

The Journey

17 year-old Anitra was the favourite of the harem. She was the favourite (as far as the Sultan was concerned) because of her great skill on the lute which she had learnt to play at her mother's knee. She was also very beautiful with short black curly hair which fell in ringlets around her milky coffee-coloured oval face, she had a warm smile and her large dark eyes were full of Eastern mystery. She wore a long purple caftan skillfully embroidered in many colours and on her shapely feet. Pink and gold embroidered damask slippers that tapered to a diamond point.

When Anitra first came to the harem she was entranced by its opulence (so unlike the poor village where she was brought up). She enjoyed the company of the other girls which made up for the cantankerous, gouty Sultan whom she had to face as his whim dictated. She loved the Turkish bath, giggling with the other women, playing her lute and smoking hashish by the fountain in the garden.

But in spite of all this pleasure deep down she missed her childhood friend Sinbad who came from her village in the south. She would stare longingly through the N'Loorish window of the harem hoping for a glimpse of him and would plead with her jinni before she went to sleep to take her back to her sweetheart. Often, by the fountain she would recall their happy, carefree days, before the Sultan spotted her and summoned her to this gilded cage, playing with Sinbad in the ruined mosque, haggling in the bazaar and taking turns to ride the family donkey. Her cheeks gradually paled as the weeks dragged by, and her bright eyes were often dimmed with tears. If only my jinni would listen! she would sigh.

One day a letter for Anitra was smuggled into the harem with a consignment of dates for the girls.

Can I see you again? the letter began. Why don't you let me help you escape from there? I'm off on a journey to China tomorrow. Meet me at 8 o'clock tonight in the garden. Here's the arsenic. You'll know what to do. Dying to see you!~ love Sinbad. Freedom! Sinbad! China! Anitra's heart leapt as inside the envelope she found a phial labelled Arsenic

That night she entered the Sultan's chamber with her lute. He was reclining on a divan languorously smoking a hookah. Anitra's face tightened with determination.

She plumped herself down on a large tasseled silk cushion. The old Sultan pinched her cheek, stroked his curly black beard and commanded: Play me your favourite tune, my dear.

Anitra played a lullaby. The music was ethereal, dreamy. As the Sultan's eyelids began to droop, Anitra felt in her caftan pocket. Yes, the phial of arsenic was there. She played again and the Sultan's head began to nod. Anitra dropped the liquid arsenic into his goblet of spiced wine. There you are, you old Bluebeard! she thought smugly. The Sultan drowsily beckoned for her to pass his drink. He sipped greedily. The crystal goblet glistened by the light of a scented ornamental candle by the divan in the darkened Chamber.

Suddenly he let out an anguished groan. His body stiffened and then slumped across the divan. He let go of the goblet and clutched his corpulent belly, screaming with pain~ Anitra fled back to the harem where there was a further commotion.

The other girls were huddled together in a corner screaming and clutching silk cushions and staring at the tight that had broken out at the back door. A gang of youths had set upon the guard, carrying daggers. Anitra's face lit up. It was Sinbad

and his friends. The guard fell to the floor with a bleeding gash to his head. Sinbad grabbed Anitra's wrist and they all ran out to mount the white Arab steeds outside the palace.

The other guards rushed in from the opposite door, stepped over the body on the floor, rushed outside and stood breathlessly by the high bougainvillea-covered stone walls, only to see flurries of dust in the distance rising hooves of the white steeds, carrying the escaping friends.

When Sinbad and Anitra reached the harbour, they dismounted, embraced and praised Allah. 'Come this way' he whispered and took her to a mean-looking dwelling which had been abandoned, save for a couple of mangy cats nosing at a chipped milkless saucer. Quickly she disguised herself in the garb of a veiled, pious old woman. They hurried out,

their ears pricked for the pursuing guards and boarded Sinbad's humble boat.

I thought I'd never see you again, darling! whispered Anitra through her black veil.

it was a living death there! I swear I'll never drink sherbert again! I'm surprised it's not pouring out of my ears!

Sinbad smiled masterfully as the sunset in his turban shone in the moonlight. His oars struck the smooth surface of the Bosphorus as they began their long, perilous journey over the seas to China and freedom. As Sinbad rowed, Anitra thanked her jinni and Allah the Almighty, The All-Compassionate One.'