kon’s governance.

“After all, there have been Kuvattas before to remove a divine presence if it corrupted a human too weak to bear it.” He looked bleakly at me. “So much of this terrible decade can be blamed on Jegsayya. She knew just how to keep us away from the Kon. But we must bear the blame, too, for ever letting ourselves take our title of Slaves of the Living God too literally. It won’t happen again.”

“Anisoyya?” I gasped at last.

Rasuvajji nodded. "Will spend thirty days in the God tower," he said. "But we already know which divine presence will capture Anir, son of Farujji." He smiled at me. "The Kon has to be interned in the tower immediately upon the death of the previous Kon. No influence is allowed or, or what happens, is what has happened, or will happen, to Anir, Anisoyya."

I stared at him in horror, wondering what terrible thing might have happened to Anisoyya, my wife.

"Chaya is more than a simple goddess of fertility," said Rasuvajji quietly, watching my face intently. "She is love and beauty, too, and it seems clear to us all that she has already possessed Anir."

He went on with a long explanation of Ajji theology, of the presence of gods and goddesses abroad in the world, and the sanctity of the God Tower, built upon the Sacred Rock where the Creator, Vekkasuya, had stood to create the world. There, only one divinity could enter, and only by the sacred rite, the receptacle prepared by the Slaves of the Living God. But if Anir was possessed, nothing else could enter.

"And Anisoyya is possessed, is she not," said the cultured monk, his eyes gleaming at me. "She is the avatar, so to speak, of a goddess, and you are her handmaiden."

I gulped and stared at him. He came round the table and sat right beside me. He put his hand on my leg and stroked it and I found my senses reeling. "She will be our queen," he said gently. "You must see that. She will marry some strong young man that we will find for her who will treat her as a goddess. She will have handmaidens like my daughter,

who will carry on the line of the house of Farujji. You could not serve her in either of these ways, could you?"

"I love her," I said, trembling as he ran a powerful hand over my skirt, caressing my shaven leg beneath the layer of silk. He took my feminized hand in his and raised it to his lips and kissed it.

"A woman?" he asked. "No, we have had enough of perversity in Subbujah. And if you stay here, it must be as a woman. No-one as lovely as you is going to be allowed to be a man. Many of the wives and daughters acclaimed by the last Kon will be allowed to choose what they are. They may keep on taking the tarkelan, the drug that so softens a man that he produces breasts like a woman. You may begin to take it if you wish."

Rasuvajji stood and pulled me to my feet. I had to look up at him. I couldn't believe how I was trembling all over. I felt my skirt swirl about me and he smiled at me. "Your hair is so beautiful for an Ajji maiden," he said, "and you have captured her fragrance. Here, Miss Rayfield, I can offer you a place as my concubine. I will enjoy watching your breasts grow as your real hair lengthens. I loved the blonde women I saw in England. I've always wanted to possess one."

He kissed me. The monk, Rasuvajji, a man, kissed me, putting his hands about me as if I was a woman and would welcome his touch. His tongue entered my mouth and I didn't resist. I just stood there and let him do things to me that a man does to a woman. I couldn't resist him. I seemed to dissolve under his touches. But then he stopped and hugged me before he went back around the table and sat down.

He looked at me and smiled as I staggered to the table, every nerve end tingling. "The drug was in the lining of the glass before I poured in the wine," Rasuvajji told me. "You feel how powerful it is. She will succumb to it as you would if you stayed here. I will send you back to Ahdallah with trusted guards.

"You may wear your corsets and dresses and your fine, blonde wig, but the men I send with you will be selected so that they will not try to have sexual relations with you. It will be a slow ride to Ahdallah and the drug will be out of your system when they leave you, with your uniforms, Mr Rayfield, outside Ahdallah. After that, if you return, you know what your fate will be. You will be my concubine. There is no other role here for you but that."

I was taken back to the inn outside the Palace. It was incredible the changes that had already taken place. There were few guards at the palace doors and none on the streets. The streets were thronged with women of all shapes, sizes and degrees of beauty. There were no beauties languishing on upper balconies. If there were women there, they were grey-haired, older women, who stridently directed their lazy daughters, or so it seemed to me, in the business of running a house.

Rasuvajji had said that Osajji had petitioned the new rulers to decree that 'love-wives', former brides of the Kon, be given official status as first wives, as women. "He has taken a beautiful wife, a Circassian, a bride of the Kon, who he does not intend to give up," had said Rasuvajji, "which is why I have decreed that such a choice can be made. We will all live with the choices made and purge perversity from our city. As I must do in sending a beautiful woman as you are, away from here."

Most men and most families, however, had shed their female-dressed 'love-wives' and their 'daughters' were having their hair sheared off, I saw in several houses, as Rasuvajji escorted me, me still dressed as a pretty woman. He told me that there was quite an exodus of shapely women from the city, particularly now that Jegsayya's head had joined Golapal's on the spikes above the gates out of the city.

I found my ponies packed and a squad of scarred veterans awaiting me at Golapal's cousin's inn. I defiantly dressed as any English woman would have, in riding skirt and high-heeled boots. I put on stockings and fresh panties beneath my dress and did my makeup, surprised how feminine I looked with so little practice at making myself into a woman. I changed my wig and put lipstick on my mouth and left Subbujah as the woman they had made me become.

*******SOME KIND OF ENDING*******

"But that can't be all," I stated in shocked disbelief as Rayfield, his hoarse voice stilled, rose, moving with feminine grace and put his glass on the bar. It was amazing what I noticed now that he had spoken. I noted how long his hair really was. I saw the thinness of his eyebrows and how smooth and unmarked his features were. I'm sure the marks on the lobes of his ears must have been for earrings.

His voice had changed, his gestures had changed, as he described himself as a woman. I'd goggled at him because it was if it had been a woman there in the Ship Room talking to me. A woman in a man's suit and tie to be sure, but a

woman nonetheless. I could imagine Rayfield just giving a flick of his hair and it would have stood out all about his head like a woman's.

What was worse was that I think that I'd seen him before, that is, I think I had seen him as a woman before. There was something about him that seemed familiar. His nose was 'patrician', I'd thought it, too thin by far. But it was perfect for a woman. A name tried to force its way out of my mind, a woman's name, one that described the person beside me.

I'd thought of Rodney Rayfield before as affected, an effete like Bunny, but put it down to his upbringing. I'd never expected to be looking at him and suddenly noticing how feminine he was. In a skirt or a dress, with his hair ungreased, and makeup on his face, I could see that he would indeed make a striking woman. Oh, I must have seen him before as a woman. A vision of a lovely woman was rising in my mind, one I forced away from me.

"How about Davenport?" I asked, my throat clogged by the heavy emotion I'd felt at such a story and from what I was seeing, sort of. "Did he stay?"

"Oh yes, that time," said Rayfield, his voice soft, a woman's voice. He wasn't holding back any more. He was talking to me as if I really knew him, knew him in another role, as a woman. "I did bring her back when I went back later. Osajji dumped Marasara in favor of a wife who could give him children.

"Marasara then found a new husband and was earning a good living in Kamara's Inn as a dancer. She was one of the attractions at the same place that we first stayed. Her second husband didn't

want children. She loved having a different man in her bed with her every night. Yes, we would have called her a prostitute but she always called herself a courtesan.”

“Davenport is still a she?” I asked fearfully.

“Oh yes,” he said, and I realized how easily his voice had shifted into a female register as he talked longer to me. “I still see her. But I didn’t for a while. Then she returned here and married now for a third time. She’s Mrs Grace Townes.” I started at that. “Yes, you’ve seen her in here with Leonard Payton-Smith, her current boy friend. That’s why I’m here in town and why I come here, as I used to, before, before I reverted to dressing like this. Grace is one of the few I can be myself with.” I gulped as I thought about what Rayfield meant by that, who the ‘myself’ might be that he could be, with Grace Towers. “She’s planning a big, splashy wedding in May, for her fourth marriage, and she asked me if I would be her matron of honor.”

“I didn’t know Leonard was that way,” I said, unable to look at a man who identified himself as going to be a bridesmaid, of sorts, at a wedding.

“He isn’t,” said Rayfield with a shy smile. “She hasn’t told him. He doesn’t want children. He just wants her as his lovely wife to make love to whenever he wants. Since she’s had an operation to have her sex changed, she says that I’m the only one who could ever expose her. She knows I won’t. She’s, she’s, helped m-me, you know, to arrange it for myself.”

I stared at Rayfield in horror.

“You’ve seen me as a woman before,” Rayfield said then. “I came to the Atwell reception in my

blonde wig and a black dress and a black hat. Don't you remember talking to Patricia Knowles."

"Remember?" I choked as understanding flooded through me. "I called the phone number you gave me a hundred times!" I flushed then at how that must sound.

"I wish I'd been home," Rayfield said, a ghost of a smile on his lips, so pale and not at all like the classy Patricia's. But then, as he sighed, I saw him relax his mouth and saw the bow in the middle of his lip that he had concealed by pursing his lips together. It was like what he did with his hands, concealing how long his nails were.

I was flustered. I would have asked Patricia out on a date and he seemed to be hinting that he would have gone out with me. He would have dressed as a woman and I would have taken him out and brought him home. I would have kissed him as well, or I would have tried. I had really liked both of them, Patricia and her friend, Grace.

"The-the others," I asked to conceal the confusion I felt. "What has happened to them? To Anisoyya?"

Rayfield looked at his watch. The rest of the club was quiet now and he wanted to leave. Perhaps he was regretting all that he'd told me.

"Well, Kuvatta was beheaded like her father," Rayfield said, his voice changing weirdly into Patricia's voice as I stared at him, seeing and hearing the woman I'd admired. "Jegsayya was as well. Dajir and Adi I took back to Ahdallah and they went off with some merchantman who tried to pay me for them. I never saw them out of dresses or makeup. I'm sure they were on one of Subbujah's insidious

drugs as they were looking more womanly every time I saw them.

“Ghani stayed in Subbujah with some man, as his concubine, and still is as far as I know. I told you Marasara stayed as a wife. Kamara chose to be a woman as did most of the girls at Golapal’s cousin’s inn. It’s famous or infamous for its lovely, strange girls and a boy who’s inclined that way, if he’s pretty enough, can find a place there if he wants.”

“And Anisoyya?” I persisted.

“I couldn’t stay away,” said Rayfield as he moved to the door and I followed him. He looked about the Ship Room as if fixing it in his memory. It came to me then that he was here saying good-bye to the place. I had caught him at just the right moment to have his story pour out after Bunny’s revelations.

“She’s a father several times over now,” Rayfield said as I could hear him as Patricia but he seemed not to notice. “Rasuvajji made me become his concubine and so I was only allowed into Anisoyya’s presence, but only as a woman. She treats me as if I am her handmaiden.

“When she heard about Christine Jorgensen, Anisoyya asked me come back here to find out all about it. I thought that she wanted it for herself but Rasuvajji laid down the law. She cannot do such a thing, not when she might still have children. That’s when she told him that it wasn’t her who wanted to be a woman but me. She was making all the arrangements for me and then she wanted me with her all the time as her handmaiden. And Rasuvajji agreed that I can stay with her forever if I am completely a woman.”

I stared at him, my insides shaking, my hair standing on end, as Rayfield, I could still call him that, found his raincoat in the cloakroom. We went to the outer door that I opened for him, each of us lost in our thoughts.

“It’s, it’s quite a voyage that you’re setting out on,” I said and, partly in the shadows, the former Captain Rayfield’s features darkened and I saw Patricia Knowles, the woman that I currently still had a crush on looking back at me.

“I’m not on any voyage anywhere,” said Rayfield then, reaching up with a hand and taking pins from his hair. He shook it and there, in front of me, he was transformed into a she. Patricia Knowles smiled at me as she took on a feminine pose, a striking female even without makeup. “Anisoyya can have her operation. I won’t. But I still want to be loved. I want to be loved as a woman, by a handsome, willing man.”

I reeled back as Patricia stepped against me. Her lips met mine and I found my heart racing as I kissed ‘her’, breathing in a scent that she had been careful to keep hidden from me before. The kiss lasted minutes, her passion endless as she pressed her body to mine and I held her, finding her waist so thin and her chest to definitely have recognizable mounds against me.

“Look,” I said, meaning to ask him, her, not to do this, to let me think about it for a while, ‘Patricia’ being the sort of woman that she said that she was..

A taxi stopped at the curb and a very classy woman got out and waved to us. “Rayosara,” she called, stepping forward, a dark-skinned woman with long, dark, shiny hair. She was dressed in

high-heeled boots, a slim dark skirt and a black leather jacket over her black blouse that showed off a prominent, female chest. She had lovely legs and a figure that seemed to be feminine in all proportions.

She shook her head as Rayfield, Patricia, went down to her. She held hold him-her at arm's length, looking him over, shaking her head in amusement as if she couldn't believe the way he was dressed or the way her hair was styled. She leaned forward then and kissed him. She kissed him and Patricia seemed to disappear in her arms as she took control of Rayfield, her arm about 'him', directing him into the taxi that she even got into after him.

"This isn't going to change anything," I heard her saying in a beautiful English accent as I trembled at the sight of the beautiful Anisoyya. "It's all arranged and you can be with me all the way. Oh, I am so excited!"

I stood, rooted to the spot, watching as she, supposedly a man, so femininely gorgeous, closed the cab door, babbling on, before throwing herself into the arms of the man in the back seat with her. At least, it could be taken to be a man with her, or a woman, cuddling and being kissed by her as the cab drew away.

As the cab went by me, Patricia suddenly sat up and made a sign to me as if she was on the telephone. My heart and stomach lurched as one. She was inviting me to call her. My head began to pound as I stared after her, disappearing with her girl friend, knowing that I would call her. I would call Patricia Knowles. I would take her out on a date and I would ... yes, I would explore her femininity with her. I knew that I would.

I breathed hard and walked down where I was parked. There was Tom Scully sitting on a bench, looking at the river and the city across the way.

“Shaking it off?” I asked. I hadn’t drunk anything but coffee in the last couple of hours. Rayfield’s story still pounded on my brain. It was almost good to see someone normal to talk to at last.

“That story of Bunny’s,” said Tom as he accepted my offer of a lift. He would pick up his car in the morning. “Have you ever heard a story like that before, of men becoming women?”

“Well,” I said cautiously. “I have.”

Tom looked at me and shook his head. “I should have known,” he said. “But still, I never have told you the story about Rosalita, have I?”

“She was a man who became a woman?” I asked and he nodded glumly. “How did you find that out?”

“I married her,” he said shortly. “It’s a story I’ll tell you some time.”

*****end*****