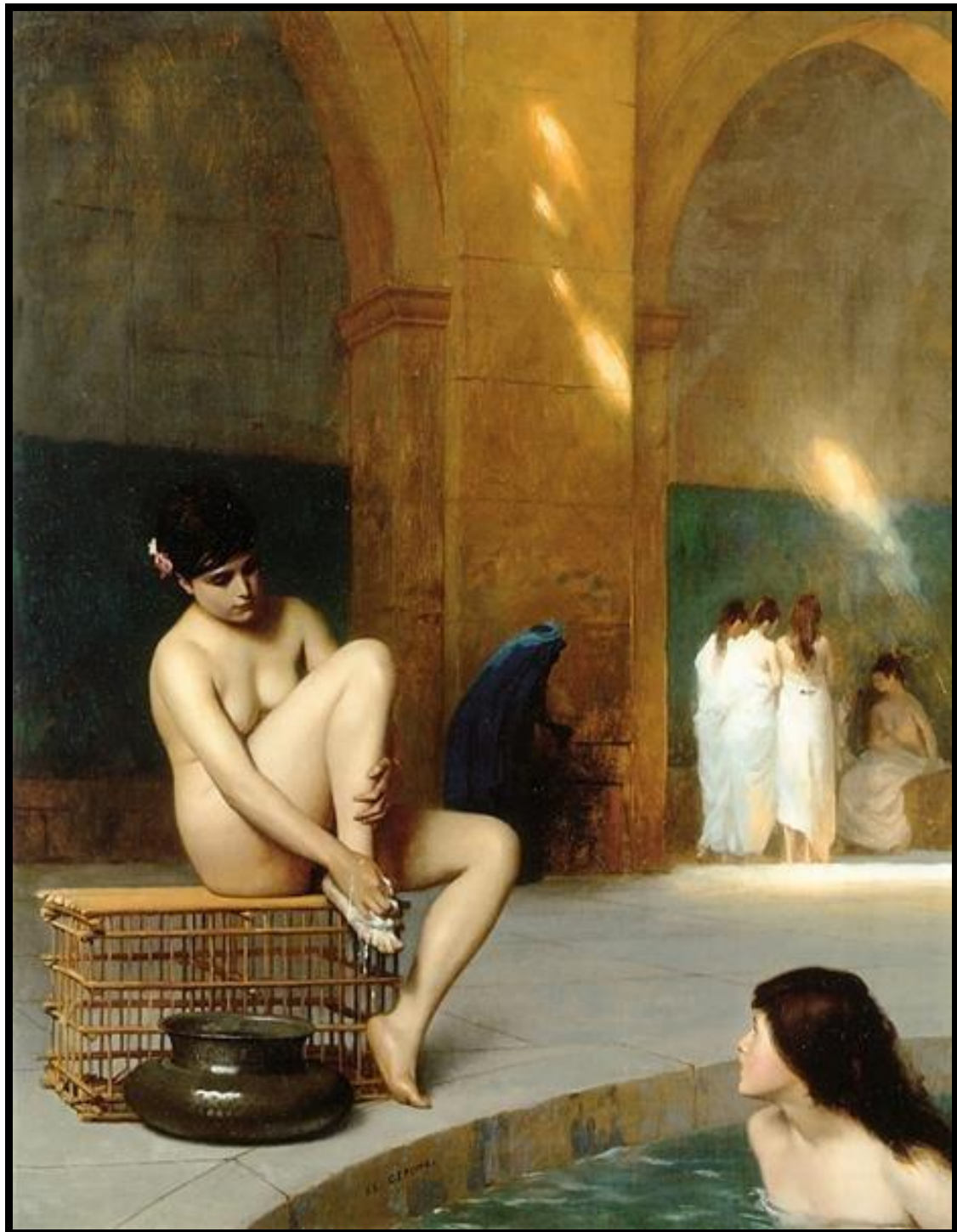


Alif

Bradley Stoke



1

“Whatever thoughts, fantasies or conjectures you may have about working in a Brothel - especially a State Brothel - you should dismiss straight away. It really is no different to working anywhere else. You will not be expected to behave any differently to a secretary or personal assistant employed in any other business.”

Ana nodded. This was what she'd hoped to hear. Although her interviewer was just a little bit more flamboyant than most, - as befitted the Director of the largest Brothel in the country, - she had been afraid that he might have been far worse. Mr Madir was not a tall man, but when wearing his top hat he had a bearing and demeanour that more than compensated for his vertical disadvantage. His stubby fingers were either fiddling with his cigarette holder or, as at the moment, delicately holding a cigarette a small distance from his mouth. Although his fingers didn't have the yellow stain of nicotine associated with a habitual smoker, there was a suggestion of roughness about them.

Ana had never visited the City of Blad before. She had never been very far from her home in Rif, a rural district in the heart of Alif renowned more for its wide open plains and sugar beet than it was for providing employment. She'd despaired of ever finding a job when one of her very many applications was returned not with the usual polite regrets but with an interview date. And now she was here, the interview was almost a formality. As soon as her duties were explained to her and the Director confirmed that she'd gained the requisite grades in her secretarial examinations, the tone of the interview shifted quite markedly from *if* she were to work as his secretary towards *when*.

However, this might not be so surprising, Ana reflected. Not many people would be attracted to working in a Brothel. Initially she had been very reluctant to post off her application form, despite all the effort expended in its completion. Some of Ana's friends were simultaneously shocked and titillated by Ana's potential job offer, while others advised her that with jobs so hard to find, especially in Rif, she shouldn't ignore any opportunity. It was also true that this job had its attractions: the pay was good and accommodation would be provided free of charge (not, as Ana was relieved to discover, in the Brothel itself).

The Blad State Brothel was an imposing building. It was difficult to determine the building's shape because from whatever direction it was seen other buildings in the narrow winding roads obscured some of it. Its entrance was a wide doorway, many times higher than the tallest man, leading to a foyer where men were sitting on armchairs or anxiously milling around. At first Ana was unsure where to go, but she breathed deep and strode towards the scantily dressed lady at the reception desk. She would not be deflected at this last hurdle. At the very least, she'd want to reclaim her not inconsiderable travelling expenses.

When Ana introduced herself, she was treated in exactly the same officious way she associated with receptionists at other interviews she'd attended. Mr Madir was informed by telephone that Ana had arrived and then, because he was such an important man, the receptionist escorted Ana into his private elevator and up to his office. Even then, Ana had to wait with the plants and plaques in the anteroom for nearly half an hour beyond the official scheduled time of the interview before the Director could see her. Ana speculated that this might be because there were other candidates for the job, but when he opened his door to invite her in there was no

evidence of what might have delayed him.

“However, this *is* a Brothel,” continued the Director, smoke billowing through the nostrils of his long thin nose. “And it is worth your while knowing how the institution works. No doubt, like many country bumpkins, you have some very peculiar ideas about it. And from what I’ve heard of State Brothels in the provinces, this may not be entirely due to rustic ignorance.” He leaned forward to gaze into Ana’s face, forcing her to lean back while still maintaining a fixed bland smile. “Do you have any idea what motivates women - or men - to work as prostitutes?”

Ana swallowed slightly. “No,” was all she managed to eructate.

“None of your friends have ever been prostitutes? None of them ever considered it as a career?”

Ana shook her head. What must Mr Madir think of her?

“There are many different reasons for a woman, - and most of the prostitutes here *are* women, - to work as a Prostitute. The most positive ones are held by those attracted to prostitution as a profession, and who take it every bit as seriously as the legal, medical, pedagogical and, I dare say,” the Director sniffed a little dismissively, “the secretarial professions. These are the prostitutes I most admire. They are the ones who have ensured that, over the centuries, the State Brothels continue to provide the highest possible level of service and satisfaction. A standard which would have ensured a state monopoly even if the law didn’t already prescribe it.

“Then there are those attracted purely for the remuneration. Prostitutes are very competitively salaried, and the bonuses, overtime and fringe benefits are really second to none. Quite a few Prostitutes, and not just the Alpha grades, earn substantially more than me. Why an employee wishes to earn so much money is really

none of my business and I do not wish to pry. However,” and again Mr Madir leaned uncomfortably forward, “one hears terrible things about their private habits. Some even drink alcohol. And for a filthy habit like that they need the money to buy it on the black market. And some have children. You don’t have children, m’dear?”

Ana shook her head. She felt distinctly ill at ease. Even in her smart and demure interview outfit, - which rather exaggerated any stiffness or primness she might already possess, - the Director’s pale brown eyes seemed to unclothe her.

“Good. And then there are those here in penal service. They most definitely do not enjoy the career advantages of other Prostitutes, but many choose to linger on as employees after serving their sentence. I don’t enjoy my dual role as Prison Governor and Managing Director, but I am above all a servant of the Government and in that capacity I am thoroughly loyal. Do you have any questions?”

Ana couldn’t think of any, and rather hoped the interview would end soon. It was difficult to avoid looking into the Director’s face, and every time she did his eyes pierced straight through her. No doubt it was his profession that made him appear like this, thought Ana charitably. Or maybe, she wondered less benevolently, it was what he was already like that had decided his choice of profession.

“Irrespective of the terms of their employment all the Prostitutes are strictly graded according to their appearance, performance and special services. This is categorised by Greek letters. The highest grades are the Alphas with the Alpha Double Plus being the highest quality, most well-paid and, as far as the client is concerned, the most expensive. At the other extremes are the Epsilons. These might be considered *bargain basement* by the clients, and their services are usually only retained because of the demand for cheapness. Epsilons mostly consist of convicts and

economic migrants. Personally, I would never avail myself of their services, but there are many poverty-stricken clients with sufficiently less discretion than myself.

“If you were employed as a Prostitute, I imagine you would be categorised as Beta Plus which is no bad thing to be. There are opportunities to work part-time as a Prostitute. Should you ever consider it, it’s a very good way to improve your salary quite substantially.” The Director paused to pull another cigarette from the silver cigarette case on the desk. He tapped it on the exterior, though there seemed no reason to suspect it needed such attention and fixed it in the end of his cigarette holder. “Does the prospect of such extra employment attract you at all, m’dear?”

Ana blushed. Revulsion gripped her stomach. She’d rather die! A heroic image of herself jumping out of the Director’s window onto the city streets many floors below came to mind as she vehemently and speechlessly shook her head.

“Well, you may come to change your opinion with time and acquaintance,” mused Mr Madir, who adjusted the cigarette holder in his lips and flicked open his cigarette lighter. He lit his cigarette carefully, watching the smoke rise. Ana averted her eyes from the smoke and focused them on the ponderous gold ring on his forefinger.

The remainder of the interview concerned more mundane aspects such as the starting date, salary, holiday allowance and the accommodation she would be offered. Ana soon found herself committed to commencing the very next day and despite her reservations about the Brothel and the Director himself, she could articulate no good reason for not accepting the offer. The Director had a tendency to digress and talk about his own job and responsibilities, and in these moments Ana had the opportunity to inspect the office. This was to be the place, she began to accept, where she’d be

spending most of her working day, taking down short-hand, typing letters and exercising the Director's more menial duties. The office was very plush, as befitted the Director's status, and above his head hung an impressive portrait of President Marmeluke, dressed in a flamboyant military uniform, gazing imperiously down on his two subjects.

After the interview, the Director escorted Ana to the Brothel Canteen along endless corridors and staircases. Ana wondered if she'd ever become familiar with the building's geography. Along the corridors were closed doors with a bright light above each one. Some were red, some were green and some were switched off. The Director explained that these described the Prostitute's current status. When the light was red, the Prostitute was engaged with a client and was not to be disturbed. When green, the Prostitute was on duty but was not at that time engaged with a client. And when switched off, the Prostitute was off duty.

Generally, the corridors were fairly empty. Occasionally they passed a man escorted by one of the receptionists wearing the regulation tight, rather revealing, leather uniform tottering on painfully high heels. These were clients being taken to a Prostitute, Mr Madir explained. Or, of course, he added, being escorted back to reception. No client was permitted to wander freely about the building. There were also Prostitutes walking singly or in pairs. These were off duty, the Director explained. But even then they had to dress as Prostitutes in case the client saw them. And indeed the scanty skin-tight clothes, the high heeled stilettos, the thick make-up and, in some cases, total absence of clothes, left little doubt as to their profession. Ana had never seen so many provocatively dressed, or undressed, women in all her life, and she felt embarrassment warm her cheeks and a curious excitement her body,

which made it difficult to breathe or talk in a natural way.

Soon enough, they passed through some swing-doors with **Entry Forbidden to Clients** etched on the glass, and the doors now had titles, like **Internal Examinations, Catering Clerk** and **Foreign Services**, with which Ana felt more comfortable. And there was an arrow labelled **To Staff Canteen**.

The Brothel Canteen really could have been a canteen anywhere, sharing the same air of temporary reprieve. It was larger than any canteen Ana had seen before but there were all the expected features: formica-top tables, counter and canteen staff, red plastic trays and cardboard coffee cups. The Director beckoned over one of the canteen staff, a harassed middle-aged woman in an apron and simpering smile, who scurried forward to take his order for coffees.

“Where shall we sit, m’dear?” the Director asked.

“I don’t really mind,” said Ana who had nevertheless scanned the tables and saw many that she probably would mind sitting at. On some tables there was the customary chaos of empty cups, wrapping paper and coffee stains. On others, there were women in several states of dress and undress gathered in pairs or groups, some observing Mr Madir and her rather warily.

“I’ll introduce you to some of the workers,” announced the Director striding towards a table with three women sitting at it. Ana tailed him, her reserved interview clothes very much out of character.

The Director briefly introduced the three women in turn, before sitting in a chair. Ana sat next to him. One girl, Ferhana, was slim and black, wearing black suspenders, stockings and black lace underwear. Her hair was fairly short and she beamed at Ana with a peculiar mischievous grin. Opposite Ana was Binta, who

had long mousy brown hair to her waist and wore no clothes at all. Ana found the prospect of sitting so close to a pair of round naked breasts and their lightly pronounced nipples curiously threatening. The third girl, Bezaffa, was extremely plump with soft white skin, most of which was clearly visible through her skimpy, nearly transparent, dress. Although fat, she was not at all unattractive, her friendly, welcoming face framed by blonde shoulder-length hair.

“Ferhana’s a foreigner as you can probably tell,” the Director continued after the canteen assistant had produced two cups of coffee, both in somewhat superior china with sugar cubes and a spoon resting in the saucer. “Not many jobs where you come from are there, m’dear?”

“Very few,” admitted Ferhana, who spoke with a flat accent. “Haj is a very poor country. Not like Alif. Many people do not have enough to eat and the cities are very dirty. That is why I have come here.”

She smiled broadly and gazed straight into Ana’s eyes.

“We don’t have many niggers in Alif,” explained the Director, “so they possess premium value in the Brothel. You’re doing quite well here aren’t you, Ferhana dear?”

“Yes,” she admitted. “When I first have come to the Brothel, I was just a Beta Plus. But I have done many tests and many exercises. Now I am an Alpha Minus and many more clients want me. I have learnt how to look after my body so I am much more good at my work and much more good to look at.”

“Actually Ferhana’s serving time here,” elaborated the Director. “She was found guilty of smuggling alcohol into the country, weren’t you?”

Ferhana looked remorseful. “Yes, that is true. In Haj it is not against the law to

buy and sell alcohol. And I made very much money selling it. But I was caught and I was sent here to be reformed.” She smiled at the Director. “But I am reformed now. And soon I will work here and make very much money selling my body.”

“A much more creditable way to make a living,” he said approvingly. “It always fills me with pleasure when girls in my care are reformed. It makes the custodial aspect of the Brothel much easier to bear.”

Ferhana sipped from her cardboard cup fixing her eyes on the Director. “It is good to know that I have a good career waiting for me at the end of my sentence.”

“Binta’s also here for remedial purposes,” the Director continued. Binta visibly jumped at being addressed, but nervously composed herself. “Like Ferhana she was classified on arrival as a Beta Plus, and I’m sure that she too could attain an Alpha grade if she worked at it.” Binta nodded but her eyes wandered away from the Director and towards Ana. “These two girls are actually quite untypical, m’dear. Most of the prisoners we get are quite poor grade. Most are Gammas and Deltas. We even get a few Epsilons. My greatest reservation of government policy in placing criminals in my care is that they tend to lower the general standard. And so few of them are properly motivated. Isn’t that true, Binta?”

“Probably,” she answered noncommittally.

“I don’t think Binta’s got quite the right attitude,” the Director sniffed. “But, Ana, what do you think about the way she dresses?”

Ana blushed. “I’m sorry. What ...?”

“Or the way she doesn’t dress,” the Director continued. “It’s not my choice. I prefer the girls to be smartly turned out like Ferhana here. A good pair of heels. Well-applied makeup. But the Department of Public Services has quite a liberal attitude and

it allows this nudist look. What do you call it, Binta?" Binta frowned. "*Naturism*, isn't it? There is a sufficiently large demand for naked girls for this kind of appearance to be permitted. They can get away without wearing any makeup or other kind of prescribed body care as long as they remain naked all the time. Isn't that so?"

Binta nodded. Her eyes wandered back towards Ana who caught a flash of insolence before they lowered in token subservience.

"Binta's not the only nudist you'll see here," the Director continued, "but thankfully there aren't too many of them. I wouldn't like the Brothel to look like some heathen place. But I can't answer for the clients' tastes. And it's the public to whom I'm ultimately answerable." He pulled a cigarette out of its case and tapped it on the Formica surface. "But you'd say you're a reformed girl, wouldn't you Binta?"

"Yes, of course," she said firmly but without enthusiasm.

"President Marmeluke's government doesn't lightly institute policies. There's a great deal of reasoned debate. And it's very cheering to see demonstrable proof of its wisdom. Binta won't treat public morality with such disrespect again, will you?"

Binta shook her head.

Ana found herself sympathising with Binta's somewhat sullen attitude towards the Director. Indeed, now that she'd got over the original shock of sitting opposite a naked woman, it no longer seemed so strange. It would probably have detracted from Binta's fresh-faced attractiveness if she'd been dressed in underwear with such pronounced makeup as Ferhana. Perhaps not all prostitutes are sluts, she reflected.

"However, for a model for my other employees there can be none better than Bezaffa. Can there, m'dear?"

“You flatter me,” smiled Bezaffa coyly.

“Unlike these other two, Bezaffa came into the profession by choice. And she’s a true professional. An Alpha Plus. Isn’t that so?”

“It is,” Bezaffa agreed modestly.

“You might wonder how someone as ample as Bezaffa, someone as voluptuous, could get such a high rating. But that’s because certain species of employee are classified appropriately for their particular virtues. And for her type, Bezaffa is quite simply top notch.”

“It’s hard work maintaining it,” confessed Bezaffa, smiling confidentially at Ana. “I have to spend a lot of time every day practising and keeping myself in shape.”

“No hardship keeping your figure, though,” the Director commented, leaning towards Bezaffa.

Ana reviewed Bezaffa in an attempt to evaluate why she should have such a high rating. She supposed that she did seem peculiarly attractive for such a large woman. Her face, in particular, shone with a fresh gleam with dark blue eyes and light blonde hair. Her smile had a flirting seductiveness which dimpled her round smooth cheeks. Her breasts swelled over the roundness of her belly with her enormous pink nipples clearly visible through the skimpy white dress.

“Bezaffa’s very much in demand. Indeed most of your work is spent visiting clients rather than them visiting you here. And you’re booked quite a few days in advance.”

“Well, I do have my regulars - which ensures a very full appointments diary.”

“And I bet they give you a little extra on the side,” the Director joked slyly.

“I wouldn’t admit to that, would I, sweetie?” Bezaffa answered. “But I can

refuse clients I don't like. That's almost the greatest privilege of being an Alpha Plus."

"Don't say that too loudly," laughed the Director, "or the other girls will be even more jealous of you!"

"It's not very often I exercise my prerogative, of course," Bezaffa elaborated. "I like all my clients. Especially the regulars. In fact, I really enjoy my job."

"It's a good career, isn't it?" the Director enthused. Ana noticed that Binta didn't seem to share Bezaffa wild-eyed enthusiasm. Indeed she scowled at the very suggestion of the profession's appeal. "Tell Ana about the advantages of your work."

"It's a good career. It's a good way to meet a lot of very interesting people and it keeps you terribly fit. In fact, it's almost all I can do to keep myself as plump as I am. There can't be many jobs where you're paid to enjoy yourself and get paid so well. The holiday allowance is very generous, there's an index-related pension and plenty of opportunity for overtime. You ought to do some part-time work in it yourself, dear. You can certainly earn quite a bit of extra cash - more than your regular income. Have you considered that option at all?"

Ana blushed. "No, not at all!"

"Well, I'm sure you'll get round to the idea. Your predecessor, Inta, was just like you to start with but after a while she got to be quite enthusiastic about it."

"She did very well," agreed the Director. "But don't you worry; if it's not for you, then that'll be respected."

"Of course, sweetie," Bezaffa agreed. She glanced at the tiny red plastic watch which pinched into her swollen wrist. "Well, it's been nice talking to you, but I've got a client to visit so I'll have to be going."

She eased out of her plastic chair and heaved herself up. She leaned over and kissed Ana tenderly on the cheek. "Welcome to the Brothel. I'm sure you'll enjoy working here. And I'm sure we'll see a lot of each other." She then bade everyone farewell and walked off in long confident strides on stilettos which demonstrated a degree of delicate charm not often associated with such large women.

The Director glanced at the canteen clock. "One o'clock!" he announced. "I must get back to the office. And it must be time for your shift, too, Ferhana m'dear."

"Oh yes!" she answered, promptly leaping to her feet. "I was just about to go."

"And what about you, Binta?"

"I'm on a later shift," she announced.

"Right, m'dear!" The Director stood up and shook Ana's hand. "So, we'll be seeing you punctually first thing tomorrow morning. I'll go through your duties with you then."

Ana nodded, still unsettled by her changed circumstances, and watched as the Director and Ferhana disappeared together through the canteen doors which slammed shut behind them with a puff. Ana was left sitting just opposite Binta and not at all sure where to direct her eyes. She couldn't very well look away from Binta as that would seem rude, but she felt very nervous gazing at a naked woman however natural her nakedness might appear.

Binta smiled reassuringly at Ana. "You're new to Blad, aren't you?"

"Yes. I've never been to the big city before."

"It must seem very intimidating. I've not seen much of the city myself - except, you know, what I can see from the Brothel. And that's not a lot."

"Are you here all the time?"

“Yes. I’m never let out! I might run away, you see!”

“You really *are* a prisoner here!”

“Nothing could tempt me to stay here otherwise,” Binta affirmed. She examined Ana quizzically. “You poor dear. All this must seem very queer to you. If you like, I’ll show you more of this place. Would you like that?”

Ana glanced around the rest of the canteen at all the strange women and the counter staff more animated now that the Director was gone.

“That would be interesting.”

“I’ll show you my room. It’s not much, but it’ll give you more of an insight of what the Brothel’s about.”

2

Binta escorted Ana from the Canteen, along another series of corridors, illuminated by lights over the doors, around a confusion of corners and up disconnected flights of stairs. Ana felt very self-conscious of accompanying a naked woman and averted her eyes as much as possible. She had no idea where they were in relation to the Canteen and the elevator by which she had originally arrived, but she understood better the scale of the Brothel. Binta chatted idly to Ana and greeted the prostitutes they passed either by name or by just a smile. They differed somewhat in age and appearance. Not all were particularly attractive and many were immigrants. Most wore make-up and provocative clothing, which gave the impression that they had been unexpectedly interrupted while getting dressed.

“So you come from Rif?” asked Binta. “I don’t know it, but it’s probably quite similar to Jebel, the district I come from. Do you know it?”

“No, not at all. I’ve never travelled far from Rif before.”

The door to Binta’s room was identical to all the others, paced out in both directions. The light above the door was switched off, but the light above many other doors was green. The one above the door to the right was red. Binta pushed open her unlocked door to reveal her room.

“It’s really nothing special,” she said desultorily, waving her arm around theatrically. “Almost all the bedrooms are exactly the same. Their official title is *boudoir*, but since it’s where I sleep and stay when there are no Clients it’s mostly just a bedroom to me.”

The room wasn’t especially exotic. It was dominated by a plain double bed

with a robust mattress covered by synthetic silk sheets. Lining one wall was a wardrobe and book-case adorned by paperback novels and inexpensive ornaments. Next to that was a small alcove enclosing a sink, a mirror and a plastic shelf supporting an array of scented soaps, shampoo and tooth-paste. On the other side of the bed were a simple arm-chair and a full-length wall mirror. A sealed double-glazed window was beside the bed, through which was a view of office blocks and a distant park. The only evidence that the room served as a boudoir was the predominant rich sherry red of the room and the three pictures on the wall displaying women in states of undress. One was a black and white photograph and the other two were prints of paintings by not particularly talented artists.

“No, I didn’t choose the decor!” laughed Binta, sitting on the edge of the bed while Ana cast her eyes around. “I hate the pictures and red is not my favourite colour! I’d have painted it green, I think, if I’d had the choice. But at least I get a nice view.”

Ana smiled shyly, closed the door behind her and strode to the window to survey the City of Blad below. It still seemed intimidating but exciting. Would she ever get used to the hustle and bustle? She turned round, her back to the window, and mused at her reflection in the mirror. She was such a timid animal with none of Binta’s natural self-confidence. She could never walk around a Brothel with no clothes on.

“It’s a very nice mirror!” Ana remarked, her eyes tracing her figure from her buckled low-heeled shoes to the straight hair that felt so lank and unmanaged.

“It’s in a very commanding position, don’t you think?” Binta commented, also regarding Ana’s reflection.

“Yes,” Ana agreed. It was set at forty-five degrees from one wall to the other and cut a corner off the room. “You can see every part of the room in the mirror.”

“And it can see you in every part of the room as well. It has a television camera behind it, you know.”

Ana gasped. “What! To spy on you?”

“All the Prostitutes have them! It’s no big deal. It’s so that the Clients can view us from the selection room when we’re on duty. They scan a live video relay of prostitutes to choose the one whose services they want to purchase. When on duty, we have to stay in our rooms all the time, so they can examine us like that. Do you see the light above the door?”

“It’s just like the one outside.”

“When it’s green, that means that I’m being looked at, so I have to advertise myself and look like I’m really keen to provide my services - though of course I haven’t got any idea at all of who to!”

“Ugh! That’s sounds horrid!”

“You really don’t like prostitution at all, do you,” smiled Binta indulgently. “...And when they’ve chosen you, the light goes red and you know that for the next half hour or an hour you’re not going to be able to continue doing the crossword, reading the paper or whatever else you might have been doing before.” Binta lay on her back on the bed, her head resting on the pillow. She rolled over to observe Ana who was still standing by the window. “My theory is that that’s not all they use the mirror for. I think they record us having sex with Clients and make pornographic videos.”

“I can’t believe they would do that!”

“Well, I don’t know for sure, of course. But I wouldn’t put it beyond them. I often think someone out there’s watching what I’m doing and evaluating my performance!” Binta smiled wickedly. “You mustn’t forget that this is a Brothel, you know.”

Ana felt uncomfortable, so she sat in the armchair, after facing it away from the mirror. “But living here is not all just being a prostitute is it?”

“No, not at all. It’s a prison as well. It’s all things. It’s home, work and prison. And it’s most like a prison when it’s work. Then, I’m confined here waiting for the green light to come on. And when the light is red, no matter how bad I feel, or whether it’s one Client or ten, I have to provide a service. The more Clients I serve and the more satisfaction I give the more likely I am to be offered remission for good behaviour. On a very good day, the light never goes red.”

Binta rested her head against the wall and supported her body on her shoulders. Ana’s eyes nervously wandered down the length of Binta’s slim tanned body to focus on the mass of brown hair between her legs, but she checked herself and raised her eyes up to gaze at her face.

“I can do what I like when I’m not working, as long as I don’t leave the confines of the Brothel. I can watch television in one of the television rooms. Visit other girls who’re not on duty. Drink tea in the Canteen. Keep fit in the swimming pool or gym. And even tend my garden on the roof and enjoy the little bit of fresh air that I’m allowed. It’s not such a bad life, I suppose, when I’m not working. There are people in Alif, not in prison, much worse off than me. I can see the beggars in the streets below. I’ve heard about the poverty and famine in the remoter regions of Alif. But I hate the work. I hate sex with these nauseating men! And I hate never being able

to leave the Brothel!”

Ana shivered at the mention of the men and Binta noticed that.

“You’re even more appalled by prostitution than Inta, aren’t you? She hated it too, although not as much as me, I think! After all, she volunteered for it in the end. Do you have much prostitution in Rif?”

“Not very much at all. There’s a brothel in the County Town, but I don’t know anyone who’s been there and I’ve never even seen it.”

“Much the same for me in Jebel,” admitted Binta. “I always thought prostitutes were repugnant and filthy. I never believed I’d ever become one. And all the obnoxious obscene perverted things I thought that men would do: it’s all true. And worse! I don’t know how men can live with themselves. They’re all perverts. I didn’t like men before I came here, and I’m certainly never going to like them after the personal hell they’ve put me through.”

Ana’s gaze wandered away from Binta and through the window. The sight of the blue sky and the seagulls flying over the city buildings made it easier to listen to Binta. Ana’s knowledge of men was not very comprehensive and Binta’s account generated a sensation of abhorrence. Her gaze floated back to Binta and unconsciously centred again on the pubic hair, which confirmed to her how different one woman could be from another.

“I don’t suppose you’re used to being with a naked woman, are you?” commented Binta, covering her crotch with a hand. “It’s not what I would normally choose to be myself. I’m no more a naturist by conviction than I am a prostitute, but I’d rather wear no clothes at all and pretend to be one, than walk around in underwear all day. Or in leather. Or squeeze my feet into those horrible shoes with the

ridiculously high heels. Or spend my life in front of a mirror covering my face with rouge, paint and lipstick. The reason I'm officially a naturist, is simply to avoid all that. And I get away with it because enough men think it's sexy. But it does mean that I own absolutely no clothes whatsoever, and that, once a month, I have to be especially clean."

"Most Prostitutes have to wear those clothes?"

"Of course. They're Brothel issue. Those who're not designated naturist are issued with a wardrobe and can wear nothing else at all when in the Brothel. There's not much variety. It's all rubber, leather, lace, nylon, silk or gauze of one kind or another. It's stilettos, suspenders, basques, stockings and collars. And the make-up! It makes everyone look like aliens from another planet. What do you think?"

Ana nodded. "I've never seen people dressed like it before!"

"I suppose that's the idea of it. If Prostitutes looked like everyone else, then the Clients would realise that they're just human. And that would never do!"

"If you hate prostitution so much, why are you here?"

"Well, it was either this or an all-woman's jail, where the conditions are much worse and the male warders might rape or molest you, or a convent. No convent would accept me because I never go to church and I don't want to go to the jail."

"But what crime did you commit? Was it drugs?"

"No, I've never been a drinker!" laughed Binta playfully. "What do you think it might have been?"

Ana wondered. She couldn't imagine Binta as an armed criminal or terrorist, even with clothes on. She was too well-educated and intelligent. Perhaps it was tax evasion, but Binta was too young to have earned enough taxes to evade. And it

certainly would not have been freelance prostitution. She shook her head.

“I’ve no idea. None at all!”

Binta smiled. “No idea? I was beginning to think it was written all over my face. You really don’t know? I’m not sure I know how to tell you. You might be shocked or alarmed!”

“Is it murder?” gasped Ana, suddenly rather frightened.

“No, it’s lesbianism.”

Ana wasn’t sure that she heard right. Did such people actually exist and was she sitting in the same room as one?

“What did you say?”

“I’m a lesbian,” Binta repeated. “I’m here for repeatedly and unashamedly performing homosexual acts with another woman. It doesn’t matter that she was a consenting adult. I have committed the serious offence of lesbianism.”

“And you’re in the Brothel for that?”

“I can be grateful for small mercies. It was once a capital offence. Lesbians would be stoned to death or disembowelled or something. Now it’s just a period of incarceration.”

Ana looked at Binta’s naked body with trepidation. So, this is what a lesbian looked like. She had no preconceptions of what they were like, but she knew that lesbianism was wrong. Not only wrong but perverse: contradicting the natural, God-given order of the world. And Binta was a lesbian. Was she safe being in the same room as her?

“I suppose just as you’ve never met a prostitute, you’ve never knowingly met a lesbian before,” Binta commented, sitting up, her hair falling over her breasts and

obscuring her crotch.

“Knowingly?”

“Well, you’ve probably met lesbians without knowing it.”

“Do you think so?” This was a novel concept for Ana. “I thought it was obvious.”

“Of course, it isn’t! What did you think?”

“I just had no opinions at all,” Ana confessed.

“Don’t worry. I’m not going to attack you!” Binta said comfortingly. “You really are as naive as you appear, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” admitted Ana, feeling a little foolish. “Rif’s a very quiet place.”

“Don’t worry about me being a lesbian,” continued Binta, reassuringly. “It’s just one of those things. Think of it like as if I were black. Or disabled. I’m just a little different, that’s all. If it weren’t illegal, you wouldn’t think anything of it.”

“Are you sure?” wondered Ana uncertainly.

“I’m sure. After all, lesbianism’s not illegal in every country, so it can’t really be that bad. Everyone knows that Alif’s a repressive country. Lots of things are illegal in Alif that are legal elsewhere.”

“Is that so?” queried Ana who hadn’t known this before. “What things?”

“You know: trades union membership, alcohol, gambling, women driving, lots of things.”

“And there are countries where they are legal?”

“Not just legal. Almost encouraged. Have you never thought about it? What about alcohol? Why do you think it’s banned here and not everywhere?”

“I always thought Alif was somehow a better country for banning drugs like

that.”

“Why does it have State Brothels, then? Why do people smoke so much? Why is there so much poverty?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know at all!” parried Ana. What was she doing sitting in a room with a convicted criminal (a pervert at that!), listening to all this seditious talk? Perhaps Binta would ask her to take her clothes off and indulge in lesbian sex and drink alcohol. Ana thought this image would inspire absolute disgust, but the tremor of fear that shook her was precisely because it did not do so.

3

Binta swung round and sat on the edge of the bed facing Ana, her feet trailing on to the red nylon carpet.

“I may be a lesbian but in my heart I know that it is for love not vice that I’ve been condemned. The fact that my love is for a woman is not material. My love is what I imagine the love of a man must be for most women. My love is a passionate love. A romantic love. A true love. As real as any love.”

Binta’s passionate pleas comforted Ana. She felt great sympathy for anyone’s love for another person, and she reasoned that it was probably just odd that it should be for a woman rather than a man.

“Who were you in love with?”

“*Am* in love with!” Binta emphatically corrected. Her eyes wandered around the room, briefly resting on her reflection in the mirror and then back to Ana, her face expressing sadness and almost tragedy. “Her name is Mezyana. To me she is the most beautiful girl in the world. She has - or had - long brown hair, almost as long as mine. She’s a bit thinner than me. And I’ve known her all my life. We were schoolfriends long before we were lovers. We never imagined we were that horrid thing known as lesbians when we first declared our love for each other.”

Binta looked down at her hands clasped together over her knees and let her hair flop down to cover her face. Ana felt quite uncomfortable. She had only just met this girl and now she was acting as her confidante.

“Mezyana’s quite different from me,” continued Binta, raising her head and pushing a stubborn lock of hair away from her face. “She’s much more moral in many

ways. Ethical, you could say. She's got very strong religious and moral beliefs. Whilst I never go to Church, she goes - or used to go - every Sunday without fail. She even worked voluntarily as a Sunday School teacher. I could never see the point of it myself, but she finds comfort in it and I've always respected that. She would join in the singing, the prayers and all the other things you do in a Church. How she never finds it boring, I'll never know. But naturally it's quite difficult to be religious in this country if you're also a lesbian."

"Doesn't the Bible have some rather harsh things to say about homosexuality?"

"I really don't know," Binta admitted. "But it can't be too severe because there are plenty of countries where homosexuality is allowed with the Church's blessing. But it's not easy to be homosexual in this country. Mezyana would say that God made her a lesbian to test her faith. I'm not sure she meant that she had been tempted by love of a woman and had failed the test, or if it was some other more subtle test she was undergoing. But she did say - or she said it once or twice - that the love we felt for each other was so strong and so good, that it must be blessed by God!"

Binta paused again and Ana felt sure she saw a glint of moisture in her eyes. Her voice had become quieter, less confident and somehow a little distant. Ana wanted to comfort her, but was afraid of doing so by touching her in a reassuring way.

"We were schoolfriends, Mezyana and I. From such an early age. We were best friends. We sat next to each other in all the classes. We walked home together after school. We played games with each other at school and at home. We would always be visiting each other and staying the night at each others' homes. It was a friendship between two school-girls no different to any other. Perhaps stronger

than most, but not unusually so. The games we played, like Doctors and Nurses, Mothers and Fathers, and so on, were just the innocent games that girls always play. My parents and Mezyana's parents were ordinary people: caring, helpful, friendly. There was no history of sexual or drug abuse. In Jebel, our families were considered respectable and unremarkable.

“I don't know how it evolved into a love affair. There certainly wasn't a day when I said to Mezyana ‘Let's be lovers.’ And I'd certainly never have said ‘Let's be lesbians.’ As children we declared our undying love for each other: but that was quite innocent. It wasn't sexual love at all. It was simply an expression of the strength of our feelings as best friends. It was expressed as love, because other words never seemed strong enough. And anyway we were always encouraged to declare our love for our parents and, in Mezyana's case, for God. But we recognised from a very early age that we loved each other.”

Binta paused again, looking not at Ana but at her reflection, seemingly lost in thought. Ana recalled her own best friends at school. She had never declared love for any of them, but she acutely remembered the strong bonds that tied them together.

“Mezyana was a Church-goer from the beginning. Her parents went to Church regularly, and she continued going, even when she no longer had any compulsion to do so. I'm sure they would have understood if Mezyana had decided not to. Mezyana's religious passion still continues, of course. She's opted to serve her sentence as a novice in a Convent rather than in a jail, you know. She'd never contemplate serving it in a Brothel, however harsh life might be in a prison. Religion and Ethics were the only big differences between Mezyana and me. But as children these didn't matter at all. I'd never had a religious upbringing, and Sunday mornings

and sometimes Sunday evenings were just times I couldn't come out to play with my best friend.

“We were always together the rest of the time, however. And that's how our love developed. We held hands, we kissed each other tenderly and innocently, and when we came to puberty we played with our bodies in the way children do. We explored each other in detail, with especial fascination for our developing mounds of bosom, the changing shape of our bodies and the area between our thighs. It was so innocent though. Nothing remotely sexual at all. Sensual, maybe. But not sexual.”

Ana again reflected on her past. There were no times that her closest friends had ever seen her naked body, except in the school changing-room showers. She had no memories of exploring her friends' bodies, but Ana accepted that different people had different childhood experiences and this was one way in which Binta's differed from hers.

“At some stage, our innocent probings of each other must have evolved into something more physical and sexual. Maybe it was when we were eleven. Maybe it was much later, when we were fourteen and our bodies were much more mature. I don't know. I'm sure only someone who can exactly define how a sexual act differs from any other could pinpoint it. At some time, however, the sexual aspect of our friendship was unavoidable. We were no longer just best friends. We were also lovers. It took a very long time for us to recognise the fact, and even longer to actually believe it or to be aware of its implications. But by that time - which must have been when we first realised that lesbianism was not a foreign condition but a word that described our love for each other - our passionate love was far too committed for us to break it off. But the realisation changed our relationship forever.

“Now that we knew that we were engaged in a lesbian love affair, we also knew that we had to keep it secret. It would change other people’s attitude towards us. It would upset our parents. It would upset our friends. And we also, rather belatedly, became aware that it was illegal. That came as a great shock to me, but when I told Mezyana she surprised me by telling me that she already knew. In fact, it was she who comforted me as I cried and cried about it. I felt so miserable. It also surprised me that Mezyana, who attached such great store in religious law, could have such a detached attitude towards criminal law.

“It was not at all easy to keep our love a secret. People must have thought it strange the way we whispered in corners and the frequency with which we felt obliged to touch each other. Our lovemaking became quite clandestine, although as best friends nobody thought it strange when we spent the night at each other’s home. At first we were horribly frightened. We were so nervous taking our clothes off together, in case we should be seen. Our relationship seemed soiled and anxious. But we gradually came to accept it and simply made elaborate precautions before making love together.

“It was also very romantic, of course. Secretly holding hands in public places. Kissing each other passionately when we were sure nobody was looking. Holding one another close and feeling our bodies together, perhaps through our clothes, and knowing that we were carrying the secret of a love that could condemn us to imprisonment. And this danger was undeniably exciting and erotic. It added great spice to our love.” Binta paused again, swept along by her recollections and now beached by the intensity of her feelings. “I’m not boring you, I hope?”

Ana shook her head.

“Jebel is a very good place for a clandestine love affair. It’s quite hilly and craggy. And some parts are rather remote and quiet. It was never too difficult to find secluded spots in the hills where nobody could see us before we saw them, and where we could fling off our clothes and make love together. The search for such places became obsessive. We would walk in our school holidays or at weekends with the express purpose of finding another secret spot where we would never be found. We may have insects in our pubic hairs and our bodies might be covered in grass or dust, but it gave us the joy and freedom we needed.

“Jebel villages, like Quria where we lived, are mostly agricultural, but neither my parents nor Mezyana’s are farmers or farm labourers. My father works in a bank in the County Town which he drives to every day and Mezyana’s father’s a veterinary surgeon. It’s quite a conservative area, probably quite typical of Alif outside the City of Blad. It’s probably much the same in Rif. Not particularly wealthy, but not desperately poor either. The community centred around the Church, the School and the Village Shop. A traditional Alif town, unchanged over the generations.” Binta smiled as she recollected her home. “Is it just the same in Rif?”

“Pretty much so,” Ana admitted. “Not so hilly, though. More gently rolling hills than crags, I would say.”

Binta nodded and continued her narrative. “I don’t know exactly when things changed for us in the village, but it was around the time we were sixteen or so, and quite clearly fully adult. People began treating us differently. Less indulgently. Nothing was actually said, but I think people had suspicions about the nature of our friendship. The girls at school were no longer so friendly towards us, and reacted with alarm if we ever got too close to them. The local shopkeeper eyed us in a

funny way. And once when we were having one of our walks in the country, a couple of boys followed us all the way. Even some school teachers treated us oddly. For instance, we were arbitrarily separated from each other in one class and had to share desks with other girls, even though we were always good pupils.

“Even our parents treated us differently. We were forbidden to spend the night with each other: an announcement which caused me to argue and shout and cry for hours. It felt like the end of the world for me, as it also did for Mezyana. We weren’t given a good reason for this change of policy, except that we were ‘big girls now’ and that ‘girls of our age don’t carry on like that’. I was felt that the world was conspiring against me. That everyone was plotting to destroy my love for Mezyana.

“We were still very naïve of course. We were presented with all this evidence that people knew about the nature of our relationship, but ignored it and pretended that it couldn’t be so. After all, we’d been so close for so long we just couldn’t imagine we would ever part. We made an extra effort to disguise signs of affection in public and our rendezvous were more secret, but we never really appreciated the true significance of our ever being incriminatingly discovered together.”

Binta paused again, her face contorted by emotion and battling to regain its composure. She gazed down at the clasped hands on her knees. She kicked out her legs to examine the full length of them. She unclasped her hands and leaned back.

“We were about seventeen or eighteen years old when we were arrested. It was undeniably our fault. We’d got used to the way people were treating us. We no longer really cared for what they thought. And we were getting a little blasé about disguising our secret rendezvous. I suppose it’s the classic case of believing that this sort of thing happens to someone else, but will never happen to you. But of course it did.

“In most ways it was an unexceptional day when it happened. I certainly didn’t imagine or suspect I was being followed when I made my way to meet Mezyana at our secret place in the hills, and I don’t imagine she did either. We met each other as usual. And, without any variation from our normal routine, we were soon undressing and kissing each other. It was only when we were actually in the process of making love that we were interrupted by three policemen and a couple of men from the village whom we recognised but didn’t know by name. I was totally stunned! Mezyana instantly broke into tears, standing up, hiding her breasts and crotch with her hands. I just stood there, not really bothering to cover myself while a policeman read out the terms of my arrest. I could hardly hear him through the rush of blood to my ears and the throb of my temples. We were then forced into our clothes, had handcuffs clapped to our wrists and escorted separately down the hill to a police van which drove us away to our prison cells.”

“That must have been horrible!” gasped Ana.

“I’ve never spoken to Mezyana since then. We were locked in separate cells and we were only able to see each other from a distance across court rooms and through prison bars. We weren’t beaten or physically abused, but the prison warders and especially other prisoners said some very hurtful things to me, and I’m sure to Mezyana as well. Everyone called me a *dyke*, a term I’d just never heard before. And a pervert. And they asked indecent questions about what Mezyana and I did together in our lovemaking. They made vile salacious speculations, which exceeded anything I’d ever imagined to be possible.

“The next few weeks went by in a kind of daze. My parents were horrified, and they cried a great deal. What upset them most was that I’d been arrested before I’d

finished my school examinations. No one else visited me, except Mezyana's parents who were actually more sympathetic and understanding than my own parents. They told me that they'd discussed our love with their daughter (which she'd never told me) but made no statement of what they felt about it.

"We were taken to court eventually. That was the first time I'd seen Mezyana since we were arrested. And the last time I saw her. She was dressed like me in the simple one-piece prison tunic that all prisoners wear and looked dreadfully pale, with her hair tied back in an unattractive pony-tail. The trial was very brief, although at the time and in my memory it seems to have lasted forever. There really wasn't much to it. Both Mezyana and I were guilty. There was really no way to pretend otherwise. We were caught unequivocally in the act of an illegal homosexual act, with three police witnesses. There were others from the village willing to bear witness of other occasions in which we had been seen indulging in similar lewd and immoral behaviour. Our only defence was our age and naïveté.

"The only part of the trial not predetermined was the sentence, but it was clear from the choice of the judge, who had a very low opinion of immoral behaviour, that it wasn't going to be a light sentence. Prior to the trial I had discussed with a solicitor which of a Brothel or a Prison I would choose to serve in if I had to accept the choice. Initially, I inclined towards the Prison, and said so, but I was given time to decide. As a result of chatting with my cellmates, I soon heard enough about prisons to decide that a Brothel mightn't be such a bad option. After all, Prostitution is a choice some women make voluntarily, which can never be said for prisons! So, when the judge pronounced sentence I was consigned to a Brothel. He said this was appropriate. And it would lead me to see the errors of my perverted ways and no

doubt teach me a better understanding of a woman's proper sexual role. He obviously believed that sexual intercourse with men was so much better than with a woman that I'd soon renounce my lesbian tendencies!"

Binta sniffed angrily and emphatically thumped her fist into her palm.

"The idiot! Like most men, he thought that what a woman needs is a penis inside her and she'll instantly be converted to heterosexuality. For me, however, the more I see of men the more confirmed I've become in my love of women. And my yearning for Mezyana just hasn't lessened at all!"

"And so you came to the Brothel and Mezyana was sentenced to a Convent?"

"That's right! It wasn't an option I was given, but then Mezyana is such a keen church-goer. Perhaps it was her vicar who stood up for her. I don't know. It's a Convent in the suburbs of Blad. I'll probably never be allowed to see her there. She's probably had her head shaved like nuns do, spending all her time praying and doing good deeds. Her religious views certainly softened the judge's attitude towards her. He said he hoped that in working for the Lord she would cease to be tempted by the sins of the flesh and see the error of her ways.

"Like me, she was in tears when the sentence was pronounced. Neither of us really believed it was happening. Nobody we'd ever known had ever been imprisoned. Nothing we'd ever done had knowingly caused anyone any harm. And we'd not made any material profit from our actions at all. From then, until I arrived at this Brothel, I imagined the very worst and time and time again contemplated the practicalities of suicide!"

4

“My life would be so much richer, if only I were free I were free and with Mezyana. If only we could express our love in the way most lovers can without fear. All I can ever think of is Mezyana and how much I yearn to be near her.” Binta sighed. “If you’ve never loved, you can never know how much pain this separation causes. Whenever I think of love or comfort or devotion - and that is *so* often - all I can think of is Mezyana.

“I want to live with her when I leave here. To share all my moments with her. Especially those little moments: the ones which mean so little when experienced alone and so much more when I’m with the one I love. We’d have our own home. We’d sleep in the same bed. Kiss each other as we left for work in the morning. Sit arm in arm, watching the television, feeling the comfort of our embraces. Laugh over shared memories over a beer or a meal out. Be as inseparable as the best of heterosexual couples. These are such innocent desires. And they so utterly overwhelm me.”

Binta ran her hands through the long strands of her hair and gazed sadly at her naked lap. Ana smiled wanly. Her emotions were curiously unfocused. She was reassured by Binta’s commitment to someone else. She’d never felt so strongly towards someone as Binta had, but she appreciated and rather envied the yearnings.

She was about to comment, when a knock distracted her attention towards the door. A broad smiling woman’s face was peering round. Like Binta, she wore no clothes and her very long hair reached down to just below her waist. She was deeply sun-tanned and her hair was bleached blonde by the sun. She was much taller than Binta, - who wasn’t especially short, - and built proportionately. She boasted round

breasts, a taut stomach and muscular thighs. Ana was acutely aware of the incongruity of her interview clothes and the nakedness of her companions.

“Hiya!” their new companion called out breezily. “How’s it going?”

Binta noticeably responded with less enthusiasm. “Hello, Ketaba. Have you met Ana? The director’s new secretary.”

“Pleased to meet you, Ana!” Ketaba grinned warmly, approaching her and kissing her tenderly on the lips. “So you’ve not come to join our profession? Well, I’m sure that like Inta you’ll soon see its advantages. It’s a good life! Very healthy and curative! As I’m sure Binta’s been telling you...”

“Of course I haven’t, Ketaba! I’m no more likely to endorse prostitution than you are to endorse alcohol or tobacco.”

“There’s just no comparison, you silly girl!” rebuked Ketaba, sitting by Binta’s feet on the end of the bed. “But you’re, well, *unnatural*. So you’re not likely to have a very balanced view on the profession.” She smiled warmly at Ana. “Don’t believe all the perverse advice our pretty little dyke might give you. She hasn’t exactly chosen this career. She doesn’t know how lucky she is that the government has deemed this an appropriate punishment for her criminal behaviour. She’s got a chance in life she’ll be inestimably grateful for the rest of it.”

“I just don’t understand how you can possibly imagine that the torment of being mauled and abused by strange men can ever be something to be grateful for.”

“Don’t listen to her! She’d never have opinions like that if she enjoyed normal unperverted sex. Prostitution is a good career. It’s the only one where a woman can be physically active, give pleasure to others, earn a respectable salary and still never have to leave her bed. It’s kept me healthy and if I were skinny and malnourished like Binta

I'd be more grateful. Still, despite her admirable devotion to naturism, she rather compromises her healthy image by her carnivorousness and sloth."

"There really can not be very many women who advocate prostitution as healthy. It's not just a way to keep fit and healthy on the punters' expense."

"Don't be so facetious, Binta! What do you think Ana must think hearing your sarcasm about a career which most people here have freely chosen? I take pride in my work. I like the physical exercise it gives me. And I like it when clients appreciate a good job done well. And a man cannot disguise his appreciation: I can tell you!"

"Don't disgust me, Ketaba! Any lingering enthusiasm I ever had for men before I worked here has been more than eradicated by rather too frequent and intimate association."

"Don't deny that you enjoy it!"

"Of course I do. I can't understand how women could ever voluntarily put themselves through this ordeal. What do you think, Ana?"

Ana's composure was disturbed by the question. Her natural sympathy inclined her towards Binta, but she didn't wish to disagree too strongly with this large naked woman to whom she'd only just been introduced.

"I just don't know enough to hold an opinion."

"Listen to the less perverted employees here and you'll get a much more balanced view. One of the advantages of the profession is that it understands and caters for naturists. I just don't think Binta at all acknowledges how lucky she is to live and work where clothes are optional. It's a healthy, life-giving freedom you just can't find anywhere else. Much as I might criticise Binta for her unconstructive attitudes and criminal tendencies, I must admit to a kindred feeling to a colleague who

shares my enthusiasm for a natural untrammelled life.”

“Our similarities there are extremely shallow,” sniffed Binta. “You’re just a fanatic”

“At least I’m not a pervert!” snorted Ketaba in return. “Honestly, Ana, I don’t know how you can sit in the company of someone who so blatantly disregards the natural order as Binta does. Surely the very notion of her crude perversions disgusts you! How do you know she’s not going to try and seduce you?”

“Don’t scare Ana with your crude homophobia. I’m no more likely to try seducing her than you are to seduce every man you meet...”

“Don’t be sarcastic! What could be more natural than the active pursuit of sexual intercourse? What do you think, Ana?”

Ana’s experience of sex was far too inadequate for her to express an opinion. She stuttered a few non-judgmental words before her face burnt into a blush. Fortunately, neither of her companions chose to comment on her virginal embarrassment.

“I detest all unnatural practises, especially homosexuality. The purpose of sex is to reproduce, and women who practise it with other women, and men with other men: Why! it’s as disgusting and unnatural as murder, drug-taking, sodomy and cannibalism! Our government recognises this and does its best to suppress such activities. The president has frequently spoken of his intentions to stamp out it out, and although I disagree with him on most things, on this I am in full accord.”

“I’d have thought that President Marmeluke would be very unlikely to share your opinions on naturism,” challenged Binta. “I imagine he considers it every bit as perverse as sado-masochism and incest.”

“There really is no comparison! Naturism is nothing more than a return to the natural order. It is a healthy and commendable relaxation of the individual in the unfettered body. The other things you mention are all totally contrary to the natural order. If everyone were homosexual then the human race would very soon be extinct. If everyone were naked, then everyone would be much healthier and more fulfilled. I’m shocked to hear a fellow naturist even hint of any comparison. The only reason naturism isn’t widely practised in this country is consideration to those misguided people who have an unnatural disgust for their own bodies, but if it were so bad why is it permitted in a state institution like this Brothel?”

“Entirely for the titillation of the clientele!” Binta bitterly responded.

“Unlike you, Binta, I see no contradiction in the instinctive delight a healthy heterosexual man gets from looking at a naked woman and the pleasure I get from displaying my body. Would you prefer it if men derived no joy from seeing you unclothed? There is nothing more natural than the naked human body, and it is equally as natural for a man to enjoy regarding it. It’s just your dykish tendencies that make it impossible for you to treat it as anything other than a selfish indulgence.”

“There aren’t very many places where nudity is commonplace...” began Binta.

“That’s where you’re wrong! Well, not totally wrong. There are quite clearly not enough such places. It would be far better if Alif were a place like Agdal, where a woman can freely walk down the streets of the capital city wearing nothing more than a contented smile and sandals, carrying all her possessions in a handbag.”

“Agdal again!” Binta smiled. “I wondered how long it would take for you to raise your favourite subject again. Everything’s so much better in Agdal!”

“But that’s because it is. And a well-kept secret in Alif it is too!” retorted

Ketaba. She leaned forward and placed a hand on Ana's knee. "What do *you* know about Agdal?"

"Not a great deal!"

Ana knew only that the neighbouring republic supplied consignments of fruit and vegetables to Alif and that its principal mountains were large enough to be seen from Rif. She knew more about the other neighbouring kingdoms and republics than she did about Agdal, but geography had never been her strongest subject at school.

"Exactly! The government of Alif is embarrassed to have such a much more liberal neighbour. They just don't want people to know that just over the border there is a country where naturism is widespread and unexceptional. A country where there are no restrictions as to how many or how few clothes one can choose to wear. A country where there are people naked in the city streets, in the countryside, working in offices, driving tractors, and doing all the other everyday things that one can do without the tyranny of clothes. For naturists like me it is truly a paradise. Whenever I have a holiday, I'm on the first train there with my exit visa and just the clothes I need to get to and from the border."

Ana had never suspected that Agdal, or any other country, could possibly allow people to wander freely in the nude. Surely people would object! Perhaps Ketaba was simply telling an elaborate joke.

"You haven't told Ana everything about Agdal though, have you Ketaba?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know exactly what I mean. The country's liberal policies don't stop at trivial things like nudity. It also allows other things..."

"Like alcohol, you mean?"

“Don’t be so coy, Ketaba! Like freedom of speech. Like trades unions. And of course homosexuality!”

“Well, you would focus on something like that, wouldn’t you? The most disgusting thing about Agdal - and probably why so much about the country is kept secret in Alif - is its tolerance of homosexuality. In fact, it almost encourages the perversion! Wherever you go there are depraved men dressed as women, sometimes with surgically enhanced breasts, women dressed as men, women consorting with women, and men with men. It’s perverts paradise! It’s the serpent in the Garden of Eden, and my fear is that if it’s not eliminated then the whole edifice will collapse.”

“How on earth can letting a few people live their own lives possibly cause any disaster...” wondered Binta.

“A pervert like you just can’t understand why...”

“Well, you’re passionate about going around in the buff. You think it’s a big deal, and what you like about Agdal is that it lets you do so. Whereas I really don’t think nudity’s a big deal at all. I could quite happily wear clothes if there were a better choice than there is here, but I can’t change my sexuality. For me, the attraction of Agdal isn’t to show my body off to everyone, like you do, but just to be able to lead a normal contented life.”

“The only way you can do that is by renouncing your unnatural tendencies. How can you possibly think that there is anything normal or to be contented about in lusting after other women? The whole idea makes me feel rather unwell.”

“Maybe so, but ...” began Binta, who evidently enjoyed arguing with Ketaba, when she was quite suddenly interrupted by a loud persistent buzz. She cursed under her breath and then frowned at Ketaba and Ana. “I’m afraid my shift’s due to start

now. I'll have to ask you to leave."

"That's fine, Binta dear. A girl's got to do an honest day's work!" smiled Ketaba as she stood up.

Ana stood up too. "Well, goodbye then."

"Goodbye, Ana," smiled Binta warmly who stood up and kissed her tenderly on the cheek, sending a frisson through Ana's body. She just wasn't used to even the most innocent kisses back home, and she was very aware of Binta's tastes. However, Ketaba also kissed Binta as they left, so Ana concluded that this kissing reflected nothing more than casual affection and was bound to be commonplace in an institution like the Brothel. As Ana and Ketaba left, she observed that the light above the door was now set to green.

"So, what do you think of Binta?" asked Ketaba as they walked along the corridor.

Ana didn't know what to say. She felt quite unsettled by their conversation and by the continued presence of a naked woman. What was she supposed to think? People weren't like this in Rif.

"She seems all right," she answered noncommittally.

"I wouldn't say that. Being homosexual, there's obviously something wrong with her. I just hope she gets over it. What about you though? When did you start working here?"

"I start tomorrow."

"Tomorrow! My! You are new to the Brothel! What do you think of it so far?"

"It's bigger than I thought," Ana remarked, awed by the extent of the corridor punctuated by red, green and yellow lights. How would she ever find her way out?

“Well, it’s the biggest Brothel in the country, you know! Probably the world. You should feel proud to be working at such a prestigious place. And while you’re here, I really urge you to seriously consider a spell of prostitution yourself. It’s healthy, it’s good money and it’ll do you a world of good...”

“No, I don’t think so. I’m just a secretary. That’s all I want to do here...”

“That’s what your predecessor, Inta, said at first. But she soon changed her mind. Although she was only a Gamma Plus, she didn’t do too badly out of it. However, I’d be foolish to believe you would have any concrete idea of what you really want to do on your first day here. I’m sure you’ll see your way to a more active career.” Ketaba paused as they arrived at a stair-case. “Erm, I don’t suppose you really know your way round here yet. Do you know where you want to go?”

Ketaba escorted Ana to the foyer down a complex series of corridors and stair-cases. She chatted away amiably, telling Ana about all the exciting things to do in Blad: the cafés to visit, the theatres and the tourist attractions. She interspersed her chat with references to the enjoyment and satisfaction she got from her career and how Ana should at least consider becoming a naturist.

Ana only partly heard what Ketaba was saying. Her thoughts retread her day so far, returning frequently to the image of Binta lying on her bed waiting for the male clients she so despised.

5

Ana began learning her secretarial duties, and finding her way around the office and the software she had to use. There was a lot to learn and her only guidance was some unspecific instructions from the Director such as where she was to sit and what she was expected to produce, but her college training had prepared her well, and she soon felt quite confident in her work.

She felt rather less confidence when she ventured outside the office to walk along the labyrinthine corridors to the canteen or to the toilet, but although often horribly lost at first, she was now more concerned about her embarrassment as she passed the scantily clothed employees. This included Binta whom she met by chance while taking some documents to the centralised photocopying room. As always, she was totally undressed and Ana blushed quite visibly as she approached from the other end of the corridor.

“Fitting in well, I hope?” Binta wondered.

“Yes, thank you,” Ana shyly answered. “I’m beginning to remember where everything goes.”

“I’m sure you are,” mused Binta, dawdling by the fire door running her fingers through her long hair. “Look...erm... do you want to come for a swim after work?”

“A swim?”

“Yes, in the Brothel Baths. No one would mind you turning up.”

“But I haven’t brought a swimming costume with me.”

Binta laughed. “You’d look pretty out of place in one of those, I can tell you! This *is* a brothel, remember. No, Ana, you don’t need a swimming costume: just your

sweet self. Come on! You haven't got anything else lined up, have you?"

Ana had to admit she hadn't, so immediately after work she eventually located the Brothel's swimming pool, which was closed off to the public and accessible only to employees. As Ana could see before she made her way into the changing area at the pool-side, there was definitely no need for any kind of bathing costume. None of the half dozen or so girls splashing about in the pool were wearing any more clothes than Binta who was floating in the deep end with her hair fanning out around her, looking like an exotic giant water-lily. Ana self-consciously took her clothes off, uncomfortably aware that this was the first time she'd ever bared her slim untanned body in public, and stood nervously by the poolside.

Binta swam towards her, her back and buttocks obscured by a trail of long hair. "Hi there! Come on in. The water's lovely and warm!"

Ana cautiously lowered herself down the steps into the pool, feeling the distinct chill of water progressively lapping up her legs and thighs. Then, with the courage she knew she had to find, she surrendered her whole weight to the water, braving the sting of chlorinated water in her eyes. Her head and hair sank beneath the surface where she saw Binta's naked body glide towards her.

"This pool's one of the few things I'm grateful for here," laughed her friend when Ana's head surfaced. "It's to compensate for the hard work we do, I suppose."

Ana regarded the other prostitutes, some of whom fastidiously swam with their faces and bound-up hair out of the water so as not to smudge the thick make-up or to get chlorine-scented locks. Ana span around and lay on her back, looking up at the evening sunlight streaming through the glass-covered ceiling. Binta was right: this was a very pleasant pool. Perhaps she could come to enjoy working here.

As she righted herself to chat to her floating friend, she was suddenly sprayed by a sudden wave caused by someone diving into the pool rather too nearby. The pale body of the culprit descended to the very bottom of the pool and then propelled itself like a torpedo to the surface.

“Why hello, Binta!” a child’s face with very short boyish hair greeted them. Ana was initially unsure whether this intruder was a boy or a girl. The chest was very flat and there were very other few signs of gender, but the girl’s nudity couldn’t disguise her sexual identity for long. She bobbed around in the water chuckling and giggling with the childishness suggested by her body. “So, Binta, who’s your new friend?”

“Ana, the Director’s new secretary,” announced Binta. “She only started a couple of days ago.”

“Oh! Inta’s replacement. Shame about her! Hi! My name’s Zabba! It’s my real name as well! My parents had a strange sense of humour. Glad to meet you. Are you new to Blad?”

“Yes, I am. It’s all very different for me.”

“I bet! And new to brothels as well, I imagine?”

“The ones where I come from don’t offer full-time secretarial work,” answered Ana, falsely suggesting that had they done otherwise she’d have taken the opportunity of working at one. “What do you do?”

Zabba laughed, with an indecent lack of restraint. “What do you think? This is a Brothel you know! I suppose I could just be a receptionist or a cook or something, though I don’t think they’d let me do jobs like that! And they certainly wouldn’t pay as well! No, Ana darling, I’m a prostitute. Like your friend, Binta! What else could I

be?”

Ana’s cheeks burnt through the film of chlorinated water. She hated to be reminded of the sordid aspects of where she worked. She still found it difficult to reconcile the distasteful nature of the profession with the actual practitioners.

“Zabba’s actually quite high-grade as well,” elaborated Binta, her arms rotating to keep herself afloat. “She’s an Alpha.”

“Yes! I admit it!” the girl replied proudly. She lowered her arms to let her body sink into the water. “And as you can see, not for the most obvious of reasons. I don’t exactly have the classic Alpha grade figure, with my teeny tits and slim thighs. But girls like me who look *so* much younger than they are and (let’s admit it!) look like little boys: we’re in great demand. That pushes up my grade a lot. I could *never* be an Alpha Plus. You need more dedication, stamina and willing than I’ll *ever* have. But I’m quite content to be an Alpha. The pay’s good and I’ll be able to retire at the age when most people are just starting their working lives.”

“However much you earn, I’d much rather be me than you,” Binta commented, “Your clients have got the *strangest* obsessions.”

Zabba smiled. “I get my fair share of perverts, I must admit,” she agreed, running a hand through her short damp crop of dark brown hair. “My bottom gets *ever so* sore. You couldn’t imagine! But you’re only young once.”

“And you look like you’ll be young forever.”

“Well, I *am* young. One day my looks just won’t be marketable any more. But I’m in this trade for the money and I don’t have to do nearly as much work as a Gamma or a Beta to earn tons more than they can.”

“Well, infinitely more than me,” sniffed Binta bitterly.

“I’m sorry, sweetest. I keep forgetting you’re not here voluntarily. And if I were only a Beta, I don’t think I’d bother either. It’d hardly be worth the effort. But for me: where else could I work at my age to afford a luxury flat in the select Honey suburb and earn far more money than a young girl knows what to do with? You’ve got to admit that those of us who’ve got a lot to sell get a lot out of it!”

“If you can put up with all the abuse...”

“Not all of it’s abuse, Binta darling. Some clients are actually quite sweet, which even you’d admit if you weren’t so dead set against men. But let’s be honest: I’d be ready to go through a lot more than this for the lifestyle. The hours are great as well! I go clubbing all night and don’t have to worry about getting up like all the other girls working in this city. And I don’t believe the occasional sore bum is really such a bad penalty. It’s those who work in factories, supermarkets and restaurant kitchens I feel sorry for. They get hardly nothing for what they do. And gain nothing like the respect from their customers that I’m accustomed to.”

“Is this what you always wanted to do?” wondered Ana.

“Goodness no! I’ll be out of this profession long before my sell-by date. What I do next I really don’t know. And I don’t really want to think about it. Growing old *really* depresses me. I hope I never have to get older than my teens!”

Zabba abruptly broke away from Ana and Binta, and swam a length of the baths. The other two followed behind, Ana enjoying the lash of the water against her body as she kept pace. They arrived at the shallow end, where Zabba stood to rub the water out of her eyes and to reveal where she shaved to make her look even younger. Ana crouched down in the water, still too shy to stand and openly display her body.

“What do you think of the Brothel, Ana?” Zabba wondered. “Do you share

Binta's negative opinions?" Ana nodded her head. "Well, you're new here, and I'm sure you'll come to take a much more liberal view of it, like your predecessor. Perhaps like her you'll be tempted to earn a bit of extra money. Everyone loses their inhibitions after a while."

"I don't think that's such a good thing," opined Binta. "But even if you weren't a prostitute, Zabba, you'd have a fairly active and varied sex life."

"You want to bet!" the girl laughed. "What could be more fun? Sure. Left to my own devices entirely there are pretty few of my clients, even the regular ones, I'd ever contemplate if I didn't do it for a living. But when you get fully immersed in it, there can't be anything more fulfilling."

"Pah!" Binta disagreed. "It hasn't made me any more enthusiastic!"

"Well, Binta dear, you *are* an exception! Nobody could accuse you of having a normal attitude towards sex."

"I really don't think that my preference in partners has any bearing over what I think about prostitution in general. It's absolutely abhorrent."

"I can't pretend to understand you, Binta, but you're probably quite right. Many of my clients undoubtedly prefer boys to women. The number of times I've had to pretend to be one myself! I'm sure you'd find that even more disgusting. Perverse even, if you weren't yourself a homosexual. But it's fairly harmless. And I'm sure the provision of my services spares countless real boys attention they probably wouldn't appreciate. I am at least a professional and know exactly what to expect."

"I don't believe that my sexual preferences make me likely to have any more sympathy for men who lust after children. If there's any sexual behaviour the government is quite right to make illegal, it's that..."

“Making it illegal doesn’t stop it, you know,” laughed Zabba. “It just provides obstacles. And anyway Binta, sweetheart, if you knew some of these men as well as I do, you’d be no more censorious towards them than you’d want them to be towards you. My services are provided to sublimate such desires in a socially acceptable way.”

“Isn’t what they do to you illegal?” wondered Ana contemplating Zabba’s groin and her references to a sore posterior.

“Sure it is!” laughed Zabba. She pinched a slim buttock with a hand. “It doesn’t stop them. And it doesn’t prevent me providing the service either. As long as they’re willing to pay me that little extra that the tax-man never knows about, I’m not going to complain about a service the Brothel can never be seen to offer or condone. And those who’re most keen on that sort of thing and the ones who most like me to dress like a little school-boy and avert their eyes from what truly distinguishes me from a boy: they’re the ones who are the most publicly vehemently opposed to homosexuality and what they deem immoral sexual acts. But why should I care!”

Zabba dipped her hands into the water and desultorily splashed water over her incompletely formed body. “However, unlike you Binta, when I’ve done a day’s work, I don’t have to stay here all night. I have my own home to go to and friends to go out with. So, if you don’t mind, I’ll be off now.” She leaned over to Binta and kissed her tenderly on each cheek, and then repeated the compliment on Ana, who discovered for the first time how short Zabba was. Only the relative maturity of her conversation made her seem at all adult. Zabba left Ana and Binta swimming slowly up to the other end of the pool: Binta on her back and Ana more cautiously facing forward.

“Zabba’s very odd, isn’t she?” Ana commented.

“Odd? Why? Because of what she looks like?”

Ana hadn't really meant that. "I suppose that's one way. No. I mean her attitude towards prostitution. I really thought that most prostitutes would absolutely hate it, like you."

Binta tread water to keep afloat. "I can't speak for all the girls here. They have all sorts of attitudes. Some like Zabba quite enjoy it for one reason or another. Some detest it, and those who are convicted prisoners like me are going to hate it the most. After all, I didn't exactly volunteer to work here. The majority though are probably somewhere in between. A job they do for the money. Or which has enough good points to seem good enough for not doing something else. You can't be sure how honest most prostitutes are, the ones who do it by choice, that is. Some who hate it will pretend otherwise to justify their choice of career. And some who quite like it will claim to hate it to retain some kind of self-respect. However, Zabba is quite right: it's a much better career for the higher grade. Alphas like Bezaffa and Zabba make good money, and they know they'll be able to retire on it. Even Betas like me are generally respected by the clients. But the Deltas and Epsilons: it must be extraordinarily disheartening. They get the worst salaries, probably don't have the choice of another career and get the most abusive and unsavoury clients." Binta wiped her nose with the back of a hand. "But don't listen to Zabba when she says you should contemplate prostitution as a career. You would be the very last person to enjoy Zabba's lifestyle. You're better off as you are. If it was so wonderful, why did your predecessor leave in such a hurry?"

"Is it only prostitutes who have liberal views like Zabba's?"

"Of course not! But those who do, don't necessarily want to become prostitutes. There was a girl Mezyana and I knew who was visiting Jebel who was a

lot like Zabba in many ways. Well, not physically. There can't be very many people in the whole world with a body like hers. Her name was Azhnia, from which you can guess she wasn't an Alif girl. Her country is quite rich and although she always claimed to be broke she always seemed to be quite well off. It must be something to do with the exchange rate. God knows why she was in such a remote place as Jebel, but she claimed to love the countryside and its slow pace of life."

"What country did she come from?"

"Gharab, I think. Somewhere where they speak the same language. Mezyana and I were really envious of her country. Homosexuality and alcohol are legal, as are plenty of other things I could never imagine being legal here. They have films with people having sex in them, some of which she said were filmed in Alif. You can openly buy all sorts of drugs, but you have to pay tax on them, of course. People are much freer in what they can say and write. They don't have to be careful about saying something the government mightn't like. It sounded wonderful to us, I can tell you: always having to be careful about revealing our relationship."

"How did you meet her?"

"Mezyana and I were never really very sociable. We only met her by chance in the countryside when we were looking for a place to enjoy ourselves together. We were certainly not looking for other company. But as we were climbing up the hills, we came across this strange girl in leather clothes and short hair dyed a bizarre mix of blue and black. She was reading a book on a rock, and greeted us as we passed. Mezyana didn't really want to chat, but I was really curious to know something about her. I didn't know there were people in the world who dressed like that. You never find out about foreign fashions from the magazines or television programs. She had a

peculiar accent, and we had great difficulty in understanding some of what she said. She was travelling in Alif and staying in a hostel near Quria. She said the hostel was really boring and she got fed up with how much people stared at her. At home, she said, nobody would look twice at someone dressed like her.”

“Is that true?” speculated Ana, who had never really thought of how foreigners might dress.

“I can’t believe that everyone wears such tight leather clothes as her, but she said there were people there who dressed a lot more outrageously. After all, there’s no law to prevent them. As she didn’t know anyone in Jebel, we got to know her a lot better. She had views about sex and so on that we found rather shocking. It was quite titillating as well, of course. She always had these stories about her boyfriends and her sexual activity which I’m afraid we found very exciting. But the nicest thing about knowing her, I think, was that we found someone to whom we could confess our relationship, and who accepted it as what it was. It was good to know that there were people who not only didn’t disapprove of lesbianism, but almost actively endorsed it. It was good to feel accepted like that.”

Binta frowned, and then, without warning, swam away towards the edge of the pool. Ana hovered for a moment in the centre, and then swam leisurely towards her. Binta’s memories of Jebel must have upset her. Binta leaned on the pool-side bar watching her long legs cycle in the water, her hair spreading around. She continued as if there’d been no break in the conversation when Ana caught up with her.

“I feel guilty thinking about Azhnia. I suppose it was the excitement of her liberating conversation, but it wasn’t long until I learnt that Azhnia wasn’t just interested in boys and the two of us...” Binta paused as she struggled to express

herself. “Well, we soon got to be a little too close. My one episode of infidelity to Mezyana. Or one of several episodes to be honest: all with Azhnia. Not that my love for Mezyana was any less. It just seemed such an exhilarating and emancipating thing: having a relationship with another girl. I never told Mezyana, and Azhnia would never tell her either. And even though I felt really rotten at the time, I still went back to her for more. Now that I’m parted from Mezyana in this horrid place, I feel even worse that the only person I’ve ever truly loved, the one for whose love I am suffering so much, and who is also suffering for it ... I feel so low and deceitful and really no better than the slut that I’ve become!”

Binta was weeping, tears lost in the dampness of her face. Embarrassed, Ana hovered by, not knowing what to say or do. Her new friend lowered her face under her cascading curtain of hair and softly sobbed.

“I know Mezyana would forgive me if she were to find out. She’s like that! So charitable and understanding. All that Christian business of only seeing the best in other people. That doesn’t make it any easier: because I can never forgive myself. And I can’t blame Azhnia. She was only doing what was natural to the mores of her own country. I am the only one to blame; and however enjoyable it seemed at the time, and however easily I got away with it, doesn’t excuse me at all!”

Binta gazed into Ana’s sympathetic eyes. “I’m sorry to burden you with all this...”

“That’s all right...” Ana tried to say with as much sincerity as she could. She was slightly disturbed by the content of Binta’s confessions, but also flattered to be confided in so soon in their friendship. “I’m sure it’s good for you to...”

“Thank you! Thank you!” Binta said with a brave smile. She briefly kissed

Ana on the lips and, before Ana could respond, lifted herself out of the pool and stood high above her on the edge. “I must go now! I’ve been swimming for long enough. But perhaps we can come back for a swim another day?”

“Gladly!” Ana replied, looking up at Binta, her arms supporting herself on the poolside. The two girls chatted on fairly trivial matters for a few more minutes, while Binta dried herself with a long Brothel-issue towel. Soon she left, and Ana floated on her back for a long time, recounting her conversation and revelling in the satisfaction of making friends with someone so soon in the forbidding loneliness of the city. Ana imagined that Binta had only left so soon to return to work. She waved to Binta as she passed along the glass walkway overlooking the pool, suddenly wincing as she recollected what Binta’s work actually entailed.

6

Ana was gradually becoming accustomed to her new life in the big city. It no longer seemed the overpoweringly threatening place as it did on her first arrival. The city of Blad was still a great mystery on the whole but she felt fairly confident of the geography of the Jadid Quarter where she had been provided with a flat, and she knew all she needed to get to work in the city centre. The bus stop was only yards from the main entrance to the block of flats, and benefited from a shelter which, at this time of the year, served mostly to keep the sun off Ana and other commuters as they waited for the bus. Unfortunately, she didn't live near enough to the bus depot to avoid having to stand all the way on most of her journeys to work, but a little bit of discomfort like that was nothing compared to the gain of having a job.

Around her block of flats were many others almost identical, all the statutory maximum height of six storeys allowed before an escalator needed to be installed, and through the windows of which were flats of much the same design as Ana's own. She was in awe of the magnificent amount of space she had: more than the two floors of her parents' home. Her bedroom had an enormous double bed she could sleep in without hunching up her body. Her kitchen was ready supplied with a cooker, a microwave and a fridge-freezer. She even had a front-loading washing machine with which she had a disastrous time trying to get working properly. The most luxurious aspect was the fully-furnished living room in which there was a table, some chairs and even a television. And so much space! So much unoccupied air. Ana felt incredibly privileged. And all provided free as part of her contract of work with the Blad State Brothel! She'd never have been able to afford a flat nearly as well-appointed

otherwise.

She stood by the living room window over a small balcony just large enough for her to peg her clothes to dry after she'd mastered the washing-machine. Down below was a network of clean well-paved roads and a shop opposite which sold almost everything from light-bulbs and lentils to radios and radishes. A huddle of older women stood at the bus stop just by a policeman in a dark green uniform, smoking a cigarette. Radiating out for a few hundred yards were similar streets, the occasional small church and a small patch of grass where children could play. It seemed so comfortable and ordinary to Ana that she sometimes forgot she'd not always lived in a place like this.

One prominent feature of the living room was a long full-length mirror in which she could examine her reflection. At first she worried that the mirror might be connected to a network of cameras and viewing screens, like the one in Binta's room at the Brothel, but she soon satisfied herself, after poking around its perimeter with a knife, that there was no real likelihood that it could be anything other than a normal mirror. Ana stood in front of it, wearing only a towel round her body which she had used to dry herself after a long relaxing rest in the bath. She smiled sadly at herself, relishing her reflection's corresponding smile.

She peered around through the window to confirm no one could see her and let her towel slip to her knees. She had never seen her naked body in its entirety before. Having seen so many naked or near naked bodies recently she was curious to see how she compared. She concluded that she had a nice face: not startlingly pretty, but still nice. A little thin perhaps, like the rest of her, but her eyes were large even if her lips weren't at all prominent. Her lank fair hair fell onto her shoulders, even more lank

than usual as it was still damp from her bath. She was slim. Her breasts and hips had never really blossomed with adulthood quite as much as some girls at the Brothel: certainly not as much as Binta's.

How would she compare with a Beta Plus like Binta? She was sure she could never be considered more attractive, although much of Binta's physical beauty (she blushed to find herself using such terms) came less from her body than how she carried it. She radiated greater self-confidence and bearing without clothes than Ana could fully dressed. She imagined Binta walking along the corridors of the Brothel with a confident unselfconscious stride; Binta swimming breast-stroke in the swimming pool, her buttocks clearly visible through the water; and Binta sitting opposite her at the canteen table, her breasts just inches away from her fingers. Fingers which could easily stretch over and stroke her elegantly shaped nipples and feel the curve of her bosom. And, Ana couldn't help wondering, would Binta actually enjoy that?

Although Binta came from the countryside much as Ana did, Jebel sounded very different from her descriptions of its hills and mountains (and rather more exciting) than the broad agricultural plains of Rif, bounded by distant hills and mountains. Her village of Biyat was such an ordinary place, - serviced by a small shop, a few irregular buses and a church, - that could claim several uneventful centuries of history. Like all the others in the village, her parents' cottage had more space in the garden than inside, where most of the vegetables they ate were grown. Her father worked at a factory several miles away and left for work very early in the morning in a beaten-up van he jointly owned with several of his colleagues. He rarely got home much before seven in the evening. Her mother supplemented their living by

forever knitting and stitching clothes. Ana was considered very much the bright star of the family for having attained a college qualification, and there was little shame attached to her inability to find work other than in the city of Blad. Most young people in Biyat were either unemployed or like Ana had little choice but to find work elsewhere.

Life in her village was very uneventful and was no less so at the small town where she had attended college. There was little for a young girl to do. There was the occasional village disco attended by too many adults and children for young people to be anything but careful in what they did or said. The affairs organised by the college were more exciting, but were compromised by her need to catch the last bus back home to Biyat. Ana would occasionally see a film in the tiny cinema with other students, but the selection of films was very uninspiring and was mostly mercilessly cut. However, Ana had never felt deprived, as she had nothing with which to compare her social life and hers was no different from that of other girls in her village.

Her family, Biyat and Rif were a long way from Blad and her new life. An immeasurable gulf separated her from her former life, and it was not just the physical distance between them. Ana sat on a chair with the towel on her lap, still facing the mirror, contemplating the upward tilt of her breasts in the slight chill of the evening. She'd never be able to tell her parents about the actual nature of the company employing her and the deceit made her feel uncomfortable. She'd never hidden the truth from them before. She'd never had the need. Now she was obliged to routinely mislead them whenever they asked questions about the big city employers who had provided her with such a grand flat. Would they guess that not many employers were prepared to pay a secretary so well, and to give her such a nice place to live in

addition?

Her employer still disgusted her. It was after all a Brothel. One owned by the State (and ultimately by President Marmeluke himself) and therefore with at least some of its approval. Ultimately, it was a concern which sold the bodies of mostly women to mostly men for the purpose of their sexual gratification. The thought discomfited her considerably. It particularly perturbed her now she could visualise the actual girls employed in the business of providing their bodies to the rather unattractive men she saw going into the Brothel. She could imagine Bezaffa, Ferhana and Zabba underneath these foul hairy bodies with their dirty unscrubbed fingers crawling over their soft skin. She could most particularly and painfully imagine Binta in this position: her pretty face being kissed by stubble-chinned, pot-bellied men, their hands grasping at her firm breasts and, worse, the most intimate part of all being repeatedly violated for their vile pleasure.

However, as Ana reflected with some relief, it was not she who had to endure all this indignity and disgrace, but her new friends, not all of whom seeming nearly as distressed as Binta. Furthermore, life at the Brothel wouldn't be any different whether or not she worked there. Perhaps she was privileged to get such a close view of the workings of a Brothel without having to actively participate. She was grateful to have met so many new friends in a city where people were generally far too intent on their own business to spare any time or friendliness for an innocent country-girl. She had met many new people and made new friends. She wasn't too sure who were really her friends, though she was convinced that Binta fitted that description. Perhaps also Ferhana and Ketaba. These were girls so very different from the people in Rif, and this fact compensated for some of the loneliness she felt living so far from her family

and friends.

She was also very grateful for her salary and her flat. She'd enjoyed selecting it with Khedra, the Personnel and Training Manager, who'd presented her with a list of available flats and told her of the relative merits of each. She hardly believed the options she had, and so soon after arriving in the city just for an interview! Her parents expressed their delight in the letters they sent her which included her younger sister's drawings of the kittens and tales of all the things in the village that had so recently been of primary interest to her. They had been surprised that things had worked out so right so soon.

The work she was doing wasn't too bad either, Ana considered. It was all well within her capabilities, and she'd already earned praise from Mr Madir for the accuracy of her typing and how she organised the manual files. She was apparently so much better at it than Inta, and so much more attractive.

The Director's praise made Ana feel extremely uncomfortable, though. It wasn't only because the office air was thick with smoke emerging from the cigarette smouldering in his holder or the sweet smell of it clinging to his clothes and hair. Although he treated the staff - prostitutes or not - in a flirting over-familiar manner, she couldn't help suspecting his motives. She decided that she didn't like him very much. Not only was he rather ugly and smelly, but for all his apparent kindness she couldn't somehow forgive him his rather active rôle in the running of the Brothel and ultimately in the enslavement and foul abuse of girls like Ferhana and, of course, Binta. Although Ana couldn't be said to be active in the more obviously sordid activities of the Brothel, wasn't she just as complicit as the Director himself simply by helping to run the administrative side of the concern?

7

Ana didn't know how many times she heard the buzz of her flat's intercom before she managed to locate it in the hallway. Who could it be? she wondered, still wearing only a towel and mostly lost in the revelry of her thoughts.

"It's me, Khedra," the tinny voice on the intercom announced. "Can I come up?"

The Personnel and Training Manager from the Brothel! What did she want?

"Of course! Of course!" Ana replied in a panic about what to wear. She hurriedly dashed into her bedroom and slipped on a sleeveless floral dress and knickers less with regard to appearance than with the need to get dressed. She hadn't found her sandals when she opened the flat door, her hair still slightly damp.

Khedra was a tall slim woman in her late thirties who dressed very smartly in a green suit with a silk scarf around her neck. If Ana didn't know, she would have assumed she worked for a bank or an insurance company. She was however very amiable and solicitous of Ana's welfare. It might only have been her prejudices that made Ana somewhat wary of her, but she certainly didn't feel overwhelmingly grateful for this unexpected visit.

"I see you've made the flat very homely," commented Khedra affably, looking at the posters of Rif that Ana had sellotaped to the wall to remind her of home. She wandered towards a vase of small flowers Ana had placed prominently on the living room table. She stooped over to examine it more carefully. "Very nice. Very nice. I hope you're settling in well in your new home?"

"Yes, very well, Miss Jismia," Ana said nervously, standing by the doorway

and wondering why she'd chosen those particular flowers.

"Call me Khedra, Ana. Do you mind if I sit down?"

"Of course not," Ana replied as Khedra lowered herself into one of the two armchairs facing the television. She sat in the other armchair, after first turning it round to face Khedra across a small coffee table.

"I hope you don't mind me visiting you like this. But I happened to be in the area and part of my duties, as you know, is to ensure that all our employees are happy in their working life. And of course I have especial concern for all our new employees. I like to see that everyone is contented and that everything is well. I trust that the flat is satisfactory?"

"It's very nice. I'm very grateful."

"The Brothel has a reputation for supplying only the best accommodation to its valued employees. I hope also that you are satisfied with this district. You should be. The Jadid Quarter has a good reputation in this city. Good amenities, good schools, an excellent bus service and, of course, no shortage of churches if you should be of a religious bent. Are you a churchgoer?"

"Not really. Only occasionally."

"Many of our employees are very religious: surprisingly, amongst not our administrative staff, but the working girls. I hope you're getting to know Blad a bit better. It must be quite different to what you're used to." She nodded at the posters of the open wheat fields of Rif. "It's not too intimidating for you, I hope?"

"I'm beginning to get used to it."

"And it goes without saying that you are a lucky girl indeed to get such a nice flat in such a pleasant part of the city. My home is a little grander than this, but then I

have worked hard to afford it. It's a detached house in the Honey district. Do you know the area at all?"

"I've heard about it."

"It's very nice. Wide avenues, large parks, big houses and shops selling the most gorgeous but fabulously expensive clothes. My house occupies nearly a quarter of an acre - that cost me a fair bit I can tell you! - with four bedrooms, two living rooms and two bathrooms. And there's only me living there!" Khedra chuckled whimsically. "I really don't need so much space, do I? But it's nice to be able to afford it, don't you think Ana?"

"Yes, very nice. I'm sure I'll never be able to afford anything like that. You must be very well paid."

Khedra frowned. "You know that it's not policy to discuss salaries, Ana. But between you and me, yes, I have done very well out of my many years of service for the Brothel. I've done very nicely indeed. But you are wrong, my dear, in supposing you could never afford something as nice yourself."

She smiled broadly at Ana and then opened a magazine that Ana had bought. It was one of many women's magazines that could be bought in the shop opposite featuring romantic stories, knitting patterns and general articles. Khedra flicked through it, clearly bored by its contents and put it down without comment.

"I suppose you might wonder how I've managed to afford so many expensive things. Look at these rings." She spread out her fingers to display the three or four plain gold rings she had on them. "Each of them is worth more than your television set. This suit cost more than three months of your salary, and I have several others. Part of this comes from my salary. The Brothel, as you know, is a believer in offering

competitive salaries to its staff, and I can honestly say that my pay is in the top quartile for my grade. Which is quite senior. Some of it has come as a result of astute investment. I have quite a portfolio of share-holdings I can tell you. But most of it has come from working overtime in the services of the Brothel's less administrative business."

"Less administrative business?" wondered Ana, who was terribly conscious of the bareness of her feet in front of her well-paid colleague. What must she think?

"The Brothel as a company requires administrative and ancillary staff for its operations to be a success. There need to be receptionists, secretaries, cleaners, technicians and, of course, managers. The Brothel has a fairly open policy regarding the rôles performed by each member of staff, particularly concerning the supply of the services for which it is most well known. In this capacity, we as managers have been very flexible in allocating work to those the Brothel employs. Some working girls put in hours at reception for attractive rates roughly equivalent to their Performance and Appearance Rating ..."

"Equivalent to what?"

"The banding that each of the working girls receives," explained Khedra noting Ana's puzzled expression. "You know, some girls are Alphas, some Betas, and so on..."

"Oh yes. I see!"

"In addition to providing extra work for the working girls (and the working men if an opportunity occurs), we also offer opportunities to other staff to become more actively involved in the provision of services. The rates are very attractive: being higher per hour than the average working girl would receive for the same Performance

and Appearance Rating, or PAR for short. The Brothel has a policy of explaining to its employees what the extra work opportunities are, how to apply for them and what the remuneration is. I would urge you to be aware that these are not merely opportunities we believe that our staff should be just aware of. They are also very desirable options which staff are actively encouraged to seriously consider.”

Ana wasn't quite sure what Khedra was getting at. “Are you talking about part-time work as a prostitute?”

“Yes, of course. Didn't I make myself clear?”

Ana shook her head vehemently, studying her bare toes in the carpet pile. “I don't want to do that! Not ever! Not that!”

“I wouldn't have been doing my job as a PTM all these years, if I didn't understand the reluctance you may feel in doing additional work which not only erodes your free time, which a young lady like you must no doubt relish to the full, but has an unfortunate reputation which I only hope that greater familiarity and reflection will dispel.”

“I would never. I could never. My parents...”

“You are not in any way expected to do anything you don't want to, Ana. All I'm doing is presenting to you the exciting and rewarding opportunities that are open to you while you are an employee in our concern. I wouldn't be doing my job if I weren't to do so.” She smiled reassuringly. “I'm sure your parents and family would soon come round to respecting any career decision you made which brought you a better income and such exciting prospects. I have supplemented my normal salary for years with a degree of extra work - often conveniently overlapping with my normal hours as it does for all administrative and ancillary staff willing to exploit such

opportunities, as I shall be more than willing to explain. This extra work is not only within the confines of the Brothel, where I have my own room for the purpose, quite separate from my normal office, as is only right. It would not do to confuse my rôle as a PTM with my other capacities. This work has often involved travel, meeting interesting and well-connected people, and visiting the most exotic restaurants and gentlemen's clubs. And it is an opportunity I would strongly urge you to consider sooner rather than later, as unusually among careers this is one heavily biased towards the younger and often less experienced."

Ana really didn't want to continue this embarrassing discussion. "Prostitution's just not something I want to do. I wouldn't enjoy it at all."

"I understand your attitude, Ana. Undoubtedly, it's not everyone's preferred career option. But were you to show interest, there would be great flexibility shown towards your general clerical and secretarial duties. I believe you've shown yourself quite adept at these - better, I don't mind telling you, than your predecessor. However, I think I ought to outline the benefits of taking advantage of these exciting opportunities. I've already hinted at the enhanced income you would enjoy - which at a preferential employee's bonus takes the earnings of a Gamma to the level of a Beta, and those of a Beta to the level of those of an Alpha Minus. The rates and conditions are not to be sniffed at. I'll leave you this employee brochure which outlines them in greater detail."

She placed a glossy brochure on the table that featured the photograph of a very ordinary young lady dressed in very ordinary working clothes (nothing like those of the prostitutes at the Brothel). She was smiling broadly while leaning against a similarly unexceptional dining table laid out for a small dinner. The front cover had

the words **Opportunities in Customer Satisfaction** just above her forehead. Ana picked up the brochure and flicked through pages in attractive printface which showed the same woman in other equally unlikely settings such as restaurants and tourist sights. The only picture at all associated with the Brothel was the swimming pool, where the women were photographed so that it was impossible to tell what they were wearing.

“You’d like to earn more, wouldn’t you Ana?”

“Well... yes...”

“And this is an opportunity to do so. But, as they say, money isn’t everything, although our surveys have shown that for the overwhelming majority of working girls - 78.9% in fact - money is the chief reason quoted for this choice of career. There are also the character-building aspects of the job. It would make you much more assertive and a great deal fitter. It is also excellent training for a married life. Do you have a boyfriend at the moment?”

Ana blushed. “No, not at the moment.” Nor indeed had she ever one, - a fact that had sometimes troubled her when she saw the apparent happiness of her friends in Rif who were engaged to be married.

“Well, when you do, you’ll find that the satisfaction and quality of service you’d be able to provide after the excellent experience that only a working girl can achieve will be something for which you will be forever grateful. Indeed, many of our employees are now happily married to former clients whom they met in the course of executing their duties. However, as you can possibly guess, it’s not altruism alone that motivates the State Brothel to offer its employees such attractive opportunities. The Personnel department will be very grateful for the extra services. It is constantly on

the lookout for suitable staff. It seems that however well we have succeeded in achieving, or better than achieving, our recruitment quotas, the demand for services continues to exceed the supply of provision. I for one would be extremely grateful were you to assent to so provide your services.”

“It’s just not what I want for a career...”

“Well, it’s true that you *have* been taken on as a secretary, and there are very few employers who can extend to such staff the extra work that we are able to do. However, even if one were to ignore the many other benefits of this extra work, I am sure it would be advantageous for you to gain a greater insight into the Brothel’s non-administrative work. This is also certain to enhance your career prospects. We have always preferred to promote rather than recruit whenever more senior positions need to be filled, and preference is inevitably extended to those who are more actively involved in the running of the business.”

Khedra skimmed through the pages of the brochure which Ana had returned to the coffee-table. “No doubt you have noticed that a great deal of the remuneration relies on your PAR. Naturally, I’m in no position to guarantee what your rating might be. I imagine you would be a Beta. Possibly a Beta Plus. But this of course depends on an initial full body assessment, subsequently supplemented by data collected from client satisfaction questionnaires which customers of your services would be requested to complete. However, assuming that you are a Beta, I think you’ll agree that the terms of pay, conditions of service, sickness benefit, holiday entitlement and pension provision are really second to none.”

Ana felt obliged to look at these details with more care. It was displayed in a table, and showing a sliding scale of pay and benefits which were really very good

indeed for the Alpha Double Plus. Those for an Epsilon Minus, however, were rather worse than her own at the moment - and reflected that even the ratings of the highest ranked prostitutes dropped with time. How long would it take to sink from a Beta to the depths of an Epsilon Minus? While Ana was reading, Khedra pointed out additional attractions, such as travel allowances, a company share scheme, a clothing allowance and the quality of the accommodation provided.

“For some of our more valuable staff, we pay a substantial contribution towards the maintenance and cost of their private premises on the understanding that it is used at least occasionally towards the provision of services for the wealthier and more fastidious client. There is no mystery, of course, in how we can afford to be so generous towards our staff. Our services are in very great demand and provide a sizeable contribution to the government’s revenue.”

“Are there any problems if I decide not to take advantage of these opportunities?” Ana wondered. She didn’t like the way she felt Khedra was pressuring her.

“Problems? Whatever do you mean?”

“If I don’t work as a part-time prostitute will there be any negative results?”

“The State Brothel does not, as an employer, discriminate in any way against any employee who refuses or simply does not wish to actively participate in its Customer Satisfaction Programme. You have my word that should you decide not to enrol on this scheme, no one will think the worse of you. But this is negative talk, Ana! You should rather consider the positive aspect. By taking advantage of what the Brothel offers you: you will be healthier, wealthier and it will greatly assist you in an administrative or clerical career. We take a very positive view of staff who have

shown themselves willing - particularly those such as you with a potential PAR as high as a Beta! Think not of Negative Discrimination of which I hope we are never guilty. Think instead of the Positive Discrimination that would instead be extended towards you for the rest of your working life in the services of your employer.”

8

There was one source of extra income available Khedra mentioned that Ana had no difficulty in contemplating, and that was to escort prisoners on the privileged day release they were deemed to have earned. So it was that Ana found herself on Sunday morning escorting Ferhana to the Cathedral of Blad, a privilege readily granted in recognition of her positive attitude and good behaviour. It seemed to Ana a fairly pleasant way to earn extra pay at time and a quarter.

She met Ferhana in the foyer of the Brothel, where for all but the administrative staff it was just a normal day. Ana was dressed in the same clothes she'd worn for her interview, and scarcely recognised Ferhana in the modest and demure clothes she was wearing. Her dress was made of dark purple crush velvet and covered her from her neck, where it constrained her throat, down to her ankle boots. She was waiting for Ana with the Brothel Chaplain, a small leather handbag clasped to her side.

Chadora, the chaplain, was a short woman of medium build who wore the dark heavy clothes of her profession, her head covered by a modest cap and a cross secured around her neck and dangling over her breast. Her duties kept her very busy, Ana had heard, as so many prostitutes felt the need for her spiritual advice and for someone to listen to their confessions. She smiled as Ana approached.

“You’ve come in good time,” she laughed. “We’ve got enough time to walk to the cathedral. It’s a nice sunny day.” She beckoned to Ferhana. “Come along, dear. It must be quite a time since you last had a day outside the brothel walls.”

“It must be more than a month,” Ferhana admitted.

They strode out of the foyer, which was very quiet this early in the morning. There was only one man milling around - clearly undecided as to whether to take advantage of the Brothel's services - and the receptionists were laughing and chatting over idle computer screens and Sunday morning papers. Ana enjoyed Sundays in the city of Blad. It was so much more peaceful with all the shops closed and no commuters about. If the city were always like this, she'd even prefer it to Rif.

Ferhana paused and blinked as they left the main entrance, accustoming herself to the greater expanse of space that welcomed them. The sky was clear, and the office buildings opposite cast well-defined shadows.

"Have you ever been to the Cathedral, Ana dear?" wondered Chadora.

"No, not at all! I've seen the photographs. It looks enormous!"

"It is indeed. The people of Blad have expressed their devotion in great style and dignity. Let's see! The best way there is probably down there." She indicated a broad avenue leading to the right. "Right! Let's get going. We don't want to be late for the service."

The three walked along, with Ferhana unusually mute, presumably lost in her own thoughts. Ana didn't want to interrupt her reverie, so she chatted with Chadora. The chaplain was very interested in how Ana was fitting in with brothel life.

"It must be a very strange place to be working as a secretary."

"No more so than as a chaplain, I'd have thought."

"Oh! Not at all! There's been a very long tradition of religious devotion amongst those engaged in what they call the oldest profession. It's not for me to say why I believe that should be so, just as it isn't for me to pass comment on the girls' chosen careers. There are undoubtedly stresses and uncertainties that their kind of

work brings them, and I hope that in my capacity as their spiritual advisor I can bring a measure of comfort to their lives.”

“It’s not a chosen career for all of us,” commented Ferhana slightly bitterly.

Ana looked at her companion, wondering if she could tell from her face what her feelings were; but Ferhana’s face had relaxed into an inscrutable smile.

“Indeed not, Ferhana dear,” agreed Chadora. “And it is a special duty which I am proud to make available to those who have not exactly entered the brothel by choice. In fact, Ana, I’d say that the majority of my time is spent counselling prostitutes who are serving penal sentences.”

“Do you ever see Binta?”

“Binta?” wondered Chadora. “There are several girls here with that name. Which Binta do you mean?”

“She means her friend. The lesbian from Jebel. The girl she spends so much time chatting with in the canteen and in her room.”

Ana blushed. She hadn’t thought that her friendship with Binta had attracted so much attention. Was Ferhana expressing resentment at Ana’s friendship? If so, her face didn’t express any sign of it. And anyway, Ana reflected, why should Ferhana or anyone else mind that she was developing such a close friendship? She had no friends in Blad other than those she had made at the Brothel.

“Binta. Yes, I know. I’ve seen her. From a distance, that is. But she’s never come to see me for spiritual guidance. Unusual in a way, because it is often girls serving time for sexual misdemeanours such as the ones she’s committed that are most solicitous of my time. Theirs is a difficult sin for me to counsel - particularly as sections of the Church are undecided about the nature of it. Some, and I won’t claim

to be one of them, say that it isn't the rôle of either the church or state to give more than advice on such behaviour."

"What do you say to lesbians when they see you?" wondered Ana.

Chadora looked steadily at Ana, as if to assess her feelings. "I tell them that the church's rôle in Alif is to urge compliance to the law and that it is not for us to ever suggest that anyone should in any way diverge from that proper observance. I tell them that they must repress any criminal tendencies they may have, and if they find this difficult to seek guidance in the message of Jesus Christ Our Saviour. I do not tell them that their behaviour is wrong or sinful. That is for them to find in their understanding of the Holy Scriptures."

"Just as you don't condemn me for drinking alcohol," laughed Ferhana.

"Well, you don't drink any these days, do you, Ferhana dear. Not that you could even if you wanted to. But please don't misunderstand me. I know that there is a difference between complying with the law from agreement with its virtue and from fear of its penalties. I hope that all the wards in my spiritual care learn to observe it willingly and not from sufferance."

"Would you condemn Binta for being a lesbian?"

"Whatever your friend has done in the past is something for which she is already punished. I can do no more than help her, if she came to me, in facing up to her sentence in the brothel; and if she asked me for guidance in mending her tendencies towards criminal sexual behaviour I would give her all the assistance it is in my power to give. But less of that! Look at the wonderful sight of the Cathedral."

Chadora indicated its massive bulk that lay ahead of them in a large public square populated mostly by pigeons and the odd Sunday stroller. A statue of President

Marmeluke stood at its centre, striking a heroic gesture towards the flying buttresses, spires and gargoyles of the Cathedral. Ana had never in her life seen such a majestic building. The towers had such grandeur, the stones composing it were so massive and the dome at the top looked as if it could hold several of the churches she was so much more familiar with.

“You may wonder why prostitutes and criminals alike find comfort from religion,” Chadora continued thoughtfully as they wandered across the massive square. “There are two main reasons I feel. One is that Jesus Christ has promised forgiveness for our sins, if we truly repent them. For criminals such as Ferhana and your friend, Binta, the true forgiveness offered to us by Our Saviour is undeniably of comfort. For other prostitutes, whose work is hardly illegal, it is more difficult to explain why they desire Jesus’ forgiveness. However, just because something is legal or even encouraged by the state does not necessarily make that thing virtuous. There are many prostitutes who regard the practice of prostitution as necessarily sinful despite the approval given it by our government, and it is to salve their consciences that they look to Christ’s forgiveness.

“The other reason, I believe, is the comfort and succour that Christ offers all believers in the promise of a better life in the hereafter. The life of the prostitute can be a hard one. I know from my counselling that it brings great distress and some pain to some of my wards. Their hope is that their devotion to Jesus Christ will be rewarded in the afterlife and that in this way their lives will not be merely ones of suffering, with the constant anxiety of how their performance and appearance rating becomes inevitably downgraded as they age. However, let us think now of the glory of Jesus Christ and His love for us, as we enter this hallowed place.”

Chadora led Ana and Ferhana through the wide and tall open doors into the interior of the Cathedral, which impressed Ana more than the outside. The ceiling was so high! It was a wonder it didn't collapse. But she noted with relief the many columns and beams, and how very substantial they were. The Cathedral was illuminated by beams of sunlight radiating through stained glass windows high above, which cast a magical kaleidoscope of colour at their feet. As if this light were not enough, thousands of candles were lit all around them, including some on a massive candelabrum supported by a long cable to the very tip of the dome and dangling yards above their heads. Chadora and Ferhana crossed themselves solemnly as they walked down the wide aisle looking for available seats amongst the already very full congregation. The echoing music of an enormous organ came from all directions. Its source was high above them where a small figure was massaging the many pedals with his feet.

The service matched the cathedral in its grandeur and pomp. Every aspect of the service outmatched those she was familiar with in Rif on the occasions her family had enticed her into a church. The raiment of the minister was magnificent, decorated with gold and silver. The choir was dressed in beautiful ornate white cloth and their voices echoed to the hymns with a purity in intonation and quality in delivery she had previously only heard on compact disc. The priest's voice resonated with an authority and power that left Ana in total awe. This was so much more impressive than the relatively amateur services in the Rif churches, which relied so much on the voluntary services of the congregation.

Ferhana and Chadora prayed with a fervour and solemnity that made Ana's own observance seem relatively insincere. She watched Ferhana's bowed head as she

devoutly murmured “Amen!”, cross herself as she raised herself and gazed with dignity at the priest who had raised his hands above his head. Ana listened intently to the service which related to some text in the Apocrypha she’d never heard of before, wondering at the trails of logic that led the minister towards his message of devotion and love. Ferhana nodded at critical moments to particular aspects of the sermon she found especially profound. If Ana hadn’t known what Ferhana’s life mostly consisted of, she would never have suspected it of such an apparently Christian young woman.

After the service, Ferhana wandered towards the confessionals while the rest of the congregation filed out, following the example of the priest and his retinue of choristers and lesser ministers. Chadora crossed herself and smiled at Ana.

“A good service, don’t you think? Are they like this in your own town, Ana dear?”

“Not as impressive, I’m afraid.”

“I suppose not. But I suspect the devotion of the congregation in Rif is more keenly felt than that in Blad.”

“What do you mean?”

“I have observed that the church’s doctrine is most well observed outside the big city. I have always been very inspired by the devotion expressed in the provinces, as if there were an inverse relationship between the pomp and ceremony, and the meaning it has in people’s lives. Too many of this congregation will feel that they have now expiated any need for devotion beyond that which they have already expressed, and will, like Ferhana, return to their lives untroubled by any Christian concerns.”

“I’m sure that’s not totally true,” Ana remarked uncertainly, “although people

in Rif do seem more devout than most of those I've met in Blad. I can't believe that those who come here are so hypocritical."

"Well, not hypocritical as such. Just busy. But I confess I am rather cynical. It may be because of my own experiences that I became a chaplain: to become more wholly involved in the practice of my faith."

"What were you before?"

"I was a prostitute, I'm afraid."

"A prostitute?" Ana found it very difficult to believe. Chadora was very much the opposite of what she believed a prostitute would ever be like.

"I worked at the State Brothel in Blad. Not like Ferhana. Not as a criminal who has been sentenced to it, but wholly from choice. I was attracted by the money and the lifestyle. Like many prostitutes, however, I became interested in the church. It addressed so well those parts of my soul that the trade of prostitution neglects. I felt that it was demeaning me and that my motives were less from a desire to give pleasure and more to earn a good living. So I handed in my stilettos and stockings and took up the cloth instead. It's not a decision I regret, and I am now ideally suited to serve the needs of my wards."

Ana was a little embarrassed by this confession. She wasn't at all sure what response was appropriate. Chadora noted her uncomfortable silence.

"I'm certainly not the first prostitute to have turned to the faith for comfort and guidance. It is said that Lady Magdalene was herself a prostitute before Jesus Christ brought her to see the light. He promised forgiveness to those who sought salvation in His message, and many other ex-prostitutes have become active in the church. Many, it must be said, wait until age has sufficiently devalued their market value before they

make such a decision - but their choice is no less sincere for that.”

“Do you think Ferhana will do the same?”

Chadora smiled ruefully. “Much as I would like to say she would, I don’t believe she wishes to express her devotion so completely. She is also not one who believes that the practice of prostitution or indeed alcohol smuggling is inconsistent with a devout faith.”

When Ferhana returned from her confession, smiling cheerfully as if a great weight had been lifted from her shoulders, Chadora remarked that she had some other business to attend to at the Cathedral and wouldn’t be able to return to the Brothel with them. “I’m sure, however, that Ferhana can be trusted to stay with you.” She squeezed Ana’s hand affectionately. “I hope to see you again in the Brothel. Perhaps in a spiritual capacity if you ever need it.”

Ferhana and Ana left through the enormous doors of the Cathedral. She was hushed by the deadening immensity of the consecrated ground, now echoing only with the occasional conversation of the visitors.

“When Chadora has said that I can be trusted to stay with you,” Ferhana remarked, “she has said that knowing that I am black and in the city of Blad, a black girl can not easily hide for long. But before we return, shall we sit outside the Cathedral? I enjoy so much the freedom of the open air. It is so much better than in the Brothel.”

The two girls sat on a bench at the edge of the square, Ferhana with her small handbag placed delicately on her lap and an enthusiastic smile on her dark face. “I hope you are liking your work at the Brothel, Ana?”

“I’m getting used to it. And I’m making friends there.”

“I hope you will think that I may be a friend of yours. I am glad you have made such good friends with Binta. She is so lonely, I think. She hates the work and she needs the comfort of friends who are not also prostitutes. I’m sure it makes her life seem so much better.”

“Do you hate working at the Brothel as much as Binta?”

“I hate it. That is true. But I hate it less than Binta. She hates it not only because the work is so bad. She hates it also because she does not like to make love with men. I am better than her at thinking it as just a job. Not a job that pays well, or at all, but a job for all that. For that I am treated very well by the director and his close associates. Binta will never even pretend to like the job - and for that she will never improve her PAR. But Binta is like me. She is at the Brothel because she has broken the law. Not because she has chosen to work there.”

“You were sentenced for alcohol smuggling, weren’t you?”

“Yes, that is true. I have made much money importing spirits and wine from my home country into Alif. In Haj alcohol is freely available and here it is not. It was such a simple matter to bring alcohol in, and so many people wish to pay much money for it. For a while, I was rich and I have met many interesting people. Many of these people are the same people who condemn me now. But when I was free to sell them whisky, gin or vodka, they were very friendly. Often they have encouraged me. ‘Bring some rum’ they would say. ‘I want a litre of best whiskey.’ ‘I want two litres of gin.’ Now, if they see me they will look away. When I was rich, I lived in a very nice flat in Blad. I had many friends who would visit me. I could afford many expensive things. But soon I was discovered. The police arrested me and they sentenced me to the Brothel. I had friends who worked as prostitutes and I thought it may not be so bad.

But I still hate it. I hate the customers and I hate the way I have to dress and have to be nice to them.”

Ferhana looked up at the Cathedral ahead of them where a party of children in smart clothes was being escorted by a matronly woman and where pigeons rose in a sudden flurry of wings to avoid them. They circled around and then descended back to almost exactly the point from which they had taken off.

“I did not go to church when I was dealing alcohol. I believed, of course. All my family in Haj are very religious. And I do not believe that my trade was at all contrary to my faith. Now I am in the Brothel, however, I find the church a great comfort. It is like finding a friend whom I have not spoken to for a very long time. Whatever I do now, however horrid the clients may be, I know that God watches over me and that He cares for me.”

“Do you regret selling alcohol?”

“I regret being discovered. I had such a very good life. Especially compared to the poverty in Haj where, although we can drink as much alcohol as we like, life is much harder than here. There is great poverty. Most people live only from the riches of the land. It is no wonder that there is such a dedicated following of Jesus Christ. His message of Love and Forgiveness in this life and forever after is very appealing. It is strange though that in Haj where so few can afford it there is so much alcohol, and here where everyone can afford it there is none. It is a strange world.”

“Are there many countries where alcohol’s legal?” wondered Ana, who craved to know more of what it was actually like. All she knew was from films where alcohol drinkers were shown to be a very villainous lot who after only a little resorted to either violent behaviour or lethargic idiocy. She knew it came in strange shaped bottles and

was the same colour as urine, but since the films she saw were only those permitted in Alif she didn't know how closely they resembled reality.

“There aren't that many countries where it's actually illegal. There are a few where it's actively discouraged, but no one ever gets sent to jail - or a brothel - for selling it, let alone for drinking it. But I don't know why your President Marmeluke is so keen that it remains illegal here. I do know that many people quite closely associated with his government are illicit consumers, not that I could ever prove it.”

“And now you are in the Brothel for your crimes...”

“Yes. I wish I were elsewhere. But not in one of your country's horrible jails. Many people have told me about them. I am at least forewarned when my body is to be violated, and there is a freedom that I would cherish greatly if I were chained in a cell all day. Binta may complain - as I know she does - of how horrid her life is. In a prison it is much worse, although in a woman's jail she would at least meet many other lesbians.”

9

After a few minutes, Ana and her ward stood up and strolled along the calm city streets in the direction Ferhana assured led back to the Brothel. More of the city was awaking, but it still had a very sleepy atmosphere. A few cafés had opened with tables outside sheltering customers under parasols from the harsh midday sun. Many seemed very young and several had newspapers on the table piled in front of them. As they passed by one café, Ferhana suddenly exclaimed: “Well, look who is here!”

“Who?” Ana wondered following the long purple arm pointing towards a table at the Café des Jeunes, where a teenage boy in a black leather jacket and jeans was sitting alone smoking a cigarette and idly watching people go by. At least, she thought it was a boy - perhaps an old boyfriend of Ferhana’s from her earlier life - but she became aware that it was in fact Zabba, who had seemingly not yet bothered to start reading the newspaper in front of her.

“Why, hi there!” Zabba greeted them as they strode towards her. “Have you finished your sentence already?”

“Not at all,” the black girl replied. “I’ve just been given leave to go to the cathedral, looked after by Ana here. We were on our route back to the Brothel.”

“Well, I’m sure you don’t have to hurry. Come on sit down. I’ll buy you some coffee.”

Before Ana had the opportunity to decide whether this was what she really wanted to do, Ferhana was sitting on a chair next to Zabba, so she joined them.

Zabba held up three fingers to the waiter, and shouted out “More cappuccino, Jason. You like cappuccino, don’t you Ana?” She nodded, though she mostly only

drank instant coffee or tea. Zabba smiled as the waiter hastened away. “Doing a bit of overtime? You *are* keen! I hope Ferhana’s been behaving herself?”

“She’s been very well behaved.”

“Like a saint!” added Ferhana good-humouredly.

“Well, you would be if you’ve been to church. Me, I’ve got no time for religion, but I guess if I were a prisoner like Ferhana here I’d take any opportunity there was to get away from the Brothel. It must be awful being stuck there all day.” She drew on her cigarette, saw that she was very nearly inhaling on the filter and stubbed it out. Ana noticed that the cigarette packet was for an expensive imported brand sporting a health warning which was never printed on Alif cigarette packets. “In fact, I’d hate to be like Ferhana or your friend, Binta. All that hard work and nothing to show for it! Mind you I’d never dream of doing it unless I got paid pretty damned well for it. Much better than you, Ana. I’m sometimes hard pushed to spend all of it.”

“You do not have to make me feel bad,” commented Ferhana.

“Well, it’s not as if you’d not made a fair bit yourself when you were dealing in alcohol. I’ve met some of your old friends and they told me how well you were doing. It might not have been legit, but you didn’t pay taxes and you were at least as well off then as I am now!”

“That was in the past, Zabba. When you were still at school, studying for exams and playing games in the school playground.”

“Less of the studying and more of the playing games I’m afraid, Ferhana dear. I was a dreadful schoolgirl you know. If I’d been better at school maybe I’d never have been so keen on taking up this trade. But then lots of the other girls and boys who studied *ever so* hard, and might even be going onto university: they’re *never*

going to be earning nearly as much as me. So who's the mug?"

"Did you take up prostitution because you weren't a good student?" speculated Ana.

"Well...! That was one reason. But actually I didn't think about it until I was faced with the choice of staying on at school or being unemployed. Both options seemed rather awful. Some of my friends are unemployed and living with their parents, and all they ever do is argue with them all the time. And there's no money at all in unemployment. Then I saw the brochures for the Brothel in the school careers' library. They weren't exactly prominently displayed. No one could claim that my school encouraged me. Although it's perfectly legal, it's still treated like a dark secret. But of course everyone - especially the boys! - liked to read the Brothel literature. And I suppose the school was obliged to supply the stuff. I thought it was a real joke: all the business about PAR and pensions and opportunities for work abroad. Join a Brothel and feel a man, as the joke goes! But I didn't know what to do, so I went along to the recruitment office at the Brothel..."

"Recruitment office?"

"Of course! Haven't you seen it, Ana? It's not by the Brothel's entrance. That's for the clients. It's round the back. Sometimes Khedra's there, but usually there are just prostitutes doing a bit of overtime. When I went there, the woman who chatted to me was only a Gamma, and I bet she doesn't earn much! But she got really enthusiastic about working in the Brothel. Well, I suppose she had to be. She probably gets some kind of commission for the girls she recruits. She made it sound really good: swimming pool, garden, paid holidays, bonuses and good pay. I thought if a girl like her can get so much out of it: what would I get? But what really made me go into

the profession was when she provisionally estimated that my rating would be at least a Beta Plus or an Alpha Minus. I saw what rates those grades got, and it just looked like an absolute fortune to me. And of course I've actually been rated as an Alpha. I asked her: how can a girl like me with no figure and no breasts get such a high rating? Was the Brothel that short of talent? Well, she told me, if I cut my hair and dressed right then the sky would be the limit! And as they say, the rest is history."

"It must be very strange to dress and look like a boy all the time. What can your customers be thinking?"

"Don't be so naïve, Ana!" laughed Zabba, lighting another cigarette as the waiter returned with three milky coffees on a tray and placed them decorously on the table. "Thanks Jason! ... No. That's *exactly* what they want. The more like a boy I am the happier they are. Their biggest disappointment is that I'm not one for real, but why should I care what they think."

"But what about other people? Those who aren't customers?"

"It doesn't bother me what they think either! But actually, - and I'm sure I shouldn't be saying this, but I know you're great chums with Binta, - I actually rather like it. Girls often think I'm a boy and it makes it much easier for me to get on with them initially..."

Ana felt an uncomfortable bounce in her chest. Ferhana sipped on her coffee and made no comment, while Zabba drew on her cigarette. "You don't mind girls thinking that?"

"Of course not! In fact, Ana, I have a lot more in common with your friend Binta than you seem to realise. The only difference is that she's been caught and I haven't."

“Do you mean that you’re a ... you’re someone who ... that you ...?”

Ferhana put down her coffee and smiled reassuringly at Ana. “It’s not that uncommon you know, Ana,” she remarked. “Zabba’s just someone who’s interested in women as well as men.”

“Does that make you, like Binta, someone who is, as they say...?”

Zabba put a hand on Ana’s wrist. “Don’t say it out loud. Someone might hear you. But of course I am. I’m just not exclusive like Binta. There’s nothing wrong with it, whatever President Marmeluke and his prudish government might say. It doesn’t get you pregnant. It doesn’t spread diseases. And I’m a lot more choosy with the women in my life than I can ever be with the men. Don’t act so shocked. If Binta does it, why shouldn’t I?”

Ana smiled weakly. She was being revealed to attitudes she couldn’t comprehend. A world where women loved women and men preferred making love to boys. And how could someone as lovely as Binta really be remotely like the crude and disturbingly androgynous Zabba.

“So, Ana, are you enjoying life at the Brothel?” Zabba asked. “Is it the sort of place you always wanted to work at?”

Ana shook her head. “I thought I’d be working in a more conventional office.”

“I bet you did! But it’s definitely an eye-opener for you, I’m sure. Prostitutes, pimps and sex. You don’t get that in most offices. It’s more like a factory than an office block if you ask me. Girls like me are on a conveyer belt of sexual diversion. We’re nothing more than live meat as far as the punters are concerned, with clothes to stimulate the punters’ rather poor imaginations and holes to be filled. Or do you have a more positive image, Ana dear?”

Zabba's views were curiously disloyal for someone who had chosen prostitution as a career.

"Don't you like working at the Brothel?"

Zabba laughed - slightly cruelly, Ana thought. "Of course I don't. Do you think I would ever voluntarily put myself through all that groping and mauling for *fun*? It's just a job for me! I take it you're not a great fan of prostitution yourself?"

"Not really. But I don't really have much to do with what happens in the Brothel."

"I suppose we're just so much data on your databases. Each of us with our individual serial numbers and a set of attributes like our PAR and years of service. We might as well be tins of baked beans or factory tools." Zabba laughed. "I can never forget my serial number. I have to key it in every time I enter or leave the building. I can see why I have to enter it when I leave. It's so that people like Ferhana here and your nudist friend don't just saunter out of the building. I don't really understand why I have to enter it when I go in. Who's going to try sneaking into the Brothel if they don't have to? Unless they're paying customers of course. And what about your boss?"

"You mean the Director?"

"The Pimple we call him. Fairly obvious of course - he *is* the Big Pimp in the Brothel and he looks like some kind of obnoxious pimple. Do you get on with him?"

"He seems all right," Ana commented unconvincingly.

"Me, I hate him! You don't like him either do you, Ferhana?"

Ferhana smiled softly. "I'd rather not say what I think about him."

"Too unladylike for you, I suppose! I think he's absolutely disgusting. He

smells like a fag end, dresses like the big villain in an amateur pantomime and he keeps pawing my bum. I'm fortunate his tastes don't stray very far from the conventional. If there's anyone at the Brothel I'd like to see come to a sorry end, it's the Pimple, preferably by a particularly revolting species of venereal disease. Don't you think he's revolting, Ana?"

Ana didn't want to express a too negative opinion about someone she had to work with every day, but she did get very tired of his habit of touching her on the shoulders and around the bottom. His humour was rather tasteless and unsympathetic.

"I wish his hands wouldn't wander so much. And he *does* smoke an awful lot!"

"Well, I can't be too sanctimonious about *that!*" admitted Zabba, stubbing out her cigarette. "I guess you don't like smoking very much! But there are a lot worse things about the Pimple than his taste in tobacco. I don't like the way he samples almost all the prostitutes in the place. There can't be very many who've not endured his disgusting intimacies..."

"Does that include Binta?" wondered Ana, blanching at the thought.

"You really *are* very concerned about your friend's welfare, aren't you? Well, I can't speak for Binta. You'll have to ask her yourself if you want to know if the Pimple's shoved his filthy warty body against hers. But most girls have got to find out about his little habits before they leave the Brothel. What do you think, Ferhana?"

"I do not wish to comment," Ferhana remarked, looking remarkably uncomfortable.

"The Pimple's attentions don't stop with a bit of rumpy pumpy. He's been known to upgrade girls by nearly an entire category as a reward for services freely and

frequently offered. If you ever see a Beta who you think ought to be a Gamma or an Alpha who really doesn't have the physical appearance of her grade, you can be pretty sure it's because they're one of the Pimple's harem of willing helpers."

"I thought the criteria of assessment were really very stringent."

"And so they are, Ana, if you don't cooperate. Look at your friend Binta. Only a Beta. Not even a Beta Plus. There's enough subjectivity in the PAR system for a little bit of fiddling, and I don't think Khedra's that fastidious about keeping standards *that* rigid. After all, she didn't get where she is by merit alone."

"She does work very hard," Ferhana defended, annoyed at the turn of conversation.

"I'm sure she works very hard at *everything* she does! She's an ambitious woman. She's almost certainly got her eye on the Director's job for herself. All it takes is for the Pimple to overreach himself or to offend one of the President's representatives and it'll be Khedra who'll be running the show. She'd be a lot better than the Pimple. She wouldn't treat the weaker and more vulnerable girls so unscrupulously. She wouldn't practise the filthy things the Pimple gets up to. And when I say filthy, Ana, I mean *filthy*! The smell is apparently dreadful! And some of the girls he's entertained look like they've been in a fight rather than having offered their services voluntarily and for no extra pay. If a client treated them like the Pimple does, he'd never be allowed back in through the Brothel doors again. Or at least for a long time. Have you ever heard of the Client Black List and the compensation terms for loss of earnings that the Brothel operates? It's one thing for the punters and another thing for the Brothel's own Director!"

"I think you are making poor Ana think the Brothel is horrid place to work!"

Ferhana stated a little abruptly. “She has to work with the Director. You do not even have to see him very much! She has to see him every day. Ana does not work in the Brothel as we do. She is a secretary. Her work is very much different.”

“Like it was with Inta, I suppose!” sniffed Zabba.

“Inta is another girl. For Ana it is for her like it is to work in any office. She does not have to know about prostitution any more than a secretary in a travel agent has to know about travel. Or a secretary in a power plant has to be a scientist. The Brothel has very nice offices, a good view over the city, a swimming pool and a subsidised canteen. The Director may not be the most nice man in the world, but he is only bad with some of the prostitutes, not with all the staff.”

“So, you’re defending the Brothel now, Ferhana!” sneered Zabba. “You really are striving for time off for good behaviour. Next you’ll be saying the Pimple’s quite a good chap really and that the girls he treats so badly just deserve what they get.”

“That is not true, Zabba! I am saying only that Ana does not have to work in the Brothel and be unhappy. I am saying that she does not have to think about what the Director does or what you and I do with the clients. What I think about the Director and my work as a prostitute is not the issue!”

“I guess you’d rather not discuss such things,” mused Zabba. She pulled another cigarette out of the packet and thoughtfully lit it. “Well, perhaps you’d rather talk about your home, in Haj. Are there any brothels there?”

Ferhana smiled. “They’re not like our Brothel at all. They are very small and they are privately owned. The government of Haj does not like prostitution, but it is not illegal. The government does not like very much things that are not illegal. There is much alcohol and homosexuality is allowed. But the government does not say that

they are good. Or that they are bad. And we may be very poor in Haj but we can say what we like about the government. And the government does not like it very much when people say bad things about it. But they do not stop people. And they do not stop the newspapers saying bad things either. Not like in Alif, where what the President does not like, the people must not do. But people are poor. They want money and do not care for having freedom.”

“Well, you can’t have everything!” commented Zabba. She looked at her companions’ empty cups. “Do you fancy another coffee? I’ll pay of course!”

Ferhana looked at Ana who was conscious that she was to be paid only for the time she spent taking Ferhana to the Cathedral. She didn’t want to shorten Ferhana’s precious moments of freedom, although her ward was more considerate.

“Although I like very much to talk with you, Zabba, Ana must take me back to the Brothel. Or they will think I have escaped.”

“Well! Hurry back then!” sniffed Zabba, pointedly picking up her newspaper. Ferhana and Ana stood up, and bid her farewell. Zabba kissed Ferhana tenderly on the lips and Ana on the cheeks. “It’s been nice speaking to you. Don’t be a stranger.”

“No,” whispered Ana uncertainly.

She and Ferhana continued along the main road, sheltering from the harsh sunlight in the shortening shadows. Ferhana was quite muted, leaving Ana to her own troubled thoughts. She felt on the edge of a great change in her life. Elements were fitting into place, but she couldn’t quite see where they would fit, although somehow Binta was central.

They were soon back at the Brothel. Ana sat on a sofa in the foyer, keeping a good distance from the clients who gathered in somewhat larger numbers than earlier

that day. An aggressive security guard, a machine gun slung rakishly over his shoulder, emptied Ferhana's handbag onto the counter and scrutinised the contents with considerable detail. As soon as Ferhana was through the staff entrance her body would be strip searched and probably no less roughly. Brothel policy was extremely strict on the possible import of any illegal substances that could be brought in by prostitutes on penal service. A policy which in no way inhibited the free movement of such illegal substances that might be in the possession of the majority of prostitutes.

Ana wasn't sure what to do with the rest of the day. Perhaps she would visit Binta. She knew her friend wasn't scheduled to be working that afternoon.

10

Ana was seeing a great deal of Binta these days. On those days when her friend was not working late, she rarely returned home directly after work. She would wander along to Binta's room and the two girls would chat together or go swimming in the Brothel pool. On some evenings, they would meet in the roof garden: high above the city and the only part of the Brothel open to the sky. Like many others, Binta had a small plot in the garden she could tend when she could. It was a very small plot that grew only a few flowers and herbs, but Binta had taken the option of working there, precisely for the freedom of an empty sky above her head. Ana enjoyed these visits which, because of Binta's chosen dress, were only possible on dry warm evenings. She enjoyed standing by as Binta knelt down on the ground: her trowel deep in the earth and mud on her knees.

Ana wasn't at all sure why she felt the need to see Binta so often. The most obvious reason, and the one she preferred to believe, was that Ana had very few friends in Blad and Binta was the closest of them. She could speak freely about all she missed from Rif and her life there. She could ramble on about her flat in Jadid and her neighbours: the couple who argued quite loudly; the young man on the floor below who tried engaging her in conversation when they passed on the stairs; the old woman who would open her door slightly and watch her as she passed by. Binta often prompted her to continue if she lost the thread of her thoughts.

Ana felt empty on those evenings when Binta was working. Time seemed to drag and she was unable to concentrate. Weekends were even worse. She often had to think of excuses to come to the Brothel, as she had when she escorted Ferhana to the

cathedral, for the occasion of spending time with Binta.

“I never enjoyed gardening in Jebel,” admitted Binta. “Indeed, I never did any at all. I couldn’t tell geraniums from hyacinths. I would have hated getting any of this muck on my fingers. Look at it all!” She splayed her fingers to display the earth that discoloured them. “But, now, I just couldn’t imagine a day not spent tending this little garden. I’ve read all the books in the Brothel library on gardening and I know far more than I used to do. Some girls here have *much* better plots than me. That Delta with the jacaranda over there: I don’t know *how* she does it! Her plot always looks immaculate. And she manages to make it look good all year round. Most of the time, there are either things waiting to sprout or flowers which have just died. There’s a real art to it!”

Ana smiled appreciatively. She thought Binta’s plot was quite delightful enough. She followed Binta’s gesture to all the other plots that lined the narrow paths around the roof garden. Other girls were working at their plots, but they were mostly Deltas and Epsilons who were also serving time, and wore nearly as little as Binta as they didn’t wish to dirty the satin, silk or leather of their working clothes. Prostitutes were not offered the sort of clothes that would normally be appropriate for working on a garden.

“What do you enjoy most about it?” Ana asked, standing against a small tree in the evening sun, her arms folded and a hand stroking her chin.

“The open air more than anything else. It’s *so* oppressive being indoors in the Brothel all day. A country girl like me just can’t take so much neon and claustrophobia. There mightn’t be a lot more space, but there’s a lot of air. You can’t see much more of the world up here. No more than I can see through the window in

my room anyway. But it's nice to know that there's nothing but sky above my head. It's a kind of freedom. But it's more than that! I like getting my hands deep into the soft unresisting earth. I like to help things grow. I love watching the first leaves of a bulb sprout from the earth, and then bit by bit watch the flowers open. I like to take my secateurs to the roses and prune them. It's so restful. You just don't notice the hours go by. I can forget the misery of the Brothel and just concentrate my thoughts on what to do with this plant or that plant. Where to put what seed. What needs to be trimmed. I wouldn't mind growing vegetables here. Carrots or cabbages. But there's nowhere to cook them. And anyway the Brothel only supplies us with a limited variety of decorative garden plants. You *can* order other plants, but whatever you order just doesn't seem to be available this month or any other month for that matter. What do you think, Ana?"

"I don't know. I like looking at all these flowers and I love watching the way the garden changes, but I just don't know whether I'd be so keen even if I were in your position."

"But you seem to enjoy coming up here and watching me work."

"That's because you enjoy it," Ana remarked. She instantly felt embarrassed. What was she trying to say?

"What do you mean, Ana?" asked Binta standing up and turning her naked body towards her friend. "You only come here because I come here?"

"Well, no. I mean, yes. I mean, it's just because ... you know ... it's nice to watch you at work and enjoying yourself at work that ..."

"You like watching me enjoy myself?"

"Not so much watching you..." rambled Ana, her ears burning with

embarrassment, not at all sure what she was trying to say. “It’s just nice chatting to you while you’re happy and not ... when you’re sort of your own person and not being ... I just think it’s nice that ...”

Binta leaned over and tenderly kissed Ana on the cheek. “*I* enjoy your company. I don’t care *why* you want to spend time with me. It’s just nice to be together.”

“You think so?”

Ana felt the heat from her ears spread across her cheeks and forehead. What was causing her so much embarrassment?

Binta looked at the earth-pasted hands with an amused smile. “How *did* they get this muck onto the roof? Anyway, I must wash it off.” She picked up her trowel, fork and a small bucket. “Let’s go to the taps.”

These were lined against the wall by a series of shrub-like trees in wooden tubs and a small greenhouse where an indistinct figure was tending to some tomatoes. Binta carefully packed her tools in a small locker, its green metal rusted a red tinge, locked the door and hid the key in a small pot just above her locker. Ana stood back as she rubbed her hands under the sparkling water of the tap as it gushed out, splashed over her wrists and fingers, and then spiralled down the small grate at her feet which were also getting washed.

“It’s unbelievably cold!” she exclaimed, shaking the droplets off onto the wall’s peeling paint. “My fingers are so numb! Feel them!”

She proffered them to Ana, who had to admit that they *were* very cold. She dropped them promptly while Binta agitatedly shook her hands.

“So, what do you think about working here, Ana? Are you enjoying it any

more?”

“It’s a job. It has its good days and its bad days,” Ana answered. She never really thought that much about it. She didn’t enjoy the director’s company, but fortunately he was more often than not busy elsewhere and she didn’t have to suffer his facetious comments too often. “It’s not as bad as your job. I’d hate to do what you have to do.”

The thought always filled Ana with disgust. It perturbed her more than she thought possible. The image of Binta being subjected to the physical attentions of her clients was one she preferred to blank out of her mind.

“Some of the clients today were particularly nasty,” Binta mused. “One man wouldn’t stop squeezing my wrist. I told him to stop and he just wouldn’t. I think he liked causing me pain. Another one just wouldn’t accept my refusal (which I’m wholly entitled to insist on) when I said I didn’t want to do what he wanted me to do. I told him it was painful and, in any case, illegal. But that didn’t stop him going on and on. And offering me quite a lot of money for it. Money I can’t even spend at the Brothel anyway. I *hate* my job. And the worst of it is how it changes the way you regard lovemaking...”

“What do you mean?” wondered Ana, leaning against a table loaded with potted plants. “How has it done that?”

“It just doesn’t seem to have anything to do with love any more. The other words you use for it - the old Anglo-Saxon ones - they seem much more appropriate than words like ‘making love’. It’s got nothing about it that I would call ‘love’. Not the love I enjoyed with Mezyana. Not the passion and satisfaction I used to get. Now, it’s just on your back, legs up in the air, a disgusting smell of body odour and a kind

of distant far away sensation from where you're supposed to feel sensation the most acutely. It's just perverse and horrible!" Binta leaned against the table next to Ana, and absent-mindedly took Ana's hand in one of her own and looked down at it. "It's dehumanising! I'm nothing more than a sex toy. I have a vacant hole to be filled and the clients just want to fill it. That's all it is! That's all they do! I prefer it when I can satisfy their lust without them putting their repulsive thing inside me..."

Ana gazed into Binta's eyes. "How do you do that?" she asked with a slight choke.

"With my hands. With my mouth. With my breasts. With anything I can. And then they release their smelly viscous muck and I know I'm safe. The trick is to do it quickly, but not so quickly that they feel that they want to have a second go. And I look at them. Those bristly greasy faces. Those pale hairy chests. The flabby mass of stomach in folds at the front. The skinny legs with the angular knees and so much hair. Those piggy little eyes. And that loathsome look of lust that they all have when they come in my room and look at me. And the things they say. 'Just like my daughter, you are!' One said. 'And she's a slut too!' That was so horrid and unnecessary. So dreadful..." Binta sighed, and her eyes moistened with tears Ana had never seen before. She put an arm round her shoulders to comfort her friend, and Binta squeezed up towards her, face against her cheek and an arm trailing over Ana's knee.

"And some of the others! The violent way they force their fingers in places where I don't want them to touch me. The way they slobber and trails of saliva drip out of their mouths and leave damp patches on the sheets. The ugliest, unhealthiest, most diseased looking bodies you can imagine. It's not just the ignominy of being a

sex machine: it's what you have to endure. It's repulsive! Obnoxious! Nothing I *ever* did with Mezyana resembles what I have to suffer from these men. God! I hate them! I hate them!"

Ana squeezed Binta's shoulder comfortingly. "They're not here now! We're in the garden. Your clients are far away."

Binta turned round and with a sudden impulse wrapped her naked shoulders around Ana's.

"You don't understand. While I'm in the Brothel, I can't escape them at all. The clients are here all the time. All the time I'm surrounded by prostitutes and the Brothel, I can't forget them. They're in the shadows of the corridors, behind the doors with red lights, in the creases of all the satin, silk and leather that's worn here. I hate it! I hate it so much!"

Her chin rested on Ana's shoulder and her body pressed against her breast. Ana patted Binta's back with one arm while supporting her with the other. The note of Binta's breathing became a distinct sob.

"There there!" Ana said periodically and soothingly, but nonetheless feeling unsettled by the sensation of a naked woman pressed so close to her. She and Binta had never been so physically intimate before. She gazed into Binta's tear-soaked eyes. A sudden rush of emotion and pity overwhelmed her, and without any thought she leaned over and kissed Binta tenderly on the lips. It was meant to be a brief and comradely kiss, but she was taken totally unawares by the intensity of Binta's response.

In a sudden wild rush of sensation, she was aware that Binta had manoeuvred her kiss to a longer and more passionate one in which there was the unfamiliar (and

yet not unwelcome) sensation of another tongue in her mouth. Ana felt obliged to follow suit. Binta's mouth was a very liquid and very warm place which tasted of so many different things: sweet, salt and even bitter. She felt the hardness of Binta's teeth: the uneven row of incisors and the crowns of the molars where, yes! she identified the metallic taste of a filling. Her tongue ached as it revolved around Binta's own tongue, slid along the gums above and below the teeth, and deep breaths through her nostrils picked up the slight soapiness of Binta's well-scrubbed flesh.

All of a sudden, Binta eased off and steadily gazed at her, with a toothy bright smile. There was something very strange about her expression. The eyes sparkled in a way Ana had never seen in anyone before and her mouth expressed an unutterably beautiful foolishness. Ana just wanted her lips to return to Binta's and feel more closely her smooth warm flesh. Binta understood Ana's thoughts, despite reservations that had vanished in the heady mist of passion.

"I think we should go to my bedroom," Binta said breathlessly, raising her eyebrows with a reluctant frown. "We can be sure of our privacy there."

Ana panicked slightly. She glanced around her. Thankfully there was no one who could have seen her with Binta. She looked back at her good friend. She smiled in a sad but determined way.

"Yes, let's go! But hurry!"

11

Ana was totally disorientated when she opened her eyes in the morning. Where was she? What was that strange mirror doing in the corner of the room? Why did the sheets feel so relatively cool and silky? But she gradually remembered and glanced at Binta who was still sleeping beside her, naked like herself. A sudden spasm of alarm constricted her neck, but she relaxed and smiled to herself as she regarded Binta's head on the pillow and recalled the passion of the night before.

It had happened so fast! And it had been so much more pleasant than she'd imagined. Her own previous gropings and fumbings with boys in Rif seemed so sordid and unpleasant in comparison. Part of her felt a pang of guilt and shame. She had after all committed a crime, the consequences of which she knew only too well from Binta's own example. Mostly, however, she felt relieved to have at last achieved the fulfilment she must have always wanted but had never known.

She scrutinised Binta's naked body. So beautiful. The long hair. The slim waist. The full breasts she'd admired before without knowing how well she'd get to know them. She smiled at the slight heave and stir of Binta's body who was breathing steadily in apparent contentment. She hoped - so much! - that Binta's feelings towards her were as strong as those she at last admitted to have towards her friend. Not just a friend now. A lover. She relished the word and mouthed it silently to cherish its full flavour. Overcome by desire, she leaned over and kissed Binta tenderly on the shoulder.

Binta stirred and rolled over towards her. She opened her eyes wearily and smiled welcomingly. A rush of emotion pounded at Ana's chest and heated her

cheeks.

“Good morning,” Binta mouthed.

“Good morning,” replied Ana. “Did you sleep well?”

“What little of the night I spent asleep, yes!” Binta remarked wickedly. “It was good wasn’t it? Did you enjoy it? I did!”

“Yes, very much. Very much. Very much indeed.”

“Oh, you’re so sweet!” Binta cried pulling herself up, the silk sheets dropping into a heap on her lap. “You’re so wonderful. Give me a kiss!”

Ana shyly proffered her lips to Binta’s and kissed her tenderly. But Binta was not to be satisfied. She squeezed the back of Ana’s neck, pulling her forward, and kissed her with the same passion and intensity Ana remembered so fondly and vividly from the night before. Ana locked her arms around Binta and pulled her close, her small breasts against Binta’s larger, firmer ones.

Quite suddenly there was a knock on the door. Binta started with a look of panic, which Ana was slow to recognise. She quickly pulled herself off her lover and called out in a hoarse startled voice: “Hello! Who is it?”

“It’s me silly!” replied a voice from outside which Ana recognised but couldn’t immediately place. “Can I come in?”

“It’s you, Zabba!” called Binta, clearly not pleased at the timing of this visit but feeling obliged to be polite. “Come in then.”

The young girl pushed open the door, wearing a shirt, grey shorts, ankle-high socks and a thin tie. She looked exactly like a young schoolboy, an impression her slenderness and lack of breasts did nothing to dispel.

“Oh ho!” she said with a mischievous grin, pushing the door close behind her.

“I see Ana missed her last bus home. I hope you didn’t mind slumming it here for the night, Ana sweetest?”

Ana blushed, unable to answer. What was Zabba thinking? She was horribly aware of her nakedness, and belatedly pulled the sheet up to hide her breasts. Zabba smiled but restrained herself from saying anything crude or unsubtle.

“Well! This is one way you’re different from Inta. But of course I guessed all along. You can’t keep a secret from me!”

“It’s not what you think...” gasped Ana.

“Don’t lie, sweetheart. You can’t pull the wool over *my* eyes. But don’t worry about me. I won’t tell a soul. You can do exactly what you like together. It’s your lives, after all.” She smiled at Binta. “So, Binta, I take it you’re not working this morning.”

“This morning? No. My shift doesn’t start till this afternoon.”

“Just as well, really. Me, I’ve just finished work! And a long night it has been too. Profitable, though! Very profitable. Quite painful, too. One of my regulars just can’t get enough of me however much I remind him of the cost of his little sordid extras. I’m just off home now. I need a decent sleep in my *own* bed without the smell of clients on the sheets. Sleeping with clients! Pah! If only that were true, then I’d never need my own bed!”

Zabba stood in front of the mirror and admired her reflection. She turned her head one way and the other, pursing her lips in a loving kiss at herself. Ana could see Binta and her behind Zabba: much more of Binta who’d obscured very little of her body with the sheet Ana clasped to her neck. Zabba turned round and smiled, while running her hands down the front of her shirt. “I really *must* get changed! I wouldn’t

want any of my clients to recognise me in the street. I wouldn't be able to fight them off! But first of all I fancy a swim. That's why I came here: to see if you were interested in a splash. But I guess you're not."

Binta shook her head firmly. "No, not really."

"Ana's company's better than my own, I suppose," Zabba laughed. "Well! You just don't know what delights you're missing, Binta dear! And Ana. Not so far for to go to work this morning. At least you can lie in."

"Work!" gasped Ana. She frantically studied the small battery powered alarm clock by the bed. She wasn't late was she? She was relieved to see that she had nearly an hour till she was due in the office, but then worried about the logistics of the operation. She wouldn't be able to change her underwear and she would have to use the Brothel shower to remove the night's odour from her body. Would the Director notice? Could she hide the evidence? "I'd forgotten about work."

"You would, wouldn't you?" grinned Zabba indulgently. "You'll just have to be better prepared in future." She sat on the edge of the bed and supported her weight on a thin arm. "For some of us, the working day has just finished, for others it's only about to begin, and for lucky Binta she's got until this afternoon to think about it. But do you still enjoy your work? The Pimple's not been molesting you, I hope?"

Ana's mind flashed back to her earlier conversation with Zabba and Ferhana. She'd been much warier of her boss since then, but fortunately the Director had not behaved especially badly. He was usually busy elsewhere in the Brothel and only rarely stayed in his office for very long. Sometimes he dictated letters, which Ana took down in shorthand for typing later. These were usually fairly standard letters, addressed to suppliers of Brothel equipment, government departments and bodies like

Careers Advisory services, newspapers, or customers who'd defaulted on sometimes rather substantial bills. She preferred the more standard letters. They kept her busy and required very little original thought, but some letters reminded her rather uncomfortably what organisation she worked for. She'd particularly disliked a letter she'd had to type to a girl who'd been forced to leave because of her pregnancy. The Director wasn't at all sympathetic to the girl's plight or her subsequent loss of earnings.

"I hate your boss!" exclaimed Binta bitterly. "I'm just glad he's given up pestering me. There was a time he just wouldn't keep his hands off me. And some of the things he said. He's so crude!"

"What'd he say then, Binta sweetest?" wondered Zabba.

"I'm just not saying. At least, not with Ana here. I don't want to distress you, Ana. But he's not a nice man, the Director. He thinks his staff are all fair game, and that we're obliged to do whatever unpalatable things he fancies. Even if I were attracted to men, I wouldn't be attracted to him. He's the most obscene and unpleasant man I've ever met!"

Ana hadn't known enough men to voice a well-rounded opinion, but his bawdy remarks *were* rather tasteless and his comments about her personal appearance were a little unsubtle. She had no intention of dressing like the prostitutes, although he often said that it was more or less expected of even the secretaries in the Brothel. And she didn't like his repeated assertion that she should display more of her chest or legs.

"The Pimple's a real bastard," agreed Zabba. "But what about his lieutenants? They're not much better are they, Ana?"

"At least they never touch my bottom or put their hands on mine."

“Well, that’s because you’re not a prostitute,” Binta said. “The Head of Catering is a real nuisance. And he’s so fat and ugly as well. He looks like he bathes in lard: his skin is so greasy. And the Caretaker seems to have taken a liking to me. He’s always slapping my bottom when I pass him. I really go out of my way to avoid him. If I see him walking towards me, I just turn round and walk the other way.”

“The women aren’t much better, are they? That Khedra’s a real cow!”

“Do they molest you as well?” gasped Ana, strangely excited at the thought of much more widespread lesbianism in the Brothel.

“No, of course not,” laughed Binta. “Zabba’s just saying she doesn’t like them. They don’t behave like the men, but they can be very bitchy and unsympathetic. They think that even those of us who’re not in the Brothel by choice should be grateful to work here.”

“They just suck up to the Pimple. He can never do anything wrong. I think they’d probably wipe his bottom clean if he asked them to. And of course you can’t be too sure that that’s not exactly what he does ask them to...”

“Ugghh!” Ana exclaimed. “What a horrid idea! You can’t be serious! Nobody would do things like that, surely?”

Zabba laughed. She appeared to contemplate elaborating on whatever it was she found so amusing, but was silenced by Binta’s frown. She turned back to her reflection, ran her fingers through her short hair and scratched her crown.

“So, you still enjoy working here, Ana? You’re not put off by the Pimple? You don’t mind having all these whores around you?”

“It’s my first job. I’ve never worked anywhere before. I have to try and make the best of it.”

“Of course, you do!” agreed Binta. “Stop trying to upset Ana, Zabba! She’s not like us. She doesn’t have anything to do with the sordid side of life here!”

“I’m sure you’re right, Binta,” Zabba responded unconvincingly. “I’m sure you’re absolutely right!”

“What we do, Ana, is quite different from what you do,” Binta continued. “You definitely don’t have to be like your predecessor, Inta. You don’t ever have to let men maul your body or do the gross things that they require...”

“If they’ve got the physical ability to perform that is...” Zabba remarked. “One good thing about our job is that we get paid the same however well our clients do their half of it!”

“Honestly, Zabba! You sometimes sound as if you liked the job! Why do you keep taunting poor Ana?”

“She’s got to know about life. Haven’t you, Ana sweetheart? You can’t just work in a place like this and be totally ignorant of what goes on.”

“I don’t believe that at all,” Binta countered. “Ana doesn’t have to know anything about what we do. In fact the less she knows the better, don’t you think Ana? You don’t want to know what the punters do with Zabba. All the perverse unmentionable things they force her to do. Or me for that matter! I hate my clients. I don’t care if they leave me complaining that I’ve not satisfied them as they’d like. However much Khedra and the others tell me off for the clients’ grievances about my lack of enthusiasm or professionalism. However many times they tell me I might be downgraded if I’m not careful and how much worse the clients would be if they had to pay less for my services. I’m not here by choice, and I don’t get anything however well I perform.”

“Has Khedra been having a go at you, Binta dear?” wondered a fascinated Zabba. “She never has anything but praise for me. You really must have peeved her. She just doesn’t understand why anyone wouldn’t enjoy this job. Have your clients been complaining that much?”

“One or two, yes,” Binta admitted. “But I’d rather not talk about it, Zabba, please. Ana doesn’t want to hear about it, do you?”

Ana shook her head, although she was uneasily curious of Binta’s contacts with the clients. How did they compare with her? What did they actually do to her? She could imagine, of course, but her mind deliberately blanked out the distasteful images and focused instead on the beauties of the body she’d enjoyed so much during the night. It hurt her to think that others had also had the pleasure of it. She looked at Binta sadly. Binta smiled at her compassionately, and, despite Zabba still sitting on the bed, she leaned over and tenderly kissed her on the cheek.

“Don’t you worry, Ana! Don’t worry! What I do with clients and what we do together are two different things.”

Zabba observed thoughtfully and silently, uncharacteristically embarrassed by Binta’s display of tenderness. She looked down at the rings on her hand, and then fumbled around in the top pocket of her shirt. She pulled out a packet of cigarettes and a lighter and held them in front of her. “I’m dying for a smoke! It’s a good way of taking the taste out of my mouth, you know!” She ran her tongue around her lips and looked longingly at her packet. “You don’t like me smoking in your room, do you Binta?”

“Not at all!” she exclaimed sternly. “You go outside and smoke it. And, anyway, Ana’s got to prepare to go to work.”

Zabba nodded and stood up. “Well, maybe we can go for a swim another day, Binta.” She strolled to the head of the bed and briefly kissed Binta on the cheek. She then left, pulling a cigarette out of the packet, and carefully shut the door behind her.

Binta smiled indulgently. “Zabba’s all right, Ana. She’s just quite young, really. But she means well. But before you get out of bed and go to work, where were we before we were interrupted?”

She stroked Ana lovingly on the cheek. She then bent over, supporting the chin with her fingers, and passionately resumed her kiss.

12

Ana was afflicted by an illness which distorted her senses, brought her to hot flushes and dominated her every waking moment, but an illness so pleasurable and delightful she mourned rather that she'd never been so afflicted before. She was in love. She was totally and passionately in love. For the first time she understood and relished every word of every love song. They were written for her. They expressed the feelings she had. She observed courting couples on the bus or in the park with a warmth and affection she'd never felt before. Her heart was truly light, she walked on a cushion of air and everything was wonderful.

Even at work, those awkward moments when there was nothing to do and she was waiting for her next assignment became full with reflections on and images of her lover. Binta smiling. Binta laughing. The things she would say as they nuzzled together under the silk sheets. Everywhere was imprinted with her image. It was so vivid. As was the remembrance of her voice heard so clearly in her mind's ear, reassuring and comforting her. The memory of the image, touch and warmth of Binta's naked skin. She could almost feel her flesh against her fingers as she averted her gaze away from the calendar of semi-clad women on the office wall towards the clouds wisping through the deep blue sky. She smiled to herself again, as she did so often these days.

"You look pretty pleased with yourself!" remarked Khedra, popping by to leave an envelope in the Director's in-tray. "A good day's work?"

Ana nodded - her mind focusing on the evening ahead when again, like every evening when Binta wasn't working, hours of patient reflection were to be rewarded

by a passionate and close embrace. When, again, she and Binta would idly slump on the sheets and spend long unhurried hours together, never bored with each other's company and never lost for anything to say. Indeed, she had come to dread the inevitable rude bell of Binta's alarm clock in the morning that told her to get dressed and return to the office.

Weekends were particularly pleasant, especially when Binta didn't have to work. No alarm clock and no reason to get up. A day together without interruption and free from anxiety. A day of relaxation and calm.

It was during such a weekend she and Binta were lying beneath the sheets spent by their mutual exertions, a sweet smell adhering to Ana's fingers and a faint odour of shared sweat. Ana gazed at the ceiling, studying the faint spidery cracks in the plaster, her head resting on Binta's shoulder, smiling with sensual satisfaction.

"Hiya!" Ana suddenly heard. "I saw you weren't working so I ..." Whose voice was that? Who was it addressed to? She raised her head to see the naked figure of Ketaba framed by the door and looking rather startled. "Oh! ... I see you've got company, Binta. I didn't know! And goodness me! It's Ana! I'd never have guessed! Ana!"

"Hello Ketaba," greeted Binta reluctantly, disengaging herself from the weight of her lover's body. "Didn't anybody tell you to knock before coming in?"

Ketaba looked rather embarrassed. More embarrassed even than Ana who hastily pulled up the sheets to cover her breasts. "I didn't know! It's usually okay! I just didn't think... And with Ana, too! I thought she had more sense!"

"Don't start preaching, Ketaba," said Binta sternly. "If you want to stay here, fine! But don't upset poor Ana. And close the door!"

Ketaba nodded sheepishly and eased the door behind her. She sat by the mirror, lifted up her hair and dropped it down loosely behind the chair. Binta reluctantly pulled herself out from between the sheets and sat on the edge of the bed facing Ketaba.

“So how are you today, Ketaba? You’re not working now, are you?”

“No, I don’t start for a few hours. I’m between shifts. I volunteered for overtime. Towards the cost of a holiday, you know.”

“Are you doing *two* shifts in one day?” exclaimed Binta. “I would have thought *once* was enough for anyone. Surely even *you* must be tired by now and looking forward to nothing better than a rest.”

“The money helps, you know. I’ve never been one to turn down the opportunity of a bit of extra work...”

“And it keeps you fit as well?” Binta sneered. “I can’t believe that you’re ever short of money. With your dedication to the profession you must be one of the most highly paid prostitutes in the whole Brothel. And you probably make as much again from clients’ gratuities. What do you want the money for?”

Ketaba seemed unbalanced by Binta’s criticism as if she’d never really considered that question before. She glanced at Ana lying under the sheets, of whom only her shoulders and head were visible. The silk sheets did nothing to disguise the contours of Ana’s body, but in the presence of two naked women what could that possibly matter? Ketaba’s stare seemed to linger rather longer than necessary, and when she returned her gaze to Binta a flicker of guilt seemed to pass across her heavy-lidded eyes.

“There must be a reason, Ketaba, for you to want to work all these extra hours.

Do you *really* relish your work so much that you can't bear to rest from it?"

"Unlike you, Binta, I enjoy the company of my clients. They may not be the most handsome or attractive people there are, but with few exceptions they are essentially decent people who are happy with the services I provide. And I am happy to satisfy them. There is an art, a skill, to prostitution and, if nothing else, I get considerable professional satisfaction from doing a worthwhile job well. I have many regulars, and when you become more familiar with the same clients you soon think of them as more than so much inadequate meat. And they soon come to respect you ever more. Your problem, Binta, is not just your dubious sexual preferences, but that you never show any sympathy or understanding towards the men who come to see you."

Ana found Ketaba's description slightly comforting. "You make it sound like you're more of a nurse or social worker than a prostitute," she remarked. The image allowed her to regard Binta's work with more equanimity.

"That's an interesting and fair comparison. Quite often the clients want from me not the services for which I am so expertly equipped and trained to provide, but just for a sympathetic ear. Many have no one else they can speak to. They may have no wife or lover and few friends. They may be locked in a loveless and unhappy marriage. They may have worries and concerns with business or health that they can't off-load on anyone else. And I tell you, Binta, that when you speak to your clients like that they soon become more human and you get quite fond of them. There is one client I have who spends more than two hours a week with me, and all he ever does is talk about how his estranged wife extracts ever more money from him..."

"...when you're not doing it yourself!" sniffed Binta. "Your services don't exactly come cheap, and with your ratings you must be bleeding your clients dry. Not

that I care much for them if you did!”

“It’s no wonder you have such a miserable time working here with attitudes like that! You really ought to try and get to know your clients better. Your gratuities will increase dramatically, your work won’t seem nearly as arduous and you may even improve your PAR. Try it and see!”

“I appreciate your kind advice, Ketaba,” Binta responded conciliatorily. “But if you don’t like men at all to begin with, you’re not going to be particularly sincere about wanting to know them better. They really are irredeemably loathsome, and my daily ordeal only further reinforces that opinion!”

“It’s your whole outlook on life that’s poisoning you, Binta. And your disgusting perversions are just an aspect of the poison creeping through your soul. You need a much more positive, outward-going, life-inspiring attitude. You need to examine deep inside yourself, release your pent-up energies and confront your karma. Nurture the inner goodness that must reside in you, - otherwise you wouldn’t adopt the life-enhancing practice of naturism, - let it swell inside you and release a torrent of positive vibrations onto the world around you. If you feel good, you inspire good feelings. And good feelings make you feel good. A virtuous cycle which can do you no harm!”

“And how is that going to improve my life as a prostitute? I don’t exactly have a great deal of opportunity to meditate or empathise with my clients. All they want and all the gratification they desire is released within seconds with no respect at all for the finer feelings of the women who collect our soiled laundry every day. I’m sure my goodness would flourish considerably better elsewhere.”

Ketaba smiled. “You don’t understand me at all, Binta. Your spiritual and

mental health are, and should be, utterly distinct from the environment you're in. Sure, a good and healthy environment like Agdal, with the heat of the sun on naked flesh and plenty of healthy amenities, is far more conducive to a positive vibe than a life confined by the Brothel walls. But one can have an inner peace, an Agdal within, which can flourish in any place and withstand all trials and tribulations. One's soul can soar to the stars even when one's body is caged in rooms of satin, silk and polyester carpets."

"You're talking nonsense, Ketaba. You really have to be blinkered to get any kind of enlightenment here. Tell me then, for the sake of argument, what I have to do to achieve an inner peace? Perhaps Ana will be inspired even if I won't be."

"I can't imagine Ana being at all inspired in the atmosphere of your cynicism and doubt," Ketaba said ruefully, but smiling affectionately at Binta's lover. "But what you have to remember first of all is that a healthy mind comes with a healthy body. If one has good health coursing through your body, you look good, you feel good and it does you good. Plenty of exercise. That's the order of the day."

"We often go swimming," Ana remarked, aware that recently they had been rather less often than before, as the excuse for doing so had come to seem superfluous.

"Swimming is good. Very good!" Ketaba approved. "As is weight training, jogging, walking, squash and contact sports. However, nothing can beat the all-round value of making love in building up a healthy and efficient body. No other exercise is as good at exercising the abdominal muscles, the upper torso, providing fast and rapid breathing exercises and exerting the heart. It makes you feel good afterwards and the perspiration cleans the skin of really deep ingrained dirt."

"Maybe it does when you make love with your clients, Ketaba. The clients

simply leave me unsightly bruises around my upper legs and a feeling of relief when they're finally through the door..."

"Again, Binta, it's your attitude that is at fault. If you had a more positive attitude then you wouldn't find the exercise so unpleasant. Besides I'm sure that not all your lovemaking is as you describe it." She glanced meaningfully at Ana lying stretched out under the sheets, who blushed at the implication. She shyly looked at Binta who had followed Ketaba's gaze and smiled into Ana's eyes. Ana smiled back, and a rush of emotion caught the back of her throat. She was so much in love!

Ketaba seemed embarrassed by the love expressed in Ana's smile, and hesitated before continuing to elaborate on her philosophy of life. "So, a healthy body is vital. And a prostitute's life assures this. Diet is also important. Remember, you are what you eat: so it is necessary not to pollute the body with the unclean flesh of dead animals that have after all spent most of their lives consuming faeces-covered grass and rotting silage. One must have a balance of vitamins, minerals and, most important of all, an exact balance of calorific input with the energy output for a balanced body weight and a healthy constitution. I always keep an accurate measure of exactly how many calories I consume and my estimated output, and adjust my diet accordingly."

"Are you a vegetarian merely because of what the animals you eat have eaten?" Binta wondered.

"Of course not. A rounded person must have due respect for all living beings and eating them is disrespectful as well as unclean," Ketaba replied. "One should also take care of the mind and soul. Meditation is essential. Take time to sit in a relaxed position with the back straight and the legs crossed in the lotus position, clear the mind of thoughts positive and negative, and enter a void where the mind can take a

vacation and the soul can soar unfettered from the trivial worries of the day. Sleep well, and adopt a regime of regular exercise, regular meditation and self-examination.”

“Self-examination?” wondered Ana, thinking that maybe Ketaba was about to enthuse on an activity of which she had been quite ashamed until Binta had encouraged her in it.

“Yes. Self-examination. Study the deep, hidden crevices of the soul. Share the inner meanings and conflicts with others. I go to seminars each week where we confide our darkest worries and most intimate secrets; listen to each other with respect; applaud the courage of breaking free from the confines of embarrassment and self-consciousness; break down the barriers that divide people from people; and recognise our own deep loneliness.”

“It really doesn’t sound much like fun to me,” Binta remarked. “What do you think, Ana?”

Ana hadn’t really been paying very much attention. Her contemplations had mostly concentrated on her lover and her beauty. She gazed at Ketaba, sensing that Binta was taking psychological advantage of her relationship to put her colleague ill at ease. She smiled, not wanting to offend, sure that Ketaba’s intention was only to give the best advice.

“I’m sure there’s something in what Ketaba’s saying.”

“And what is that?” Binta continued. “Health, vegetables, meditation and shouting sessions with a bunch of neurotics. I think I’d rather remain an unreconstructed failure. And I can’t see it making me any happier with my rôle as a prostitute.”

Ana felt rather embarrassed for Ketaba: she didn't deserve the scorn Binta showered on her. She crouched up in the bed, pulling the sheets into a bundle around her chest and over her legs. "I've not seen much of you recently, Ketaba. And I'm sure your tan is deeper. Have you been away somewhere?"

"Yes, I have! I've been in Agdal for a fortnight's holiday. It's been a wonderful break. Across the mountains and on the beaches. Two weeks totally unencumbered by clothes or petty prejudices. I thought you already knew?"

"I knew well enough, Ketaba, but Ana doesn't get to meet you as often as I do," Binta explained. "I gather that exit visas are very expensive. Perhaps that's why you have to work so hard?"

"Yes, they are. Yet again, I had to bribe someone at the passport office. And there were even more people to bribe at the border crossing. But you get used to that. Alif doesn't make it easy for its people to leave and it's not that welcoming coming back either. My luggage was thrown all over the place at customs. They said they were searching for alcohol, pornography and contraband, but the things they confiscated like a portable radio and a hair-drier (both of which I'd bought in Agdal) weren't on any list of prohibited goods I've ever seen!"

"It must have made you wonder why you ever came back!" remarked Binta, more sympathetically. "What did you do on holiday? You didn't do much meditation did you?"

"A little. But mostly I took advantage of the superb sports facilities at the hotels and lodges I stayed at. The swimming pools and gyms were excellent. All the latest equipment!" Ketaba pulled back her shoulders and flexed the lean muscles on her arms which Ana found genuinely impressive. She then tensed her waist and Ana

admired the tautness of its muscles - quite unlike the slight looseness of her own slender waist. “And when I wasn’t in the gym or pool, it was up in the mountains and valleys with sturdy boots and a rucksack on my back. I walked for miles over those crags. It’s even hillier than Jebel, Binta, but you can’t wander around Jebel in so few clothes. I was lazier on this holiday than on an earlier one where I’d been on a sort of group outing with others intent on enjoying the great outdoors...”

“Did you spend your time shouting and screaming at each other on that holiday?”

“Don’t be facetious, Binta. It wasn’t a self-awareness holiday. It was a trekking holiday. The idea was to spend time in a group far away from the hotels and lodges, sleeping under canvass and getting to know each other better. That was a wonderful time. We managed to go miles without meeting a single soul. And when you’re that remote you need the company of other people. You can easily get lost. One hill looks pretty much the same as another when you’re surrounded by them and there aren’t any obvious landmarks.”

“A good opportunity for you all to bare your souls to each other, I suppose?” Binta sneered. “You can all tell each other your most embarrassing secrets and feel sorry for each other.”

“You make it sound as if that’s something to be ashamed of, Binta. It’d do you a great deal of good if you tried doing that. Mind you, it can be quite an embarrassment in Agdal. Many people go there from countries like Alif not because they’re confirmed naturists, but for quite different reasons. I have to admit that although there are plenty of naturists in Agdal, they’re pretty much in a minority. Other people go for the alcohol and drugs. They spend much of their time sitting in

bars where alcohol is sold openly over the counter, not even requiring a medical licence. The only restrictions on alcohol and other drugs relate to age rather than ethical or medical issues. Some go there because they're homosexual. You get to meet homosexual men and women, - dykes like you, Binta, and ...”

Ketaba stumbled in her flow. It was clear to Ana that she had intended to mention her name, but something prevented her from being so bold. Ana wasn't sure whether she should feel flattered by this or worried that it suggested that Ketaba didn't take her relationship seriously. Ketaba actually appeared to blush, and then she digressed slightly.

“Some people go to Agdal for spiritual awareness. All sorts of religions are practised in the country. Shrines are scattered all about the place for one faith or another. That's one big difference between Alif and Agdal. There's only one faith widely practised in Alif, but all possible faiths abound in Agdal. Maybe it's because of this diversity that the country is liberal in so many ways. Whatever it is, you often meet people who go to Agdal to consult gurus or to worship at particular temples. I find it interesting to discuss astrology or the tarot or the **I Ching** with the people there...”

“You're not into that sort of mystical mumbo-jumbo as well are you?”

“Why can't I have a healthy curiosity, Binta? Surely it's better than dismissing the occult and the mystical with no justification. Yes, I *do* believe that the precise moment of one's birth and its precise location has a great deal of importance. You ought to find out more about such things yourself before dismissing them...”

“I'm not sure I have the time to get involved in a load of self-indulgent nonsense. What do you think, Ana? Would you be interested in having your palm

read, your stars interpreted and a throw of coins analysed?”

“I’m sure it would be very interesting,” Ana answered diplomatically. She had no wish to upset Ketaba however much she might disapprove of homosexuality. “I don’t know if there’s anything in it, but there might be...”

“Well, if that’s what you want to do, Ana...” Binta remarked without further comment. She smiled at Ketaba. “Did you take many photographs of your stay in Agdal?”

“Why yes, I did as a matter of fact. And unlike last time I was able to get my camera back into the country without having it confiscated or having the film torn out. I was sensible enough to take an Alif camera with me that had none of the extra value an imported camera might have. I took loads of pictures of the places I visited and the people I met. Do you want to see them?”

“Oh yes!” Ana said enthusiastically.

She had always enjoyed looking at holiday photos when she was at home in Rif. Somehow they seemed more real and engaging than the glossy pictures in Geography text books. She also found the idea of visiting Agdal very attractive, particularly in the light of its liberal attitudes towards lesbianism. Her sketchy knowledge of its principal mountain ranges and agricultural exports didn’t really give her a very clear idea of what the neighbouring country looked like, and she understood better now why she had heard so little about it before.

“Perhaps I can bring them in to the Brothel sometime and show you. Or perhaps...” Ketaba hesitated, as if she was about to be very bold, but with a slight impulsiveness she continued, “... perhaps I can show you them in a more conducive place than the Brothel. Perhaps at my flat?”

“Your flat?” Ana responded. That would be interesting. She lived in the Honey district, where all the better paid prostitutes chose to live. “Oh yes, I don’t see why not.”

“Well just say when. I can prepare a meal and make more of an evening of it if you like. What do you think?”

“I think it sounds a wonderful idea.” Ana looked sympathetically at Binta who seemed strangely subdued by Ana’s enthusiasm. “It’s a shame you can’t come as well, Binta. I’m sure Ketaba would invite you as well if she could. Wouldn’t you, Ketaba?”

Ketaba nodded eagerly, and Binta appeared reassured by this, but not wholly so. When Ketaba left for work, Binta seemed rather thoughtful. She evaded all reference to Ketaba and Agdal, despite Ana’s excited questions about either of them. Ana wondered whether Binta was jealous of Ketaba: but how could that be when she was so determinedly opposed to homosexual behaviour of any kind.

13

Ketaba's flat was situated in a very plush block in the Honey district, adorned by spacious balconies, views across a large park and a concierge sitting in a cabin by the entrance who called Ketaba on the internal phone when Ana arrived. She waited in the foyer, her arms folded, awed by the magnificence of the marble walls and the beauty of the little fountain splashing at the foot of the marble steps.

"You can go up," the concierge advised her. "It's the third floor. On the right as you leave the lift."

Ana trotted up the steps and into the wide-open lift door, which closed as she entered. She adjusted her hair in the reflection of the lift's mirrors. She felt slightly nervous visiting Ketaba at her own home. The only other home she'd ever visited in Blad was Binta's in the Brothel which was now as much home to her as her own flat. The Honey district impressed her. The avenues were wide and lined with palm trees and conifers. The houses were quite simply magnificent: larger than any she'd ever seen before, but protected by high walls, barbed wire and broken glass. She was dressed casually - a light floral dress and sandals - and felt poorly dressed in comparison to the ostentation of the women she passed.

Ketaba was waiting for her in the corridor when Ana stepped out of the lift. She was totally naked as always, but still oblivious to any incongruity between her appearance and her environment. She grinned broadly. "I'm *so* glad you could come! I've been preparing a vegetarian meal for us! Come in! Come in!"

Ana was slightly overwhelmed by the enthusiasm of Ketaba's welcome, but she smiled and followed Ketaba into her flat. It was much larger than Ana's. Indeed it

was larger than most houses. The several rooms were spacious and had more than a touch of expense lavished on them. Varnished floorboards were covered by densely woven and intricately patterned carpets. The furniture was plush and inviting, interspersed by expensive electronic equipment. Original paintings framed those stretches of wall not devoted to bookshelves which heaved under the weight of Ketaba's considerable library.

Ketaba's interests were evident everywhere. In one room there was exercise equipment to keep her figure trim and muscular. Ana gingerly felt the weight of some bell-bars left on the floor and found them rather too heavy to lift. The paintings concentrated on spiritual or sensual matters. The books were on subjects like Astrology, Self-Awareness and Physical Exercise, although Ana was interested to see that Ketaba's taste encompassed such unlikely subjects as Quantum Physics, Political Philosophy and Abstract Expressionism. The compact discs displayed covers of peculiarly photographed outdoor scenes suggestive of spiritual enlightenment and discovery.

"You don't have to keep your clothes on, Ana," Ketaba said soothingly, pinching the strap on Ana's shoulder. "Most people take them off when they're at home with me."

"I'm sorry?" wondered Ana, slightly bemused. She became belatedly aware that Ketaba was asking her to undress. She had got so used to seeing Ketaba and Binta, she had actually forgotten that they were habitually naked. This didn't oblige her to do the same thing. "Er ... I'd rather not!"

"Suit yourself!" Ketaba replied, clearly disconcerted by Ana's rebuff.

"It's just I'm not a naturist. Whatever Binta is, it doesn't mean that I'm the

same.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Ketaba agreed, smiling again. “Well, let’s sit down, clothes or no clothes, and wait for dinner to be ready.”

Ana sat on a large luxurious armchair, while Ketaba hovered around her audio system. “What would you like to hear?” She asked. “Classical? Jazz? Ambient?”

“I don’t mind. Something relaxing I suppose.”

Ketaba knelt on the floor and sorted through her compact discs. She selected some haunting atmospheric piano music accompanied by orchestra.

“Does this meet with your approval?”

“It sounds very nice.”

Ketaba sheepishly rushed off into the kitchen without a word. After a moment, she returned with a bottle of clear liquid. There was a curious golden wrapping around the top and a crest on a label written in a foreign language.

“Do you know what this is, Ana?”

Ana shook her head, although she had a very good suspicion.

“It’s a bottle of wine from Agdal. I didn’t buy it in Agdal, of course. It would’ve been found at customs and I’d be in prison now. I bought it from a friend of Ferhana’s. Normally, of course, I disapprove of alcohol. Making it illegal is one of President Marmeluke’s better policies. Frequent use is undoubtedly very harmful, and I’d be the last to recommend anything bad for the body or soul. But there can’t be any harm in sampling it occasionally. What do you think?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never come across alcohol before. Doesn’t it make you hallucinate and become violent?”

“I’m sure it does if you drink enough of it. You see plenty of evidence in

Agdal of the dangers of over-indulgence. But I've been tempted to drink the odd glass when I've been on holiday there and although it does have quite a strange effect it has never made me hallucinate. And in Alif, it's so very expensive on the black market that it wouldn't be possible for someone to 'get drunk', as they call it, unless they were much richer than me. I won't even tell you how much this cost me! But wine goes down very well with a meal. Are you tempted to try?"

Ana was definitely tempted. Having broken one law in Alif, she could really see no reason why she couldn't break others. It wasn't just the illegality of alcohol that troubled her. "Won't it make me ill? I don't want to be poisoned."

"A little alcohol won't do that. Do you want to taste it and see what you think?"

"Why not!" smiled Ana mischievously. Perhaps she'd get to like it. Ketaba produced a very curious contraption that looked like a screw supported by a metal frame, which she inserted into the bottle's top after tearing off the thin gold metal covering. She screwed it in and pulled out a length of spongy wood. She then poured the contents into some straight glasses that were sitting on the dining table. She handed one to Ana who took a tentative sip.

"It's very cold. And it tastes very peculiar, a bit like fruit juice," Ana commented. She relished the cool sharpness in her mouth, wondering when she would experience its effects. The room hadn't started spinning yet and there were no hallucinations. Perhaps alcohol wasn't so bad after all.

"It's Chardonnay, I think it's called. Wines have all got strange names. Like Champagne, Beaujolais, Rosé. Experts in wine are called *connoisseurs*. But I'm no expert. In Alif, if you want to buy alcohol you just have to make do with whatever

happens to be available. And I wouldn't want to buy whisky, gin or rum. Drinks like that are much stronger."

"Does alcohol vary in strength then?"

"And in taste as well," Ketaba agreed. "In countries where alcohol is legal there is an extraordinary variety available. Do you like it?"

"I'm not sure," admitted Ana who nonetheless dutifully sipped her glass. Ketaba picked up her glass and took a long swig from it, before disappearing again into the kitchen. She was away quite a few minutes, while Ana contemplated the wine. It made her feel very daring. Were there many more laws in Alif left to break, she wondered. She began to notice a strange effect but wasn't sure whether she should attribute it to alcohol or just a general giddiness due to the excitement of travelling to Honey. She idly studied the books on Ketaba's bookshelf, occasionally taking small cautious sips from her glass.

"Here we are!" announced Ketaba, carrying a tray with two plates and several side-dishes. "Dinner is served!"

Ana replaced the book on mountain-climbing and took her seat at the dinner table. Ketaba placed the food down and busied herself in organising the atmosphere. She turned off all the lights except for two table-lamps and lit the tall candles on the table. She slightly lowered the volume of the audio system and lit a few joss-sticks. The two women tucked into the meal, which Ana found surprisingly tasty. She'd forgotten that the food was vegetarian and it was only later that she'd reflected that there hadn't been any meat involved in the preparation. The salad was particularly pleasant: so much crisper and tastier than the soggy affairs she'd eaten in the Brothel canteen. Ketaba was also right about the wine. The food tasted better for it, and the

wine seemed somehow more appropriate with food.

“You seem to get on very well with Binta,” Ketaba remarked chewing on a celery stalk.

Ana wasn't sure how to react to that remark. “What do you mean?” She blurted out. Was she being condemned for her love?

“I'm sorry, Ana. I don't mean to upset you. I was just saying that you and Binta are getting on very well. I know she's a lesbian, and I suppose it's inevitable that she would try to lead you into her bad ways. I've met several lesbians in Agdal, and although I still think it's a rather perverse activity, I have to admit that as people lesbians aren't necessarily any worse than anyone else. What do you think?”

“They're just ordinary people, I'm sure.”

“And you don't mind Binta being a dyke at all?”

Ana shook her head vehemently.

“I probably sound very naïve but is it true what I thought when I saw you in bed with Binta the other day? You know that she and you are ... you know ... not just friends?”

“You could say that!” said Ana with a smile despite herself. She took a longer drink of wine. Somehow she seemed to need its extra fortification. She was sure now that the slight detachment from her environment and the light-headedness she was feeling was associated with the drug. It also made her less worried about whatever Ketaba might think about her relationship with Binta. “We're in love. It's very beautiful.”

Ketaba visibly blushed, and required more alcohol which she poured from the bottle into both her and Ana's nearly empty glasses. “Love truly moves in mysterious

ways. I still can't see how it can be possible to be in love with someone of the same sex as yourself. It's the most obvious perversion. Sex wasn't designed for that. If it were, nobody would ever have children."

"It's not that Binta's a woman that I love her..."

"Are you saying you'd love her if she were a man?" Ketaba wondered thoughtfully.

Ana considered that view. She viewed Binta in her mind's eye. The beautiful smooth skin. The roundness of her feminine contours. The beauty of her face. She tried substituting an image of a man for that of Binta, but somehow this didn't compensate at all. There was something specific about Binta as a woman as well as her being so beautiful in so many other ways that had attracted Ana to her in the first place. Ana hadn't really thought about this too much before, but perhaps not only was she involved in a lesbian relationship she was actually a lesbian herself.

"I don't think Binta's gender's got anything to do with it," Ana lied.

"You're just too easily led, Ana dear!" smiled Ketaba indulgently, holding her glass in front of her face and looking through it at her companion. "Binta is obviously congenitally unbalanced. Perhaps she inherited her homosexuality. Perhaps she had some unfortunate experiences when she was a child. I suppose we ought to be sympathetic to her plight, and hope that there may be some way in which she can be cured. What do you think?"

"There's nothing wrong with Binta at all! I don't think there's anything wrong with homosexuality! I don't see why people can't be in love with whoever they like without being told they shouldn't. I think love is an important and special thing. It should be treasured and valued, not condemned. The one who is wrong is the

government who makes it illegal. It's not fair on people like Binta. It's not fair on me!"

Ketaba saw that the turn of conversation had become a little heated. She put her arm across the table and patted Ana on the back of her hand.

"I didn't mean to upset you. I can see you're very much in love. Even if it is to a dyke like Binta!"

After the meal was finished, Ketaba cleared away the dishes and was very insistent that Ana shouldn't even contemplate washing them.

"They can wait till tomorrow," she smiled. "Anyway, guests don't do the washing up!"

Ana and Ketaba returned to the sofas with the half full bottle of wine placed on the coffee table and a change of music. Ana was still not sure whether she liked the taste of wine, but she didn't object when Ketaba carefully refilled their glasses.

"Shall we see your photographs of Agdal?" she asked.

"Photographs? Agdal?" wondered Ketaba, who had clearly forgotten the ostensible purpose of Ana's visit. "Oh yes! My holiday snaps!"

She took a long sip and wandered over to an antique beech valise. She opened a drawer and pulled out a handful of ornate photograph albums. She carried them over to the coffee table and plonked them down. She sat on the sofa next to Ana, her naked skin brushing against Ana's bare arms. Ana felt too lazy to move very much out of the way. Ketaba selected an album and opened it.

The photographs mostly featured Ketaba, taken by acquaintances she had made in Agdal. Generally, she was as naked as she was habitually at the Brothel and manifestly in her own home: though in some photographs she wore a tee-shirt or

bikini. Ana was surprised her how very ordinary clothes made Ketaba look. Many other people were also naked, but even among her acquaintances they were not in the majority. There were photographs of Ketaba preparing to go on a hike wearing only heavy walking boots, a bright blue rucksack and a cloth hat to shade her eyes from the bright sun.

The landscape behind Ketaba and her friends was undeniably beautiful. Long stretches of white sand, blue sky and the odd coconut palm tree. Hills and even craggy mountains stretching above and beyond, again framed by a deep blue sky. There were pictures of Agdal's shops, historical buildings, ancient ruins, great temples and large market squares. Ana's heart leapt as she looked at the pictures. She so wanted to be there! It was such a beautiful country. And one so enlightened! It was the perfect holiday destination. She *so* envied Ketaba for having been there.

Ketaba provided a commentary as Ana regarded the pictures, touched by the intensity with which Ana scrutinised each picture, lingering over some for several minutes. She gave accounts of the exercises she'd done in the gymnasia she photographed, the swims she'd taken in the blue expanse of sea (Ana had never seen a real sea herself) and the exact number of kilometres she and her friends had walked over the hills and the altitude to which they'd attained. "So high!" gasped Ana. There were no hills of any great height in Rif. Most of it was flat open farmland interspersed with the odd copse and lake.

She was also fascinated by Ketaba's account of Agdal nightlife. Ana hadn't really participated in any in Blad: Binta was scarcely in a position that she could accompany Ana to a night club or a restaurant, but even from her position of relative ignorance she knew that it offered none of the scope and variety of Agdal. Some, like

the sex clubs and the casinos, she found sordid and unattractive, but the sheer range and liveliness of the night clubs and 'bars', as Ketaba called them, was attractive. Perhaps, she thought, relishing the strange taste of wine in her mouth, the availability of alcohol had something to do with it.

Ana didn't really enjoy Ketaba's tendency to identify and describe the companions she had photographed almost entirely in terms of their sexual activity. "Those two were sleeping together one night, but on another night she was with this chap here and he was with this girl," she might say pointing at a group of smiling people with rucksacks underneath a sign celebrating some great historical battle. "Those two men seemed all right at first, but I was absolutely disgusted when I saw them kissing each other. It was just like men and women - tongues and everything - but two men! Can you imagine?"

The thought disgusted Ana as well, but it also gave her a frisson to recognise that homosexuality wasn't just a term to describe women who made love with other women. She was beginning to comprehend the capacity of love to embrace so many different preferences. However, her disgust was actually felt greater when Ketaba described in what she thought was rather too much detail which boys had made love to her and exactly what this had entailed. She pointed at them, indicating their genitals or other features (her lovers were all naturists like herself), and described what they had done together, where they had done it, how long it had lasted and how she rated the performance. "He was really not very good at all!" she said about one man with quite long hair and a slightly caved in stomach. "Looking at his penis, you'd think he'd be a real joy. It's nearly twice average size. But could he keep it going for more than three minutes? I found myself thinking about dinner rather than sex."

Ketaba leaned over to the bottle and poured the last few drops into her glass. She swallowed it with a bold gesture and smiled rather foolishly. Ana was belatedly aware that although she had drunk perhaps nearly two full glasses of wine over the evening so far, Ketaba had consumed all the rest of it. Perhaps she was ‘drunk’, although Ana’s own senses were a little too befuddled to make an objective evaluation. She also noticed belatedly that her naked friend was now talking rather sadly about what she perceived as the failure of her love life.

“Making love to men is easy, but loving them isn’t! It never seems to work out right for me, however hard I try. My lovers can’t complain about the quality of my lovemaking. Perhaps it’s because I’m a prostitute. Perhaps they can’t understand my interests. I just don’t know what it is! What do you think, Ana?” She looked directly into Ana’s eyes steadying herself with a hand on Ana’s hand. “What *do* you think?”

“I just don’t know,” Ana replied. “I’m not a man. I can’t say what it is that makes a man love a woman.”

“But you know what it is that makes a woman love a woman. You love Binta. You seem to love her in a way that nobody’s *ever* loved me! Really loved me, I mean. Real, genuine, unconditional love! Have you really got no idea why I’m such a ... such a failure?”

Ana blushed. She really hadn’t expected to serve the rôle of confessor for Ketaba. “I’ve got no idea at all!”

“Well, do you think I’m attractive? Physically attractive that is?”

“Yes, of course!” Ana answered automatically. What a question to ask? Ketaba had an Alpha rating. What more objective rating for beauty could there be?

“So do you ... well ... do you fancy me?”

Ana opened her eyes wide, and snapped her hand out of Ketaba's.

"What are you asking?" she asked abruptly.

Ketaba looked clearly upset. She ran her fingers through her long tresses of hair and tangled one around and around her hand. She pointed at a naked young woman in one photograph sitting on a beach towel next to Ketaba with an expanse of sand and blue sea stretching out behind them. Both of them were wearing sunglasses and grinning at the camera. The woman was slim and short with black hair tied up in a tight bun by a large white bow. Like Ketaba she had no evidence of ever covering enough skin for any portion to become any paler than any other part of her.

"That's Rhumana. She fancied me! Or that's what she said. We were friends throughout the holiday. We met on the first day and I found that wherever I went she was the best company to be with. She was such good fun. She made me laugh, and she laughed at the things I said. Not like Binta. Or Zabba. She didn't make fun of me. She was always very sympathetic. She was from Agdal herself, and was on holiday in her own country. I *so* enjoyed her company. More than the boys I slept with: who were so boring when we weren't making love together. And some of them were pretty boring then as well! When you're not being paid to be understanding in your lovemaking, you tend to be more impatient you know! I didn't know she was homosexual. It never really crossed my mind. But then near the end of the holiday she told me she fancied me."

Ketaba's hand wandered over to hold Ana's again, and Ana let her do so respecting her friend's expression of distress. Ketaba's eyes were luminescent with tears that threatened to overspill her lower lids.

"We'd drunk some wine. She was much better at drinking than me. She'd

much more experience coming from a country where it's legal. We were laughing and chatting, and then I felt her holding me close and then she squeezed me against her. I didn't think much of it. In group sessions, we often hug each other and get close to each other. Then she kissed me on the face and told me she fancied me. She told me that she wanted to go to bed with me. She told me she wanted to sleep with me and make love to me....”

“And did you?”

Ketaba shook her head sadly. “No, I didn't! I was horrified. I told her I didn't ever want to see her again! I told her that I hated dykes and I thought they were thoroughly perverted and disgusting. I told her that in Alif homosexuality was illegal, and if there was one difference between Alif and Agdal where Alif had the moral upper ground it was regarding Alif's laws on homosexuality. And then I left her. And I never saw her again. And now ... and now ... I feel so bad!”

“Why's that?”

“I don't know! I *did* like Rhumana so much. We got on so very well. I did enjoy her company *so* much. I don't know if I've ever enjoyed anyone's company as much as hers. And now I'll never see her again. And sometimes I think ... you know ... sometimes, I think ...”

“What do you think?”

“I ... er ... I think ... Goodness! Is that the time?” Ketaba looked at her clock which indicated it was after half past twelve in the morning. “Time has passed! I suppose that means the last bus has left for your place?”

“Yes, it has,” admitted Ana who had been so disorientated by the wine, she'd simply not noticed the hours pass by. “I'll have to catch a taxi.”

“They’re very expensive at this time of night. Stay in the guest room. I’ll show you where it is.”

Ketaba led Ana to one of the rooms which was twice the size of the bedroom in her own flat containing a firm mattress on an enormous double bed.

“What do you think?”

“It’s very nice,” agreed Ana. She didn’t go to bed immediately. She and Ketaba continued to look at photographs for an hour or more longer with a few glasses of mineral water and some carob coated sweets. Ketaba made more references to Rhumana, but she did not elaborate, and restrained herself from touching Ana’s hand for which she was grateful. Ana got more tired and had to announce that it was really time to go to bed.

“Of course, Ana,” said Ketaba standing on her feet and wobbling uncertainly. Ana stood up as well and felt slightly giddy too, but she attributed it to sitting down for so long. She felt a rush to her head and felt the room stir. She pressed a hand against her forehead in the hope it would somehow contain her inappropriate sensation of vertigo. She felt Ketaba’s hands around her shoulders to steady her.

“Thank you,” she said in gratitude opening her eyes and staring directly into Ketaba’s slightly foolish smile face, a tress of long hair falling loosely down over her nose and mouth. Ketaba held onto Ana and shook back her hair.

“Oh Ana!” she said in a strangely weak and slightly strangled voice. Suddenly Ketaba’s lips were pressed against her own and Ketaba’s muscular and wine-tasting mouth was inside hers. Ana was at first rather startled, and reciprocated automatically as she would if Binta were to kiss her, but just before her tongue wandered beyond Ketaba’s teeth, she pushed herself off. Ketaba wasn’t Binta! What would Binta think?

What was Ketaba thinking of! Didn't she despise lesbianism?

"Don't!" Ana told Ketaba.

Ketaba let go of Ana's shoulders. "I thought ..."

"Just because Binta and I are in love doesn't mean ..."

"I don't know what came over me!" Ketaba said in humbled tones. "I'm really sorry! I'm really sorry! It must be the alcohol. That must be what it is! I'm just not used to it. I knew it was bad for you. I should have heeded my own advice. Never again! I'll never touch it ever again! I'm so sorry! I shouldn't have. Ever!"

14

“Breakfast!” greeted Ketaba cheerfully, announcing her presence in the bedroom where Ana was sleeping. Ana cautiously opened her eyes and looked at her naked friend towering above carrying a tray adorned with fruit juice, muesli and toast. “I thought you might appreciate some breakfast, Ana!”

Ana smiled shyly. Nobody had ever brought her breakfast in bed before, so she gratefully sat up and put the tray on her lap. She picked up the glass of fruit juice which tasted slightly sour to her sleep-encrusted taste buds, but appreciated the way it brought gradual clarity to her thoughts. She looked up at Ketaba who was hovering nervously over her and smelt distinctly of the freshness of soap and shampoo. She had her long hair tied back in a white towel.

“Thanks very much,” Ana said, putting down the fruit juice and picking up the spoon to tackle the muesli. “I had a very refreshing night’s sleep.”

“And you don’t feel at all sick or unwell after the wine?”

Ana frowned, thinking back to the night before. Wasn’t she supposed to experience something called a ‘hangover’ after drinking? She didn’t feel at all bad, although she remembered a slight giddiness when she first went to bed. “No, I feel all right.”

“I felt slightly ill when I woke up,” sighed Ketaba. “I didn’t sleep at all well. I was tossing and turning all night. I suppose it serves me right...”

“Oh yes,” commented Ana, remembering more about the previous night. She caught a glance at Ketaba’s eyes which looked slyly at Ana’s chest. She glanced down idly and noticed for the first time that her breasts were on full display. She had

become so accustomed to sleeping naked next to Binta, she at first thought nothing of it. Then she recalled Ketaba's late night kiss, and with embarrassment hoisted up the cotton sheet to cover her chest.

Ketaba sighed, in recognition of Ana's discomfort. "I'm sorry about last night," she remarked sadly. "I'm very very sorry! I don't know what came over me! I've never behaved like that before with a woman. It must have been the wine. I must have drunk far more than I should."

Ana smiled reassuringly, but still rearranged herself so she could eat with no risk of the sheet falling down to her lap. "Don't worry, Ketaba. It *must* have been the wine. It's supposed to make people behave very strangely. You probably just weren't aware of what you were doing."

Ana wasn't convinced however that Ketaba's behaviour wasn't symptomatic of deeper repressed feelings. She'd once been told that the really bad thing about alcohol was that it released people's inhibitions and let them behave in ways that were more honest but also more socially unacceptable.

"I'm not a lesbian, you know. I don't 'fancy' women at all. It was just me getting upset after all that alcohol," Ketaba continued, sitting nervously on the side of the bed. "But don't tell anyone about it, will you? Not even Binta or Zabba. I don't want them to think I'm a dyke like them. I don't want them to try seducing me. And I don't want people to think I'd ever behave illegally."

"I won't tell anyone," Ana said. She felt slightly offended at the suggestion that her lover would attempt to seduce Ketaba just because she might think she was a lesbian too. Binta was surely not the sort. She also realised that keeping news of the incident secret from Binta wasn't going to be that easy. Questions would be bound to

be asked about her night at Ketaba's flat, and Binta might already suspect that her colleague had designs on her lover. She had after all been peculiarly unforthcoming about why she was so unenthusiastic about Ana's visit.

"I'd be so grateful if you don't, Ana. I'd be so *very* embarrassed if anyone knew. I'd feel humiliated. What *would* people think? I couldn't live for shame!"

"It was nothing, Ketaba. Nothing at all. Don't mention it, and I'll probably just forget it altogether anyway."

Ketaba smiled with an expression of relief. "Yes, you're right. It was nothing! After all, we didn't actually *do* anything, did we? There was no lovemaking or anything, was there? I'm probably just worrying about nothing at all! It's all in my mind, isn't it? Well, we won't say anything more about it!"

Ana finished her breakfast and waited until Ketaba had left the room with the empty tray before she ventured out of bed and into her clothes. She declined Ketaba's offer of a shower before venturing out and sat in the living room while Ketaba put some clothes on. Ketaba's choice of a track suit and trainers suggested more a woman who enjoyed sports than one who worked in a brothel.

"Shall we go for a walk? You're not in a hurry to get anywhere are you? It is Saturday after all."

"No, I'd love to see more of Honey," Ana agreed, leading the way out of Ketaba's flat into the streets beyond. She was still impressed by the general affluence and splendour of the district. It made her own suburb seem very mundane.

"Do you enjoy working at the Brothel?" wondered Ketaba as they strode past the ornate railings of the impressive homes, large cars parked in their wide drives. "Or do you still have reservations about it?"

Ana mused for a moment. "It's not too bad as a job, and I'm getting used to the idea of working with all the prostitutes around," she admitted thinking particularly of how it had made it possible to meet Binta. "I don't like the Director, though. He's fairly objectionable even when he doesn't touch my bottom or make coarse comments about what boyfriends he thinks I've slept with. Everything he says has an obscene second meaning and he smokes an awful lot."

"That must be terrible. I'd hate to have to put up with all that smoke. I don't like the Director either, and I don't think he likes me. When I started working at the Brothel he was always trying to get me to sleep with him, but I just didn't fancy it. The smell of smoke on his clothes! Some of my clients smoke, but somehow it's different when it's a client. You can tell them not to smoke, which you can't do so easily with your boss."

"You enjoy working at the Brothel, don't you?"

"*Enjoy* isn't quite the right word. It's a job, like yours, and I hope I take a proper professional attitude towards it. I think though that it's rather devalued when people like Binta and Ferhana work there. It shouldn't be used as a prison. But the Brothel treats its staff pretty well: much better than it would do if it were not a government enterprise. Anyway, I wouldn't want to break the law and freelance, like some girls do. You're not so well protected, and there's no pension to look forward to. Although I'm sure I'd earn a lot more if I did. The government wouldn't take its percentage of my earnings!"

"Is that the only thing that's wrong about working freelance? You don't think it'd be better if it were as it used to be, where individual brothels competed against each other? Zabba always says she wished she could set up her own business."

“She would, wouldn’t she?” sniffed Ketaba disparagingly, running her fingers idly against the wall of one of the houses. She pointed towards a track running through some grass between tall trees on the other side of the road. “That’s where I often go jogging. I usually spend at least an hour each day running. It’s an excellent way to stay fit. Though I wouldn’t say it was as effective as working.” She turned her head towards Ana, and resumed her subject. “If you remember, the reason why the government first institutionalised Brothels all those generations ago was to prevent the spread of venereal disease. It was decided that suppressing prostitution by making it illegal would only make the situation worse. Nowadays, sexually transmitted diseases are almost totally unknown in Alif. We’re given regular checkups once a month and it’s very rare that a girl has caught something. That’s a lot better than many countries, where all visitors returning from holidays there have to be screened for anything they’ve caught.”

“Is that true of Agdal?”

“Strangely, no. But the Agdal government has its own ways of discouraging the spread of disease. And the other thing that institutionalised prostitution has done is stop the exploitation of prostitutes by their pimps. Apparently, working girls hardly saw anything of their earnings when it was under private control. It all went to their pimps who went around covered in jewels and expensive clothes, while the prostitutes had nothing at all. Some of these pimps even beat up their girls if they thought they hadn’t made enough money and would push them out to work even when they were feeling ill or had had more clients than they were happy with. It’s much better at the Brothel. However bad the Director is, he’s not nearly as bad as these pimps used to be. At least that’s what the history books say.”

“Zabba says that it’s now President Marmeluke’s government that’s the pimp. She says that the government gets it both ways by getting an initial cut from a prostitute’s clients and then by taxing her earnings.”

“Well, it’s undeniably a good way for the government to ensure that prostitutes pay taxes. In countries where it’s illegal there must be an awful lot of revenue that never gets collected. It must be better for the country if prostitutes pay taxes just like other workers. It’s unfair on those who work legally.”

“I suppose that’s true,” remarked Ana. “But there must be some bad things about the government running Brothels. Isn’t it inconsistent for the government to be organising and profiting from something it so often says it disapproves of?”

“I have no idea why they would disapprove of it. It’s a perfectly natural and harmless activity. It’s good for the clients who in many cases would never have sex with such beautiful or attractive girls providing professional services to those who can afford it. It must be good for prostitutes like me who want to provide those sorts of services. Though I suppose there are those who’d argue that it sets the prices artificially high. They say that if prostitution were privatised, there would be a lot more competition and prices would just drop. They also say that as prostitutes wouldn’t have to lose such a large percentage of their earnings they’d also be better off. But I can’t believe that. What guarantees are there that the brothel you’d work at would be one of the better paying ones? And I’m sure that if a group of privately run brothels teamed together they could fix the prices just as high as they are in the State Brothel. If not higher!”

“Perhaps there’d be less prostitution if the government weren’t seen to be encouraging it?”

“Well, the government doesn’t exactly advertise the Brothels. There are no commercials on television or the radio, are there? And anyway, I don’t think there’d be any less if it were private. Though, I suppose there might be more variety. They wouldn’t all look the same as they do now. Clients with different interests could go where they liked. But I think they probably do now. If they have particular tastes which the State Brothels don’t provide, there are clandestine brothels which cater for them.”

“Do you think so?” Ana asked, imagining an underworld of characters like Mr Madir and Zabba setting up business in semidetached houses in the outer suburbs of Blad.

“There are always cases mentioned in the newspapers about illegal vice rings being closed down - and I’m sure that some of these vice rings trade in sexual services as well as pornography, drugs and alcohol.”

Ana admired a monument they passed that commemorated people who had died in a previous war. At the top of it was a statue of the man who had been president at that time, long before President Marmeluke but looking much the same, particularly with regard to the heroic pose in which he was sculpted. Around the monument were some railings and a faded brass plaque. Along the road from the monument were houses of quite modern construction and a dark figure walking towards them. The figure came closer and Ana could make out whom it was wearing the long black gown with a cross dangling over her chest.

“Good morning, Ana. Good morning, Ketaba,” greeted Chadora drawing up to them. “How strange seeing you here. You live nearby, don’t you Ketaba?”

“Yes,” admitted Ketaba, amiably but looking slightly annoyed at losing her

exclusive rights to conversation with Ana. “What are you doing here? You don’t live in Honey, do you?”

“Noohh!” laughed Chadora. “I couldn’t possibly afford to live here. Not unless I were in a sheltered church property. No, I’ve been visiting one of your colleagues. She felt in need of the succour and advice that only the church can provide.” She smiled at Ana. “I believe I have an appointment with you later this week, isn’t that right?”

“Appointment?” Ana couldn’t recall any such. She’d been too ecstatically happy in her love affair to think of seeking guidance in religion.

“You asked to see Binta’s lesbian lover, Mezyana, I believe. I’ve been detailed to accompany you. Surely you haven’t forgotten?”

“No, not at all. I just didn’t know I had to be accompanied by anyone.”

“It’s regulations, I’m afraid Ana dear. It isn’t considered advisable for anyone to visit people in penal institutions without some official representation. And I’m delighted to say that I am the one who has that privilege. Don’t worry. I won’t be eavesdropping on your conversation and it will be exactly as private as you may wish. My rôle in the matter is finished as soon as I have escorted you to the unfortunate girl.” Chadora smiled at Ketaba who appeared somewhat puzzled by the exchange. “Ana’s put in an application to see Mezyana: Binta’s partner who was convicted with her for criminal sexual conduct. Mezyana had proved to the court the sincerity of her religious conviction and was excused prison or the Brothel on condition she serve time at the Blad Convent.”

Ketaba nodded. “It’s lucky for her that she was religious. I’m not religious at all. I don’t believe in anything. If I were to commit a crime I’d probably opt for the

sentence that Binta has.”

“You may not have the option,” frowned Chadora. “However, I find it strange when you say you don’t believe in anything. It appears to me that you believe in rather a few things: they’re just not encompassed by the teachings and practices of the church.”

“Are you saying that I ought to be religious?” challenged Ketaba.

“Not at all!” laughed Chadora. “Your faith in God is between you and your conscience. I am merely saying that you have beliefs.”

“I most certainly don’t believe in God. And I think those prostitutes who do, do so simply to absolve themselves of guilt and remorse. They are just unable to accept what they do for what it is, and see the virtues of it. I really don’t see why they feel that way. What could possibly be wrong with making a living out of doing what one does best? And if that is the provision of sexual services, so be it!”

“Perhaps they feel that it debases conduct the church believes is best spent between husband and wife?”

Ketaba sniffed. “That rather makes it seem as if sex was purely and simply for procreation and not for recreation.”

“Some may also feel that it is the most fulfilling expression of sincerely felt emotions,” Chadora remarked.

“Hmmm! Anyway, many prostitutes who turn to the church are criminals like Ferhana or sexual perverts. You can’t say that it is because they attach great importance to ethics or morality, can you?”

“You certainly like to argue, Ketaba!” Chadora exclaimed, smiling amiably at Ana. “I would respond to that by saying that the individual’s relationship with God is

a personal one, and that although one may seek guidance from the church, one can still dispute the ethical codes based on interpretation of the Gospels and the word of the Lord.”

“They just want to be able to do whatever they like and be absolved of their sins. They don’t have enough self-confidence and belief in themselves, so the church becomes a useful crutch.”

“It is not for me to criticise anyone’s reasons for turning to the church, Ketaba. I think if you were only to look at it from a less sceptical perspective you would see all it has to offer and perhaps you could come to love God.”

“You won’t see me becoming a churchgoer!” Ketaba affirmed. She looked across the road at a small ornamental tower in which a clock was inlaid. “Is that the time? I don’t have a watch. Too much ornamentation! I really didn’t realise it was that late in the morning. I’ve got to go to work this afternoon. It’s all work work work for a busy working girl.” She turned to face Ana and looked at her with an abashed expression. “It was very nice having you to visit. I do hope you can come again.” She almost guiltily and quite perfunctorily kissed Ana on the cheek and dashed off almost immediately.

Ana and Chadora watched Ketaba walk off in a stride that very soon broke into a jog and carried her off the main road and along a rough track by the edge of the woodland opposite.

“I hope I didn’t frighten Ketaba off,” Chadora remarked apologetically. “I know she doesn’t like religion and I probably remind her too much of it. Or was it that she just didn’t want me to intervene in her chat to you.”

“I’m sure that’s not true,” commented Ana, sure that that was much more

likely to be so. Perhaps Ketaba would have liked to have spoken more about her failed love affairs, and found Chadora's attitudes too opposite her own to feel comfortable voicing her views.

Chadora watched Ketaba's statuesque figure disappear in the shadows of the trees. She glanced back momentarily, dodged past the small lap dogs an old woman was escorting and was gone. "Ketaba is a sad figure in many ways. She so much wants to believe in something, but she is also adamant that it must not be in religion or politics. She is always looking for something and I don't think she'll ever find it." Chadora returned her gaze to Ana and firmly took a hand in one of hers. "So, next week you'll be seeing Mezyana in the Convent. It is just a social call, isn't it?"

"Binta wants to know how Mezyana is, but of course she can't visit herself. I'm just visiting as Binta's proxy, if you like."

"And I daresay you'd like to see what Binta's former lover is like as well, I imagine. Isn't that right?"

Ana nodded shyly. Chadora squeezed Ana's hand affectionately, and then linked her arm inside Ana's and the two walked along the peaceful Honey boulevards towards the bus stop for the Brothel. She didn't ask why Ana should want to visit the Brothel on her day off, and her conversation became much more desultory. She talked about the private gardens of Honey, the large estates and the great wealth of many of the inhabitants. She chatted about Rif and Jebel, and listened with apparent interest to Ana's accounts of her home and its great wheat fields. She made no more comment at all about either Mezyana or Binta, but it seemed to Ana that there was an understanding between the two of them, and that Chadora was subtly expressing her approval of a relationship based on love.

15

“It’s good to see you arrive so early!” exclaimed Chadora when Ana arrived in the Brothel chapel in her smartest clothes, worn so rarely since her interview. She had combed her hair carefully, applied the lipstick with which she so rarely bothered and cut her fingernails with fastidious attention. She was very anxious about her visit to the Convent. She so wanted to make a good impression on Binta’s former lover. At least she hoped it was her *former* lover, and the barely vocalised fear that this might not be wholly the case made her feel terribly insecure.

Chadora was dressed in her normal working dress and was fussing about the chapel. She had laid hymn books in front of every pew, and organised the selection of hymn sheets on the board. Ana watched Chadora unhurriedly straighten a few cushions and cross herself in front of the altar. She strolled towards Ana through the fragmented kaleidoscope of light from the stained glass windows above the altar and smiled warmly.

“It looks like a fine day for visiting the Convent, God Willing!” Chadora commented, taking Ana’s arm in hers and escorting her out of the Brothel through an exit Ana hadn’t been aware of before. It avoided the main reception area and led the two of them through the Brothel recruitment office where a slim girl with quite a long nose sat bored at the desk reading a newspaper. She stood up sharply as Chadora and Ana entered, but relaxed immediately.

“Good morning, sister!”

“Good morning, Qabiha. How has your day been?”

“Just two visitors today, sister. Neither very interested I thought. I shan’t earn

much commission at this rate.”

“God willing there may be more,” Chadora remarked, leading Ana out of the door and into the streets beyond. The Convent was in a distant suburb of the city, and it was necessary to travel there by bus. Chadora took Ana to the bus stop several blocks away and they sat on the waiting bus as it prepared to leave. Ana envied the respect Chadora received from passers by, and remarked on this.

“The way I dress does indeed make a difference,” Chadora agreed. “I am a servant of God, and therefore I am accorded respect. That is a good thing and something for which I am very grateful. When I worked in the Brothel as a prostitute I wore very different clothes, was seen as a servant of men’s lust and was treated with as much contempt as I am now treated with honour. I am essentially the same person but in my capacity as a whore I truly earned the disrespect that was shown towards me, for I was indeed nothing better than an expensive diversion for men who would be better focusing their attentions on higher spiritual values. But it is not for me to condemn. The Lord’s will is that all should be loved equally: high or low, misguided or enlightened. After all, He has shown His great love and mercy by welcoming me into His bosom where I can now compensate for all that I did in my early days.”

“Do you regret having worked as a prostitute?” Ana wondered as the bus moved off.

“Regret is the wrong word. No, my regret is that it took me so long to surrender myself to His ministry. There were so many wasted years, but the Lord be Praised I am now wholly dedicated to His service. But this is my decision. It may be that I would never have chosen such a vocation had my earlier one not been so very different. I have foresworn marriage to a man, and have opted instead for the more

worthwhile and absolute marriage which is that to God and His Church. No other love is greater than His, and no love is more satisfying than that I feel towards Him. Unlike a man He will never abandon me. He cares for me when I err. He loves me when I am miserable. And His capacity for forgiveness is infinite. What man can possibly offer so much?”

Ana blushed. She had no real knowledge of the love a man could give, but felt that it must be very much secondary to the love that Binta offered her, or that she felt towards Binta. This was not a subject she wished to discuss with Chadora.

The chaplain smiled at Ana. “We are now on our way to the Convent. Like the church, the chapel and the cathedral it is a house of God, and a place where, together with my sisters, I too spent a happy year of my life dedicating myself to the worship of the Lord. It is a place of great spiritual beauty. A place where my love for the Lord was encouraged and nurtured, and where I discovered I no longer needed the distraction offered by a man’s temporal love. It is not an easy matter to abandon the affection of physical or sexual love. It is difficult and occasionally frustrating. Especially for one such as I who had made love to men maybe more than a dozen times every day. It was not because I dislike such activity. Indeed, like Ketaba, it occasionally gave me feelings of great usefulness to the poor men who felt the need to buy a prostitute’s services and, I’m afraid, it was sometimes very pleasant. Unlike your friend Binta, men do not repulse me at all. I became a novice from a wish to worship and serve, and not to escape from another way of life.”

“What’s life like in the Convent?”

“Austere. Very austere. There are no distractions from the main purpose of worship. There is no television, no shopping, no parties and definitely no men. Indeed,

had you been a male friend of Binta's, it would have been a much more difficult excursion to organise or even gain permission to do so. "

The Convent was no less austere in appearance than Chadora's description of its daily routine of prayer, bible readings and good deeds was in activity. At first, Ana was sure that the tall imposing walls surrounded a prison. It must have been just as effective in preventing Mezyana from escaping and seeking her liberty in the streets of Blad outside. However, the entrance was quite unlike that of a prison, although the large metal doors were just as functional for security purposes. Chadora explained that unlike a prison the gates were there to keep intruders out rather than to keep the nuns in.

"How does that relate to Mezyana's sentence?" Ana countered.

Chadora noticeably blushed. "I believe that the use of the Lord's house as a prison or as a punishment goes against its spirit. Just as your boss, the Director, forever complains about having to act as a prison governor as well as the head of a commercial enterprise, I would say that God also protests at the abuse of His house for such a base and unspiritual rôle. For Mezyana, this place is indeed a prison. Just as the Brothel is to her partner in crime. I don't know Mezyana, of course. She isn't one of my wards. But I would hope that her attitude is not that the Convent is only a prison, although I doubt she has any more freedom than your friend, Ferhana. I hope she benefits from serving the Lord and recognises His love in allowing her to do so at the behest of President Marmeluke's government."

Chadora rang the doorbell to the Convent's entrance, and entered into an exchange with a woman on the intercom. Ana studied the ancient doors of the Convent which came directly onto the street with no intervening garden or forecourt.

The doors were opened, and Chadora and Ana were let in by an elderly nun who greeted the two of them with a broad smile and a humble bow. Chadora returned the compliment and indicated subtly to Ana that she should also bow her head.

The interior of the Convent was as austere as its exterior. The lights were quite dim and there were no decorations or ornaments except for a large crucifix on the wall and a portrait of President Marmeluke. A series of corridors radiated in all directions, along which could be seen the occasional dark shadow of a nun. The nun ushered the two of them towards a room to one side, in which there were a few ageing chairs and a table on which a few religious magazines were laid.

“If you can wait here, I’ll look for someone with the appropriate authority. It’s to see Sister Mezyana, is it?”

Chadora repeated that it was, and that they were very grateful for her services. She waited until the nun had left, and then smiled at Ana who was sitting apprehensively, her legs crossed, studying the portrait on the wall of a former mother superior whose features were difficult to distinguish in the shadows. “They’re not very used to having visitors in the Convent,” Chadora remarked. “In most cases, the nuns are free to come and go as they please, so this kind of escorted visit is actually quite rare.”

Ana nodded, and glanced through the open door down the corridor where the nun scurried along, carrying a loose-leaf folder under her arm. “Will she be long?”

“I can’t say. But Convents are not places noted for their speed and haste, Ana dear. Anyway, there will be plenty of time to talk to Mezyana. So, tell me. Are you enjoying your career at the Brothel?”

“I quite like the work and I enjoy meeting the other people who work there,”

Ana answered diplomatically.

“Especially meeting Binta, of course. And Ketaba, as well,” smiled Chadora. “But you’d probably have got to meet people in Blad, whatever job you were doing. Does it trouble you to work in a Brothel given the activities that go on there?”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m sure I don’t have to elaborate, Ana. The Brothel is a place where young women sell their bodies and where clients indulge in sexual fantasy and sexual congress. Most people who are not prostitutes, and indeed many who are, find this rather unnatural and perverse. It must also be very strange for you: making friends with women who will have up to fifteen sexual partners a day. It doesn’t take much of my imagination to see how all this could upset a girl fresh from the green fields of Rif.”

“I don’t like to think about it very much,” admitted Ana. “It’s not that I’m a prostitute myself. I like to think of people at the Brothel as I find them. I don’t like thinking about what they do when they’re with clients.”

“Including Binta, I suppose. And has much pressure been put on you to persuade you into part-time prostitution like your predecessor, Inta? Have Khedra and the Director sold you the benefits of such work?”

“Khedra visited me at my flat once and told me all about the benefits. And often when I see her at work she makes comments about ‘*the door always being open*’, and ‘*if you’re short of money you know what to do*’, and ‘*I really don’t know how you manage on your salary*’. The Director also makes comments, but they’re horribly coarse. He says I have a very attractive pair of breasts and he’d love to see them. He says my legs are pretty on the eye, but would be nicer to touch. And he often

touches me on the bottom at work. And, yes, he does sometimes say it would be good for me to work part-time as a prostitute, and that if I did he'd be privileged to be my first client. He's so horrible, though! I couldn't bear the idea."

"Well, don't worry about what he and Khedra say. Remember that you are absolutely and unreservedly in no way obliged to provide sexual services at the Brothel. Don't ever feel that it would advantage your career or that you actually need the extra money. You already earn quite good money for a secretary I imagine, and you wouldn't be that easy to replace were you to leave. Good secretaries rarely choose to work in Brothels."

"I didn't really choose to work in a Brothel," Ana protested. "It's just that there were so few jobs."

"Well now you've gained experience, I'm sure your choice has widened considerably. You don't have to continue working there. If you wanted, you could find somewhere else to work. The oppressive atmosphere of the Brothel need not be a permanent fixture in your life."

"I'm sure you're right," Ana remarked, staring at her hands and reflecting on the real reason why she was determined to stay at the Brothel for the foreseeable future. "But I've made so many friends there. And I don't know anyone else in Blad."

"As I say, you'll easily make other friends in other jobs. And if you still want to see people like Ketaba and Zabba, you can do so."

"But it's not just that..." Ana stumbled, struggling to find a way to phrase that so long as Binta remained working in the Brothel, then so too would she. She visualised Binta's beautiful face and bare shoulders. She would suffer any indignity to be able to see her regularly and to share a bed with her.

Chadora took Ana's hand in her own and squeezed it affectionately. Ana turned her head round to look into Chadora's face. "You needn't be evasive with me, Ana. I have worked as a chaplain and as a prostitute at the Brothel for several years, and I have learnt a great deal about how it can be between two women who crave affection. I know that both you and Binta feel terribly lonely and isolated in the Brothel. I know, too, that your affection for Binta is rather stronger than that usually felt between two girlfriends. It is not at all uncommon among girls in the Brothel, but it is also something about which the law of the land has a very firm opinion."

"Are you saying that I should leave Binta?"

"My rôle is to give spiritual and pastoral advice, Ana. I would say that your career at the Brothel and your friendship with Binta, which may seem so wonderful now, could become cause for regret later. The Church is undecided about the morality of homosexuality, but generally believes that due obedience to the law of the land should take priority on issues of conduct which do not impinge too deeply on a good Christian's duties and ethical standards. Your future hinges on your attitude towards both the Brothel and Binta, and you must seriously ask yourself what is most important in your life and what sacrifices you feel you must make to gain what you really want. Remember that you do have a choice. You don't have to stay at the Brothel and you don't have to continue your illegal sexual conduct."

Ana didn't appreciate being told how to lead her life, even by someone like Chadora, but she felt too embarrassed to object. She released her hand from Chadora's, using as an excuse the need to find a handkerchief in her handbag. While rummaging inside among the purse, comb and compact tucked inside the little pockets, she ruminated: "I don't know what I want to do in the future. But for the

present what I most want and what gives me the most pleasure is Binta. I can't explain to you how very special she is to me and how much ... how very much ... It's just something that grips me. Holds me captive. I don't think I could leave her if I wanted to."

Chadora smiled. "I apologise for talking to you like this. But you need not fear that I shall ever speak to others about you and Binta. However, the time of waiting is over: I see that someone is coming to meet us."

A thin middle-aged nun with thick glasses and quite prominent teeth drifted into the room escorted by a very young nun, barely out of her teens, quite plump and incredibly bashful.

"Good morning, Sister Chadora," the nun remarked. "So this is Ana. Come to visit Sister Mezyana. Are you related to the sister, Ana?"

Ana shook her head. "No, not at all."

"I thought not. Your surnames are quite different. And your dialects as well," the nun continued, looking at a sheet of paper she had attached to a clipboard. "A friend of the sister, I suppose? Do you work at the Brothel?"

Ana abruptly blushed at that comment, and noticed that the young nun was visibly shocked at the very notion. "Well, yes. I do," confessed Ana nervously. "But not as a ... not a ... I work in the office. I'm a secretary."

"I see!" sniffed the nun. "Well, never mind. Sister Mezyana's friends must come from many walks of life, otherwise she wouldn't be here on penal servitude." She looked at Chadora. "Well thank you, sister. I don't believe we need detain you any longer. If you could kindly sign the visitor's book as you leave."

She then whisked around and led Ana and the young nun, both feeling

abashed, down a long corridor towards Mezyana's cell.

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Ana was escorted to an austere room in which only a portrait of President Marmeluke and a crucifix decorated the bare walls. The only furniture was a wide table with a chair on either side. The nun beckoned her to sit on one of the chairs and left her alone. Moments later, the door opened and Mezyana entered wearing a long dark gown and a hood over her head. She smiled at Ana, and sat wordlessly on the chair opposite her. She pulled back her hood and revealed a thin freckled face and a head that was totally shaved.

“Good morning, Ana,” Mezyana said, looking at her inquisitively. “You’re a friend of Binta’s, I gather, come to see how I am. Is that right, or have I been misinformed?”

“No, that’s quite right. Binta hasn’t seen or heard from you, and she’s interested in your welfare.”

“So, my letters to her have been intercepted and she’s not received them!” sighed Mezyana. “I thought it would have been considered sufficient punishment imprisoning us like this. Has she written to me?”

“I don’t know,” Ana admitted. “She hasn’t told me.”

“And you must work in the Brothel too, otherwise you wouldn’t have got to know her. How is she? Is she well?”

“Very well. She doesn’t enjoy working at the Brothel, though. She loathes it. She detests her clients. She despises the work she has to do. And she hates not being allowed to leave.”

“I can’t say that surprises me. What surprises me more is that she opted for it.

She could have gone to prison. I had wondered whether it was because she liked sex so much and she thought she'd enjoy having more of it. Why did she choose the Brothel?"

"It was either that or prison. And she heard that prison was very unpleasant."

"So having sex with strange men every day is somehow better. I really don't understand Binta. She so often said she would *never* contemplate it. In fact, she told me many times that she would never dream of making love to anyone other than me. She's *so* fickle! She just couldn't wait till after her sentence, I suppose." Mezyana looked quite bitter. She glanced down at the crucifix dangling over the front of her gown, and then looked up at Ana. "I daresay that she's not quite forgotten me, if she's chosen to send her new girlfriend to see me. I take it you *are* her girlfriend? And by that I *do* mean *girlfriend* as the word might be used in a love affair."

"I am," admitted Ana, blushing and feeling guilty. "I'm very much in love with her."

Mezyana steadily examined Ana's thin face, and smiled reluctantly. "I suppose she could have found worse than you. So much for her undying and eternal love for me. At least in God I have found someone who will *never* be so fickle. Are you a prostitute like her?"

"No, not at all. I work as a secretary."

Mezyana frowned slightly disbelievingly. "A secretary? So, you're not a whore. That's something I suppose. I was very worried that she would have a love affair with someone stained by frequent loveless sex. As she must be herself. It pains me to think that she is being ... that strange men - and *so* many of them - are ... that her precious body is daily violated in such a gross and immoral way. A secretary you say?"

At the Brothel?”

“Yes, I work in the Director’s office.”

“And you’re not a prostitute at all? Not even for some of the time?”

“No, never! Never! I wouldn’t dream of ... I just couldn’t ... It’s such a *horrid* idea!”

“But you still make love to Binta, don’t you? Like I did for so many years. Loving her. And she loving you, I suppose. I so hoped that she would stay faithful. I so wanted her to love me forever. To be there when I finish my sentence.”

“She says she still loves you,” Ana protested.

“So much so that she will also love you!” Mezyana sighed bitterly. She smiled bravely at Ana. “Well, it’s not your fault. Binta isn’t the sort of girl who’d be content to wait. She always wanted more from the here and now. She’ll always opt for ephemeral distractions. Like Azhnia. But I must forgive her, I suppose, however much I still long for her, and however much faith I invested in her love for me. The Lord God teaches us to forgive all sinners. And I mustn’t blame you. She *is* beautiful and it’s inevitable that another person should fall in love with her. And seduce her.”

“I didn’t seduce her!” Ana protested.

Mezyana steadily explored Ana’s face. The pale freckles round her nose wrinkled slightly as she screwed up her face in the pain of the implications of Ana’s reply. “So, if you didn’t seduce her, she must have seduced you. Have you ever had a relationship with a woman before?”

“No, not at all. Nor with a man.”

Mezyana nodded her head and bit her lower lip with her teeth. “You poor girl. It’s you who are most wronged by this, not my beloved Binta. I should have realised,

of course. I knew Binta so well. Or so I thought. She got to know you and eventually, when she'd established that you were a lesbian ... well, perhaps not a lesbian, but someone attracted to women like her - and like me, despite my service to the Lord, - ... she simply extended her friendship from the platonic to the physical. Is that so?"

Ana nodded unhappily. She and Mezyana stared at each other. Ana felt very uncomfortable. She hadn't known what to expect from meeting Binta's former lover, but she'd somehow hoped for some kind of support. She was in desperate need for some endorsement, or encouragement, or for someone to say that, yes, her love for Binta was good and wholesome. Someone to make her feel that her love wasn't a perversion and was as genuine and tender as she felt it to be. A small tear welled up in her eye and trickled slowly out of its corner.

"I'm so in love with Binta! She's all I live for! She's all I want! She fills my every waking thought. I love her so much it hurts to be parted for just a moment."

Mezyana smiled sympathetically. "So perhaps you can understand how I feel, Ana. But I mustn't berate you. The Lord beseeches us to forgive and to understand. And that I must do. But please forgive me for resenting you for taking the only love for me - the only love of mine not dedicated to the Lord and my family - away from me, and leaving me here bereft of ... abandoned by Binta." She lowered her head, overcome by the intensity of her own love.

There was an uneasy silence between the two of them. Mezyana bent her head down to study the table and ran a hand over the grey stubble of her scalp. Ana felt that her meeting was a disaster: but what did she expect? While time had moved on for Binta, it had clearly frozen for Mezyana, who still thought in terms of the love she and Binta had shared before their arrest.

“What’s it like living in the Convent?” Ana asked after a while, more to break the tension than from a genuine desire to find out.

“The Convent?” Mezyana repeated, frowning. “What is it like for me living here? Amongst all these holy women with shaven heads who think I am a sinner to be more pitied than loved, and to be avoided at all costs lest I should rape or molest them. In the shadow of these dark forbidding walls and no license to wander the streets of Blad like my sinless sisters. In the worship and adulation of the Lord God Our Father. It’s incredibly boring, that’s what it is!”

“Do you hate living here like Binta hates working at the Brothel?”

“You misunderstand me. I don’t *hate* living here at all - even if it is lonely and monotonous. I feel that it is duty to the Lord that I am serving by circumstance rather than choice. It is not the way I would like to have served the Lord, but I am happy to do so. It is undoubtedly preferable to prison. And service in the Brothel is just an option I *would not* contemplate.”

Ana nodded in agreement with Mezyana’s remarks. “Will you serve in the church when you have finished your sentence?”

Mezyana frowned. “Before I came here, I would have answered yes. By serving my sentence as a novice, I could eventually graduate and become a more active member in the service of the church. But I will never be able to clear myself of the stigma of my criminal conviction, and there will never be a long or prosperous career for me in Alif. What I do when I finish here, I really don’t know, but at least in the world beyond, my sentence could be excused as a period of devotion. Perhaps, when I leave I’ll become a secretary.” She smiled wryly at Ana, who in the relief of the slight levity felt a great weight suddenly lift from her chest. “Who knows?”

Anyway, in many ways, it is not an unpleasant way of life, living here.”

“How is that?”

“Well, it is certainly peaceful and restful. Nothing happens and nothing is ever likely to happen. It is strange to be relieved of the anxiety of wondering what to do or of ever making a significant decision. If I were here by choice and not known as a notorious sex criminal, I would no doubt have made many friends, like the other nuns.”

“Would you like to return home to Jebel when you finish your sentence?”

“Oh, I’d like to! I’d love to return to those craggy hills and the beautiful valleys. But I won’t. The villagers would treat me as a pariah. I would be shunned and regarded as a pervert. I’ll probably take my chance on starting life again in Blad. Why do you ask? Have you ever been to Jebel?”

“No. But Binta’s told me ever so much about it!”

“She has, has she? I suppose she would. Neither she nor I had ever been anywhere else in our lives before. And beyond the small glimpse I get through the window, I don’t even know what the city is like. She probably has the same lack of freedom. Jebel is undoubtedly beautiful, though. Where do you come from? Are you a Blad girl?”

“No. I come from Rif.”

“Rif? A country girl, like Binta and me. You’d recognise life in Jebel then. I can’t imagine it’s much different in Rif. Binta and I had a strange childhood. We were so obsessed with one other we hardly had any other friends at all. My only other friends at all were the children and teachers at the Sunday School. We missed so much of a normal childhood and adolescence I think. And now I wonder, what for? Where’s

Binta now? I loved her. And I thought she loved me. I always thought it was a mistake when our friendship became more physical - but Binta was so irrepressible. And when we'd started touching each other, Binta just couldn't stop. Wherever and whenever she could she would touch me and persuade me to touch her. I can't deny that I enjoyed it, and I loved the pleasure it gave her, but I knew it was bad and dangerous. But she was so persistent, and I couldn't help thinking that something that felt so good must therefore be good."

Mezyana paused, and Ana again felt uncomfortable. What could she say that could comfort Binta's former lover? And what could be said that would make her feel less desolate herself? Mezyana smiled bravely at Ana.

"So, tell me. How is Binta? I imagine her dressed in thick makeup and parading around the Brothel in suggestive clothes. Is that so?"

"Binta doesn't wear any clothes at the Brothel. In fact, I've never seen her dressed at all."

"She doesn't wear clothes?"

"She doesn't have to. She's a certified naturist."

"Is that so? She never was in Jebel, at least not when she was with anyone other than me. But then she was always a bit of a show-off! Is it her kind of rebellion against the Brothel?"

"I think it must be. Most of the other girls wear blatant lipstick, mascara and eyeliner, and a lot of underwear. Binta doesn't dress like that at all."

Mezyana laughed, relatively gaily. "Binta the nudist! What a strange thought. Are you one as well?"

"No, not at all! I wouldn't want all those men looking at me in that horrid way

they do. I'd hate that."

"So, you wouldn't contemplate prostitution at all?" Ana nodded shyly in assent. "Do you just hate men or do you just hate prostitution?"

"I don't hate men. Not really. But I don't like my boss, the Director. He's so crude and basic. Everything he says sounds like it's meant to make me feel like just so much *meat*! I think all he sees in me and all the other women are merely objects for his sexual desire."

"Isn't that just like all men!" sniffed Mezyana disdainfully. "And now you are Binta's lover? Not me. You! It's difficult for me to accept. I always believed I was the only one in Binta's life, and she was always so for me. And now it's all changed! Instead it's you! Did Binta send you to torture me?"

Ana sighed deeply. "Surely not. She says she wants to see how you are. She says she worries about you every day."

"Clearly not as much as I worry about her. But I should be less selfish. I'm sure God would wish that I were more generous and wished all joy and happiness to you and Binta. But it's not what I feel. I look at you. And I think of Binta's beautiful naked body. And I think of the two of you together. Cuddled together. Kissing each other. Making love together. And I think: it should be *me* there enjoying it. It should be me! Fate is so cruel!"

Ana stared unhappily and dejectedly at the table. This interview was so painful. She felt even more guilty for her love for Binta. Not only was she committing a criminal act, she was also the innocent party to her lover's infidelity. It made her love seem tarnished and vulgar. Tears welled up unprompted in her eyes and a small droplet eased itself from the corner and etched itself on her cheek.

“I’m sorry I’ve caused you so much pain!”

Mezyana looked at Ana steadily and sympathetically. “Don’t feel guilty. Don’t feel so bad. It isn’t your fault! If it hadn’t been you, it would probably have been someone else. Binta’s love for women is clearly not reserved for me alone. It’s my pain that I’m expressing. It’s not one that you should share. Perhaps I should thank God that Binta’s new lover is not a prostitute and who shares my abhorrence for it. You are, at least, very pretty. And from what little I’ve seen, relatively virtuous and kind-hearted.”

Ana could see that Mezyana herself was crying as she struggled to restrain her deep disappointment and feeling of loss. She bent her shaven head down and for several minutes cupped her face in the palms of her hands. Her shoulders shuddered, and she broke into a single agonised sob. She then abruptly stood up: her face a mess of misery and tears. She brushed the back of her hand over her eyes, and turned around.

“I better go now. You better leave too!” Mezyana sobbed, running to the door. “Tell Binta that I love her! Tell her that I’ll always love her! Tell her that ... that ... I understand. Tell her she can consider herself released. Tell her I love her! I love her so much!”

She pulled open the door to the cell and ran out leaving Ana alone, unhappy and disconsolate, in the emptiness of the room. She remained for several more minutes reflecting on her encounter and watching the drip drip of her tears fall onto the table in front of her.

17

Ana left the Convent in some distress. She stood by the bus stop and waited as if in a dream, almost startled when a bus actually arrived to take her back to the city centre. As the bus drove along, she looked through the window at people going about their life, oblivious to all but her own musings on her love of Binta and her sympathy for Mezyana.

She disembarked at the terminus and walked aimlessly around the city centre, not at all sure where to go. She ignored the bustle of shoppers as they dashed in and out of the city stores, conscious that despite herself her steps were taking her closer to the Brothel where she had made no plans to meet Binta today. Indeed, she knew that Binta would actually be working at the moment: a thought which caused additional distress in itself. That beautiful body. Those disgusting men! How could she live with such jealousy?

“Cooee!” Ana heard, but ignored.

“Hey, Ana!” came the call again, to which this time she felt obliged to respond. The source of the cry was Zabba who was sitting in a café with another girl Ana had never seen before. Zabba was dressed in a leather jacket and looked much more like a boy than a girl. Her companion was a slim girl with a short bob, wearing a tee-shirt and a floral skirt. The two of them were smoking cigarettes and had cups of coffee in front of them. “How are you today?”

Ana strolled over to them. “Fine. Fine.”

“I must say you don’t look it! Come. Sit with Bida and me.”

Ana nodded and sat sheepishly in the vacant chair, scarcely caring that she was

downwind of the tobacco fumes she normally avoided. Bida smiled at her, and Ana noticed for the first time that she was discreetly holding Zabba's hand under the table.

"You don't know each other do you? This is my close friend, Bida. She's still at school. And this, Bida, is Ana, who is a secretary at the Brothel."

"They have secretaries there!" exclaimed Bida, in a young voice.

"Secretaries. Cleaners. Accountants. Everything. But, hey, what's the trouble, Ana? You and Binta haven't had a tiff, have you?"

"A tiff?"

"You know. A lover's tiff. It happens to the best of us, doesn't it Bida dear?"

Her friend nodded her head shyly. "You're never very honest with me, Zabba. All those other people ..."

"It comes with the job!" Zabba replied sharply. "Was it something like that?"

Ana shook her head and gazed at the ring of coffee stain left on Zabba's saucer while she sipped from the cup. "No, it wasn't. I've just been to the Convent. To see Mezyana."

"Mezyana? Oh, Binta's ex! That must have been quite weird for you," remarked Zabba sympathetically. "What was it like?"

"It was horrible! She's still very much in love with Binta."

Zabba nodded her head. "Loyal girl. And I thought these nuns were always making love to each other. She's not, I take it?"

Ana shook her head sadly, slightly alarmed by the suggestion. "I felt so bad. Taking Binta away from her!"

"Nonsense! It's Binta, not you, who should feel guilty, if anyone should. I'd be very surprised if it was you, rather than she who started it."

“But I could have said no. I could have resisted.”

“I can’t believe that’s what you’d rather have done. What do you think, Bida? Do you think Ana should feel guilty that she’s having a relationship with someone who’s got a lover imprisoned in a Convent?”

“Is that what’s happened?” mused Bida. “I don’t know. I’d hate it if you did the same to me. I’d hate it if someone took you away from me.”

Zabba looked distinctly uncomfortable and made no comment. She opened her packet of cigarettes and offered one to Bida before inserting one in her mouth. She lit them, and then addressed Ana, clearly intending to change the subject: “How do you like living in Blad? Better than the provinces, isn’t it?”

“I’m still not used to all the people,” Ana admitted. “I often long to be out in the country air again, and lead a more relaxed life.”

“Just the two of you together, I suppose. Binta’s a country girl too, isn’t she? Is she pining for the great outdoors as well?”

Ana nodded. “We’ve often thought about returning to the country when she finishes her sentence.”

“Not many jobs there, though, are there? What do you intend to do? Rear sheep? Grow crops? I’d have thought you’d both be better off staying in Blad. More opportunities for work for a start. And anyway how long do you think you could live together in the country before you both get found out again? Do you think you’d like to serve time in the Brothel like Binta? And do you think you’d be at all likely to be sharing the same Brothel? If I were you, I’d abandon the notion of living in the sticks. You’re much better off in Blad. Nobody notices anything here. Nobody really has the time or inclination to get upset by a little bit of illicit sex. And it’s not that bad in

Blad. Really it isn't."

"I'd hate to live anywhere but here," Bida remarked. "What's there to do in the country? No cinemas. No night clubs. The shops are boring. Everything would be boring. It's much better here. And anyway Zabba lives here. I'd hate to live anywhere away from her. The pain would be intolerable."

"Ye-es," agreed Zabba embarrassedly, inhaling on her cigarette and blowing a ring of smoke into the air. "So you can see, Ana, it really isn't that bad here."

"It's still not home to me," Ana protested. "There must be somewhere else to live."

"Perhaps it's working at the Brothel that brings you down. Do you still not mind working for the Pimple?"

"The Pimple? Oh! The Director. I don't like working for him at all. He's a horrid man. Sometimes he says dreadful things about Binta. He knows we're good friends, and he says things like he hopes I'm better in bed than her. That I give better satisfaction to men than Binta does."

"And do you? Give better satisfaction?"

Ana looked down at her hands. What a disgusting question! But how could she answer it? "I don't know. I haven't tried."

Zabba sighed. "Are you saying you're a virgin?"

Ana nodded.

Bida smiled: "See! I'm not the only one Zabba! There *are* others."

"I don't see it's something to be especially proud of. And what else has the Pimple been saying? Has he tried to get you to sleep with him?"

"No!" gasped Ana vehemently. "At least I don't think so. I'm not sure. He says

so many things. I just don't really take it all in. He *does* keep touching me. Especially on the bum. And once he grabbed me round the waist, but I slipped out pretty quickly. And he sometimes asks me questions about boys and sex and other things. I try to ignore it as much as I can."

"I must say the Pimple sounds remarkably restrained. I can't believe he's *such* a reformed character. Perhaps he's got more subtle plans for you. Mind you, he is a bit of a coward. He's probably frightened of being rejected. I gather he's never really pursued Ketaba who'd more than likely put him in his place. But I warn you, Ana, that man is poison. He's no better, and probably worse, than any of the clients who come to the Brothel. I remember how he used to pester me when I first started working there. It worries me that he knows you're friends with Binta. He doesn't know the whole story, does he?"

Ana was sufficient confused without having to contemplate the awful consequences of that prospect. "I'm sure he doesn't. At least I hope not! We try to be ever so careful."

"He's not a naïve man. He could very easily work out why you spend so much time with Binta."

"We're careful, aren't we?" Bida remarked. "We keep it secret. Not even my mum knows about you and most of my friends think you're my boyfriend. I don't want to go to jail. That'd be horrible!"

Zabba squeezed her young lover's hand affectionately, but wasn't to be distracted. "Has the Pimple ever said anything to you that would make you think he suspects you and Binta of having more than just a normal friendship?"

Ana shook her head. "I don't think so. He's just very nasty about her. He calls

her a 'frigid dyke'. Or a 'waste of her client's good money'. Or a 'disgrace to a noble profession'. He says she ought to buck her ideas up and dress more appropriately and not pretend to be Eve in the Garden of Eden. Innocence, he says, is not one of Binta's virtues. I always thought that was because she hasn't let him ... you know ... hasn't allowed him ..."

Zabba grinned. "I love a girl who can say no - as long as it's not to me!"

"Oh, Zabba!" gasped Bida, glaring at her lover. "How can you say that? Aren't I enough for you? Surely you don't need anyone else?"

"Of course not, Bida sweetheart," Zabba answered, squeezing her knee reassuringly under the table. "You're *quite* enough for me!"

18

Ana's life had set into a pattern in which on the whole she was still blissfully happy. As long as she could meet Binta every day how could her life be otherwise? She hardly ever spent the night in her own flat: she normally stayed behind at the Brothel with Binta and relished their hours together spent on her bed, trying never to think about all the men that had also been there during the day and had forced themselves onto her lover. She loved everything about Binta. Every freckle, every dimple, every blemish. She loved Binta's body: so slim, so elegant, so perfect. She loved the sound of Binta's voice and its assertive tone. She loved the feel of Binta's long hair as it fell over her own naked buttocks, the warmth of her skin, the salty taste of her sweat, and the ivory hardness of her teeth nibbling her skin. Ana was so lucky to be in love with someone as truly perfect as Binta, and honoured that her love was so abundantly reciprocated.

Being in love made her days in the office so much more bearable. She hated it when Mr Madir made his usual coarse comments, a cigarette forever lit and inserted into his cigarette holder, and dark bristles outlined against his pale greasy skin. "That new girl," he might say. "She's got tits like melons even if her face is like a monkey. But when you're stoking the fire, as they say..." Or he might say: "You're no boiler, Ana sweetheart, not like these bloody Deltas we've just taken on. Pity the client who can't afford better. Let's hope they're blind, eh?" Or he might say when a prostitute had left his office after one of his mysterious interviews: "Wooahh! If they all had her talents, we'd be pricing ourselves right out of the market!"

These comments were bad enough, but even worse was his irrepressible

tendency to touch her on the flimsiest of excuses. Her bottom might be pinched if he found her bending over to pick something up. His hand would brush uncomfortably against her breasts. He might place a hand firmly on her knee and she would be forced to go through the humiliation of asking him to remove it, against his assertions that there was something decidedly wrong with her or his accusations that she was just an intolerable prude. Sometimes he even greeted her as ‘the tight-legged Ana’ or ‘the convent girl secretary’ or, most foully of all, ‘cock teaser’. However, Ana learnt to ignore these remarks and put out of her mind his rather too frequent suggestions that she boost her income by taking on some part time prostitution.

“I just don’t want to, Mr Madir,” Ana replied firmly. “I’m quite happy with what I’m earning at the moment.”

“Perhaps I should give you a pay cut,” suggested the Director unkindly. “Then maybe you’d be less happy and more willing to take an active part in the work of this Brothel.”

“I wouldn’t do it if it were the only way to earn a living!”

“But it’s not a bad living. Khedra’s told you all about its benefits, hasn’t she? I simply can’t understand your reluctance. I’m sure you’d make the perfect working girl.”

Ana shook her head vehemently. “Not now. Not ever. I’m paid to work as a secretary and that’s all I want to do!”

“You’re a tough nut to crack!” smiled Mr Madir with grim good humour. “And I thought Inta was bad enough. Are you sure I can’t persuade you to regard the opportunities provided by the Brothel in a more constructive light?”

Ana was sure that he couldn’t, but fortunately the Director was not in the

reception area of the office for most of the day and she could get on with her duties without worrying about him too much. However, whenever he appeared, a spark of electricity would shoot up her spine and she could feel the colour vanish from her cheeks. Most of her time was occupied in the minutiae of organising correspondence and filling up the Director's diary with all the duties he was expected to perform. Some of the Director's tasks took him out of the Brothel for days on end and involved meeting illustrious members of the government or civil service. Often his work kept him in other parts of the building for what purposes Ana didn't know, didn't care and was simply relieved that he was absent. Sometimes the Director left the office in the afternoon with a bag of golf-clubs and hideous smelling cigars which he thankfully rarely smoked when Ana was around. On these and other occasions, Ana felt particularly happy and worked so much better, her stray thoughts focused entirely on her lover.

Often Ana and Binta would meet together in the canteen, particularly when Binta's working day finished late. Ana would leave the office, and make her way along the tortuous series of corridors that the Director had escorted her on her first day and were now so very familiar that she often paced her walk by counting off the rooms she passed. She had become so used to the array of green and red lights above the rooms and the sight of women tottering by on their punishing stilettos, that it surprised her when it crossed her mind as to what it all purported. She would be greeted cheerily by the canteen staff, who had a particular affection towards her, probably because she was one of the very few people who frequented there (especially after working hours) who was not a prostitute. They would often pass kindly words regarding the weather or whatever they had seen on television.

Ana would take her cup of coffee and sometimes a cake to nibble, and almost always sat in the same position against the wall where she could most easily spot Binta when she arrived. While waiting, she would sip her coffee slowly and watch the other girls in their red and black leather, lace and acrylic gather in larger groups, cackling in coarse bawdy humour and inevitably light up an array of cigarettes as soon as they sat down. They might notice Ana and stare at her, as well they might as no one else wore such obviously modest clothes as she. Some recognised her as the Director's secretary and were particularly friendly to her. Ana had come to realise that although at first the prostitutes might seem threatening or not altogether wholesome, once she had any dealing with them - perhaps in arranging travel expenses, holiday pay or sterilisation fees - they never seemed like mere prostitutes again. She felt excluded from the girls' lives, and evidently this was a gulf that was mostly respected and honoured.

It might be as much as two hours that Ana would wait for Binta: a wait that became increasingly agitated as she wondered what might be detaining her. She might read a newspaper to pass the time, although she often found the adulatory articles about President Marmeluke and the wisdom of his policies somewhat tedious. There was always a story about an alcohol bust, the shamefulness of the dealers and the wretched lives of alcohol takers. Most articles seemed perversely remote from the world that Ana knew, especially of the Brothel which was never once alluded to, although it always pleased her to read about her home district of Rif. Even there, the articles about new dams, educational schemes and agricultural initiatives appeared to have little or nothing to do with the Rif with which she was familiar.

After a torturously long time, Ana was delighted to see the naked form of

Binta appear, followed by the still disapproving stares of more fully dressed girls, who would greet her from the distance with a smile. She wandered over to Ana, who noted how much her face was disguising a degree of frustration and agitation.

“I’m sorry I’m late but Kesira, my shift supervisor, kept me,” Binta remarked, standing by Ana’s table. “There’d been another complaint from a client about my performance. He’d said I was too quick and wouldn’t do what he’d asked me to do. That might be true, but I’m not obliged to do *everything* they ask me to do. That’d be horrid! Kesira said that if I wasn’t careful, I’d be downgraded to a Beta Minus or even a Gamma Plus, but why should I care? It’s not as if I actually get paid according to my grade, or any other grade for that matter. And I long gave up believing I’d actually gain any remission for pretending to be more enthusiastic.”

“Do you think you might be downgraded?” wondered Ana, who couldn’t understand why her lover wasn’t graded an Alpha or an Alpha Plus if beauty was the sole criterion.

“I don’t know. I don’t care. It’s all theoretical. I don’t think they would though. They earn more from me if they keep my grade up. Anyway, I’ll get a cup of coffee. Do you want one, Ana sweetest?”

Ana nodded and watched as her lover wandered over to the counter, ordered herself a couple of cups and chatted idly with the girl behind the counter. As a prisoner she didn’t pay for anything she ordered in the canteen, and when she ordered anything she ensured that Ana didn’t pay either. She strolled back holding the two cups, placed them on the table and sat down opposite Ana, briefly stroking her legs under the table as a substitute to the kiss on the mouth that would be so unwise to publicly indulge in. Binta didn’t want to add any substance to the suspicions she felt

her friendship with Ana might have already engendered.

“I hate working here!” Binta declared again. “But there’s not too many more months of my sentence left, and then I’ll be free to lead my own life and not have to suffer all these disgusting men. And would you believe that at the same time as saying I’m no good at the job, they’ve already started sending me career advice to persuade me to stay working here when my sentence finishes?”

“You wouldn’t do that, would you?” gasped Ana, who more than anything else wanted to end the nightmare of suppressing her worries of what her lover was enduring from her clients every day.

Binta squeezed Ana’s knee affectionately under the table. “Of course not. Every single client is a hell I never want to repeat. I’m sure they do it automatically. In fact, didn’t you say that they’ve even approached you?”

“Yes, but I couldn’t! I wouldn’t!”

“Of course, you wouldn’t!” Binta agreed reassuringly. “And I wouldn’t either. They always want more prostitutes to replace those who leave, like I will soon. And when I leave, we’ll live together and forget this horrid place altogether.”

Ana nodded. “Then I’ll be able to leave too. I wouldn’t have to work for that odious Mr Madir just to be able to see you. It’ll be wonderful, won’t it? The two of us together. We could lead an ordinary life and be a normal couple...”

“Well, almost a normal couple,” remarked Binta with a sardonic smile. “We could walk the streets of the city. We could sit in cafés and see the world. And I’ll be able to wear clothes again. I haven’t worn a stitch for so long.”

Binta glanced down at her naked body which had the even tan she cultivated in the Brothel sun beds. Ana wasn’t at all sure she wanted even the smallest part of her

lover's gorgeous body hidden from sight, but she recognised that it would be totally impractical to be a full-time naturist working and living anywhere else in Alif.

"And I'll be able to show you Rif," Ana remarked. "It'd be so nice to introduce you to my family and friends."

"And perhaps I could show you Jebel," Binta countered, "even though I'm not too sure I ever want to go there again. It's beautiful. It's the most beautiful place you can imagine. But after the way I was treated there, and the way people would treat me if I returned, I don't think I could face it. Although it would please me *so* much if you were to see my home. I think about it so often." Binta dropped her head sadly, and grasped Ana's hand for reassurance. "I may never see it again though."

"I'm sure you will," said Ana, without conviction.

"Perhaps Zabba is right. Perhaps we *will* have to make our life in Blad. What do you think of Blad? I see so little of it from inside here in the Brothel. I'd never visited it before I came here. Do you think we *could* make a life here?"

"Of course we could. We'd have to find a new flat together, because I wouldn't be able to stay in my present apartment if I left the Brothel. But it wouldn't matter what it was like or where it was, as long as we were together, and the Brothel was far behind us. Our life would be so much better. I could visit Jebel and you could visit Rif, and we would live in Blad during the week. We would go to bed together, and wake up in the morning and work in different places. We could cook together, see films together, sit in cafés together. We could spend every moment of our lives together when not at work."

Binta smiled broadly. "That would be *so* good. Life would be so fulfilling. No more Pimple. No more Khedra, Kesira or whoever. No more filthy minded,

unhygienic clients. An ordinary life and someone to share it with. It seems such a modest, such a simple ambition. Surely, it isn't too much to ask for. Even if we *do* have to live in Blad!"

"Oh dear!" sighed Ana. "You're not really that keen on living in the city are you?"

Binta smiled sadly. "Not that keen. I'd much rather live in the country again. I *am* still a country girl, and I don't feel any enthusiasm for Blad's noise, hustle and bustle. I'd prefer the country air, the blue sky, and everything else I miss from Jebel. But Zabba is right, there's nowhere else in Alif we could live as a couple without being found out again by snooping neighbours, and then we'd both be incarcerated in a brothel or prison. And, anyway, how would I get a job in the country with my criminal record?"

Ana nodded her head. "But do we have to live in Alif? Couldn't we live in Agdal? Ketaba thinks it's a pretty good place and we wouldn't have to worry about breaking the law there. We could really lead ordinary lives."

Binta's face lit up. "I suppose you're right. It's obvious really. Just because Ketaba's so keen on it doesn't mean it wouldn't be any good for us. Nobody would hold my criminal record against me in Agdal, and we *could* be just like an ordinary couple. But I can't believe it can be that easy. I can't see the Alif government letting us leave. And why would the Agdal government welcome us? They've already got plenty of people much better qualified than either of us who can bring a lot more wealth with them. And if we had to bribe our way in, how could we afford to do it? I haven't got any money. Have you?"

"Well some. But not very much."

“Ketaba can afford to go to Agdal. She earns a *lot* of money. But even she says it’s expensive. I don’t think we could. We won’t be able to get the papers together, we can’t afford it and I don’t know that they’d even want us anyway.”

Ana sighed disconsolately. She picked up her cup and sipped at the coffee. “It would be nice, though, if we could. Ketaba’s photographs were very nice. Agdal seemed *such* a lovely place. It’d be good just to have a holiday there. And there’s an awful lot of countryside. There are mountains and hills, just like in Jebel.”

“A lot more mountains than Jebel, I’d have thought. Jebel’s not really that mountainous. And Agdal’s by the sea as well. I’d love to see the sea. All that water! And sand as well! We could sit under palm trees on the beach and watch the sun come down. Oh! It would be so nice to live somewhere like that. And we could be open about our love for each other. We wouldn’t have to be secretive. We could kiss in public. We wouldn’t have to pretend to be just friends. And people wouldn’t think we were perverts if they knew. They’d just accept it! Think how different my love affair with Mezyana would have been if we’d lived in Agdal rather than Alif.”

Binta stroked Ana’s knee, but seeing her longing gaze Ana did not feel at all reassured. She still felt unsure about her rôle in Binta’s life after her meeting with Mezyana, and often felt the heavy weight of guilt whenever she reflected on the love that the novice still expressed towards her lover. It had been so difficult reporting her meeting, and not only because of the pain the encounter caused her. She felt anguish as she observed Binta’s great interest and concern towards her former lover. Could she be so certain that she wasn’t merely a temporary aside in Binta’s great lifelong romance which would be revived once both of them had finished their sentences?

“If we had lived in Agdal,” Binta mused, “we would never have been parted.

We could have been like a married couple. We would never have had to hide our love from other people.” She looked into Ana’s eyes and must have noticed her discomfort. “Oh, Ana! Oh, sweetheart! Oh, dearest! Don’t think that just because I love Mezyana ... loved Mezyana ... that my love for you is any less strong. She is in my past, and had we not been separated by the law who knows what might have been? Who knows? But that is only speculation. What matters is our love together. Don’t be jealous of Mezyana. *We’re* together. And that’s what matters! Isn’t it?”

Ana nodded. “That’s what matters!” She stared at her cup sadly and then looked up imploringly. “Oh, Binta! Please stay with me. Please say you’ll always love me. I couldn’t bear to be without you. Your love for me is the most precious thing in my life. Everything else is unimportant. Please always love me. You are my whole life.” She was conscious of tears welling inside her eyes, and of sniffles coagulating in her nostrils. “Please always be with me. I love you so much!”

“And I love you!” insisted Binta, looking rather sad and a little guilty. She squeezed Ana’s hand under the table so tightly that their palms sweated together. “Don’t *ever* think otherwise. I love you. And I want you more than you could possibly know. Just don’t *ever* believe anything else.”

19

Ana and Binta stood by the bars enclosing the Brothel garden and watched the city streets below in the long evening shadows. Even now, long after the working day was over for most people, life was busy in Blad. Ana sometimes found it quite reassuring: but now she was somehow finding it irritating. Couldn't Blad ever sleep or rest like a normal place? Why did it have to be so permanently lively? She expressed her thoughts to Binta, whose arm was surreptitiously around Ana's waist, confident that the corner of the garden they were standing in was safe from prying eyes.

"After all these months, you're still very much the country girl!" laughed Binta. "You'd rather have the quiet of a rural evening. Crickets and cicadas in the evening sun. A perfectly black sky and none of the ceaseless roar of traffic. Perhaps that's why I love you! You're just like me!"

Ana sighed. "You're right! It still doesn't seem right to me. I'd love to live in the country again. Rif. Jebel. Khlib. It doesn't matter where. That's all I really want."

"And yet you want us both to settle in Blad!" objected Binta.

"It's not what I really want. It's just what we have to do. What is important is that we stay together! Everything else is irrelevant."

"And so it is!" agreed Binta with a smile, kissing Ana on the ear, snuggling her face into Ana's hair. "Just you and I! Nobody else. Just us!"

"It would be perfect. Away from the Brothel. Our own flat. We could cook dinner together. We could watch television together, stretched out on the sofa. We could share the evenings together in the parks and cafés..."

"And best of all we could make love all night together! With no fear of other

people knowing what we do. And with no obligations to anyone else at all!” exclaimed Binta, taking Ana’s ear in her mouth and running her tongue around its crevices. “Wouldn’t that be perfect!”

Ana blushed. Binta was so right. That was very much what Ana looked forward to more than anything else with a yearning that ached in her bosom more than she dared admit to herself. However much she rationalised her love in terms of the more domestic and mundane, what really drove Ana’s love was much more carnal and she was still not sure whether she should be so unashamed about it. Not only was she in love in a more physical way than she’d ever believed was truly right, it was for a woman. With a sudden spasm of guilt, she disengaged herself from Binta and walked towards a corner of the garden bars where she knew that they would be within sight of the young Delta who was bent over her flowers with a trowel and a small plastic bucket. She glanced at the girl who was looking up and, despite her PAR, seemed quite attractive in the late evening light. It was so unfair, Ana mused, that appearances which couldn’t be helped had become such a currency in the Brothel. But, at the same time, she thought, as the girl lowered her head and the bright sparkling eyes and full cheeks were hidden and her clumsy awkward body became more the object of her attention, there must be a reward for those like Binta blessed with more than their fair share of beauty.

She turned to regard Binta, who was clearly rather put out by Ana’s sudden dismissal of her. She was so beautiful! The eyes. The hair. That body. Every inch of her was beyond comparison. Ana must be the most fortunate girl in the world to be privileged with a lover as beautiful as Binta. She smiled broadly, and glanced again at the Delta. Binta’s breasts, her hair, even such details as the slenderness of her ankles

and the sinuousness of her legs made her so much the better in comparison. It may be unfair on the Delta to think such unflattering things, but beauty is so much better appreciated when contrasted with those that fall short of its high standards.

“What are you thinking about, Ana darling?” Binta asked in genuine concern.

Ana bowed her head, and in the process took in the sight of the whole of Binta’s naked body. A pang of emotion and love stabbed her breast and very nearly caused her to burst into tears. “I was thinking about you,” she admitted.

“Nothing bad, I hope?” joked Binta.

Ana looked up with a sad smile. “I love you so much. And I love you more and more. How can there be so much love in me? Nothing I do. Nothing I ever say. Nothing. Is enough to express my feeling for you!” She approached Binta, who withdrew discreetly behind a small palm tree and out of sight from the Delta who was gazing rather vaguely in their direction. “I never knew love could be so strong!”

“Oh Ana! Oh Ana!” exclaimed Binta, pulling Ana towards her and kissing her long and forcefully on the lips and inside her mouth. Ana felt her entire body tremble in the closeness to Binta’s naked body, ignoring the possibility of being seen, surrendered totally to the vagaries of her passion.

Ana’s hands wandered down Binta’s naked body and clutched her buttocks in her palms. As she did so she envisaged her body as she now knew it so well, spread out on the bed receiving her caresses with such gratitude and returned with so much passion. She felt her love swell as the image grew in her mind. She possessed Binta’s body. But, and the thought sent another much less pleasant spasm through her, it was also a body she shared with so many others. She tried to banish the image, but it stayed in her mind, even while Binta’s tongue explored inside her mouth. The hairy

buttocks. The taut sinewy hands. The swelling gut. The harsh bristles on a man's chin. The thoughts became too much. She pushed herself off Binta and with no warning burst into tears. She covered her face with her hands, but the tears still came. Her face felt ugly with unhappiness but she couldn't stop.

"What's wrong now, Ana? Why are you crying? Has Mr Madir been particularly bad today?"

"No. It's not that!" Ana sobbed. "In fact, I've not seen him at all today. I wasn't thinking about him at all!"

"So what's troubling you, sweetest?"

Ana looked up. Could she voice her feelings? The very idea of what was troubling her sent a fresh spasm of emotion through her frame, and the tears resumed.

"Tell me! What's wrong?" demanded Binta, resting a hand on Ana's shoulder. "Why are you crying? What's upset you?"

"Nothing. It's nothing!"

"There must be something. You can tell me. You must tell me. If anyone should know it's me."

Ana looked steadily into Binta's concerned wide eyes. "It's you! It's what you do. All those men. Those horrid men! Every day. Hour upon hour. How can you?"

Binta nodded with reluctant understanding. "It doesn't mean anything, Ana. You must believe me. It's not choice. It's not what I want to do. It's what I *have* to do. It doesn't diminish my love for you. If anything, it makes my love for you that much the stronger. I don't enjoy it. You know that. I hate every second of it. It's horrid. It's disgusting. It's demeaning."

"But you still do it..."

“I’m not here by choice. The clients mean nothing. They’re less than nothing. There’s only you. Believe me!”

“But they do *it* to you. They do *it* every day. While I sit in the office, typing letters and taking notes and addressing envelopes, there are men, every day, while I think how wonderful you are and how much I love you!”

“My thoughts are with you when the clients do what they do, Ana. It becomes more bearable to think of you and how much better it is with someone I love. Someone who loves me. When they come into my room, take off their trousers - their bellies swelling loose and the smell of sweat - and then come on top of me, snorting and grunting like pigs... it’s *you* my thoughts focus on.”

“Are you saying that you think of me when your clients are making love to you? Am I just there to make it more bearable for you?”

“No, not at all. Well, yes, I mean. I don’t know!” stuttered Binta. “Yes, I *do* think of you when I’m servicing my clients. But I don’t mean that I think of you and them in anything like the same way. It’s not the same at all. It might be in a sense. It’s sex I suppose. And sex is sex, whether you enjoy it or not. But love makes all the difference between it being hell and heaven. With you, it’s heavenly. I’m in paradise. That’s because I love and respect you and I can’t bear to be parted from you. But with them...”

Binta paused. She turned round and looked out through the bars of the garden at the rooftops opposite. The dusk was setting in. Street lamps were coming on, and light emanated from behind the curtains of the residential blocks opposite. A car drove by and cries from a crowd of young men echoed across the streets. Ana walked up to Binta, and put an arm around her bare waist. There was a tiny shudder from Binta’s

buttocks as she did so. Binta wasn't crying, but her eyes had a drained look about them.

"I hate them so much, Ana! You must believe me. I hate the Brothel. I hate everything to do with it. Each day I count off: thinking only of the end of my sentence. I look forward to our meetings together. And those days when we don't meet... Those are the worst days! I feel lonely. Isolated. Surrounded by enemies. Okay, the other prostitutes - some of them - are all right. Zabba. Ketaba. Ferhana. They're company. They're people I can talk to, and who listen to my worries. But they're just friends. And often not really that. And the clients. They don't count. They just break up my days: and a good day is when I can forget them altogether. A good day is when we meet and spend the nights together. Please believe me. You are more important to me than you can imagine."

"But so many men! And you can't say that you don't enjoy it! You enjoy it with me. How can you not enjoy it with them?"

"It's different. It's not the same thing at all. I *hate* men. I despise and loathe them. I didn't before I worked here. I just didn't think about them very often. They were just there. I was, I suppose, just indifferent. So I had no strong feelings about them. In fact, I sometimes thought there was something wrong with me: not liking them in the way a woman is supposed to. I thought maybe that I would get to like them more if I got to know them better. But it's not been like that. At all! The more I've seen of them, the more clients I have, the more contempt, disgust and revulsion I feel towards them. I know that Ketaba and Zabba say I should make more allowances for them. Even Ferhana says that men are more to be pitied than despised: but if you knew men like I know them, then *you* would hate them too. If it weren't for men, this

world would be a so much better and healthier place. And Alif is a true man's society where women can only be either whores or mothers, and never anything that they might otherwise choose to be."

Ana nodded. She so much wanted to believe Binta.

Her lover frowned: "I've been thinking about what we were discussing the other day in the canteen about Agdal. Do you remember? I've been thinking that perhaps I should be more positive about emigrating there. I don't know how. And I don't know at what cost. But it *must* be possible! People *do* emigrate. They do somehow manage to do it. There must be a way. And it must be a prize worth having. Living there would be such a neat, such a perfect, solution to our dilemma."

"Our dilemma?" echoed Ana, staring deeply into Binta's wide green eyes.

"Yes. That we want to live together. That we both want to live in the country together. In Alif, we can do one or the other, but not both. And we may not even be able to find jobs outside Blad even if we did live in the country. And what sort of life would it be for us in this big city? In Agdal, all that would be past. We could live like ordinary lovers. Wouldn't that be wonderful?"

Ana smiled broadly. "Yes, it would! It would be paradise. Oh, I *do* hope it's possible! But what can we do to get there?"

"I don't know," admitted Binta. "I really have no idea. Agdal's only over the border, but it might as well be another planet. But I can ask. The other girls here might know. Ketaba might. She's been there enough times. She knows what's involved in going there as a tourist. Perhaps we could go as tourists ourselves and just not come back. We'd be illegal immigrants, and we'd have to get terrible jobs where nobody was bothered about our papers: but it'd be better than staying here. Maybe Ferhana

might know. After all, she's an immigrant herself. She might know what's involved. Even if I find nothing at all, it's worth asking, isn't it?"

Ana felt hope rising inside her. This must be the solution, she thought. There would be no problem about language in Agdal, and it was known to be a wealthier country than Alif. All that tourist money and all those industries Agdal was famous for. With so much wealth, maybe there'd be some spare for Binta and her.

"Do you think I could get a job as a secretary there?" she wondered. "I've gained a lot of experience here. And I'm sure there'd be more jobs for secretaries in Agdal than Alif. They've got many more offices and businesses."

"Perhaps," nodded Binta. "Perhaps. If we got work permits, we could do anything. I don't know what I could do. Perhaps I could study at college - maybe part time - and get a qualification I can use. I might become a secretary too. Or perhaps something better paid than that: I wasn't at all bad at school, and if I worked hard I'm sure I'd get something." She smiled broadly, and hugged Ana tightly to her chest. "That *must* be the answer. I can barely wait. The idea is giving me hope. I'll finish my sentence here, and when I'm free we'll do whatever we have to do to get to Agdal. I don't care what it is, I'll do it. I'll even sell my body if necessary!"

Ana flushed with alarm: "You wouldn't do that, would you?"

"It's what I do now, and I get nothing for it!" Binta gazed into Ana's sad round eyes. "Don't take me seriously. I'm only joking! I'm just saying that I'll do anything - well, *nearly* anything for us to live happily together! Wouldn't that be simply wonderful?"

"Yes! It would be!" exclaimed Ana, feeling a wave of joy tingle through her body. "Agdal is where we'll go. You're right. It must be so. A country where we can

live a normal life. Oh! I *so* hate Alif. It's such a cruel unforgiving country. But in Agdal we can be happy. Won't we, Binta?"

Her lover nodded and pulled Ana so close to her that her head rested on her shoulder. Ana looked over it, through the bars of the garden, over the tall buildings of the city in the early evening dark towards the red aura of the last rays of sunset, where she fancied were the tall snow-capped mountains, the golden beaches and the friendly faces of Agdal. They'd be there soon, she reflected. Hand in hand along the beach, listening to the sea lapping against the shore, not a care in the world. It just *had* to be!

20

“Have some more, Ana. Go on!” urged Bezaffa, who with no real prompting from her guest poured some more whisky into the glass Ana had in front of her. “It’s good stuff. The best! Cost me a great deal, I can tell you.”

Ana focused uncertainly on the glass. This form of alcohol was much more potent than the wine she’d had when she visited Ketaba, and she’d been quite unprepared for how much more intoxicated it had already made her. But she was undeniably developing a taste for it, especially when it was diluted with this other strange substance called soda, which Bezaffa added to it to make up the volume. She took a small sip from her glass and studied her hostess, who was sitting opposite her in a white gauze dress that flowed over her voluptuous contours and did nothing to disguise the details of her body underneath. Ana smiled as she felt that curious slight burning sensation at the back of her mouth that the wine she’d shared earlier had never done.

“Aren’t you glad now that you accepted my invitation?” Bezaffa said soothingly. “A pleasant meal and a pleasant drink. What could be more delightful?”

“Not many things,” Ana slurred unevenly. “But why, if it’s so good, does the government make it illegal?”

“President Marmeluke’s government makes everything nice illegal,” Bezaffa replied. “It doesn’t stop them, or anyone with means, from partaking. They just don’t want the ordinary person to have any part of it.”

“Thass not fair, issit?” Ana slurred. “Why should there be one law for some and another for the others? Surely, everyone should be able to do the same things.”

“That’s very idealistic, Ana sweetheart. Money and power will always make accessible more pleasure to some than to others. I should know. I’m priced right out of the reach of most of the Brothel’s clients’ reach. And that’s only right, you know. What joy for the privileged would there be in having access to certain things, if everyone could have them? Some things must be set aside in even the most perfect of societies.”

Ana felt in no mood to argue. “I’m sure you’re right.”

She had at last succumbed to Bezaffa’s repeatedly made invitation that she come and visit her. Now she was here, she wasn’t at all sure why she’d resisted for so long. Bezaffa had indeed been the perfect hostess and her home was the most delightful place she’d ever seen. It was a sprawling building in the Honey suburbs, further out than Ketaba’s flat and altogether more affluent again. Like all the homes in the avenue, Bezaffa’s was surrounded by a high wall topped with a murderous fringe of broken glass, but once past the wall, the home was very splendid and clearly remarkably expensive. How could Bezaffa afford it? Even on her income as an Alpha Plus, the large car parked in the gravelled drive, the expanse of garden and the many bedroomed house must have been a strain to maintain. And once through the porched door, past the maid who was relieved of duty as soon as Ana arrived, the house was even more splendid. The rooms were massive, the fittings and furniture sumptuous, and the portraits on the wall chosen with a masterful eye for æsthetic quality. Ana stood in the hallway trembling with a sense of her own lowliness as she regarded the broad staircase leading up to the first floor and the sheer spaciousness of the house. She was intimidated by the ostentation, but also felt somewhat honoured to have been invited.

Ana leaned back in her chair and tried fixing her gaze on Bezaffa who wandered about somehow in her vision. She focused her eyes on Bezaffa's chubby round hand which rested on the table delicately holding her own glass by the stem. She examined the little dimples at the knuckles of each delicately tapered white finger rooted in the roundness of her hand. From the hand, her eyes followed the smooth contours of Bezaffa's marbled arm, dimpled again at the elbow and slightly indented by the pressure of the table beneath her forearm. She brought her eyes up further, and rested them on the fullness of Bezaffa's breasts swelling under her dress, the nipples of which were not in the smallest part obscured. They were breasts so very different from those of Binta's or Ketaba's - other than her own, the only breasts she'd observed for any length of time. Bezaffa's nipples were quite simply enormous, but perfectly proportioned on the curves of the bosom that boasted them.

Ana became uncomfortably conscious that her gaze had lingered perhaps too long on a very private feature of her hostess's body. What *must* Bezaffa think? She knew that ever since she had become aware of her feelings towards Binta she had viewed other women's bodies in a way she had never consciously done before. She was sure, or very nearly sure, that these ruminations didn't represent any lascivious intent. It was just that her curiosity about women's bodies had increased dramatically now that she had come to have such an intimate association with one. But she told herself vehemently that the one love in her life was Binta, and it was unthinkable, it was wrong, it was immoral, to even contemplate the love of another woman. It would wholly and unutterably break the trust cemented between her lover and her. She gazed into Bezaffa's face, above the round gracefulness of her ivory neck, and noticed with a start that her eyes were gazing at her with an expression of indulgent contemplation

not at all unlike that which she'd associated with Binta as they lay together in bed.

Ana didn't know what to say. She looked unsteadily into Bezaffa's round blue eyes which continued to stare at her steadily but not unfriendlily, framed by long blonde hair that flowed over her shoulders and above the round orbs of cheeks dimpled like her knuckles by the broadness of a toothy grin. Bezaffa raised the back of her other hand to brush a likewise dimpled chin. She brought it to her mouth and licked off the trail of whisky that had dribbled down it unseen, staring at Ana as she did so.

"So, tell me, Ana sweetest, are you ever distressed by Binta's criminal character?"

"Criminal character?" repeated Ana.

Bezaffa smiled. "Come now, cherry, you know what I mean. Binta isn't working at the Brothel like you or me. She doesn't do what she does either for a living or as a vocation. Nor does she apparently relish what she does ... that much."

"No, she doesn't," agreed Ana, who even through the haze of the alcohol noticed Bezaffa's uncertain lingering on the last few words.

"She's in the Brothel because she's a criminal. She's broken the law, and as a criminal she has been sentenced for it. Doesn't that distress you?"

What was Bezaffa trying to ascertain? "Why should it distress me?"

Ana's hostess stood up slowly and wandered over to her hi-fi cabinet where Ana was for the first time aware that the compact disc she'd been playing had just finished. Bezaffa had kicked off her high heels, but still walked in an elegant restrained way that emphasised the wiggle of her round buttocks, and Ana noticed with a shock, that under her dress she appeared to be wearing nothing even on her

lower portions. Bezaffa leaned over and sorted through the various discs she had.

“I only ask, dearest Ana, because you and Binta are such close friends. I have always thought it excellent that the administrative staff and shop floor workers of our noble concern should be close associates of each other. That, after all, is why I am so very happy that you have agreed to visit me in my humble abode. It can only be a good thing for our two enterprises to be linked by mutual respect and understanding. And Binta is such a darling, don’t you think? Such an absolute sweetie! I’ve always enjoyed my conversations with her, although I suspect she rather dislikes my more enthusiastic attitude towards my chosen career.”

She selected a disc, carefully extracted it from its casing and gently placed it in her player. She stood back, pointing a remote at it, and watched as the disc slid into the machine and started playing the soothing and harmonious strings of classical music. She turned round and faced Ana who was relieved to see now that Bezaffa had, after all, covered her crotch with what was still undeniably a very flimsy cloth.

“So, my darling Ana. Does Binta’s criminal character ever trouble you? Do you mind associating so closely with criminals?”

Ana blushed. “But what Binta’s done is in the past. It’s behind her now. And anyway isn’t what she’s done no worse than what we’re doing now? Drinking alcohol? That’s illegal, isn’t it?”

Bezaffa wandered back to the table, sat down again by her glass and the generous display of cakes in the huge cake stand. She daintily picked a chocolate éclair and put it slowly and lasciviously into her mouth. She took a huge bite out of it and chewed it speculatively.

“Yes, drinking alcohol *is* a crime. Indulging in it, and, worse, trading in it,

attracts a very severe penalty as dearest Ferhana has found to her cost. But alcohol trafficking is not the crime for which sweetest Binta has been convicted, is it?”

“But it’s surely no worse than indulging in alcohol?” pleaded Binta uncertainly.

Bezaffa swallowed the last remnants of the éclair, and smiled indulgently. “Are you saying then that sexual depravity is no worse than the occasional indulgence in wine? Are you saying that an activity which automatically implicates more than one person is better than a vice which can be indulged in solitarily?”

Ana was puzzled. What answer was she supposed to give? What was a safe response? She had no clear idea what Bezaffa’s attitude towards lesbianism was. Was it as censorious as Ketaba’s, however inconsistently she maintained her professed views? Or was it as indulgent as Zabba’s? How free with her opinions could Ana afford to be? After all, Bezaffa was known to be fairly friendly with the Director and Khedra.

“I don’t know. I don’t know what to think. But it’s not that Binta can help being what she is. She’ll always be that way. Trafficking in alcohol is something that you choose to do. It’s not something that you can’t help doing.”

Bezaffa frowned. “Are you saying that sexual deviant behaviour with others of the same sex as yourself is somehow justified because of a person’s predilections? Isn’t that a bit suspect? Should alcohol be legal just because people have a taste for it? Extending the argument, couldn’t theft and murder be justified just because people have a tendency to indulge in it? I’m not sure I like the thrust of your opinions, sweetest.”

“It’s not that!” sniffled Ana, confused by the alcohol and her hostess’s

remarks. "It's not that at all. I just think that something to do with love and affection and understanding, and being kind to one another, and having only good thoughts about another person, and wanting to be with that other person all the time: that can't be wrong. It can't be a real crime, whatever the government says!"

Bezaffa reached out a hand and the warm softness of it enclosed Ana's free hand - the one not nursing the glass of whisky. "It's not the love that is condemned, Ana my love. It's the practise. Nobody really believes that Binta will be a reformed character when she leaves the Brothel and will never again lust after other women. What the government hopes is that she won't actually indulge her illegal lusts."

"I just don't think it's fair! It's wrong to condemn someone to what Binta's been condemned to for what she'd done. It's not right."

"I take it that you condone her actions then, cherry? Well, don't worry. I won't hold your opinions against you. Morality and criminality is a shifting scenario. What's illegal here is legal there and often almost expected. What may be legal today was illegal yesterday and may be again tomorrow. Ethics and the law has never been my field, Ana my love. The greatest crime Binta committed, I believe, is allowing herself to be caught. That in itself has caused misery to herself, her friends and her family. I have no opinion on Binta's character or her actions. Just as I have none on yours. But shall we sit on the sofa? It's a lot more comfortable you know!"

Ana was pleased to recline on a more comfortable seat, but almost immediately regretted it. The luxuriousness of Bezaffa's sofa somehow made the effect of the whisky more potent. The room appeared on the verge of a spin it never actually carried through. She placed the whisky glass on the glass coffee table, vowing not to take another drop of it. Bezaffa sat opposite her on the other sofa, the folds of

her dress flowing about the cushions, and smiled at her steadily and silently. Ana felt a little overdressed. The alcohol made her feel a little hot and bothered, so she undid her cardigan and laid it beside her, revealing the new white cotton blouse she'd felt obliged to buy for a visit to Honey. She looked at Bezaffa whose eyes were now closed and relishing the sound of the string quartet emanating from her loudspeakers. Ana consciously noticed the music for the first time, and found it strangely melancholic and wistful. She leaned back in the sofa, her chin against her chest and her hands spreadeagled to support her, while focusing her thoughts on the various string instruments. Bezaffa opened her eyes and smiled at Ana in a sleepy reassuring way.

"I hope you don't mind me asking, Ana honey," Bezaffa said abruptly, "but have you quite definitely ruled out the idea of part time work as a working girl?"

Ana blinked her eyes in vague disbelief that her hostess should be asking such a question.

"You mean as a prostitute?"

"Well, yes. As a prostitute. Like me. Like Ferhana, Zabba, Ketaba and the other girls of your acquaintance. Like, indeed, your beloved Binta. Have you seriously dismissed the option and opportunity of such extra work?"

"Yes I have. Very seriously. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, I don't know. Just idle speculation. Such a pretty young girl as you. You'd do so well at it. And it's not such a bad job, you know. Plenty of girls work part-time at the Brothel. Not just enthusiasts like Khedra. Housewives. Undergraduates. Inta, your predecessor. Why not you?"

"I couldn't. I just couldn't. The idea of it ... It's horrid. I'd hate it!"

“You don’t know for sure until you try. It’s such a natural thing to do. It can be so much fun on occasion. What have you got against it? The hours? The pay? Those aren’t at all bad. What is it that puts you off?”

Ana blanched. The whisky made her feel very unsure of herself. What was it she didn’t like? “All those men. Those horrid hairy men. Their hands all over me. What they’d do. I just couldn’t bear it!”

“It’s not that bad you know, cherry. But I think that your reluctance might be to do with inexperience. Forgive me if I’m wrong, but I sense that you have had no real knowledge of lovemaking at all. Except with your beloved Binta. You’re still a virgin, aren’t you? You’ve still not enjoyed the full attention of a man’s caresses.”

Ana nodded her head. What was Bezaffa saying about Binta? Was it so very obvious that she and Binta ...?

“Is it that you don’t have any interest in men? Like Binta? Surely not.”

“I’m not sure. I don’t know what to think. I just look at men, especially those who come to the Brothel, and I just don’t feel any ... you know ... I just don’t think of men as being the sort of ... I just don’t know what I think!”

“No. I can see that,” purred Bezaffa reassuringly. “Many girls think like you before they gain any experience, sweetest. It doesn’t mean that you wouldn’t enjoy the attention of a man any less. It just takes time.”

“I don’t know. I just don’t know,” repeated Ana sadly. She sat up in the sofa, resting the weight of her elbows on her bare bronzed knees. “I used to think about men. Well, some men. But I never thought of them in a ... in a ... I always thought of them in a romantic way. Buying flowers. Being kind and protective. Being comforting. Not as what they are when they come into the Brothel.”

Bezaffa stood up and wandered over to the sofa where Ana sat. She placed her heavy weight on the cushions beside her and placed a comforting bare arm around her shoulders. Ana felt the warmth and softness of her hostess's skin through the blouse's fabric.

"It's quite natural to feel confused, Ana. One's sexual identity is never a simple thing. If anything, my years at the Brothel have taught me that. You mustn't let it trouble you unduly. I've had many moments of indecision and insecurity myself."

"You have?" asked Ana, hardly noticing Bezaffa's plump hand take one of hers in its grasp.

"Yes, I have. When you make a living as I do from selling your body for the carnal satisfaction of men, it can't help but make you think, can it? I've often sat alone at home surrounded by all the many things my successful career in prostitution has let me afford, wondering about it. But I am nonetheless certain that I have made the right career decision and one for which I have been amply rewarded. How can something be wrong if it brings such great satisfaction?"

Ana had heard that argument put forward before, but by Binta in justification of the love she and Ana shared. This recognition only added to the confusion she felt. She looked down at her small hand wholly swamped by the firm round fat of her hostess. She turned her gaze to look directly at Bezaffa, who was smiling at her in a curious way, her eyes betraying an interest that puzzled her.

"I'm frightened of men," Ana confessed. "I just don't know what to think about them. And I'm even more frightened of the thought that, as a prostitute, I wouldn't know who I'd be making love to on any day. Men are so intimidating. I'm so afraid."

“Indeed, you must be!” smiled Bezaffa kindly. She eased her arm around to grasp Ana more firmly around her furthest shoulder and brought her round to rest in her voluptuous breasts. “You mustn’t be so scared. Familiarity is all you need. They’re not so bad, really. You must believe me, cherry. Men are not demons!”

Ana felt swamped by the massive wealth of Bezaffa’s bosom, but found it at the same time so very comforting and reassuring. With little prompting, she put her arms around as much of Bezaffa’s waist as she could and held on while her hostess gently stroked her hair. Ana felt one of Bezaffa’s monstrous nipples press hard against her ear through the thinness of the dress and listened intently to the gentle heaving of Bezaffa’s breath, which pressed her bosom against the contours of her face.

“You’re such a sweet, ... such a pretty ... little dear, aren’t you, cherry?” remarked Bezaffa in a strangely contorted voice. “So pretty. So vulnerable. So delightful.”

She lifted Ana’s chin off her bosom and gazed into her eyes. Ana was charmed by their pale blueness, the softness of the cheeks and Bezaffa’s tiny little nose, so dwarfed by the folds of her dimpled skin. She smiled deeply, feeling a warmth transmit itself through her skin and into the very depth of her soul.

She didn’t know how that smile did it, but it became the inevitable prelude to a passionate kiss with her hostess, full on the mouth, which unbalanced the two of them, causing them to roll over on to the length of the sofa, Bezaffa’s tongue deep inside her mouth and her hands gradually shedding her clothes. Bezaffa’s own dress came off with the barest of difficulties revealing a body of incredible whiteness and fullness. It somehow seemed so natural. So right. Perhaps it was the alcohol. Perhaps it was a deeper longing inside her. Ana, in a sense, didn’t want to know. All she knew

and all she cared was that she was enjoying another woman's body with just as much pleasure as, and just maybe more than, she enjoyed Binta's.

21

The pain in Ana's head pulsed hard against her forehead and brought a flush of sweat to her cheeks and brow. She opened her eyes gradually, blinking in the additional pain inflicted on her sensitive constitution by a bright shaft of sunlight illuminating the bedroom and shining on the satin sheets that covered her legs and the mattress beneath her. Where was she? What was this strange bed?

Suddenly aghast, she remembered details of the night before and her lovemaking with Bezaffa. How could she? How could Binta ever forgive her? How had she allowed herself to be so led? It must have been the alcohol. She looked around the room. It was empty, but from a room further down the corridor she could hear the sound of a man talking on the radio and the relentless hum and roar of a washing machine. How much had she had to drink? This unpleasant nauseous feeling in her head and noxious sharp taste in her mouth must be what was known as a hangover.

The nausea rose inside her chest, making her belch in a revolting way that brought small fragments of digested food to the back of her mouth. She placed a hand on her chest to restrain herself, but it got no better. Indeed, a sharp pain focused itself between her eyes, sweat burst out on her forehead and her stomach burst into an unpleasant life of its own. She realised with horror that this was a prelude to being sick. God! Where was the toilet? She must get there before she soiled the sheets. She jumped out of the bed, covering her mouth with her hand and dashed naked into the corridor. She looked up and down its length, and saw a door marked by a small floral plaque which she somehow remembered as Bezaffa's toilet. She ran in, knelt down in

front of the latrine and spent several uncomfortable minutes relieving herself of surprisingly little vomit. She coughed and spluttered, the small foul-tasting solids she'd brought up refusing to be dislodged from her mouth.

She eventually felt able to leave the bathroom and gingerly eased the door open to see Bezaffa, in a voluminous silk dressing gown, standing by the kitchen where the sounds of the radio and washing machine came from.

“Are you all right, love?” she asked with a tone of concern.

Ana nodded, covered as much of her breasts and crotch as she could with her hands and ran back into the bedroom to look for her clothes. They weren't there. Not on the floor. Not on the chair. Ah! They must still be in the living room, she thought, hurriedly dashing out of the bedroom to come straight up against Bezaffa who had wandered down the corridor towards her bedroom.

“My clothes...” she explained embarrassedly, vainly trying to disguise her immodesty.

“They're in the wash, dearest.”

“The wash?”

Bezaffa smiled. “You probably don't remember, you poor little child. You were terribly sick last night. All over your clothes! So, I've put them in the washing machine...”

“But what do I wear? I can't stay like this!”

“Nonsense, Ana. There are no secrets between us anymore. You don't have to hide your pretty assets from me!”

Ana wasn't at all convinced. “I *must* put something on.”

Bezaffa took Ana by the shoulders and pulled her close to her breasts. She

gently kissed Ana on the cheeks and lips, while firmly pushing Ana's arms down.

“Don't be such a silly! You can't put on your clothes until they're clean, can you? And anyway, how is your current nudity any different to that which I got to know so very intimately last night? Don't trouble your pretty head about them. Do you want some breakfast?”

Ana shook her head. “I don't think I could. I'm sure I'd just be sick again.”

“You might be right,” remarked Bezaffa thoughtfully. “How about some coffee and orange juice? That'll make you feel better. I'll get some paracetamol as well. Your head must be really splitting. You really aren't used to alcohol are you, cherry?”

Ana had no spirit to argue, so she allowed Bezaffa to lead her to the living room and sat naked in the sofa while her hostess disappeared into the kitchen again. Out of sight from her hostess, she was more able to relax and concentrated her miserable thoughts on how she had betrayed her trust to Binta. She must never know! It had been such a ghastly mistake. It was all the fault of the whisky. She would never have succumbed otherwise. All she wanted to do was collect her clothes and return home. She bent her head down to examine her sore and powdery crotch. She would run the bath water, and just lie in it until the water was cold and every last vestige of her transgression washed away.

Bezaffa returned to the living room carrying a tray with several glasses and cups on it. She placed it down on the coffee table, her dressing gown parting slightly to reveal her own nakedness underneath. Ana blushed at the thought of the close intimacy with it she had so recently enjoyed. She was no better than a slut, she reflected with self-hatred. Bezaffa handed Ana a glass of water and two powdery

tablets, which were gratefully taken and swallowed with almost the whole of the glass of water in a series of very rapid gulps. She wasn't sure whether it was the water or the tablets which began to relieve her nausea and the dryness in her mouth.

She smiled gratefully at Bezaffa and picked up the glass of fruit juice, holding it in two hands, her body crouched forward.

“Feeling better, dear?”

Ana nodded, and was about to reply, but was abruptly halted by the sound of the doorbell which rang through her weakened frame in agonising spasms of dread. Who could this be? Bezaffa silently got up and wandered into the hallway at the end of the corridor, while Ana relaxed slightly. It must be the postman or someone like that, she reasoned. She needn't feel so alarmed by just a doorbell.

However, her fears seemed well-justified when she overheard the sound of women's voices of which one was clearly Bezaffa's, and the other she wasn't at all sure. Perhaps just a friend of Bezaffa's. Surely she wouldn't let this woman into the living room. She became aware however that this was exactly what Bezaffa was going to do.

“She's a little worse for wear!” Bezaffa remarked with a chuckle. “And her clothes got into a frightful state. She just couldn't hold her drink at all!”

“And she's in here, is she?” the other woman replied.

Ana's heart leaped violently into her throat. She grasped the largest cushion on the sofa she could find and huddled it against her chest in the hope that it would afford her some modesty. It was Khedra! What was she doing here?

Khedra strode into the room, wearing what must have been her casual clothes, but still very smart for that. A silk blouse and tight trousers which came short of her

calves. Her hair was tied back in a green bow.

“Hello, Ana dear. Bezaffa told me you might be here. And goodness me! Not a stitch on you! Indeed, just like your friend, Binta.”

Ana nodded slightly, her cheeks red and a fresh flush of nausea rushing to the back of her eyes. “I’m terribly sorry. This must be very embarrassing!”

“Not at all!” replied Khedra with a broad grin. “I’ve often wondered what you might look like underneath your office uniform. And I must tell you, I’m not at all disappointed. You’re a very pretty young girl. You may even be an Alpha Minus. Undeniably a Beta Plus.”

“I’m neither of those things!” Ana retorted bitterly. “I’m a secretary. Those grades don’t mean anything to me.”

Khedra twisted her lips into a crooked smile and without a word lowered herself into the sofa opposite Ana. She had a briefcase and a robust plastic carrier bag overflowing with bulky items which she placed on the cushions beside her.

“An Alpha Minus for appearance definitely,” remarked Bezaffa amiably to Khedra. “And if her performance is as good for more normal activity as it is for the more exotic variants, I’d say a Beta Plus there at least.”

Ana’s eyes opened wide. What was Bezaffa saying? Wasn’t she confessing to Khedra what they’d been doing? Why was she doing that? She looked up at Bezaffa with alarm, who nonetheless smiled at her amiably. “Drink your coffee, dear. It’ll make you feel much better. It’ll certainly wake you up.” She grinned conspiratorially at Khedra. “Ana really didn’t get that much sleep last night, you know!”

“What an active girl!” Khedra remarked approvingly. “That’s what we like in our girls. Stamina! Technique comes with practise, but stamina is rarely improved on.

Have you got any coffee for me, Bezaffa sweetheart?"

"Why, of course," said Bezaffa, rushing off to the kitchen abandoning Ana to Khedra, who leaned back in the sofa, smiling contentedly and with amusement at Ana's obvious plight.

"You really mustn't think I'm bothered about your modesty, Ana. I see working girls every day in all states of undress and quite often in activities far more immodest than nudity in itself could ever be. If your clothes are in the washing machine, that's quite sufficient to me. I would never construe your nudity as an invitation of any kind." Khedra scratched the back of her head. "And anyway, I don't share your predilections, dearest. The law is quite wasted on me."

Ana looked down at her bare feet on the carpet. If only Khedra would leave. If only she could leave. She was so embarrassed. Perhaps if she looked away from Khedra long enough, this humiliation could end.

"And you still won't consider part-time work in the Brothel, dear?" Khedra wondered, taking no notice of Ana's attempts to ignore her. "Or perhaps our delightful hostess has convinced you otherwise. Surely, she's told you of the very many advantages of it. Has she, Ana? Tell me. Don't pretend you can't hear me!" Ana raised her head and glared at Khedra. Go away! Her thoughts commanded. "Goodness! Such a mean stare! You don't like me talking to you about these things, do you? Did you like it more when Bezaffa spoke to you about it? Answer me. Did she speak to you?"

Ana nodded.

"And have you changed your mind?"

Ana shook her head.

“Well!” sighed Khedra. “You *are* a stubborn girl, aren’t you? Quite willing to break the law when it suits you, but not willing to gain honest extra employment!”

The doorbell rang again. It echoed through Ana’s numbed skull and jolted a spasm from her throat which again threatened to introduce undigested matter into her mouth. She swallowed hard, and looked anxiously towards the door. She was horrified to hear the sound of a man’s voice when Bezaffa opened the front door. Her horror was further exacerbated when she recognised the voice as belonging to her boss, Mr Madir. What was he doing here?

Bezaffa escorted him into the living room, carrying another tray holding three cups of coffee. Ana realised with another shock that both the Director and Khedra had been expected. Why was that? Had it anything to do with her being there?

“Well, m’dear!” remarked the Director, bareheaded but wearing a suit, carrying with him the sweet smell of cigarette smoke. “Fancy meeting you here! And so delightfully turned out, don’t you think, Bezaffa? I told you I thought she’d have a good pair of tits on her. Not as truly magnificent as yours, but good all the same. If you like them small and pert that is!”

Ana hid her breasts as well as she could, and felt utterly humiliated. She was imprisoned behind the cushion she grasped to her chest, and quite incapable of standing up and leaving the room.

“What are *you* doing here?” was the only response she could muster.

“Is that the best way in which you can greet me? I must say, Ana m’dear, you haven’t learnt the respect that a man of such a position as I has come to expect. Perhaps your dykish tendencies have also perverted your sense of respect and good manners. And take that silly cushion off your lap. If you think, m’dear, that you’ve got

something to hide I've never seen before you are most sorely mistaken.”

“Don't be so hard on the girl,” remarked Khedra amiably. “She's not used to meeting men in the buff...”

“Doesn't stop her hanging around with Binta or Ketaba, does it?” sneered the Director. He sat on the sofa next to Khedra and took a cup of coffee from the tray. He took three or four teaspoonfuls of sugar from a sugar bowl, and stirred them vigorously in his cup. “So, Ana m'dear, here we all are! Such a delightful gathering don't you think? And you so well turned out, if you don't mind me saying so. Couldn't find your knickers, then?”

“They're in the wash,” Bezaffa explained. “She was very sick last night.”

“Too much booze, eh? Honestly, m'dear, if you're going to break yet another law of this land, you really should ensure you've got the stomach for it.” He stubbed his cigarette out in an ash tray that Bezaffa placed in front of him. “So, m'dear, I dare say you're wondering why we're here?”

Ana stared at her boss. What *was* the reason? She couldn't find enough of her voice to confirm his conjecture. She nodded her head.

“I like a challenge, m'dear. That's the truth of it. I don't like things to be too easy. It doesn't give me enough pleasure. It's better to climb a mountain than a hill, as they say. When I'm confronted with a challenge, I'll persevere. I won't give up. Inta, your predecessor, was a challenge at first, but in the end she succumbed all too easily. Much more easily than you, m'dear, I'll give you that.” The Director took his silver cigarette case out of his waistcoat pocket and carefully inserted a cigarette into his cigarette holder. He lit it with his petrol lighter and asked Bezaffa, while puffing out a fresh cloud of grey smoke: “And was our little prude a challenge for you last night?”

“Not at all!” Bezaffa chuckled, glancing at Ana with a smile lacking the friendliness she’d previously associated with her hostess. “A couple of drinks. That’s all it took!”

“A real dyke slut!” sniffed the Director contemptuously. “Keeps her legs crossed for the men, but opens them wide to a pretty woman! Well, Bezaffa m’dear, you certainly won that wager, eh? No flies on you, eh? And what do you reckon of our little piece of dyke fluff. Good performance rating?”

“Not bad!” Bezaffa confirmed. “Not bad at all! Good appearance, too!”

“I can see that! Well, almost see it. How long are you going to keep that cushion on your lap, m’dear? Do you really think it makes the blindest bit of difference to me whether I see your furry mound or little titties? I’d abandon it if I were you.”

The cushion was the only friend Ana had in the room and she was loath to lose what little protection it afforded her. She shook her head vehemently.

“Anyway, m’dear, I like a challenge. I’d like to see you participate more fully in the work of the Brothel. And now that you have demonstrated to darling Bezaffa that you aren’t at all the tight-arsed virgin you pretend to be, I really don’t see now why you shouldn’t do so. Khedra has quite kindly brought along with her literature and other material that might persuade you to do your bit and work part-time in more active service in the Brothel’s interest. Isn’t that so, Khedra m’dear?”

“Indeed it is!” announced Khedra, placing the briefcase onto her lap and decisively snapping open its locks. The briefcase opened to reveal glossy brochures and booklets. “I have here the training manuals and information we supply to all our recruits, with particular emphasis on what the Brothel offers to part-timers and what in

return the Brothel expects from them. I think you'll agree it's a very attractive offer. One that you really would be a fool not to accept."

She pulled out the literature and laid it carefully on the table. Ana looked at the remarkably coy covers. They showed photographs of prostitutes, some of whom she recognised, in their work clothes, greeting clients and chatting amiably among themselves. Khedra picked one up and handed it to Ana who took it in her hands and resting the cushion against her tummy flicked through the pages. This one was rather more informative than any literature she'd seen before on the subject, showing women with rather more of their bodies on display than she'd ever before in her life seen in print. The chapters had headings like: Greeting the Client, Anticipating a Client's Wishes and Personal Health and Hygiene. She flicked through the pages feeling alternate flushes of heat and shivers as she imagined herself in such positions.

"I couldn't possibly!" she remarked. "Never. Never."

"Come on, m'dear," continued the Director. "It's not as bad as you seem to think. If it were, then nobody would ever do it. It's just a job. Wouldn't you agree, Bezaffa?"

"It is. And a good one at that! You really ought to think more seriously about it, Ana. It'd do you no harm at all. And the money's very good."

"Have you seen the rates, Ana?" asked the Director.

Ana nodded.

Khedra elaborated: "I've been through all that with her. She knows how attractive it is."

"And she knows that in addition she can easily more than double her income with gratuities from grateful clients. You could be rich, m'dear. You could very soon

be able to afford a house nearly as nice as Bezaffa's. You're young. You're pretty. A bit of hard work and you'll soon see the benefits. You could have foreign holidays, buy a car, go to the opera - you'll have more money than you'll know how to spend. What do you think, m'dear? Would you like to take the opportunity that's laid out in front of you?"

Ana bowed her head down and pinched her forehead which had started aching again. The painkillers' effect seemed to have totally evaporated. All she wanted was to get away. "I don't want to. I just won't."

"You get excellent backup service," Khedra recommended. "Frequent checkups. Sick leave. Maternity leave. A crèche if you wanted it..."

"She won't need that!" snorted Mr Madir. "Dykes don't have babies. They're frigid. It's scientific fact."

"Maybe," responded Khedra sceptically. "Anyway, Ana, sweetheart, there is really nothing to worry about. Frequent counselling. Training to improve your performance rating. Advice to maximise the quality of your appearance. And these in turn will maximise your earning potential. And for someone like you that could be quite significant." She turned to face Bezaffa. "Would you say she's technically intact?"

Bezaffa nodded. "Pure as the driven snow. Technically."

"We can of course confirm that in the standard medical. That in itself is an asset of quite inestimable value, Ana m'dear. Your first takings could set you up very nicely. There is a large demand, wholly impossible to fully satisfy, for the right species of inexperience, Ana. You have done well if you have indeed maintained your internal intactness, for which there is a considerable bonus and, no doubt, quite a

sizeable gratuity from any client who enjoys your première performance.”

“And the gratuities are tax free, m’dear. The Brothel has an unofficial policy of passing a blind eye on any such extra income. It is believed that it adds extra stimulus to the quality of service provided and improves staff morale...”

“...And much of it gets returned in the form of purchases from the staff shop,” added Khedra. “The goods on offer being very much in demand in the service of the client.”

“So, Ana m’dear, what do you say?”

“No. No. Absolutely not!” Ana spluttered, a fresh rush of nausea rushing to her head. She pushed back her head in the hope that it would subside, but instead her stomach began to heave with a mind of its own. Her eyes flooded with tears as she reflected on her humiliation and helplessness. A salty trail trickled down her cheeks.

“I think the poor girl’s going to be sick,” remarked Bezaffa. “I’ll take her to the bathroom.” She leaned over and put a comforting soft arm around Ana’s shoulders. “Come along, Ana dear. It’s alright. Don’t you worry!”

Ana gazed up at Bezaffa with pitiful gratitude. She leaned against her hostess’s large soft body as she raised herself, the cushion clutched tightly to her breasts, and allowed herself to be led to the bathroom, averting her eyes from Mr Madir’s leering lecherous gaze. As soon as she was in the bathroom, she threw aside the cushion and flung herself onto the floor in front of the toilet bowl, leaned her elbows on the edge and coughed frantically to relieve herself of the vomit she felt must be waiting to emerge. She was quite disappointed to find none appear. Her sickness was more psychological than physical.

As she knelt there, Bezaffa tenderly stroked her bare back. “There there!” She

said reassuringly. “It’s nothing, see. Nothing at all. It’s just a hangover. People have them all the time in countries where alcohol is legal. Perhaps you can see now why President Marmeluke’s government has proscribed such poisonous substances in Alif.”

Ana stood up, certain now that there was nothing to be gained from her endeavours. “Why? Why?” she pleaded.

“Why what, sweetest?”

“Why am I being treated like this? What have I done? Why are Khedra and the Director tormenting me?” She wrapped her arms around Bezaffa, feeling again the warmth and softness of the body which had tempted her so fatefully the night before. A fresh gush of tears, partly stimulated by her efforts over the toilet bowl, released themselves onto her cheeks. She sniffed miserably.

“Oh, Ana. You’re getting it all wrong! Mr Madir and Khedra are not tormenting you. The idea of it! They’re simply explaining to you the advantages of part-time extra work in the Brothel. It’s really not that big a deal! And surely you must admit that there are plenty of good reasons why you should take the offer. It could truly make you quite rich.”

“Why can’t they understand I’m just not going to? I just couldn’t. Why don’t they leave me alone?”

“Well, there’s quite a premium commission for recruiting an attractive girl like you. Particularly one who’s still intact. I daresay the Director and Khedra wouldn’t mind sharing it between them...”

“And you too!” accused Ana bitterly. “Is it just for money then?”

“Well no, it isn’t! And you are most unfair to suggest that I comforted you last

night simply to share the commission. I really find that most offensive. Although I make love with men every day, it really is not often that I am tempted by the attractions of my own sex.”

“Is that so?” sniffed Ana. Perhaps she hadn’t just been used. Perhaps there was still some love and tenderness left in her world.

Bezaffa smiled indulgently. “Of course, Ana. You are a truly attractive young lady. I almost envy Binta. She’s succeeded in winning your love where many men have presumably tried and failed.”

“What do you know about Binta and me?” Ana sharply demanded.

Bezaffa looked a little put out by Ana’s direct accusation. “Nothing. Nothing. It’s just what I surmised, cherry. Nothing more. Come here, sweetest! You’re amongst friends.” She pulled Ana’s naked body to her chest and her pale blue eyes explored her face. Ana melted under Bezaffa’s gaze, as she smiled broadly and allowed her to take her mouth in hers and to once again sink her tongue inside. Bezaffa’s chubby dimpled hands caressed Ana’s smooth slim naked back and gently squeezed her buttocks. A warmth crept inside Ana’s chest, thoughts of fidelity to Binta forgotten in contemplation of the humiliation still waiting for her in the living room.

“Come come,” said Bezaffa softly. “We can’t possibly indulge here. Not with our bosses waiting for us in the living room!”

“I don’t want to go back in there!” Ana announced. “I don’t ever want to go back. Can’t I just leave now! Go home without facing them again!”

“Really, cherry! With no clothes! You’ll be arrested within minutes. Indecent exposure is a crime you know. You’ll just have to wait until your clothes are washed and dried.”

“Couldn’t I borrow some of your clothes?” pleaded Ana. “Then I’d be decent and I’d be able to escape.” That was all she wanted to do. Flee and return to her Jadid flat. She wanted her life to simply return to what it was. Her infidelity forgotten and she back snuggled in Binta’s arms.

“That really isn’t possible!” Bezaffa exclaimed with a dismissive chuckle. “My clothes are far too large for you. They would just drop off. You’re just a flimsy skinny rake in comparison to me.” She stood back, her arms outstretched and her hands still gripping Ana’s shoulders. “Look at me, sweetheart! Nobody could ever accuse me of being thin. I’m definitely not the delicate slender reed that you are! The idea of it!”

She pulled herself back onto Ana and caressed her face again with her tongue and lips. “But I’m naked!” Ana exclaimed.

“As I said, you’re amongst friends here. And anyway, cherry, you have nothing to be ashamed of. Your body is so beautiful and desirable. I could just eat you up!”

“I want to go home. I don’t like being seen like this!”

“Nonsense, dearest. Absolute nonsense. And anyway shouldn’t you at least listen to what Khedra has to say. After all she’s gone to an awful lot of trouble to come here and explain to you the advantages of part-time employment. Surely it’s only courtesy to listen.”

“I don’t want to. I’ve already made my mind up. And I’ve said so many many times before. Never never never!”

“You *are* a stubborn thing, aren’t you?” chuckled Bezaffa. “I can’t help but think that you’ve really just misrepresented things. There’s no plot to humiliate you or force you to do things you don’t want to do. You’re perfectly within your rights just to

listen and continue in your obstinacy. No harm will come to you, I'm certain. You surely can't blame Mr Madir and Khedra for trying to persuade you to do something which is so indubitably to your advantage."

"But I don't like them to see me naked!" Ana persisted.

"Oh well! Is that all!" sighed Bezaffa. She picked up the large white towel that hung from the electric towel rack and had been pleasantly warmed by it. "Do you want to cover yourself with this, then?"

Ana nodded. That would be better than nothing. Ana gratefully wrapped the towel around her breasts and held it in place with a large knot. It was not clothing, and Ana still felt very vulnerable, but it was so much better than nothing at all.

Bezaffa smiled amiably: her pale blue eyes shining seductively. "So now, cherry, you have no excuse for not coming into the living room and listening to what Khedra has to say."

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“Well well! No longer the naturist, m’dear!” jeered the Director, as Ana was sheepishly escorted back into the room by Bezaffa whose arm was firmly round her waist.

“Don’t mind Mr Madir,” said Khedra soothingly, frowning at her colleague. “We’re both very grateful that you have agreed to come back. This won’t take long. I’ve just been setting up a video for you to watch, so make yourself comfortable in the sofa next to Bezaffa and we can watch it.”

“Video?” wondered Ana, obediently sitting down and thankful for Bezaffa’s continued support and reassurance. She glanced at the video disc player underneath the television where an open plastic case lay by the carrier bag Khedra had brought along with her. The television showed a blue screen, blank except for a little number in the bottom right-hand corner.

“A training video,” Khedra explained. “We show it to all our new recruits. It’s part of the training routine and not normally shown to the public...”

“Although export sales are very healthy!” the Director remarked with a grin.

“Export sales?”

“Yes, Ana,” Khedra continued. “The Brothel is proud to be able to sell its products abroad. We are happy for institutions like ours to benefit from our high quality of training product...”

“And not just brothels,” interjected the Director. “The private market is *very* healthy.”

“And indeed it is,” agreed Khedra, “but Ana isn’t here to learn about the

Brothel's export initiatives. This video, and others like it, should reassure you that the services the Brothel provide are of a professional nature and we take a professional's pride in proper training, employee care and customer satisfaction. This video is called **A New Life** and it will show you what the life of a working girl, whether full or part time, can be like."

She picked up a remote control and pointed it at the video player. The disc began to whirl and the screen crackled into a chaos of interference. After a few seconds, the screen reorganised itself into an image of a smiling woman in her early thirties wearing an elegant jacket and skirt, carrying a briefcase and with the title of the film appearing over her head.

"A New Life," she echoed. "And that is the exciting challenge you have chosen. A life of great rewards - both material and social - but one which needs to be approached in the right way. And that is what this film will help you do, by outlining how to get the best out of your new career and at the same time provide your clients with the satisfaction they crave."

The video continued in this vein, as the woman, Muhathila Idrus, explained such important aspects of a prostitute's work as Courtesy to the Client, Being Prepared and Proper Hygiene. In all of this there was little to hint as to the actual nature of the service the prostitute provided. The only suggestions were the dress the prostitutes wore and the fact that all their clients seemed to be men: ones, in fact, astonishingly courteous, well-dressed and surprisingly good-looking. Ana had rarely seen clients such as these in the foyer of the Brothel when she came to work in the morning or when she went home. Most clients she saw were unprepossessing: badly dressed, often overweight, frequently balding and most often middle-aged. They were

usually far less courteous or thoughtful than those in the video who would unfailingly shake hands with the prostitute and smile in a welcoming way that made it seem as if it was the client who was providing the service rather than the prostitute.

The advice provided gave no insight into the concerns Binta expressed. Indeed it seemed more like common sense than anything else. The novice prostitute was advised to shower herself after every client's visit, tidy herself up and remove any off-putting odours that might trouble the next clients.

"After all," said Muhathila, standing by a shower with a girl wearing a towel quite as large as the one Ana was wearing, "your next client doesn't like to think that he isn't the first to have made your acquaintance that day. It's only courtesy. And as we have said before, courtesy is critical for success in your new career."

The video finished after nearly half an hour, with Muhathila once again repeating the film's key points. The Director looked extremely bored, preferring to thumb through the promotional literature rather than view the film itself. Khedra had a fixed expression on her face. She'd obviously seen the video many times herself, but kept a watchful eye on Ana.

"So what do you think?" she asked as synthesised incidental music twiddled over the credits. "You can see that the profession is really not so bad at all."

Ana sighed. "I know what it's like. I've spoken to people. I know people who work as prostitutes. It's nothing like what the video says it is."

"Of course, it is, Ana dear," Khedra insisted. "All the points made in the video are absolutely valid. As a prostitute you'd be a fool not to follow them."

"But I'm not a prostitute. And I never will be!" Ana insisted.

The Director sniffed. "She's right, you know," he said to Khedra. "It's not all

like that. Show her some of the harder stuff.”

Khedra glared at Mr Madir. “Not yet.” She turned back to address Ana. “Life as a prostitute isn’t all work, you know. There are plenty of fringe benefits.” She walked over to the video player, removed the video disc and replaced it in its case. “And you will be making a lot of money.” She selected another video disc from her bag and slipped it in the video machine. “This will tell you about the career prospects and advantages of the profession.”

“But I already know about them...” Ana protested.

“No harm in hearing about them again,” smiled Bezaffa, squeezing Ana’s arm affectionately. Ana nodded, but still believed she would feel happier when this ordeal was over and she could go home.

Khedra sat back on the sofa next to the Director, pointed the remote at the video disc and let it play. This one was called **In The Money** and featured another smartly dressed woman, this time in her early forties and with a habit of pulling documents out of an attaché case she carried around with her. Amongst other things, this video featured information on the classification system used in the Brothel, and how prostitutes could progress up to higher grades and better pay by paying sufficient attention to their appearance and performance.

A very pretty girl was featured in the Brothel gym practising on the equipment and then turning obediently to Mrs Zhunia, the presenter, to explain how through exercise, skin care and Brothel-sponsored surgery she had enhanced her rating from a Gamma Plus to an Alpha Minus, and how much difference it had made not only to her income, but to her self-esteem. Ana had never seen this girl in the Brothel and didn’t believe she was an actual employee, but even so she doubted whether it was humanly

possible to make such a leap in one's PAR. The general pattern was more often downwards through the grades, rather than upwards. Part of her function as a secretary was to forward complaints from prostitutes bitter at dropping a grade or so, and demanding reappraisal.

Other advantages of working as a prostitute were the facilities at the Brothel ("Free to employees but so expensive elsewhere!"), the pension scheme, staff discounts and favourable mortgage loans. Each one of these advantages appeared to give Mrs Zhunia a frisson of delight: "I really can't understand," she remarked at one stage in the video, "why I hadn't chosen this career myself!"

Ana was pretty sure, or felt she was sure, that she knew why *she*'d never opt for the career. The video made no reference at all to the kind of work the prostitutes did to deserve such good remuneration, and those featured were dressed in ways that were more appropriate for working in an office or walking in the park. The nearest suggestion was Mrs Zhunia's occasional reference to "working hard" or "not giving up", which implied that there was indeed some effort involved in attaining these lovingly specified luxuries.

"Well, did you learn anything from that?" asked Khedra hopefully as the video disc slid out on its drawer.

"Not really," admitted Ana, hoping that this was the last of her ordeal.

"What do you expect?" scoffed the Director. "She knows all that stuff. Show her the real thing, for goodness sake!"

Khedra sighed, but selected a video entitled **A Loving Profession**. "The Training Services Division of the Brothel tries to do the best for its trainees and part of this is to provide practical training for its recruits. We don't believe in just sending

out our working girls with no practical knowledge of what is expected from them. Much of this training is necessarily theoretical, particularly for those who are intact as you are, Ana dear. Videos are an invaluable tool for this, though of course we also provide demonstrations and some class work. This video is one of those we use to demonstrate techniques of customer care and is, I warn you, rather explicit.”

At first, Ana wasn't too sure what Khedra meant by this last remark. The video began very much like the last two except that the woman presenter was an anonymous figure who wasn't seen at all, but had a gruffness that suggested that she was neither young nor inexperienced. This time the prostitutes were featured in the kinds of work clothes Ana was more familiar with: a bizarre collection of underwear, stockings and lace. The clients were again untypically young and handsome, and when they bared their torsos, which they did fairly early on, revealed a musculature which few actual clients could ever lay claim to. It came as a shock though when the video proceeded towards its actual subject matter, as the clients removed all their clothes and the prostitutes removed their knickers and opened their legs.

Ana became aware that she was watching film of actual sexual intercourse. She had never seen videos which even featured nudity: the Alif government had made pornography illegal and possession of it was a serious offence. The display of genitalia or breasts was explicitly banned and even the hint of nudity would be excised from any film that dared to include it before it reached the cinema. Now Ana was seeing not just nudity but sexual acts which were explicit and graphic, filmed from angles that left absolutely nothing to the imagination. Curiously enough the prostitutes themselves could hardly be described as naked. Throughout the filming they retained their stockings, even their shoes, and it was rarely that their breasts were

revealed. But the breasts were not the main object of the camera's attention, as groins were pushed together in repetitive, even monotonous, thrusts.

There was a soundtrack over the top of this activity as the anonymous presenter explained exactly what was going on, how the prostitute was achieving certain effects and the results this provided for client satisfaction. Ana hardly heard it at all. Her eyes were transfixed at the horror at what she was seeing. At least it was horror when she first saw these images. So, that was what men and women did together. She was even more determined never to participate herself. However, after a while, she became inured to the sight of such physical sex. It was tedious, predictable and not at all erotic.

Bezaffa squeezed her arm tenderly. "See, cherry, there's nothing to it!"

Despite Ana's original disgust, she found she was beginning to agree with Bezaffa. There really didn't seem very much to it. She could even envisage herself, lying back, with her eyes closed, gritting her teeth and thinking about other things (just as Binta sometimes described it), while from a remote distance a man whom she might not even have to look at would do his humping backwards and forwards, until he lost his ability to continue and then leave. Perhaps, she thought with contempt, her fears were rather exaggerated. It was probably nowhere near as painful as she'd imagined, although the video didn't suggest to her that she'd ever actually enjoy it however much the women in the video seemed to be, by the evidence of their loud cries and simpering grins.

The Director watched the video with a disgusting leer across his face, clearly enjoying specific moments such as when a woman was first penetrated or took the client's organ into her mouth. Khedra wasn't even watching the video, being more

interested in reviewing a list of video titles she had on her lap. Ana looked round at Bezaffa, who grinned conspiratorially at Ana.

“It’s great fun, isn’t it? Don’t you think?” she said, hugging Ana affectionately across the shoulders and looking more at Ana than the current scene of oral sex filling every part of the video screen.

“Tempted now, m’dear?” asked the Director with a leer when the video finished, lighting the cigarette in his holder with his lighter.

Ana looked at Mr Madir contemptuously and shook her head adamantly. “Not at all!”

“But there’s nothing to it!” Khedra remarked. “There really isn’t! Just think how much you’ll be earning for really no effort at all.”

“It’s just not something I ever want to do! It’s horrible! Can’t I go now? I’ve seen more than enough. I just don’t want to do it!” She faced Bezaffa. “My clothes must be washed now. Can’t I just put them on and leave?”

“They’re still wet, cherry. You wouldn’t want to catch pneumonia. And anyway I’m sure that Khedra has more that she wants to show you.”

“I don’t want to see it. I haven’t changed my mind at all. All I want to do is go home and forget all these horrible things I’ve seen.”

The Director sighed loudly. He drew on his cigarette holder and emitted a large cloud of slightly bluish smoke. “I told you, Khedra m’dear, that soft sell wouldn’t work on our little virgin. We’ll have to switch to harder sell. A stick may work where a carrot fails.”

Khedra nodded, and knelt in front of her carrier bag where she pulled out a video tape. She turned on Bezaffa’s videotape player and slid the tape in. With a series

of clunks and whirrs it adjusted itself and the screen reorganised itself into the view of a prostitute's room, very similar to the one Binta lived in. There were no introductions or synthesised music. There was just a view of a woman whom Ana vaguely recognised with a client who in terms of age and physical attractiveness much more closely resembled those who actually came through the Brothel doors.

The Director leered and puffed out more smoke from his nostrils. "As you know, Ana m'dear, the Brothel provides each prostitute with a two-way mirror which enables potential clients to view those who are available at any time. This mirror is connected to the Brothel's intercom system and enables us to record the girls at work. This is invaluable in the appraisal of the girls in their work, and is a requirement by the government should there be any dispute in the award of grades. As a bonus this provides the Brothel with an additional source of export income in selling the film abroad to a market that likes to see actual, authentic footage. This video shows Jadida at work. She seems to be enjoying herself, don't you think, m'dear?"

A cold tremor passed through Ana's body. What did this portend for Binta and her? The film was very static, featuring none of the camera angles and close-ups which typified the previous videotape. Bezaffa grasped her more tightly, as if to prevent her leaving the room.

"Jadida's a pretty girl isn't she? Much your age, probably much the same grade as you'd gain, and a good example to us all. Now, Khedra, show our little friend tape of someone more familiar to her."

Khedra nodded. She ejected the video tape from the machine, which had only a handwritten sticker to identify it. She then slipped in another tape, which when it began showed a much larger white body, with legs high in the air being penetrated by

another unprepossessing client whose trousers were down to his knees and still wearing a shirt. Ana stared at horror at the client's hairy bottom, the prostitute's folds of fat and a face that repeatedly ejaculated cries clearly meant to express great joy and abandon. She then frowned at Bezaffa who smiled at her in a curiously conspiratorial way.

"Yes, m'dear," the Director affirmed. "Your latest belle, Bezaffa, at play. Or should I say, at work. Watch and learn."

Ana watched in horror, blood draining from her face as she contemplated the repeated thrusts and then the horror and disgust as Bezaffa, still apparently enjoying all that was happened lowered her head to a lower part of the client's body and proceeded to exercise her mouth in a way that was explicit and frightening.

"How could you?" Ana accused.

"Easy!" laughed Bezaffa good-humouredly. "You ought to try it. It's good fun! There can't be many jobs where you get paid so well for doing something you enjoy!"

"I just *couldn't* enjoy doing that!" Ana insisted. "It's obscene! Vulgar! Disgusting!" She stood up abruptly. "Turn it off! Just turn it off! I don't want to see any more. I've seen enough. That's enough!"

"Surely not, m'dear!" the Director laughed, lighting another cigarette. "There's *so* much more to see! You can't leave us now." He smiled cruelly, letting a cloud of cigarette smoke rise slowly from his nostrils and followed it up with a gaze. He then looked directly into Ana's eyes causing her to blink with fear and trepidation. "Jadida and Bezaffa aren't the only two girls we've filmed at work. No way! We have film of Zabba, Ketaba, even darling Khedra here. It's totally routine you know. Every working girl is filmed at work. In fact, there's so much recorded on video that of

course we never get the opportunity to see more than the smallest fraction of it. Just what we might be interested in. Compiling export tapes is quite a tiring job I can tell you - and I'm glad it's a duty that has never fallen to me." The Director sucked in on his cigarette holder, the embers sparking at his inhalation. "As I say, every working girl's every working moment is recorded and stored, even if it may never get seen. Khedra and I, we usually only get to see them when an export tape has been compiled or if we have particular reasons to review the performance of any individual girl. Khedra m'dear, show a video which will especially interest Ana. One that features a girl whose performance has recently caused us considerable concern as a result of some rather less than complimentary comments from her clients."

Ana drew her breath in. She had a very good idea who this girl might be, but she hoped - so much! - that it wasn't. But as the video was inserted and began, she could see that her fears were confirmed. The girl receiving the frequent and rhythmic pelvic thrusts of the paunchy middle-aged man with a large bald spot in his hair and responding with occasional gasps and cries, was immediately distinguishable from all the other prostitutes she'd seen on video in that she wore no clothes at all. Her long hair, the dark green eyes and the face, occasionally obscured by the body of the man lying on top of her, could only belong to Binta. At first Ana tried convincing herself that it was someone else: another person in the Brothel who looked like her, but Ana knew Binta too well. She knew every small detail of her lover's body. And this was clearly, indubitably and horrifyingly, Binta.

"So, m'dear," sneered the Director, "this is your dyke friend. Or is she a dyke? She doesn't seem to mind it so much, does she? I'd say she was actually enjoying it, wouldn't you? And look! She's giving the client just what he wants with her mouth.

Look at that tongue! Look at those active fingers! Just *what* were those clients complaining about, I wonder. Binta's not a girl who shies from her duty, eh? And listen to those cries. They certainly suggest to *me* someone who's having a good time. Maybe she's not such a dyke after all!"

Ana stared in wordless and silent horror. It was Binta! It really was! And maybe she was enjoying it. Maybe she was pretending to, just to persuade the man to finish as soon as possible. But it appeared that she was enjoying it. That horrid, disgusting man and his filthy misshapen appendage! Could it be that Binta really *did* enjoy her work?

The video switched to a scene of another man, quite skinny and gaunt, enjoying her in much the same way as the first, with Binta lying on top of him, her mouth hidden as her fingers worked at his trouser top but her head bobbing up and down, suggesting attention the thought of which left a very unpleasant taste in Ana's mouth. She turned her gaze away and looked into Bezaffa's eyes which were fixed on her.

"Is Binta *really* enjoying it?" she whispered.

Bezaffa grinned broadly. "It's impossible to say, cherry. She's a professional. She's got to look like she enjoys it. But I'd say, yes. She does seem to be enjoying it. Those are pretty genuine little cries of passion, don't you think?"

Ana turned her head back to the screen. Binta did seem to be making rather a lot of noise. And it did seem to come bit by bit to a climax, the sound of which was so familiar, so achingly familiar, and one which until now she had unreservedly believed her own property and the fruit of her own endeavour. And all that strange viscous liquid that engorged itself all over Binta's face and breasts. If Binta enjoyed it,

perhaps Ana could do so too. What meaning was there to her fidelity to Binta, if her lover felt free to express her passion so freely and promiscuously? Ana's eyes swelled with tears and her cheeks smarted as they seeped soundlessly onto her face.

"Crying are we, m'dear?" laughed the Director. "Find the truth a little difficult to accept, do you? Don't worry, we have more to show. Much more. You see, the camera doesn't merely record when Binta is working. Oh no! There's no such discretion in the Brothel, - though of course generally there's precious little of the remotest interest to see most of the time when a girl is off-duty. Washing her hair; reading books; chatting to friends; sleeping: none of these are activities which could interest us nor, it need be said, any of our potential export market. And anyway with a fixed mirror, so much is out of frame. Everything that is, except what goes on in the bed." Mr Madir smirked. "Show Ana one of our unofficial recordings, Khedra m'dear."

Khedra nodded. "If you think it's for the best..."

"It is! It is!" Ana's boss assented.

Khedra ejected the video tape while Ana wrapped herself around Bezaffa, the most comforting object in the room. How could Binta enjoy all those horrid men? *Was* she enjoying what they were doing to her? And what she was doing to them? Bezaffa gently stroked Ana's back, as her tears soaked into her dressing gown and dampened her ear as it pressed hard against the breast. Khedra pushed in another video tape and Ana watched out of the corner of her eye as it jerked into action. It was then that she got another very horrid shock. There was Binta again: quite clearly enjoying the sexual attention of another person. But that other person, seen from such a strange angle, and quite as active in lovemaking as Binta herself: it was someone

very familiar, but curiously not familiar at all.

Ana had never seen a film of herself before, except in the video screens of security cameras in the malls of Blad. And in those cases, she'd been fully clothed and really doing nothing more than walking past, looking to one side of the camera, as the screen would be in a quite different location to the lens. Here though was that same curious sensation of self-recognition, but this time in positions and poses she'd only briefly viewed in the same mirror which had recorded her in her sexual play. She breathed in deeply, her eyes swelling with shock and fear.

"I need not tell you, m'dear, how the law of this land views such sexual transgressions as this. It's a serious offence, punishable as you know by imprisonment or, if you are *very* lucky, penal servitude in the same august institution where you currently earn a living. As you can see, Khedra and I have here rather undeniable evidence of your criminal activity. That *is* you, isn't it, enjoying yourself in such a disgusting if rather titillating way. And dear me! There really doesn't appear to be any evidence of reluctance on your part, m'dear. You *really* do seem to be a willing party to all this behaviour. My goodness! Just look at that! Don't the two of you seem to be having *such* a good time! What have you got to say, m'dear? It *is* you there, isn't it?"

The naked Ana on the video tape chose this moment to look directly into the mirror, her head emerging from between Binta's legs with a strange wild expression that the Ana in Bezaffa's living room had never seen on herself before. Seen like this there really seemed no difference between this Ana and the women she'd seen making love to men on the other video tapes. Ana nodded, looking towards the video, squeezing Bezaffa's chubby white hand so tightly that blue marks rose on the soft white skin.

“What are you going to do?” she asked through a voice that emerged from deep inside a hollow breast. Her heart pounded hard inside her chest and her stomach fluttered with a fear that promised to erupt into a fresh outpouring of vomit from her raw punished throat. “Are you going to have me arrested?”

The Director smiled grimly and triumphantly. “In a court of law this would be pretty well conclusive evidence - wouldn’t you say? - of misdemeanours which attract quite harsh penalties. Not just for you, of course, although I daresay your main concern is quite understandably yourself. What would an unsympathetic judge and jury think of someone indulging in such filthy behaviour with a known lesbian? But it is also of concern, of course, to your dyke friend, Binta. She would not be let off easily. A second offence committed while serving a sentence for the first. She may never again emerge a free woman. Dearie me! That would be sad, wouldn’t it, m’dear?”

“What do you want me to do?”

“I’d have thought that was fairly obvious from all the hard work that dear Khedra has been putting in on your behalf. The administration of the Brothel - Khedra and I - is quite willing to turn a blind eye on your criminal transgressions, if you are ready to show yourself willing to compromise on our behalf. And Khedra has already spelt out the great advantages of working part-time in such a capacity. You really have nothing to lose by taking up our generous offer. And I really do not need to spell out the penalty of non-cooperation.”

“You mean I have to work as a prostitute? A whore? Have strange men see me every day?”

The Director smirked. He pulled a cigarette out of his cigarette case and

tapped it a few times on the silver exterior. “Describe it how you like, m’dear. But essentially, yes. A little bit of effort on your behalf and we’ll never mention your criminal acts to anyone.”

Ana leaned forward, tears gushing from her eyes and her mouth forming such ugly shapes as she confronted her helplessness. “What shall I do? What can I do? Can’t anybody help me?”

Bezaffa stroked Ana comfortingly on the back, and then bent her head down and nuzzled it against Ana’s own. “You know the answers, sweetest. You really do not have any choice. Not really! And it’s not such a bad choice. Not a bad choice at all! Either imprisonment and stigma for you (and worse for sweet little Binta!) on the one hand; and riches and rewards for such little pain on the other. You really have no choice. Just say yes! Sign the forms darling Khedra has provided and you need worry no more.”

Ana looked closely into Bezaffa’s face which was so close to her: the pretty blue eyes, the smooth round face, the sympathetic smile. A sudden rush of hatred and loathing shook her slender frame, flushing her forehead with an exhilarating heat of passion.

“You betrayed me!” she exclaimed with a sudden appalled insight. “Betrayed me!”

She pushed herself off Bezaffa, throwing herself down on the length of the sofa, hardly caring as the towel fell off her breasts and revealed herself nearly as naked as the cheerful and ecstatic image of herself on the television engaged so passionately with Binta. Ana didn’t care. Her humiliation was nearly as complete as it possibly be. What difference did a little more make? Bezaffa sounded hurt by the

accusation.

“I didn’t betray you, cherry. I didn’t. What we have done together...”

“I hate you! I hate you! You betrayed me! You used and abused me! You took advantage of me!”

“Bezaffa hasn’t betrayed you, Ana darling,” Khedra remarked, kneeling amongst the video tapes and with a touch of sympathetic emotion in her voice. “If anything, she has compromised herself. She didn’t know about these videos any more than you. If anyone betrayed you, it was you. With your naïveté and blatancy. Don’t think we didn’t notice you and Binta: always together, and you staying overnight in the Brothel. You really could have been a lot more discrete, you know. It was just a matter of time. You know that!”

“It’s not right! It can’t be right! I’ve done nothing wrong! Nothing! It’s love! That’s all! Love! We’re in love, Binta and I. Why must it be condemned? It can’t be right, when something so true and good and pure and wonderful between us ... Waaahhh!” Ana cried in helpless agony, resting her tear-strewn face on her palms, elbows supported on her knees, and the raw red wound of her face and emotions spilling drops of despair onto her breasts and the towel over her thighs. “I’ve been betrayed! Betrayed!”

The Director placed his unlit cigarette into the holder and with a grandiloquent gesture lit it with his lighter. He puffed out a large cloud which ascended into the already smoke-filled air and gradually descended in a grey-blue mist over Ana’s bare shoulders.

“Talking of betrayal, m’dear,” he commented in slow even terms, “there is more that we can show you. Your dyke lover is really no saint - not that anyone has

ever accused her of being so. You really should have chosen your friends much more carefully you know.”

Ana raised her head and glared at the Director. “What are you saying about Binta?”

“Show her Khedra!” commanded Mr Madir, leaning back with a contented and malevolent grin on his face. “Show what a little angel Binta can be.”

Khedra sighed reluctantly, but obediently ejected the video tape of Binta and Ana, and slipped in another. Ana looked at the screen with sore red eyes, a trail of clear salty snot emerging from her left nostril and sneaking into her mouth. She huddled up out of reach from Bezaffa who sat in discomfort at the other end of the sofa. The video whirred and clanked into motion and then the screen flickered into focus.

It was Binta again. That Ana was sure. She’d now seen enough of Binta on video tape to be certain that it was her lover. And, again, she was with someone. And this time it wasn’t Ana. But she was making love, with the same visible passion that she’d just witnessed in the last video. And she wasn’t making love with a client. No client looked like that. Not so slender, young ... or feminine.

Or black!

There was only one black person in the Brothel. There had, in fact, only been one black person that Ana had seen in her entire time in Blad. Black people were not native to Alif and very few indeed had ever ventured in at any time in its long turbulent history. The woman who was with Binta. And enjoying her caresses. And whose caresses were being enjoyed. This woman was undoubtedly Ferhana.

Ana stared and stared. It couldn’t be. It must be an illusion. It can’t be true.

But the black woman's face rose from the garden of Binta's beauty, as Ana's had in the earlier video, and stared directly into the mirror. It was Ferhana. Ana's eyes ached in disbelief and humiliation. Binta. With Ferhana!

“Now will you do the right thing, m'dear?” asked the Director kindly.

Ana stared back at the video as Ferhana and Binta stretched out on the long length of that familiar bed, their arms around each other and Ferhana's fingers where Ana believed no other woman should ever intrude. She squeezed shut her eyes. Go away! she whispered to herself. Don't be true! She opened her eyes, and focused through the salty film that had attached to her retina. It was still Ferhana and Binta. Together!

“What are you going to do, sweetest?” Khedra asked. “Will you volunteer to a bit of part-time work? It really won't do you any harm.”

Ana vigorously nodded her head. Her humiliation was complete. She didn't care that her breasts were uncovered or that her face was an ugly contorted tear-stained mess of misery.

“Yes!” she announced emphatically and despairingly. “Yes! Yes! I will! I'll do everything you say. Everything!”

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Ferhana was as puzzled as anyone by Ana's abrupt change of character and appearance. She no longer dressed in the smart modest clothes that made her stand out against the general style of the Brothel. Instead, she had taken to wearing a very short skirt, black stockings, torturously high heels and blouses that barely covered her navel and accentuated the lift of her supported breasts. Her hair was tied back and frizzled loose, and her face had become almost unrecognisable under a mass of rouge and mascara. She no longer stayed late in the Brothel, seeking out her friend Binta, and was very rarely seen even in the canteen where Ferhana had often met her together with Binta. When she was seen in the canteen, or even in the corridor, she was always escorted by either Khedra or the Pimple, and very occasionally more favoured prostitutes like Bezaffa.

She had seen a similar change in Ana's predecessor, Inta, but Ana's transformation was all the more shocking for its abruptness and how much it contradicted all that Ana represented before. It was rumoured that Ana had started seeing clients, just as Inta had done, something she had sworn so many times and so vehemently that she would *never* do. Binta never saw Ana anymore. Quite suddenly and with no warning, Ana just never sought her out and even went out of her way to avoid seeing her or as much as catch her eye. Ferhana knew that this unexplained schism in their relationship had troubled Binta immensely: she had withdrawn from sight, spending more and more time by herself or with her plot in the Brothel garden.

She was initially just rather annoyed, if resignedly, when the Pimple requested her - really, commanded her - to come to his office for what he termed a bit of

extramural entertaining, but she reasoned that these services she supplied on an occasional basis would bit by bit gain her the remission she sought. As she reasoned to herself, a little extra humiliation at this stage should result in a shorter overall sentence, and therefore bring much nearer the end of all her suffering. Whatever lies she had barefacedly expressed to Khedra or the Pimple, she had no intention whatsoever of prolonging her stay at the Brothel beyond the absolute minimum required. Ferhana was rather more shocked than irritated when she came into the office to find the Pimple with a frightened Ana, who was sitting uncomfortably on his knee while he crudely molested her breasts.

“Good afternoon, m’dear,” the Pimple said, with that cruel smile of his that Ferhana had seen so many times before and had learnt to fear. “You know Ana, don’t you? You’ve met her before, I believe.”

Ferhana nodded. What a stupid question to ask, although there might be a touch of truth in his sarcasm. Ferhana didn’t know Ana as she was now, in her long stockinged legs and the Pimple’s hands fondling the nipples beneath her blouse.

“Poor little Ana’s been doing a sterling job recently,” the Director continued, “entertaining clients and me, and assisting more materially in alleviating our constant employment problem of suitably attractive young ladies. But the poor girl’s not happy. Are you, m’dear?”

Ana silently and sullenly nodded, showing absolutely no evidence of enjoying her situation on her boss’s knee.

“And why do you think that is, Ferhana m’dear? Well, my opinion is that the poor child has had little opportunity to enjoy what she likes most. And do you know what that is, m’dear? You probably can as I know you are no stranger to its pleasures

yourself.”

What the Pimple wanted was for Ana and Ferhana to indulge in what he called ‘Sapphic play’ in his presence and quite clearly for his own perverse pleasure and enjoyment rather than from respect for Ana’s needs or desires. Ferhana had no choice in the matter, although it troubled her that the Pimple seemed to know about a feature of her own personality she thought she had kept fairly well hidden. As she and Ferhana enacted the scenario suggested by the Director, it became even more apparent to her that despite Ana’s show of pleasure - clearly learnt from the same induction course that she and every other prostitute had to endure - she was hating every single moment of it. There was a falseness and insincerity about her caresses that was so blatant to her, she wondered whether the Pimple would comment.

She looked at the Director, who had kept his trousers and underpants on for a change and puffed indulgently on a cigarette. It was then she realised that the pleasure their pretend lovemaking afforded him was far less to do with satisfying any sexual craving on his part, and more just an opportunity to see Ana humiliated. The very fact that Ana was getting so little pleasure out of the activity, appearing to loathe every part of it, was itself the greatest source of his enjoyment.

Ferhana orchestrated the activity to a premature climax, and with a few gestures and sympathetic smiles persuaded Ana to pretend to be similarly satisfied. The Pimple was clearly not convinced, but forbore any comment and allowed the two girls to get dressed.

“Well thanks very much, Ferhana m’dear!” the Pimple said, lighting another cigarette. “Who said niggers couldn’t do it just as well as anyone else? I daresay the two of you will want to rest now. Why not have an extended lunch, Ana, m’dear? The

letters I wanted you to take down can be done some other time.”

Ferhana and Ana left the Director’s office, and closed the door behind them. Ana gave vent to a sigh to express her relief of an ordeal survived, and almost immediately darted away from Ferhana, trotting on her high heels along the corridor.

“Wait!” cried Ferhana. “Wait for me!”

Ana turned her head round and glared at Ferhana with an expression of pure hatred that alarmed her. She had never believed the secretary was capable of such unadulterated loathing. Where had it come from? She hesitated a moment, but then thought better of her own feelings of insecurity and chased after Ana, taking off her impossibly uncomfortable shoes to catch up with her. She grabbed Ana by the arm.

“What is wrong? What is troubled you?” she asked.

“Take. Your Hand. Off. Me!” said Ana with a flash of unfeigned anger.

Ferhana withdrew her hand as if it had just been burnt on a hotplate. “Why are you so angry with me? I did not want to have ... It was not what I have wanted ... The Director, he ...”

“Leave me alone!” snapped Ana. “I don’t want to talk to you. And I *never* want to talk to you!”

“What have I done? It was not what I wanted ... I had no choice ... Please believe me!”

Ana paused in the corridor by a door with a red light shining above it, ignoring the masculine panting emanating from within.

“It’s not just what you did just now! Although that was bad enough.”

“What is it? Tell me, what I have done? Why are you so angry with me?”

Ferhana was genuinely upset by Ana’s outburst. “And why have you changed so very

much? Why do you dress like a prostitute? Why do you not see Binta anymore? What is wrong?"

"You should know!" exclaimed Ana angrily.

"Why should I know?" asked Ferhana, genuinely perplexed.

"Don't pretend you don't know! I know about you and Binta. I know how the both of you deceived me. I know all about it."

"About what?" Ferhana asked, gradually realising what it was that might be upsetting her. She and Binta had been so careful. They didn't want to hurt Ana. It was the last thing they wanted to do.

"I was shown a video of you and Binta. On the bed. I know what you did together. I've seen it! I was shown it by Khedra."

"Video? What video?"

"The video tape of you and Binta together. Making love. Filmed through the mirror in Binta's bedroom."

"The mirror? You are saying they tape what we do through the mirror?"

"Everything! And I've seen the videotape. I know how you and Binta have deceived me. Lied to me. Made a fool of me." Ana glared straight into Ferhana's eyes as she at last vocalised what Ferhana had suspected: "I hate you! I hate you and Binta! I hate you!"

Ferhana let her shoes drop to the floor with a clunk. She bowed her head down and cupped her face in her long black fingers, the red-tipped nails tangling in her short curly hair.

"The mirror! Through the mirror! They filmed us! They would not ... go so low! And you have seen us! Is that why...? Is that the reason for you to ...?"

As she raised her head, Ana saw tears on Ferhana's face, although she wasn't sure whether they were from remorse or from being found out. "I must explain to you. It is not what you think. I am not Binta's lover. She is my friend. My best friend at the Brothel. My closest friend. Perhaps my only true friend. But she is not my lover. She is your lover. It is you she loves..."

"Don't lie! What were you doing together if it isn't what lovers do?"

"I must explain. I must tell you. She loves you. Not me. I would be happy if it was me she loves. But it is you! You must believe..."

At that moment, the door opened behind them and a short balding man in jeans and tee-shirt emerged with the prostitute he had been seeing. Ana took the opportunity to walk off again, with a long stride that she hoped would shake Ferhana off, but the black girl showed no signs of allowing that to happen. She picked up her shoes and rushed after Ana on her stockinged feet.

"We must talk!" she urged. "We must! It is all a horrible ... It is something you do not understand too well. You must listen to me. Is it really because of what Binta and me have done that you ...?"

"Yes!" said Ana, not wholly truthfully, but in the malicious hope of branding Ferhana with the shame of her actions.

"But that is not right! Please, we must talk. Somewhere. Anywhere."

They were passing by the viewing gallery of the gymnasium, so Ana with unpremeditated cooperation pushed open its door. Inside there was the steady rhythm of a squash ball ricocheting against a wall.

"We'll talk here, shall we?"

Ferhana nodded as they entered, and they sat together in the seats above an

empty squash court. She laid her shoes on the seat beside her, and gazed directly into Ana's eyes.

"You must listen to me."

"Well, then!" said Ana, folding her bare arms and facing Ferhana defiantly.

"Explain!"

Ferhana was abashed by this command, but smiled sadly. "It is you that Binta loves. She loves you so much. And she is so very ... sad. She is unhappy. She cries all the time. She talks about you. Why do you not talk to her anymore? Why do you not see her anymore? She eats so little now. All she wants is to be with you again. It's not me she wants..."

"But she still makes love to you?"

"No. No. Not anymore. And not often did we ... It was my fault. I was so lonely. I am so lonely. I hate it here. I hate it nearly as well as Binta hates it. Because I am black and the only black person here, I am treated very bad by the ... They treat me like I am a monkey. Or an animal. And so many want to see me. More than most girls because I am ... because all the other girls are not ... And I am so unhappy. I only have God to help me. But God is not always with me. And sometimes I want other ... I want so bad ... And Binta. She is so beautiful. She is so kind. We talk together. And I have always liked ... just like you and Binta and Zabba ... It is women that ... And Binta is also my best friend here ... and ..."

"Binta was my lover!" Ana angrily exclaimed. "She was my first and only lover. And then you came and you took her away from me. You made love to her!"

Ferhana gazed into Ana's eyes, a tear running down the side of her cheek, agitatedly wringing her hands together. She disentangled one to stretch towards Ana's

own hands resting on her lap, but thought better of touching her as Ana glared antipathetically at her.

“You must understand, Ana, that Binta and I, we work in a Brothel. Every day we have to make love with men. Horrible men. Ugly men. Disgusting men. Perhaps you know now yourself...?”

Ana nodded. In the last few months she had learnt all too well what men were like, at least those who were clients in the Brothel, and she knew how repulsive most of them were. Any notion she might once have had of them in a more positive light, or even seriously entertaining the notion of romantic love with one, was now impossible to conceive.

“It is not normal. It is ... weird! It is not natural. It seems only right that ... When you have sex all day and you feel unhappy, it seems natural to ... Making love is not to Binta and I what it was like before... And sometimes it just seems right to comfort ourselves, not with words, not with a joke or a ... It just seems so ... It just happens and we may not like ourselves for it ... But it's not ...”

Ferhana bravely reached out a hand to Ana, tears dripping from her chin, and gazed at her with such sorrow that Ana reluctantly accepted her touch, but without warmth.

“Please, Ana. You must understand. You must believe. Binta loves you. She does not love me. I love Binta, but not like you love Binta. We did what we did, not because Binta loved me, but because ...” She squeezed Ana's hand firmly. “Because I wanted to. Because I want love in *my* life. Because Binta is the only person who ... the only person at all who ... I could love! And I'm sorry! Sorry! I didn't wish to harm you. Or hurt you. Or Binta. Or ...”

She removed her hand from Ana's and buried her face in her hands, tears seeping between her fingers, releasing short uncontrollable sobs and whines. Ana looked at the girl she thought she hated, and recognised that she really didn't hate her at all. The hatred she felt was really against the Brothel, the Director, President Marmeluke, the Republic of Alif, and everything else that had perverted and destroyed her love for Binta, and now systematically humiliated her in her rôle as part-time prostitute. What she wanted more than anything was for her current nightmare to end.

Ferhana raised her head and gazed at Ana, rubbing some of the tears onto the back of her hand. "And you, Ana! You've changed so much! Was it really because of me? Was it really because of my ... Because of Binta and ..."

"They blackmailed me!" said Ana with a firmness that surprised her. It seemed quite a relief to talk to someone sympathetic after all these months. Nobody else in that time could be relied to listen to her with any understanding or concern, although Bezaffa had been kind and relatively indulgent. She reflected with regret on the times she allowed the woman to repeat her seduction of her, - a respite from the joyless sex she'd become more accustomed to, but one forever tainted. It wasn't totally true, she had to admit, that she had no understanding of how Binta and Ferhana should have done much the same together. Shared misery is better than solitary despair. "They told me that I was to either do what they said or I could be a prostitute like you and Binta. I had no choice. None at all. They had filmed Binta and me together. They had known all along anyway..."

"And they know about me!" wailed Ferhana. "I am hoping that they never ... They couldn't ... Could they?"

"They sent me on a two week training course," Ana continued, staring ahead

of her at the bare unfriendly squash court wall. “It was horrible. But I hoped it would never end. Because I knew what would happen afterwards. Khedra was a tutor on the course. But she wasn’t the only one. And some of the tutors were men. They showed us videos, they gave us seminars, they made it all sound really very normal. Almost respectable. I was the only Beta on the course. All the other girls were Gammas or Deltas. Except one girl who was an Epsilon. She hated the course as much as I did, but she hated herself even more. In the second week, the course became more practical. We had to ... We were made to do ... And all watched and assessed and ...”

“I know,” said Ferhana sadly. “I have done the ... attended the course too. Binta has. Everyone has. Some girls seem to like it. They look like they enjoy it. I didn’t, but I pretended to. They call it ‘making love’, but there is no love at all!”

“When the course finished, I was made to dress differently. I was taught how to apply makeup, how to walk in these horrid shoes, how to, as they called it, ‘*look sexy*’. ‘*Inviting*’. It was a week or more afterwards before I had my first client. My first ever. He was rich. I know that. The price of it was very very high. The Director told me that, but I’ve seen the accounts and I know exactly how much it cost. And he gave me a lot more money as well. It felt so dirty when I took it from him, although the notes were very crisp and new. It had hurt so much. There was blood everywhere. He sniffed at it. He licked it. He seemed to enjoy it. I felt like he had just murdered me, but that I had somehow survived...”

“Was it your first time ever with a man?” asked Ferhana with some horror. “Just as it had been for Binta. You had never...?”

“Never! And, I thought, never again. But, unfortunately, it was not at all long until the next client. It didn’t hurt so much then. I was sore. But it was a different pain.

And then more clients and I gradually remembered more of my training and I did what they said to finish the ordeal sooner. And then the Director ...”

“The Pimple has a go at everyone,” Ferhana remarked. “Not Binta. Not Ketaba. But everyone else. He had me ... he has had me many ... He says he likes ‘niggers’. He is liking that I am different and he says that variety is the ... is the ... I can’t remember.”

Ana wasn’t to be distracted in her flow. “The Director said that he wanted me. And because I was his secretary, he could have me whenever he liked. Every day he had me, even when there were clients to see. He is *so* cruel. He’s done to me such things ... things that should never be done ... things that are illegal. He likes it when I fall on the floor crying and weeping. He laughs at me. He always pays, though. He stands over me, as I lie crying on the floor, humiliated, abused, damaged, dropping notes onto my body. He likes me to suffer. It is what he likes most: to make people suffer. He enjoys it.”

Ana looked into Ferhana’s eyes with intensity and bewilderment. “How can *anyone*, ever, enjoy doing what they know will most upset someone else? What *is* it that makes some men so cruel? Is it because they are men? What possible pleasure can there be in making others suffer?”

Ferhana scrunched up her face, pulled her nose between her fingers and sighed. “I don’t know. Some people do. Not just men. It’s just there. Something that I do not understand. Perhaps it is because it is making a man feel more powerful and stronger. Many clients who see me, they treat me badly. They like it when I complain. The more I say no, the more they say yes. They like it when I am hurting.”

“Physical pain is one thing. It hurts, but it goes. What the Director likes is fear,

disgust, revulsion. He asked you to see me because he knows that it would upset me. He knows that one reason why I was so hurt and upset when they ... He knows that the very thought of making love to the one who has deceived my love with Binta, sullied that small part of her which I thought was pure and undividedly mine, would cause me hurt. He just wants to humiliate me. He only cares for me in the sense of wanting to find ways of hurting me further. He's not content with blackmailing me into a life of prostitution, he wants to pull me apart altogether!"

Ana paused. She stared ahead of her at the squash court wall and felt once again the familiar lachrymal welling she'd become so accustomed to. Almost every night, when she returned home, her crotch bruised, another vestige of pride damaged, another humiliation to reflect on, the tears would burst through, providing her with the only comfort she could be sure wasn't tainted by malice or perverse intent. She sobbed deeply, and her face cracked open in a raw smouldering wound of self-pity and anguish.

"And now I've lost everything. My pride. My virtue. My virginity. My honour. And, worst of all, Binta!"

She collapsed on Ferhana's lap, her arms around her waist and her face buried in what few folds could possibly form on her very short skirt. She was faintly aware of Ferhana's fingers stroking through her hair and the distant sound of her comforting voice, interspersed with the curious vowel sounds and consonant clusters of her own tongue.

"I've lost everything!" sobbed Ana. "I've been stripped to a degree of nakedness that I didn't believe existed. A nakedness that goes beyond being unclothed!"

Ferhana and Ana sat together, their arms around each other, sobbing gently.

After a while, Ana pulled herself up and looked directly into Ferhana's eyes. "Do you think I've lost Binta forever?"

"No, not at all. Not at all. She wants you still. She wants you very well. She is wanting you all the time. All you have to do is see her. She will be so pleased."

"But then they will think that Binta and I are ... That we are ... It could make it very difficult for both of us ..."

Ferhana nodded slightly. She took her hand away from behind Ana's shoulders and cupped it in her other hand. "There is a way you can help Binta. A very good way. A way that nobody else can do. She has a friend. A friend of mine, too. She is my friend from when I lived free in Blad and could do whatever I wanted to. She is also a friend of Binta, by chance. It is a ... coincidence that she knows Binta. They met in Jebel. She is not from Alif. She is coming from Gharab. She is visiting Blad and wanting to meet Binta. And she also is wanting to meet me. I write to her, and she is writing to me. She is not writing to Binta because all Binta's letters are opened and the ... authorities might think she is a ... a lesbian, like Binta. And she is wanting to visit Binta. But nobody can visit anyone in the Brothel unless they are a relative. Or they have special permission..."

"Special permission?" asked Ana, guessing what Ferhana was trying to say. "Who is this friend?"

"She is named Azhnia. She is a very nice girl."

"Yes, I've heard of her. And how can I help?"

"If we asked the Director if she could come into the Brothel, he probably would not allow her. He would probably think she were a ... He would think that there

may be other reasons why she would want to see her. Or if he did, it would be difficult for them to speak together without ... without worry. But if she were a friend of yours ... If you let her in yourself ... Then Binta and she could speak together. There would be no suspicion that ...”

“Weren’t Azhnia and Binta once lovers?”

Ferhana raised her eyebrows in what appeared to be genuine surprise to Ana. “That can’t be so! Azhnia never once said. Neither has Binta. Were they ...?”

Ana regretted her remark. “You want me to invite Azhnia into the Brothel as if she were my friend, and not Binta’s? Or yours?”

“Yes. If you could? Binta would be very happy. They have not seen each other for many years. Azhnia is very unhappy for Binta. She did not know the government of Alif could be so cruel. She is very much wanting to comfort Binta.”

“And I could invite her in as my friend?”

“Please. It would be very well for Azhnia. And for Binta...”

“Was she a friend of yours when you used to sell contraband alcohol?”

Ferhana looked at Ana with concern. “Yes. She was. But in her country, alcohol is not illegal. As in my country, it can be bought anywhere. Nobody is stopping you if you want to buy alcohol. She found out I sold alcohol. That is how she got to knowing me. Do you mind? If you do, I am sorry. I should not have spoke to you. It is not ...”

“I’ll help,” said Ana with firm conviction. “It wouldn’t be at all difficult for me. We can meet in the foyer and I can let her in. I’m sure there’d be no problem. No one needs to know she’s a friend of Binta’s.”

“You can? That would be very well. Binta would be very happy.”

“It’s no problem to me. Just tell me when and I’ll meet her. After normal office hours when the Director isn’t here.”

“That is very well. I am so happy. Binta will feel so much happier too!”

Ana nodded sadly. She opened the small handbag she had over her shoulder and pulled out a small makeup mirror. She studied her reflection. The mascara and lipstick were so smudged! She’d have to reapply it before leaving the squash court. She looked at Ferhana’s face. Her makeup was equally much a mess, but the difference was less immediately obvious on her face. Ana pulled out a small tissue and holding the mirror up, daubed at the streaks running from her eyes and over her cheeks.

“I must be going now,” said Ferhana, briefly kissing Ana on the cheek. “I must tidy myself too. I am having more work to do soon. Thank you again for your help. I write to Azhnia and we will be arranging a time when she can come.”

“Yes. Do that,” said Ana distantly. “I’ll do what I can.”

Ferhana stood up and left the viewing gallery, Ana watching her leave from the makeup mirror as she carefully patted her cheek. A warmth gradually spread over Ana. She felt the deadness and despair that had shadowed her for so long begin to disperse. It was as if her conversation with Ferhana had opened a brief gap in a cloud through which the sun could at last peek through and herald hope and change. Perhaps there was a promise of better things to come. She tucked away her tissue, and pulled out a stick of eyeliner which she carefully applied to the upper eyelid. She hated her new appearance. As soon as she got home from work she would clean every vestige of it from her body along with every last smell of her clients and especially any scent of the Director. At work however, she had come to feel naked without it. Somehow, the

uniform of a prostitute distanced it from herself not dressed or made up in that way. It made her a different person: one who was able to do the horrible and painful things she had to do every working day (and some weekends).

She glanced towards the door where Ferhana had left, thinking about their conversation. She still hadn't forgiven Ferhana and Binta. A surge of hatred swept through her as she reflected on the video she had seen, every detail of it rehearsed so often in her memory. But she was sure that what Ferhana and Binta had been then, and what she had become now, were really so alike that moral approbation was no longer really appropriate. And whatever else she felt, she couldn't afford to lose that sensation of hope that so overwhelmed her.

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Ana opened the door to the foyer and looked around her. Amongst the usual selection of middle-aged men hovering around was a single young lady, dressed in leather jacket and trousers, with short blue hair and hoop-like earrings dangling down each side of her round-cheeked face. It could only be Azhnia, but Ana needed to go through the motions. She approached the prostitute at the reception desk, thanked her for her call and waved to Azhnia who raised her eyebrow with some surprise, but nonetheless waved back with an expression of recognition that was totally feigned. Ana reflected with regret that to Azhnia, she must have looked just the same as all the other prostitutes in her tight revealing clothes and thick pasting of makeup.

Ana strolled up to Azhnia, and greeted her with a theatrical show of familiar amiability. She could see Azhnia's eyes examine her from eyeliner to high heels: clearly disturbed by the blatancy of her appearance. Ana had never seen a woman dressed like Azhnia before: the nearest to her in appearance was Zabba when not at work, but Zabba's appearance was still within the parameters of dress acceptable in the City of Blad. Azhnia's appearance was no more confrontational than Zabba's but it suggested a self-confidence rare in Alif women.

Ana sat next to Azhnia, who stared at her. When she spoke, her voice was somehow more languid and relaxed than normal for Alif; and the vowels appeared contorted and tortured to her ears. Nobody could ever mistake Azhnia as a native to Alif however fluently she spoke the same language. "Well, Ana, isn't it? How're you hanging? 'Sreal neat to see ya. 'N' this's where you work? 'Sreal weird! Quite freaky, in fact. You guys're in the weirdest setup I could ever imagine!"

“Don’t you have brothels in Gharab?”

“Yeh! Sure we do. Not like this though. Not that I’ve ever been inside one, y’know. Our brothels are all private. The state’s got nothing to do with them. But in Alif near everything’s nationalised, so I s’pose there’s nothing so weird about brothels being nationalised ‘n’all! I just never thought it’d be like this somehow. It’s sort of almost like a hotel foyer here, isn’t it? You kind of expect bellboys and bureaux de changes, don’t you?”

Ana wasn’t sure she really understood everything Azhnia was saying, but she nodded her head in assent. “Are you living in Blad?”

“Yeh. Sure I do. I got a job working in a café. Not a waitress, though. They said it wouldn’t be right for the customers to see me. They’d be put off their coffees! Behind the counter. It doesn’t pay very well, but it means I don’t have to spend all my savings in one go. And they give me a room above the café. It’s real tiny, but it’s better than nothing I s’pose! You live here do you?”

“In the brothel?”

“Yeh. Like Binta and Ferhana. You live here?”

Ana raised her eyebrows. “No, thank goodness. I live in Jadid.”

“Jadid? That’s a real nice quarter, that is. But Ferhana said you, like, had your own room in the Brothel where we’d be going and meet Binta.”

“Yes, that’s so. But it’s not my home. It’s just where I work. Shall we go there?”

“Oh yeh. Sure! Yeh. Let’s go then.”

Ana escorted Azhnia past the reception desk to the door she’d come through, tottering on her heels while Azhnia followed behind in considerably more comfort in

her rubber-soled boots. She led the way along corridors and up staircases to her room which was in one of the smarter wings of the Brothel reserved for Alphas and prostitutes like her who were accorded higher status for their other services to the Brothel. Azhnia looked around her with wonderment at the rows of doors and the lights above each one of them. A prostitute passed by, escorting a small balding man in an ill-fitting suit, and Azhnia's eyes followed them. She was clearly fascinated by all that she saw, but made no comment. They soon reached Ana's room, the sight of whose door sent a shiver of anxiety down Ana's spine. She hated it, however well-decorated it might be and however comfortable the bed. It was a room she only ever normally visited when she was about to see a client, and the association with all those hateful, loathsome encounters always left a very uncomfortable feeling in the back of her throat.

"This is it!" announced Ana, pushing open the door and revealing the bed, armchair and washbasin. "This is where I work."

"Where's Binta?"

"She'll be along soon," Ana said. She indicated the bed. "Sit there. I'll sit on the chair, if you don't mind." She hated the memories connected with the bed. It was with some reluctance that she'd agreed to return to the room after her working day. It was normally somewhere she was happy to leave and the bed for all its apparent luxury was more like a soft-mattressed torture rack than somewhere to sleep.

"This is a real neat room!" said Azhnia approvingly. "It's real big. Bigger than my bedsit, I can tell you! Can't say much for the choice of décor: these reds and pinks. It's like a real boudoir. It's not your taste, is it?"

"All the rooms are decorated much like this. We don't have much say in how

it's done. It's what the clients want and expect."

"Is this where you, like, have sex with them, is it?"

Ana ignored the question. She had no wish to discuss that aspect of her working life with anyone. Azhnia was more persistent.

"Ferhana says it's, like, real awful what she has to do. She really hates it. It's something you don't like, neither, isn't it?"

Ana nodded. She tried to change the subject. "Mostly, I work as a secretary..."

"Yeh, Ferhana said in her letters. She said it was real weird, y'know, you working in this kind of joint. I thought it was real weird that anyone like works in a Brothel at other things than being a like prostitute. You sort of think that that's all that ever happens here, but I reckon there's gotta be some admin and all, hasn't there? And you got to know Ferhana and Binta as a secretary, didn't you?"

"That's right," sniffed Ana.

She studied Azhnia. She was clearly nervous, despite her show of self-assurance. Was it because she was anticipating meeting Binta or was it because she was in a place like the Brothel? She glanced at the mirror. She hoped that nothing would be recorded of their conversation, but she reflected that with the enormous volume of recorded material being collected that as long as what was seen was of no visual significance then everything said would probably never be scrutinised. She looked back at Azhnia.

"Do you like living in Alif?"

"What a question! Yeh, it's all right. I've made some real good friends here. It's got some real neat countryside. I s'pose I must like it. I've been to plenty of other countries too, and a lot of them are pretty neat too. But I keep coming back here. I

don't really know why, but I s'pose the friends I've made here must be one good reason. Friends like Binta and Ferhana. And friends are real important, y'know. Don't you think?"

"Yes, very important," agreed Ana.

There was a knock at the door. Ana jumped back with alarm, her face whitening as she contemplated the fact that it must mean that Binta had arrived. She had rehearsed and re-rehearsed this moment for so long: what she would say, the bitterness that she felt, the betrayal of her love that Binta had been party to, the worries and anxieties that had haunted her in the last few months. As the door opened and Binta entered, seeming so much smaller and more humble than she'd remembered, all the rehearsed lines were discarded. She broke into a sad but broad grin. She hadn't realised how much she had been longing to see Binta again.

"Hiya, sweetie!" greeted Azhnia. "How're you hanging? The bastards not getting you down, are they?"

Binta hovered by the door and nodded in reply. Like Ana she seemed to have lost her voice. She leaned an arm against the door, gripping its edge with her fingers, and stared straight into Ana's eyes. Then she returned the grin and ran straight to Ana, leaning down on the floor by her stockinged feet, grasping her arms in her hands and staring up at Ana with a look of pleading and shame.

"Oh! Ana! I've missed you! I've missed you *so* much! I've been so worried that you wouldn't talk to me ever again. So worried now that you ... that you ... I thought I'd lost you forever! I haven't, have I? Tell me that I haven't! Tell me that all will be the same again!"

Ana looked down at her lover, smiling broadly and crying at the same time. "I

still love you, Binta! I will always love you! All I want is for us to be together again. Please believe me!”

“Ferhana told me about the videos. How you found out about me and her. How can you *ever* forgive me? What can I do to convince you that it is *you*? *Only* you that I love! Please please forgive me! And *how* you must have suffered these last months! Those horrid clothes you wear. The suffering you must have been through!”

In Ana’s rehearsed script this was to be the occasion in which she would now spell out exactly the full gruesome and unpalatable details of her life as a prostitute - part-time, maybe, but a prostitute all the same. She was to tell Binta about the recurrent humiliations met upon her by the Director and his never-ceasing reminders of the illegal activity with Binta which had entrapped her in this way. In her mind’s eye, this script was now crumpled up and thrown away into the waste bin at the corner generally intended to receive paper tissues.

“Oh, Binta!” she said with a deep sigh. “None of that matters. Nothing matters! All that is at all important is that we be together again!”

Binta smiled sadly, and buried her head on the thin strip of black skirt that intervened between the nylon of her stockings and the bare flesh of her midriff. Her arms wrapped themselves around Ana’s waist and her breasts nuzzled against her knees and thighs.

“Oh, Ana! I love you. I love you. I haven’t been able to eat. I haven’t been able to sleep. My life is a misery, punctuated by the nightmare of the clients and the few pleasures that my garden affords me. Oh please, Ana! You *do* forgive me, don’t you? It *will* be like it was before again, won’t it!”

Ana stroked Binta’s long hair as it spread out over her shoulders and onto

Ana's thighs and outward over the pile of the carpet. She let a finger roam around her ear and onto Binta's cheek. If only it could be like it was before, she thought, but now that she was under the almost constant supervision of Khedra and the Director it could never again be as free or natural. She would always fear reprisals which could affect both herself and Binta.

"We-ell!" exclaimed Azhnia, in a long drawn-out whine. "I didn't expect this, Binta sweetie. I really thought it was me who'd come to see you. I didn't know that it was gonna be like some lovers' reunion!"

Binta turned around to face Azhnia, leaning an arm on Ana's thigh with a trail of tears running down her cheek. "Oh, Azhnia! I'm so sorry! I wasn't thinking. It was just that ..."

"You don't have to spell things out to me, sweetie. Ferhana hinted there might be something between you two. I just didn't think I'd be some kinda, like, frigging gooseberry, y'know. I'm real happy for you two. Really I am!"

"I know. I know," blubbered Binta. She took one of Ana's hands in her own and squeezed it tight. "How are you, Azhnia? How's life treating you?"

"Fine! Fine. Same's always! But it's you I'm worried about. How're you? How're you coping with living and working here?"

"It's horrible! Horrible! I hate every minute of it. It just gets more and more unbearable!"

"You've not, like, got used to it?"

Binta shook her head. "All I ever think of is: when is it going to end? When will I be free again?"

"And when will that be, sweetest?"

Binta sighed. “Another couple of months or so!”

“Well! That’s not so bad after all the time you’ve been here!”

“But I don’t know what to do next. I haven’t got anywhere to go to. I can’t go back to Jebel. I don’t know anyone in Blad. I don’t have any skills that’ll get me a job. And wherever I go people will find out that I’ve got a criminal record and that I’ve worked in the Brothel.”

“Can’t you just go and live in Jadid with Ana here?”

Binta looked up at Ana with longing. “I’d like that. I’d like that so much. But now *they* know about Ana and me, it won’t be safe. They might want to arrest us again. And then it’ll be worse.”

“Well! There’s only one thing you two can do, and that’s, like, bail out! Just leave Alif. Go someplace where girls like you won’t be hassled and you can, like, lead your own lives. Most countries don’t care a hoot about lesbians. They wouldn’t hold it against you!”

“But it’s not as easy as that!” Ana said sadly. “It’s very difficult getting passports in Alif. It’s very expensive and they probably wouldn’t give one to Binta because of her criminal record. And for me, they’d ask my boss for references and he would *never* give me one.”

“You sure about that?”

Ana reflected on the Director. It would be just the sort of humiliation he would dearly love to inflict on her: tearing up her passport application and throwing the shreds over her body. It would only be as bad as some of the other unspeakably disgusting humiliations that he’d contrived for her benefit. “I could never be more sure about it!”

Azhnia mused on this. “Well, say you could leave the country, where’d you both wanna go? Have you got any kinda idea, like?”

Ana gazed down at Binta who was nuzzling her cheek against the silky artificial fibre of her skirt. “Agdal. That’s where we’d like to go. Agdal.”

“Hey, that’s only, like, next door, isn’t it? Yeh, I been there. Real neat, it is. You’d love it there. They got nothing against lesbians there. And they like nudists and all. Ferhana told me you’d become a nudist, Binta. I really didn’t believe her: it seems such a real weird thing to do. Like getting into astrology, mysticism, incense and therapy. Not like you at all. But here you are: naked as the day you were born. So, Agdal is it? Well, I think you’ve chosen the right one there!”

“You think we’d be happy there, Azhnia?” asked Binta longingly.

“Well, yeh. I’m real sure you would. But when I say you’ve chosen the right one, I don’t just mean there. I’m sure you’d be real happy in Gharab as well if you’d wanted to go there. ’Fact you’d probably be happy in almost any frigging country ’slong as it wasn’t Alif. No! What I mean is that Agdal’s a much better bet than most because it’s got this *Amnesty from Oppression* policy. Haven’t you heard about it? It’s been going on for years. Ever since they became, like, the most liberal country in probably the whole frigging world.”

“‘*Amnesty from Oppression*’?” wondered Ana. “What’s that mean? And what’s it got to do with us?”

“You’re not kidding me? You’ve never heard of it! Well, that’s real weird. I thought everyone knew about that. I ’spect you guys never get told anything, do you? Your government’s real tight on information. But I thought here in Blad and in the Brothel and all, it’d be like common knowledge.”

“Tell us, Azhnia. What is this policy? What should we know that we don’t know about now?” asked Binta with a certain impatience in her voice.

“Well! All around the world there are countries like Alif which are like real intolerant and repressive. Countries where people who disagree with the government are locked up or shot. Countries like here where the only elections are like real shams, where you’ve only got the government’s appointees standing for positions in your parliament, congress or senate, or whatever they call it here. Countries where the president, like your own President Marmalade - sorry, Marmeluke - supposedly win 99.9% of the popular vote. Ever since Agdal went so liberal it’s had this *Amnesty from Oppression* policy. I s’pose it’s like a guilt trip the country’s got. It used to be real repressive itself. Worse than Alif! And not that long ago, really. It just got fed up with fighting all these stupid wars (though it’s not gone as far as give all its territories back!) and had some kinda revolution. And now it like gives asylum to political prisoners and people like that all over the world. That’s what their *Amnesty from Oppression*’s all about. It’s to sort of like make amends for all those people it shot, imprisoned and tortured when it wasn’t the liberal big shot it is now!”

“Are you saying we could get political asylum?” asked Ana incredulously. “But neither of us has done anything political. We’ve never done anything like that at all!”

“Oh, I wouldn’t be sure about that. You’re both lesbians. Binta’s a naturist. You’ve both been pretty much punished for your views and practices, working as prostitutes in this place. I think they’d look on you pretty sympathetically. Naturism and homosexuality are pretty much commonplace in Agdal. They’re bigger deals there than they are in Gharab, which wouldn’t be nearly so happy to see people roaming

around in the nude all day. Yeh! I reckon you've got a real big chance with Agdal. All ya gotta do is apply for asylum through this programme of theirs. I mean, you don't know your chances until you try, y'know't I mean!"

"I can't believe it," said Binta sceptically, but with a face which betrayed her eagerness to believe every word. "It sounds just a little too good to be true."

"That doesn't mean it's not true. You go have a stab at it. It could work out for you. Agdal's got a real big embassy in the Honey district. Just ask a few questions. You don't know how far you might get."

Ana looked down at Binta with a smile. "Azhnia's right! That might be exactly the right thing to do. We can but try."

"I don't see why *any* government would want to be that generous. What have we done to deserve such preferential treatment? But on the other hand, I've come to despair so much while I've been here, I've probably got too cynical for my own good. I just can't believe there can be so much good in the world."

"Oh, Binta, there's always gotta be something to balance the bad. It'd be a real bad world if it were all as bad as Alif wouldn't it?"

"But if you think Alif's so bad why do you keep visiting here?" Binta wondered.

"I don't come from here. I can leave whenever I like. A Gharab passport's real good for getting anywhere. And as a foreigner I can probably get to see more of the good side of Alif than either of you. I can just travel around, look at all the different parts of your country, meet people like you and Ferhana, and then when I get fed up I can just head to the border and go somewhere like Agdal or whatever. So, Alif's not as bad for me as it is for you. And you got real neat countryside here. Better, in fact,

than Gharab which is a lot colder and a lot more industrial than Alif. If you had a better government, people'd probably flood into your country from everywhere. But it's *you* we're talking about. You're the ones that want to get out."

Binta nodded. "Yes. I do. Desperately! I've lost everything I ever had in Alif. My family have disowned me. Mezyana's in a convent, and she'll be there for much longer than I'll have been in the Brothel. I know nobody at all outside the Brothel walls. And I'm going to be stigmatised for the rest of my life. But what about you, Ana?" She turned her head around to gaze into Ana's face. "Do *you* want to leave Alif as much as I do? Won't you miss your family?"

"I already do!" sighed Ana. "I haven't seen them since I arrived here for the interview. But they would disown me too if they knew what I was doing now. I shall probably never be able to walk through Rif again if they knew what I did for a living. They would despise me for it. But more than that, I could never live my life without you, Binta. You're all that really matters to me!"

Azhnia smiled indulgently. "How *very* touching! I'd never have guessed. You've done real well, Binta. Two good loves in your life. Y'know, I've had more than my fair share of lovers and boyfriends, but none of them seem to've been as good or passionate as yours have been."

Ana knew that this was a reference to Mezyana, but she also knew about Azhnia's own relationship with Binta. A flash of anger spread through her, as she reflected on how Binta had not only been unfaithful to her with Ferhana, but had earlier committed the same indiscretion with Azhnia. Could she really trust Binta that much? When would she do the same again? She glared at Binta, who flinched slightly.

"Oh, Ana. Don't look at me like that! Trust me! It's you I love. Only you. In

the last few months, I've thought only of you. Yours is the only true love in my life!"

Azhnia scratched her nose, and smiled to herself. "You mustn't let the past get in the way of your future together, y'know. Mezyana is in the past. By the look of it, *you* are her future."

"Mezyana isn't the only person in Binta's past I am concerned about!"

Azhnia blushed. "Well ... er ... anyway ... It's the future you've got to think about. It's not that long till Binta's sentence finishes, y'know! You've both gotta think what you're gonna do next. And if Blad or Alif or Jebel or whatever's not what you want then you're gonna have to look elsewhere aren't you. And if it's Binta you love then you're just gonna have to accept that she's not perfect, y'know. There's always gonna be a past behind her. And it's not just gonna go away, y'know!" She looked around Ana's room, at the red and pink wallpaper, the silk cream sheets and then finally at Ana herself, who was uncomfortably aware of the thick mask of makeup pasted on her face and the artificially enhanced cleavage below her chin. "And don't forget, Ana. You've got some past of your own that's not gonna go away that easy either!"

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Ana hovered outside the gates to the Agdal Embassy, dressed in her smartest interview outfit, her makeup scrubbed off and her stilettos replaced by a pair of comfortable soft shoes. Now she had actually arrived in Honey, having disembarked off the bus and finally identified which of the palatial buildings was the Embassy, her nerves were deserting her. The fear of disappointment was greater than that she'd ever felt for a job interview. Not only her happiness but that of Binta's rested on the outcome of her endeavour. What would they do, as Ana dreaded and almost expected, if they were not eligible for political asylum? However, there was no turning back. She was trapped by her need to report back on the outcome of her visit. She rang the brass doorbell, and stood back, her heart thumping as it chimed. How long would she have to wait?

Not long at all, as it happened, as a uniformed guard approached the gate. He scrutinised Ana. "Have you got an appointment?" he enquired, looking at a list he had attached to a clipboard. Breathlessly Ana nodded. Azhnia had warned her that Agdal non-nationals like her were unlikely to be readily admitted otherwise.

"Name?" the guard asked. Ana gave her full name and watched as the guard studied his list. The telephone call she had made to the Embassy had seemed so inconclusive. She couldn't believe that the brusque secretary who answered had actually taken down her details, but all was fine. Her name was on the list. The guard ticked it off with a pen and opened the gate to let Ana through.

"Amnesty from Oppression, isn't it? We get a lot of you political asylum people here. Right bunch of weirdos. You're not one, are you?" Ana shook her head.

If there were so many others, how much chance did she and Binta stand? “Anyway, we’ve got someone to see you. I’ll take you to reception to wait for her. You’re very early, you know.”

Ana was fully aware of this. In fact she was early by more than an hour. But after taking a whole day off work, she really had nothing else to do all morning. Her pacing backwards and forwards across the flat, endlessly rehearsing her case, had worn her out. The only thing she could do to break out of this was to pack her handbag and rush down the stairs to the bus.

She was led into a waiting room just past the main reception desk where a small number of people were sitting in comfortable leather armchairs, while efficient-looking receptionists sat in front of monitors with small headphones in their ears. She was sure those waiting were Agdal nationals, although there was nothing in their appearance that distinguished them from anyone else, unless it was their self-confident demeanour. They were not obviously naturists or homosexuals, although there was no way of knowing what they might look like at other times.

In the waiting room, unfamiliar magazines were stacked on a small wooden table surrounded by beige leather armchairs. A portrait on the wall of the woman president of Agdal peered down between two identical flags. She looked refreshingly informal and relaxed in comparison to the countless portraits of President Marmeluke in his military finery prominent in all the cafés and shops of Alif. She would normally have found the magazines fascinating with their unedited pictures and articles about life not only in Agdal, but also in Alif and many other countries she knew nothing about. There was a freshness and openness about them, not least in the ubiquitous presence of naked flesh, and the unashamedness in which people of the same sex were

portrayed as couples. Her eyes darted agitatedly about. Every footfall in the corridor silenced her breath, as she waited the door to open.

She wasn't alone. There was an elderly gentleman reading beneath a No Smoking sign, and a mother and young child sitting together with some toys which the child kept poking into her mother's face. They did not stay for very long, however. They were escorted out by one or other of the efficient receptionists, and soon Ana was alone, pretending to read an article about a famine in a remote corner of Alif of which she had previously been totally unaware.

Eventually, just after the appointed hour, her turn came. A tall receptionist entered in a very smart suit and with very short hair. Perhaps appreciating Ana's nervousness, she smiled quite warmly.

"The Amnesty Facilitator will see you now."

Ana looked at her blankly.

"The Amnesty Facilitator. The political asylum officer, if you like. Come on! She hasn't all day."

Ana nodded shyly, stood up and followed the receptionist down a series of carpeted corridors to an office hidden deep inside the Embassy's labyrinth. She was ushered in and introduced to a woman in her early thirties, dressed in an open-necked blouse, seated behind a large desk and under another portrait of the Agdal president. The receptionist disappeared, leaving Ana standing awkwardly by the door, her handbag clasped to her front.

The Amnesty Facilitator also had very short hair, with long earrings dangling from her ears and a small stud in her nose. She smiled broadly. "Hello, Ana. My name's Wahata." She proffered her hand across the desk. Ana strode forward and

shook it. “You can sit. How can I help you?”

“I’m ... er ... we’d ... We would like ...”

Wahata smiled sympathetically, and glanced at a sheet of paper in front of her. “You want to apply for assistance on our Amnesty from Oppression Programme, I gather. What are your reasons? I note that you work for the State Brothel. Is that the reason?”

“Well, yes. Er ... no. It’s for me and my lover. We’re both at the Brothel ...”

“And you’re both prostitutes are you? Is your lover male or female?”

Ana had never been asked such a question so baldly before. It shocked her momentarily, but she reasoned that there was no reason for pretence here. “Female. She’s a prostitute. I’m not. Well, not really. But I am, as well. And we wondered if ... we wondered ...”

“You’re both prostitutes. You have a gay relationship.”

“*Gay?*”

“Yes. It’s an Agdal term for homosexuality. I don’t believe it’s current in Alif. Is your lover voluntarily a prostitute?”

“No, not at all.”

“Is she a prisoner, then?”

“Yes. For ... for ... sex crime.”

“What category of sex crime? Practising homosexuality?”

Ana nodded. Wahata wrote down a few notes on a sheet of paper. “Gay couple. One imprisoned in a Brothel for lesbianism. And you? Are you voluntarily a prostitute?”

Ana shook her head. “No, not really. I didn’t want to. I work there mostly as a

secretary. But my boss ... the Director ... he ...”

“Would you say you’ve been coerced into it as a result of your sexual preferences?”

Ana nodded. “Yes. *Coerced*. I’m sure that’s the word.”

Wahata scribbled a little bit more. “All too common in your country, I’m afraid. Particularly for women. And are there any other practices or activities that you and your lover participate in which would make you eligible for assistance under our programme?”

Ana frowned. What could she say? “What kind of practices or activities?”

“Political ones, for instance. Have you ever been arrested at political demonstrations? Have you ever circulated illegal literature? Has either of you practised any activity which is perfectly legal and acceptable in Agdal, but not at all in Alif?”

Ana blanched. “I can’t think of anything that ...” She remembered Ketaba’s own peculiar enthusiasms for Agdal. “Binta’s a naturist, though. That’s acceptable in Agdal and not in Alif.”

“It is indeed. There aren’t many staff here at the Embassy who consider themselves naturists and those who do are male. I’m not one myself, but for those who practise it, it’s almost a religion. Are you a naturist yourself?”

Ana felt obliged to strengthen her case as much as possible. “Er ... yes. Yes, I am.”

Wahata scribbled another note. “It doesn’t make much difference in your case whether you are or not. I think your case already sounds quite strong. However, every little extra helps. There may be some among those evaluating your case who might be

further swung on that basis. So, if I can summarise. You are two lesbian lovers coerced into prostitution by the Republic of Alif for your sexual preferences, who are also naturists as much as it is possible to be in your country. Would you agree with that summary?"

Ana nodded without a great deal of satisfaction. It wasn't exactly how she would have liked the complexities of her life described.

"Yes. I'm sure that's exactly right. Do we really have a strong case?"

Wahata smiled. "I wouldn't say you have the strongest I've come across. Those who are more public in their political activities always get the highest ratings. If you had been tortured, imprisoned without trial or about to be expelled, then you could probably expect priority treatment. I take it that you are not politically active in any way?"

Ana shook her head. "I don't really know anything about politics."

"It's a wonder anyone does in Alif. President Marmeluke's government doesn't believe in keeping its citizens particularly well informed. However, your case is far stronger than most who come here hoping to be eligible for patriation. Some like you for their sexual proclivities, others because they, well, feel that life would simply be better for them in a more liberal country, and others I suspect who are simply attracted to the free access to alcohol and other such soft drugs. Most such applicants are unsuccessful, however. And the tendency in recent years has been for rather fewer cases to succeed. Agdal has mostly resolved its labour shortage problems and there have been expressions of discontent from a sizeable minority of Agdal nationals at the perceived influx of foreigners - especially those who are most culturally distinct and don't speak the same language. Especially, I'm afraid, those from countries like Haj.

Not that this would present a problem to people from Alif like you and your lover. Now, if I may take some more particulars which can be used by our Amnesty Investigators in pursuit of your application ...”

Wahata then proceeded to ask a number of formal questions about Ana and Binta, such as where they came from, what relatives they might have in Agdal, formal qualifications, their history of oppression, and their political and religious views. Some of the questions relating to their sexual activities and past partners were particularly embarrassing and awkward for Ana to answer, though she tried to answer as fully as she could. No, she hadn't contracted any sexually transmitted diseases. No, she wasn't a drug addict. Yes, she was prepared to accept that none of her family could emigrate to stay with her, unless they could be proven to be her own children. No, she had no children. Yes, she was willing to abide by all the laws of the Republic of Agdal, and would accept immediate repatriation in the event of any such transgression. Wahata wrote down Ana's replies with efficiency and haste on a glossy printed form she had in front of her.

At last, Wahata was finished. She folded over the final page of the form, and replaced the top of her pen.

“I think that should be sufficient. Now, I can, of course, give you no assurance at all about how favourably your application will be received, and it is fair to say that it is not an immediate process. Our investigators will have to do some work to be sure that what you have told me is honest and truthful, and that your continued stay in Alif would be intolerable to an Agdal national. My opinion, for what it is worth, is that your case will be assessed favourably, but I cannot say when a decision will be arrived at.”

“How long might we have to wait till we know?” asked Ana breathlessly. The suspense would be terrible, and the longer the wait that much greater the possible disappointment.

Wahata glanced back at her form. “Your lover, Binta, is due to be released in, let’s see, just two months. It’s not likely that she will have any remission for good behaviour, is it?”

Ana shook her head. From her capacity as secretary to the Director she was privy to the fact that Ana had not been deemed to have earned a single day’s remission from her sentence, unlike Ferhana whose term had been dramatically shortened for her cooperativeness and the quality of the services she had supplied for the Brothel. But then Ferhana’s original sentence had originally been considerably longer than Binta’s.

Wahata scratched her chin. “I think we will probably know the result, one way or another, well within two months. Rather sooner, I’m afraid, if your case is unsuccessful. Now, I needn’t have to remind you that we expect total discretion from you regarding your application while we process it. The Alif government has a very unsympathetic attitude towards its nationals whom it suspects are applying for assistance under our programme. They have frequently made complaints, often at the highest level, about what they perceive as an open door to criminals and the antisocial element. They say that it undermines the effectiveness of the justice system if criminals can just walk out of the country for a new life. They also find it embarrassing that other countries, such as Agdal, should express such a low opinion of their legal system to the extent of extending sympathy towards offenders. Should word get out that you have applied to us in this way, it would be extremely prejudicial to your case.”

“How would that be?”

“Well, we would probably have to withdraw any offer of asylum that we may give or have already given. You and your lover would probably be arrested for interrogation by your less than sympathetic police department, who would probably find grounds for imprisoning you. They don't need an actual reason for doing so, but they would do all they consider necessary to ensure you were not in a position to leave the country. I have personally known some very distressing incidents regarding applicants whose current whereabouts it is now impossible to ascertain. I suspect they may even have been consigned to labour camps in the rather more inhospitable corners of Alif.”

“How were they found out?”

“I can't say. Even were I to know, which I don't in most instances, I am bound by the confidentiality of my position to say nothing which could even indirectly identify anyone who has applied for Amnesty. What I would say is that as soon as you even telephoned the Embassy you had committed an offence in the eyes of your government which they would not treat lightly. I'm afraid your decision to come has already set you down a difficult path with regards to the Alif government which the success or otherwise of your application will not effect. It is for that reason that I will issue you with a wealth of information on tourist interest rates, five star hotels and visa requirements. If anyone ever mentions anything to you regarding Agdal or this Embassy you will say that you came here to inquire about holidaying in some of our resorts. Not, as it happens, at all unlikely, because you are unlikely to be able to gain any information about tourism in Agdal from any other source. Alif's travel agencies are notoriously unhelpful, I'm afraid. Most visits to the Embassy from Alif nationals

relate precisely to that. You will, of course, tell Binta to be equally as circumspect.”

Ana nodded her head. It hadn't occurred to her that she had already put herself at so much risk. “I'm sure Binta won't say a word.”

“I'm sure she won't. Nor you, of course. Gay people in Alif are accustomed to hiding information about themselves from other people, and this will be just an extra secret for you to keep.”

Ana examined the woman to whom she had so soon surrendered her entire future. What was she like when she wasn't working? Was she someone who in a different capacity she could perhaps have got to know as a friend? Ana knew she liked her. Even found her quite attractive. But these considerations were totally irrelevant. Her main hope was that Wahata should use whatever weight she might have in the processing of her case for it to result in her favour.

“Now, for security purposes - yours as well as ours, I'm afraid - you must never return to the Embassy again. You must not contact us either. We're sure that many of our calls are intercepted, and I hope you didn't contact us from your work telephone number.”

Ana shook her head, although the reason she'd not done so was less from security considerations and more from the fact she could never know when someone would come into the office while she was on the telephone.

“We will contact you. Don't contact us, however much you feel like doing so. When you hear from us, this will probably be an anonymous phone call, and whoever it is, male or female, will use a woman's name. In your case, it will be, let's see ...” Wahata rummaged through some papers she had on the desk. “It will be ... Kerhala. It will be in the discretion of whoever calls you how that word will be used. The contact

will inform you where to go and at what time. Ensure that you can make it. If you can't, for whatever reason, say so immediately and an alternative will be promptly suggested. Do not prolong the telephone call and do not suggest that you don't know the person who is calling. Is that understood?"

Ana nodded. These elaborate arrangements were not ones she'd expected. "Kerhala," she repeated.

"Yes, Kerhala. A common enough name, you must agree. Now, Ana, our formal interview is over. I think I've gathered all I need to know, unless you have some other piece of information you think is relevant. Is there anything?"

Ana frowned. Was there? She reviewed her situation as best as she could in the whirl of thoughts jumbling about in her head. She shook her head. "I'm sure there's nothing."

"Sure?" prompted Wahata. "Okay! In that case, perhaps I can tell you a few things about Agdal. What do you know about our country?"

"Not very much. A friend of mine from the Brothel goes on holiday there quite frequently and I met someone from Gharab who's travelled through it. I've seen photographs of the beaches and mountains. They look splendid!"

"Yes. Agdal is blessed with beautiful scenery and a very pleasant warm climate. Slightly less arid than Alif, particularly on the coast, and some mountains are permanently covered in snow. Agdal's tourism industry is very profitable - quite the envy of Alif, which has never really fully exploited its tourist potential. It's also a much more built up country than Alif, which you probably won't know from talking to tourists nor indeed from reading the tourist literature I'll give you. Alif has only one city of any size: Blad. Most of your other cities are rather tiny by comparison to those

in Agdal. The likelihood is that if you were successful in your application, you'd be living in a town. Possibly one as large as Blad or even larger. I see you are a country girl. Rif, you said you came from. Does the prospect of living in a town like Blad again trouble you?"

"I don't know. Both Binta and I would prefer to live in the country again. But, if there were no choice, we would be happy to live in a city in Agdal. After all, in Alif, there's probably nowhere other than Blad we could live."

"Indeed not," agreed Wahata. "Even in Alif, cities are generally more tolerant towards people who do not conform in one way or another. I warn you though that Agdal's cities are much more congested and busy than Blad. That might be a little difficult to cope with. In comparison, Blad is a dozy quiet place. I certainly think so, anyway. My home in Agdal is in the capital city and I often miss the buzz of Agdal urban life. However, where there are more people there are more jobs, and I think you'll find that the opportunities for employment are somewhat better than they are in Alif, particularly for a secretary with your qualifications. You got quite good grades in your exams, I remember you saying."

"Yes. But there weren't many jobs, though."

"No. It doesn't surprise me you had to work at the Brothel. I'm sure prostitution and its allied industries wouldn't be nearly as prevalent in your country if Alif women had more career opportunities. As you probably know, Agdal is a relatively wealthy country. The change in government that took place in the revolution when I was a child might have initially caused a great deal of chaos, especially when your government so ineptly intervened under President Marmeluke's deposed predecessor, but Agdal now boasts a very comfortable GDP, a widely envied balance

of payments and a stable and prosperous economy. Your own government will never forgive us for how much we have profited from our liberal and open political system. That is why you will never be told very much about Agdal and why your government is so concerned about our Amnesty programme. A mass exodus of your brightest and best would not do your country's benighted economy any good whatsoever."

"Doesn't having alcohol legal in Agdal cause any problems?"

Wahata laughed. "Of course it does. When you allow a degree of freedom there are bound to be problems. Yes, we have alcoholics. We have a problem with other activities legal in Agdal and illegal in Alif. Sexually transmitted diseases among the promiscuous, particularly in male homosexual communities. Drug addiction. Pornography. Pollution. Car accidents. Agdal's not paradise. Don't believe that for one minute. Prosperity and liberalism bring their own problems, and there are plenty in Agdal who argue for a return to a more conservative regime such as Alif's. My own opinions are fairly irrelevant on these issues, but I wouldn't say that people in Alif are that much happier for being prevented from doing things than people in Agdal are for having the choice. And anyway, I don't think making something illegal actually stops it happening. Alcohol is still drunk in Alif. Homosexuality is still practised. And although pornography is illegal, Alif is actually one of the world's biggest exporters of the stuff as a sideline to its profitable State Brothels."

"Do you have brothels in Agdal?"

"Oh yes. We have them in Agdal. There may actually be more prostitutes in Agdal than in Alif - but then there are rather more people. However, prostitution is not nationalised as it is in Alif, and statistically very few people pursue it as a career for more than a few months. It is scarcely the job for life that it appears to be here."

Wahata glanced at her watch. “Well, I’m terribly sorry, but I have another appointment in a few minutes, so I’ll have to close the interview.” She opened a drawer to the desk and pulled out a plastic folder full of brochures and leaflets. “This is the tourist information I told you about. Go to the reception desk, and you will be shown out through a back exit which will rather lessen the likelihood of you having been seen visiting the Embassy. Remember, don’t contact us. We will definitely be contacting you. One way or another.” She stood up, prompting Ana to do the same. “Well, goodbye. And give my best regards to your partner.”

26

Ana had never seen Binta in clothes before, and it made quite a pronounced difference. Dressed in the kind of clothes she had worn when she had been arrested, she looked like just an ordinary girl from the provinces. She was sitting on the sofa in Ana's Jadid flat, her legs crossed, thumbing through a newspaper. It was Ana who looked most like a prostitute in the work clothes she hadn't bothered to change after a day in the office mostly spent in anxious anticipation of this very moment. She had earlier lent Binta a spare key to her flat, who, after being released from the Brothel, made her way there across the city, while Ana was pretending that this day was really no different from any other, even though it was the day for which she'd been most longing for the last two months.

The day had been meticulously planned ever since she received a phone call during work from a man she'd never spoken to before who greeted her with considerable familiarity and asked if he could see her after having met her at Kerhala's party. Ana hadn't been to any parties recently, or indeed at all in her time at Blad, but she knew from the coded reference that this could only be the long awaited contact from the Agdal Embassy. The man arranged to meet Ana at a café in the Honey district, and elaborated no further. Ana was impatient to know at last the outcome of her application, but prudently asked no compromising questions.

When she arrived at the café at the due time there was no man waiting for her and no man arrived. Instead, a tall woman with black curly shoulder-length hair and a summer dress approached her, asked her name and introduced herself as Kerhala. Ana was then guided to a table hidden behind a post inside the café, and sat opposite the

woman, facing the kitchen and hidden from the street. The woman then informed her that she was an employee of the Agdal Embassy, as Ana had already surmised, that her real name was not really Kerhala and that Ana's application had been successful. What was now required of her were passport photographs of herself and Binta to be sent to the Agdal Embassy as anonymously as possible. The two girls would be issued with Agdal passports which they would need to exit the country. These would be presented to them just before their departure. To receive them, Ana and Binta would be met at a certain café not far from the border with Agdal on the day after Binta's release from the Brothel. Kerhala then went on to explain to Ana exactly what was required of the two conspirators to secure their elopement.

The cost of this troubled Ana as she looked around her flat, at the posters on the wall and the television she had spent so many hours watching. All this was to be abandoned. All that would be salvaged was only what she and Binta could get into her suitcases, and most of that was clothing. She had cashed as much as she could from the bank, and everything else she'd acquired was to be lost forever. Nobody was warned of their departure - not even their closest friends, and certainly not Mr Madir. Ana was not to give notice that she would leave and nobody was to know that Binta would ever see Ana on leaving the Brothel. She had attended work on this, her last day, as on every other day, accepting every humiliation the Director visited on her with exactly the same resignation as on any other day, and the following day not bother to call in sick until quite late. Nobody's suspicions should be prematurely aroused.

She had also been required to keep her contact with Binta to the bare minimum, and they were instructed never to use any intermediaries, however

apparently trustworthy. This was to protect their friends in the inevitable interrogations which would follow when it was discovered that Ana had absconded. Those few contacts Ana had with Binta were kept as brief as possible, and their main purpose was to arrange where they should meet, which was why Ana had presented her with a key to her flat. The only other thing required from Binta was a passport photograph, which fortunately Ana was able to obtain from a copy of the standard advertising literature for prospective clients of Binta's services. She was also advised to give no impression that she and Binta were at all likely to meet on the day of Binta's release.

Ana put down her handbag and raced over to Binta who looked up at her with a broad smile. "You're free!" she exclaimed. "Free!"

Binta grinned, opening her arms to embrace Ana. "Yes I am! At last! After all these years. I'll never have to make love to a man ever again."

The two lovers kissed passionately, happy in the knowledge that there was no one to interrupt them, and indeed for the first time since before Ana's fateful evening at Bezaffa's home. Their arms locked around one another and Ana felt the familiar warmth of Binta's body through the plain cotton blouse and skirt she wore over her hidden flesh.

"You have a very nice flat, Ana," remarked Binta. "I didn't know people ever lived with so much space. So much of it! And all yours."

"Not for much longer," mused Ana sadly, looking around her. "I'll miss it! I'll have to leave behind almost everything. I'll never see it again. I'll never see the bedroom, the shower, the television, the kitchen, ever again. But it'll be all I'll regret leaving. And you? You found the flat alright?"

“It wasn’t easy. I didn’t realise how big a city could be. All I’d ever seen of Blad was what I saw from the Brothel. I didn’t know how far it spread out. There’s so much of it! I was really disorientated. I could walk any way I wanted, but I just didn’t know where to go.”

“Did you catch a bus?”

“A bus? No, I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know where any of the buses went. I just walked. It was miles! And the pavements are so hard. My feet are just a mess of blisters! But after being in the Brothel for so long and not being able to walk any distance, walking was really enjoyable, I can tell you.”

“How did you find Jadid?”

“I just asked people. And looked at street maps. I didn’t know it was so far from the Brothel. And the streets all look the same! I had your map, the one you drew me. That helped a bit when I actually arrived in Jadid. When I found the post office you told me about, and saw places with names like The Jadid Video Arcade and The Jadid Community Centre, I knew I was in the right place. It wasn’t difficult then to find your block of flats. It was a horrid climb up all those steps!”

“Did anyone see you come in?”

“I remembered what you said. There was that concierge at the door. I told him I was a friend of Zuja’s. That was the name you said, wasn’t it?”

Ana nodded. Zuja was a girl on the top floor who had a large number of friends, and another visitor for her wouldn’t attract any attention to the fact that Ana, for one of the few times she’d been in the city, was entertaining a visitor. Anything, however small, which might alert anyone to something unusual in Ana’s routine could sabotage the whole endeavour.

“Oh! It’s wonderful to see you here!” Binta gushed. “I’ve been looking forward to this moment for so long. I’ve been counting off the days, counting off the clients, one by one, just waiting for the moment when I could be sitting here waiting for you!”

Ana gripped Binta as tightly as she could. “Me, too! Every day! Every hour! It’s been unbearable! And not daring to speak to you: that’s been the worst! I was dreading that I might get back here, and you weren’t here. That you were somewhere else...”

Binta looked into Ana’s eyes with a troubled expression. “You still doubted me?” she said betraying hurt in her voice.

Ana nodded gravely. “Or I thought some other disaster might happen. I don’t know. Any disaster. That the police had found out that we were planning to leave. That the Director had found out. That Khedra had chosen this day to pay me a surprise visit. But you’re here! That’s all that matters! Oh! I’m so happy! We’re together at last! And we’ll never have to go back to that hateful Brothel ever again! How do you feel about not having to go back?”

“It’s a hideous nightmare that I’ve finally woken up from. Did I really have sex with all those disgusting men? And I was kept busy right to the end. It was horrible! They kept threatening to lower my grade if I performed badly, and, as you know, the lower the grade the more disgusting the client. And Khedra kept trying to persuade me to stay on as a prostitute when I finish. She told me that life as an employed prostitute was fundamentally better than that of a prisoner in the same place. Once I earned money, I’d appreciate it more. You didn’t find that, did you?”

Ana shook her head, although it was true that her income had increased quite

dramatically since she started working part-time in that capacity. “I’ll never have to see the Director again! Those horrid cigars he smoked. The taste of them was foul. All those vile things he got me to do. He was particularly taunting today. He told me such lies! That you had agreed to work in another brothel and that you were likely to share a flat with Ferhana when she leaves.”

“Did you have to ...?”

Ana nodded her head. “Let’s not talk about the Brothel. I never want to see it again. One thing that most upsets me about it is that I shall never get paid for the last month I worked. All that suffering for nothing!”

“I’ll miss the other girls,” sighed Binta.

“Like Ferhana?” snarled Ana.

“Oh, Ana! Please forget Ferhana. But, yes, I will miss Ferhana. She was a good friend. And Zabba, Ketaba and all the others. I’ll probably never meet them again. Ever.”

“In a way I hope I never do. They’ll only remind me of the Brothel. I want to forget every detail of it. I want to start afresh with you. Every aspect of that chapter in my life to be erased forever from my memory. That’s what I want. The only thing I want left of my time there is you. Nothing else. Just you!”

Binta kissed Ana passionately. “And I, you! That little room in which I was confined for so many hours, with the stains and smells of the clients. Those long corridors. That horrid mirror. The light above the door. Never again. I don’t even care what happens to my little garden. Slugs and greenflies can eat every morsel of it. I don’t care if I never work in a garden ever again!”

“I’ll miss never seeing Rif again. I wonder if I’ll ever see any of my family

again. They don't know I'm leaving. The first they'll ever know is when I write them a letter from Agdal. They don't even know that I work in a Brothel - and certainly nothing about my non-secretarial work. They'd be horrified if they knew!"

"Where have you said you've been working?"

"An insurance company. I thought of making up a name, but they might suspect something, so I told them it was Floose & Co. I've been dreading that they'd visit me and find out that I'd been lying. And of course I haven't told them anything about you, except that you're a friend of mine. I don't know whether I'll ever have the courage to tell them the whole truth. They would be so ashamed."

"My parents don't know about you either, Ana. I've written to them, but I've always had to be careful about what to say. My father's never written to me. My mother's letters are always so evasive. She doesn't admit even in her letters exactly where I've been sentenced and the reasons why. I might as well be abroad in Agdal already as far as she's concerned. She doesn't seem to expect me to come home again either. It may even be a relief to her if I'm abroad and they have no reason to feel ashamed for never seeing me again. I'll never see Jebel again any more than you'll ever see Rif. I look forward to seeing the countryside in Agdal. Do you think we'll be living in the countryside? I do hope so. I didn't enjoy walking through Blad at all."

Ana smiled compassionately. "I hope we do, but I wouldn't rely on it. When I asked Wahata where it was likely that we would be living, she simply said it was most likely to be where the jobs are. And most jobs are in big cities, aren't they?"

Binta nodded sadly. "However much I'm looking forward to leaving Alif, I still have apprehensions about Agdal. I *do* hope we enjoy living there. But it *must* be better than living in Alif. Surely!"

“We’ll be able to live together. We’ll be able to be open about our love together. I don’t care where we live really. If we don’t have to worry about being arrested then I’m sure we’ll be happy.”

“Yes, you’re right!” sighed Binta. “Agdal must be better than Alif. But I can’t believe it’s going to happen. It seems so unreal. I’ve only just got out of the Brothel! It’s the first time I’ve been free to wander anywhere other than Jebel. Blad seems foreign enough to me. The tall buildings. All the people. The busy traffic. And tomorrow at this time I won’t even be in Alif at all!”

“But at least we’ll have each other!”

“Yes, we will!” said Binta with a broad grin. “We’ll be together. Free and together! Forever!” She squeezed Ana tightly to her and peppered her face with kisses. “I’ve been aching for this moment for so long. I’ve been so wanting you. Just to be close to you. Just to feel you. Oh, Ana! I love you *so* much!”

27

“Well, hello!” said Wahata. “I’m glad you made it. And so promptly.” She beckoned Ana and Binta sit in the chairs opposite her in the small rundown café at which their rendezvous had been arranged. “You must have left Blad *very* early this morning!”

Ana yawned. Yes, it had been, but after a restless night in which neither she nor Binta got any sleep at all. This sleeplessness was partly to do with their forebodings for the day ahead, but more to do with the exertions of the two lovers’ reconciliation. They had got up extremely early, just as the first few rays of dawn sunshine streamed through the gaps between Blad’s tall office blocks, and humped their heavy suitcases down the steps to the ground floor, dreading that they should disturb anyone. Then into the city streets, heading across town towards the nearest railway station. As suggested, they bought tickets to a destination beyond that of the small border town of Bab, and sat separately in the train as it pulled off. Kerhala had warned them that secret police were much more widespread in Alif than Ana might imagine. Any unusual activity could attract very unwelcome attention - a category into which their early morning departure easily fell. The two women didn’t dare sit near each other until the train was well on its way and more people had embarked.

The journey took several hours, through barren plains bordered by mountains, past fields of peasants driving their donkeys and cattle, through small dusty towns and for nearly an hour along the length of a broad river on which boats were sailing in the bright light of the morning sun. The two girls were captivated by the vista, Binta especially. As she so often reminded Ana, not only had she never travelled such a long distance by train before, she had never seen any part of the world that was neither

Jebel nor Blad.

“It’s so beautiful!” she sighed. “And I’ll probably never see these places ever again.”

Bab was one of the least prepossessing railway stations at which they’d stopped. Nobody else got off the train when they did, dragging their heavy baggage down the great drop onto the platform and across the railway lines to the main platform. A guard blew a whistle and the diesel locomotive thundered off carrying its relative security away from them. The station was dusty and badly maintained. The metal signs were rusting and broken. A few goats were grazing by the side of the tracks, and stared warily at the two fugitives as they struggled out of the station and onto the dusty dirt track outside. This was certainly no tourist destination.

The Safari Café was probably the only café in the whole village, and scarcely a very busy one. Two old men sat outside smoking cigarettes and drinking coffee, and the waiter barely seemed to notice them as they struggled in with their luggage past the gas bottles and freezer cabinet by the doorway, but Ana knew for sure that they had come to the right place when they saw Wahata sitting inside in the shade by a wooden bench wearing culottes and a striped tee-shirt nursing a half empty glass of black coffee.

“This is a pretty godforsaken village I’m sure you’ll agree,” said Wahata when the waiter had served Binta and Ana with two welcome but unpleasant tasting glasses of coffee. “Not really what anyone would choose as their last sight of Alif, but it suits our purposes. It’s less than ten miles from the Agdal-Alif border, and we can trust the villagers to be sympathetic. A few generations ago, Bab was a village in Agdal which along with the rest of the Safari district was conquered by Alif in one of those

frequent wars which used to bedevil our two countries. People even now resent Alif occupation and the way they have been forced to drop their traditional customs for those of the invaders. I can talk to you quite freely here, and tell you all the things you need to know before I drop you off at the border. You're probably asking yourselves though why we've arranged for you to leave the country at this particular point."

"Well, yes," admitted Ana whose conversation with Binta had been about little else when they realised how very desolate the village of Bab was. "And it's still quite a long way from the border."

"There's a bus which comes to the border once a day. We shall time our arrival at the border to coincide with it to minimise suspicion. It would be too dangerous however for you to actually travel by it. It's regularly searched by police and, at the very least, questions would be asked as to why you should be going to Agdal. The questioning is rarely subtle and it would be very disconcerting for you - particularly for Binta who has only just come out of the Brothel. It's possible that the cost of them allowing you to continue on your way would be to provide sexual services for the police, and there's no guarantee that they would be true to their word. You would certainly be expected to pay quite a substantial sum of money as a bribe. That would be the least you could expect without an Agdal passport. Agdal citizens do not expect or get that kind of treatment, though it's almost routine for Alif nationals, particularly those without passports of any kind."

Wahata paused, and leaned over to rummage in a large handbag she had by her side. She pulled out two green plastic booklets which she passed over to Binta and Ana. "With these, however, you should be a lot more secure, although we still have the odd complaint from our own citizens of very uncivilised behaviour from your

minor officials.”

Ana looked at the booklet. It was her first sight of a passport, and it came as rather a surprise that such a very important document should look so ordinary. She was disconcerted to find that it was already creased and worn, with several visas already stamped inside, but there, on the opening page, was her photograph and the name Aghba Mustafubal printed underneath. Binta’s passport was in a similar state and the name inside was Harama Asine. Ana flicked through the pages, feeling a little disappointed. “Why are they both in such a bad state?”

“Common sense, I’m afraid. Passports in pristine condition would attract attention. Someone would be bound to suspect that they were forgeries. It’s not unknown, you see. We have deliberately distressed them and given them expiry dates which are really not far into the future. We have also faked an entry visa into the country, because that will be the first thing that the border guards will search for. Fortunately, Alif visas are not very sophisticated and extremely easy to forge. The names you’ve been given have been randomly selected but are more common in Agdal than they are in Alif. Your real names would also attract attention. We have to do everything possible to reduce the possibility of your being found out.”

“We’re very grateful,” said Binta. “You’ve gone to a lot of trouble on our behalf.”

“It’s not entirely for you alone. It is in our interest and that of the future success of the Amnesty from Oppression programme that you are not discovered. Agdal’s relations with Alif are always very fraught and President Marmeluke’s government isn’t at all averse to making high level complaints for every incidence of granting asylum to Alif nationals. The fewer such incidents known to your

government the better for us. If they don't find out now or in the future, the better it is for everyone, including any future petitioners. That's one reason for moving so promptly on Binta's release. The longer you tarried the more likelihood that someone somewhere might suspect something. What we hope is that people in your government will believe that you two have just disappeared: not an unknown phenomenon for people like you who have little to gain from being known as convicted lesbians. Our people are already laying tracks which will suggest just such an action." Wahata turned to face Ana. "Have you phoned work yet to say that you aren't coming in today?"

Ana shook her head. "No. I haven't been near a telephone since we left Blad."

"Well, you'd better call in now!" Wahata pulled a portable telephone out of her handbag and extended its aerial. "What we want you to say is that you have contracted 'flu and that your doctor has advised that you take a week off work. We will send your office a forged doctor's note which should allay suspicion. This will hopefully buy you a little time."

"Why do you want to do that if we're going to be in Agdal by this evening?" wondered Binta.

"It's not for you we want to buy time, but for your friends and colleagues. They will be as mystified as anyone when you don't turn up for work again, and with the benefit of extra time it is likely that when it is known that you have absconded from work plenty of other alternative theories and hypotheses will have propagated which will muddy the waters a little bit and lessen the chances of the correct solution being arrived at. I can't emphasise too much how much risk your friends may already be in if the slightest suspicion reaches the appropriate authorities."

With her heart thumping painfully and a glaucous mass lodged in her throat, Ana carefully punched in the digits of her work telephone number. She started with surprise when the bleeps of the automatic dialling resolved themselves into a piercing whistle, but then she realised she'd not prefixed it with the dialling code for Blad. She reset the receiver, punched in the longer code and waited with trepidation as the phone at the other end rang and rang. It was not at all welcome to her when the voice that barked angrily down to her was unmistakably the Director's.

"Hello. Who is it?"

"It's me, Ana."

"You! What are you ringing in for? Why aren't you here, you bitch? Why didn't you ring in earlier? How do you expect the office to run without you?"

"I'm ill. I've got 'flu."

"Flu, my foot, you slut! You should be here. Come in this minute."

"I've got a doctor's note. He says I've got to stay off work for at least a week..."

"A week? You lazy bitch! You better send that note in, m'dear. Bit of a coincidence, isn't it, you getting 'flu on the day after your dyke girlfriend leaves the Brothel. You're not with her, are you? Dyking about together?"

"I don't know where Binta is. I ... er ... I didn't even know she was due out."

"Lying dyke!" snorted the Director. "That means I'll have to hire a temp. Didn't give me much warning, did you bitch? You seemed all right yesterday."

"It came on very suddenly. I feel very ill."

"Huh! Well, I suppose you just haven't got the stamina, have you m'dear? I'll have to cancel the clients I arranged for you this week. They're going to be damned

disappointed. Get well soon, and I won't have any sympathy for you if you're off one day longer than the doctor's note says. Stupid bitch dyke!"

With that there was a sudden click as the Director put his receiver down. Ana gently lowered the portable phone, and stared at Binta and Wahata with a face drained of all colour.

"Your former boss doesn't sound like a very pleasant man," commented Wahata mildly.

"He's really horrible!" Binta exclaimed. "He's always seducing the girls at the Brothel and treats them really badly. You wouldn't believe some of the obscene things he's had poor Ana submit to!"

"I've been in this business just long enough to believe anything, I'm afraid. Alif is not a country famous for the kindness that its men treat its women." Wahata stretched a hand over to grasp Ana's which was still gripping the phone and staring at it blankly. "You handled that very well, Ana. Your boss clearly suspects that there is a connection between your absence and Binta's release. We shall have to watch your flat carefully to see whether he sends anyone to investigate. It's likely that what he'll be expecting is that Binta and you will be there together, so not finding either of you there may rather shock him. As long as no connection is made between your disappearance and the Republic of Agdal then no unfortunate conclusions may be drawn." Wahata turned to face Binta. "Although you are free from the Brothel, are there any appointments which you are due to make with anyone? Perhaps on the Brothel's post-employment rehabilitation programme?"

Binta shook her head. "No. Not at all. It's just a way they have of trying to persuade people like me to continue working for the Brothel after we've been

released. There are no jobs in Alif, except in places like the State Brothel, and I want nothing at all to do with it in future.”

Wahata nodded. “Your uncooperative behaviour over the last few years will have made such reasoning totally plausible. So, the authorities presumably have no way of tracing you. That’s all for the good. Unless something very untoward happens in the next few hours, you have both seen and heard the very last of the Brothel, and I dare say you must be delighted if that’s the case.”

Ana’s phone call to the Director still shook her. She eased her grip on the phone and handed it back to Wahata who carefully dropped it into her handbag. “He’s such a horrible man!”

Wahata nodded sympathetically. “Many men in Alif are like him. A country like yours seems to encourage male chauvinism. Not just in Brothels, of course. In every walk of life. In hotels, offices, factories, everywhere where women work. Women are very much second class citizens here, derided when they are successful, despised when they’re not. It’s not the worst country in the world in that respect, but it’s clearly not the best. You’ll be much happier in Agdal, I’m sure, where there are laws to protect women from the worst excesses of male behaviour, though I’d be lying if I said there weren’t far too many instances of male harassment and chauvinism in Agdal too. Alif is not a country which seems likely to improve the lot of its women in the near future and while men like your Brothel Director remain in positions of power and influence it’s unlikely to happen very soon at all.”

“Are there other ways in which Agdal is better than Alif?” wondered Binta.

“It’s more difficult to think of many ways in which Alif is at all better than Agdal. But President Marmeluke’s government would not be in power at all if it

didn't govern with the consensus of at least a sizeable minority of its citizens. I'm not saying that it is legitimate in the sense that it actually does win those fabulous majorities in your national elections that it so consistently claims. No party in Agdal has ever gained the massive electoral support your government boasts. What I'm saying is that there are enough people in your country who genuinely believe in the policies of your President Marmeluke to keep him in power until another would-be dictator comes along and by treachery or deceit manages to oust him from power and become president himself. It's unlikely though that any change of government in this way would make much difference to the policies your government pursues, whoever the actual individuals composing it are."

"But you managed to change your government in Agdal," objected Binta. "Surely the same could happen in Alif."

"Perhaps. Perhaps. But at great cost, I can tell you! It took at least a decade of chaos, civil war and invasion until Agdal evolved into the nation it is now. Many thousands of people died in the process and it didn't always seem inevitable that a liberal or enlightened regime would take power. I'm not sure I would gladly wish that kind of penalty on the people of Alif in their desire to attain better rights and economic prosperity."

Wahata signalled to the waiter who had been standing out of earshot in the entrance to the café. He wandered towards them, as Wahata stood up and paid for the coffees. "Right!" she announced to Binta and Ana. "We'd better get going."

The three of them strode into the dusty unmetalled road running through Bab, lined by sandy coloured buildings, on whose flat roofs were washing lines and the occasional television aerial. Wahata led them down the road to an area of dusty

ground where a car waited amongst the odd blown page of newspaper and a sleeping dog. Ana was surprised to see that the car was really not the grand Embassy limousine she'd expected, but, while Wahata was turning her key in the car door to release all the door locks, she reasoned that this too was not to attract unwelcome attention. It was quite modest, not at all new and the number plates were familiar as belonging to Blad. The three of them entered the car, Binta sitting in the front next to Wahata.

“We'll be arriving at the border rather early,” Wahata announced. “The bus isn't due to arrive for at least an hour, but I think it's rather better to be early than late.” She turned the key in the ignition and steered the car onto the road, bumping uncomfortably over the uneven ground. Wahata drove carefully and slowly, avoiding the potholes and hens scattered about the road.

“You may wonder why we've selected this particularly border post for you to leave,” Wahata said. “There are after all many such border posts, and most are a great deal more salubrious. For instance, one could have left the country by 'plane, bus or train. All much more convenient than this. But our objective is to minimise risk as much as possible. The passport control and customs here are much more lax than most others in Alif. They would be less likely to pick up on the fact that you don't have Agdal dialects and are dressing rather more conservatively than Agdal women would. They would also be less likely to be amongst the first border posts notified if your descriptions were circulated should anyone suspect you were trying to leave.”

“Surely, no one knows that we're here,” Ana remarked from behind Wahata's head.

“Nobody knows, but they may have their suspicions. Who knows whether one of your colleagues at the Brothel has discovered about your escape, by whatever

means I couldn't say, and has broadcast it to the authorities. Your boss has made the connection between Ana's day off sick and Binta's release. Although that connection may be useful later on in explaining your abrupt departure from the Brothel, it may be that his suspicions may be further aroused. Events like these have been known to happen, and in cases under my care as well."

"What happened in those cases?" Binta asked. "How did they find out? What did they do?"

"I don't know the answer to your questions at all, but I remember clearly one case I was supervising. Through a different crossing point to this. In fact, it was by sea. We do try to vary our selection as much as possible within the slim choice of relatively lax crossings. Like today, I escorted the man and his wife, who were being persecuted for their political activities, to the crossing point, as far as I could go - the actual crossing has to be done without any assistance from me I'm afraid. I watched them walk to the border patrol, and spent several anxious moments from a vantage point in the harbour waiting for them to pass through and embark on the boat. I waited and I waited, and still there was no sign of them. Eventually, I abandoned the wait and drove back to the Embassy. The first I knew about them for sure was that neither of them ever arrived in Agdal. The next I heard was in a report in one of your national newspapers. They were one of many in a list of people arrested for alleged alcohol smuggling and corruption of minors. What happened to them after that I don't know, but I can only fear the worst."

Wahata continued driving along the uneven roads, past derelict farm houses and fields in which women farmworkers wearing scarves over their hair were bent double over the crops they were working on. In the middle distance, some splendid

mountains towered above, which Wahata identified as being on the Agdal side of the border. The only other traffic they passed were carts pulled by oxen or mules, and a small open-topped van in which several women were sitting, watching the fields as they went by. Among them was a thin teenage girl with most of her front teeth missing who smiled broadly at them as they passed. Both Binta and Ana were captivated by the view, while Wahata drove doggedly on, occasionally cursing the state of the roads. "I don't think they've been maintained since this was Agdal territory!" she remarked bitterly at one stage.

Eventually, Wahata stopped the car by a derelict farmhouse, and parked it out of sight of the road. She pointed at a single bus shelter just by the road which had none of its windows and very little of its roof left intact. A few people were gathered there disconsolately between their bags and suitcases. "That's where I suggest you wait until the bus arrives. Those other people have come through the border from the Agdal side, and are no doubt waiting for the bus to take them deeper into Alif. There are very few buses which can travel through the border, and the bus which comes here does a round trip. This is where it drops off those heading for Agdal, and picks up those who've just arrived. For the moment you will be masquerading as people heading into Alif. Avoid talking to anyone and if you have to, be as noncommittal as possible about where you come from and what you've been doing on your supposed holiday in Agdal. It's quite likely that the only people who'd be interested in you are not people with your best interests at heart. It's possible that there may be a secret policeman surveying the border for contraband and very likely to be scouting for his own slice of the pre-sale proceeds of alcohol or drug smuggling. It may be that you'll be approached by smugglers who would try to tempt you into a profitable sideline.

Guard your bags well. If it's thought that you're going into Alif, someone may slip some contraband into them to protect themselves from being caught on the bus by the police. Don't even look at people. Do you understand? It's very important that you do."

Ana and Binta nodded. "Every stage of this journey seems fraught," Binta remarked bitterly.

"It is, I'm afraid. You can't actually see the border patrol from here, and you won't be able to see it from the bus stop. It's about a hundred metres further on, just over the slight ridge. But you can see the border." Wahata indicated a long barbed wire fence occasionally topped by tall watch towers. The dead body of a goat was lying by one point. Beyond the barbed wire was desolate countryside much like that on the Alif side of the border, and then a second row of barbed wire a twenty or so metres beyond. There was no other feature in the whole landscape.

"Be prepared to hand over all the money you have. It's actually illegal to export money from the country, but I don't believe there's any harm in having some Alif money on you. The patrols are accustomed to the idea of Agdal visitors not spending all their money, and they'll be quite happy to relieve you of it. It'll actually make the crossing easier for you if they get something out of you, and it is more typical of Agdal carelessness with money than Alif parsimony. However, you'll need these."

Wahata handed over a few worn change receipts from Alif banks. Ana examined them. There was an awful lot of money that had been changed. How could anyone ever have spent so much money?

"And here's some Agdal currency."

These notes were similarly worn and unlike Alif notes did not feature a portrait of the head of state. Instead there were pictures of historical figures Ana had never heard of and strange mythical beasts which were the emblems of Agdal.

“You’ve been on holiday in Alif for two weeks. If anyone asks you at the border, you found everything in Alif very cheap, but the hotels were dreadful. Complain about how you’ve been perpetually harassed by men during your stay, but say nothing which could be interpreted as criticism of the government, and especially not of President Marmeluke.”

Wahata opened the car door, and Binta and Ana followed Wahata as she got out of the car, pulling their bags out of the boot.

“Now, make your way to the bus stop. Keep as much out of sight of the road as you can. Wait till the bus arrives and join the other people as they head towards the border. On no account be among the first to arrive, and try not to be the very last. Somewhere in the last five or six would be best. Answer all questions briefly and with no ambiguity. Surrender some if not all of your Alif money if asked, but bear in mind that there is no consistency to the questions that will be asked or the demands that will be made. Accept that your luggage will be searched, ostensibly for alcohol and drugs (though why anyone would wish to smuggle them out of Alif I really don’t know!), and that items will almost certainly be confiscated. Don’t appear too resigned to their loss, but don’t make too much fuss about it. Remember your new names and particularly your homes. Remember that the last hotel you stayed in was the Hotel Marmeluke in Blad.”

“What do we do when we get to Agdal?” Binta asked.

“I was just about to get to that. Go to the nearby town of Alan and book a

room at the Hotel Liberty. You will soon be met by officials from Agdal who will guide you through your first few days in the country. They'll organise a flat for you to stay - probably in one of the cities - and help you find a job. There are plenty of jobs in Agdal's cities if you don't mind working in a fairly menial capacity at first."

Wahata scratched her face in the hot midday sun. "Well, I think that's everything. Remember everything I've told you, and don't even speak to each other until you get through the border. Anything you say even to each other could arouse suspicion. I hope it all goes well, and that if I ever see you again it'll be on the Agdal side of the border. Best of luck!"

With that, Wahata turned to each of them, and gently hugged and kissed them in turn on the cheek. She smiled bravely, and then turned round to her car. She got inside, and pointedly turned her face away from them. The last words she said before the two lovers wandered along to the bus shelter weighed down by the heat of the sun and the bulk of their bags were: "Don't wave to me when you leave. It might attract unwelcome attention. Good luck again!"

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Ana and Binta shuffled together along in the queue of anxious people waiting to leave Alif. The barbed wire marking Alif territory was just metres behind them, with the striped barrier pole raised by an officer carrying a fearsome submachine gun. Ahead of them and temptingly near was the barbed wire border of Agdal. Between them and the border, however, were very officious looking customs officers and armed guards who were meticulously discomfiting all those ahead of them in the queue. Already, a couple had been rudely pushed to one side, and stood helplessly by in the midday sun attended by an armed guard. Their baggage was separated from them, perhaps forever, and the young woman was sobbing while her boyfriend comforted her with an arm around her shoulders.

The border officials examined every passport with incredible care, slowly turning each page and examining the visa stamps. Beyond were customs officials, in front of which had already developed a queue, who were being equally thorough with the contents of their luggage. Alif passports were particularly scrutinised, and their possessors were asked a frighteningly extensive list of questions. Did they have relatives in Agdal? Had they visited Agdal before, and if so, for how long? Had they ever drunk alcohol? Were they likely to do so on their visit? Had they ever been imprisoned or cautioned for any civil or criminal offences? Were they now, or had they ever been, employed by the government of Alif? One young man with a male friend was bluntly asked if he were homosexual. Ana shivered as she listened to this exchange in which the man indignantly declared otherwise only to be asked further blunt and humiliating personal questions. The two men were then taken to one side.

Ana feared what might happen to them, but less than ten minutes later, after Ana and Binta had shuffled a couple of metres nearer to passport control, they were walking, clearly shaken, towards the customs post.

“You’ve been to an awful lot of countries, young lady,” remarked the passport official when it came to Ana’s turn at the counter. “Gharab, Aras, and ... what’s this? ... Dafathy?”

Ana had studied her passport well enough to remember the real name on the visa. “Thafady,” she corrected.

“Thafady. Did you go mountain-climbing there, young lady?”

Ana was quick-witted enough to answer: “No. There are no mountains in Thafady.”

“Hmm! No, maybe there aren’t. Though Dafathy’s well equipped with them. And what is your home town like?”

“Akin. It’s very nice.”

“Better than anything in Alif?”

“No, about the same.”

“And did you enjoy your stay in Alif?”

“It was very pleasant.”

“And what was the purpose of your visit? Do you have any relatives in Alif?”

“Not that I know of.”

Eventually, the official seemed satisfied and at last picked up his visa stamp, flicked through the pages and pressed it down on the ink pad before transferring it to the passport. He then squiggled a mark over it in biro and handed it back to Ana, before proceeding to do the same thing for Binta.

Ana and Binta had pretended for almost an hour now not to know each other, had only exchanged smiles at each other, and Ana trembled as she strode on to the next queue while Binta was being interrogated in much the same nature as herself. She felt a certain degree of elation as she strode on, nearly but not quite free of Alif. As she settled at the end of the queue, she spent several anxious moments watching Binta from a distance who like her was asked a series of questions. It seemed like an eternity, but it couldn't have been more than five minutes, until a smiling Binta strode towards her, separated by an elderly couple from Agdal who had been processed by the other official.

The next ordeal was to have their bags searched, and questions asked on how much they had spent in Alif and where it had been spent. In the process, as Wahata had predicted, they were made to surrender their Alif money (some of which Ana had cautiously secreted into a pocket, more for reasons of sentiment than practicality). The customs official seemed quite satisfied by the amount which he meticulously counted separating one or two notes from the others which he carefully placed in an official box. Ana's bags were not so much unpacked, as tipped upside down, the contents of underwear, shoes and clothes scattered over the bench and onto the floor. Ana was instructed to pick up these items and to replace them on the table.

"You seem to have an awful lot of clothes," sniffed the customs official, hardly disguising his disappointment. "More changes of clothing than you had days in Alif I think."

"I like to be well prepared."

"Many of these clothes have Alif labels. Did you buy them while on your holiday?"

Ana could see the clothes were mostly too worn for that to be plausible. “They must have been imported into Agdal where I bought them.”

“It’s good to see that Alif exports something!” grunted the official cynically. “Let’s look in your other bag. You may pack the first bag again.” He opened the bag and produced a camera and a radio which were hidden among more clothes, towels and personal belongings of mostly sentimental value. “I see these are Alif goods. Have you got an export license for them?”

Ana shook her head mournfully, knowing that this was the last time she’d see either of them again.

“I’d best confiscate them, young lady. You presumably haven’t been informed of our government’s very strict policies regarding exportation.”

As the official scrutinised the few books, ornaments and the travelling iron she had in the bag, she was very grateful that she had decided after all not to take with her the letters written to her by her parents and which she’d been so reluctant to throw away. The official would have probably opened them and read them, particularly on noting the fact that the stamps and postmarks on them were unmistakably of Alif origin, featuring the ubiquitous features of President Marmeluke. Several pens, two novels and a nail clipper did not rejoin the other items she was eventually allowed to stuff back into her bag, although no mention was made of any export regulations regarding them.

And then Ana was free at last. She strode along the desolate path to the Agdal border. A single guard stood there with his hands in his pocket. Ana showed him her passport, and he merely flicked through it with a bored expression. He handed it back to her with a smile. “Have a nice day,” he said before returning to the stool in the

shade of the small hut where he was based and waited for the next person.

It was an agonising ten minutes Ana waited by the roadside as other people passed her through the border, her bags at her feet and sweat streaming down her forehead. At last, Binta wandered along, still trying to secure her case, and just managing to retrieve her passport to show to the guard.

“Welcome home to Agdal,” he said smiling, letting Binta through.

As Binta approached it was as if the cares and worries of the last few days and the trials of the last few months disintegrated like vestiges of cobweb from Ana’s mind. Binta was grinning broadly, scarcely capable of restraining her delight and relief. “Free!” she exclaimed. “Free! Really and truly free!”

“Oh, Binta! Binta!” Ana replied, rushing up to her lover and hugging her tightly against her. “We’ve done it! We did it! We’re here in Agdal. Where we can be ourselves. Where we can be a normal couple. Where we can say what we like. Where we won’t be put in gaol or sent back to the Brothel. Where,” she added slyly, “we can take our clothes off in public like Ketaba does when she’s in Agdal.”

Binta smiled, glancing slightly to one side at the shoulder strap of her skirt which was slipping down her shoulder. “I don’t think I’ll be taking *my* clothes off. At least, not for a good while. It’s more liberating for me to be able to wear them again after all these years. The first thing I’ll do when we’ve started earning, is build up a wardrobe of clothes I’ll be happy to wear.”

“Of course. Of course you must!” breathed Ana. “What’s important is that we’ve got the choice. No more Brothel. No more Director. No more ...”

“No more filthy, abusive, dirty-minded men. Ever again. I’ll never ever have anything to do with them again. Ever! From now on, it’s just you and I. Nobody else.”

She eased herself out of Ana's grip, and allowed her bags to drop to her feet. She turned around, holding Ana's hand in hers, and scanned the horizon. Ahead of them were the mountains they had seen from the deserted farmhouse, led to by a metalled road in good condition and dotted by houses in much better condition than those neighbouring the border on the Alif side. A few kilometres ahead, a tractor was slowly ploughing across a field followed by a flock of seagulls. Cattle were grazing in fields nearby. A bus was standing by a bus stop just thirty metres away in which the others who had come through the border were already sitting. Several green taxis stood by a taxi rank where men and women were sitting around, smoking cigarettes and chatting. Trees dotted the plain with wire protecting their bark from any unwanted grazing.

"Those border guards!" Binta remarked turning her head back to face the barbed wire defending the Alif border, which now seemed so much more distant than the few metres between them would suggest. There were still people being processed by the Alif officials, while the sole Agdal border guard was sitting on his stool reading a paperback with headphones over his ears. "They asked so many questions. They said my clothes were in a pretty poor state for someone from Agdal. I told them I didn't wear them very often, which is true, but it was not really the right answer. They asked me what sort of a whore I was. Did I practice my loose morals in Alif? Had I imported any alcohol? All sorts of horrid questions. They searched me and found some Alif money I'd hidden in the handbag you gave me, and accused me of trying to smuggle it out. Of course, they took it from me. Such an awful amount! All the savings I'd ever had before I'd been sent to the Brothel. I thought they were going to turn me back. It was awful!"

“But they didn’t, did they? You weren’t turned back. You were let through.”

“I don’t think they’d really suspected me of being an Alif citizen. Safari’s such a long way from Jebel that I might as well have come from a foreign country. They just didn’t like me because they thought I came from Agdal. They think all women from Agdal are whores. Ironic, really. They just wanted to humiliate me. Alif’s last word, I suppose. They took the ivory doll Ferhana gave me. They took the bracelet Zabba gave me. It was horrible. I had to crawl on the floor to pick up all the underwear they’d dropped down there. But believing me to be from Agdal, they probably thought they couldn’t do anything to stop me passing through.”

“But we’re free now!” pointed out Ana.

“Yes. Free!” Binta turned to Ana, her arms outstretched and a tear running out of the corner of her left eye and over her cheek. “Oh, Ana! I’m so happy! So happy! This is the happiest moment of my entire life! We are here, together! You and I. No other moment could ever be so perfect. Oh, Ana! None of this could have been possible if it wasn’t for you! Never would I have seen a day like this if it wasn’t for all the selflessness you’ve shown towards me. All the suffering you’ve been through because of me! All that you’ve done for me, despite everything. Ana! Ana! I love you *so much!*”