Something different

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Absidy led them to the elaborately carved hindu-style wooden door. In the center of the door a high relief of Rati, the Hindu god of sex, masturbated vigorously, surrounded by rays of light.

"Before we go inside, close your eyes and take a deep breath. Tell me what you smell."

"What does the air outside have to do with what's inside?" Faraday answered. "Are you cooking something in there?"

"Just do it, please."

Chloe spoke first. "Gardenia. It has to be gardenia. Is it inside? The scent is unmistakable."

"That isn't Gardenia, Chloe. I know that scent. It's Jasmine. Like me."

"It's whatever you want it to be," Absidy said. "If you try, you may even find the flowers, hidden somewhere behind a tree. That's the other reason, besides the beaches and the way the landscape changes, that we'll never sell this island. Ever."

"I'm beginning to understand, Absidy. There's probably some reason that we respond this way. Something in the air, maybe. And it's like this outside the crater too, but the effect is not as strong. What's causing this?"

"We'll tell you about that later. But now I'm going to answer your questions about the boxes you saw us ship out."

Absidy touched the underside of Rati's right breast, moving his finger slowly, in the shadow made by the sun. The door swung open. "This is it, kids. Go on in. This is our deep dark secret."

The room reeked of patchouli oil. He flicked a switch on the wall, flooding the room in bright pink light from an overhead fixture. Faraday had to squint, let his eyes adjust. The light fixture ran the center of the room, just below a ceiling joist under the nipa leaves. It had polished metal sides, with clear glass safety covers over the LEDs.

There were drilled steel racks along each wall, plastic bins sat shoulder to shoulder on the shelves. Vulgar purple and red LEDs along the shelf edges - there had to be hundreds of them - flashed in sequence from one end of the room to the other. A blacklight tube neon tube they'd wired to a vintage metal stanchion that someone salvaged from the old Saigon *Salle de Cine'ma* buzzed a low, lascivious hum in the corner.

There were tables with shipping tape, and markers and pens, and small, flattened cardboard boxes, and rolls of recycled paper, and more tape on the shelves. Old metal stage lights, attached

by clamps to a crossbeam, projected hot red hearts onto strips of silver tinsel that hung in strands over the central table. He looked over at Absidy, who was standing by the switch with a perfect poker face. Faraday had to laugh. *Porn shop lighting under a nipa roof, in a volcano. In the middle of nowhere. And it isn't grass they're selling.*

"So? What is it?" he said.

"Joom," Absidy answered.

"Joom? Like Doom? What's Joom? I don't get it," Faraday answered.

"I'll show you." Faraday and the women watched as Absidy withdrew a three-inch cube from one of the bins and placed it on a table under the reflecting tinsel.

"Before I open it, are there any guesses?"

Faraday, Chloe and Jasmine looked at each other in succession. None of the three had a clue as to what it might be. Ella stood by, expressionless, her disapproval obvious. "Okay. No guesses then. Here. He pulled the lid off, revealing a peach colored plastic ring, with a flattened top the size of a dime under the plastic.

"Okay, it's ahh, a very nice ring."

"It's one of the Jooms. We sell them on the internet as sex toys."

"What does it do?"

"It vibrates. There's a battery under the vibrator. It comes with an induction charger."

"How did you manage to fit a vibrator and a battery on a ring?" Faraday asked.

"Think of a smartwatch, or a cell phone. We use the same vibrators that they use. They call them 'coin vibrators' in the trade. The batteries were the easy part - we use the same lithium oxide batteries. There's a thin gasket that separates the battery from the vibrator. You press down on it, like this," he said. "When you stack one over the other like that it isn't that much larger than a flat gemstone set on a gold or silver ring, really."

Even the usually taciturn Jasmine thought it amusing. "Nice work. I like it," she said.

Chloe broke out into a laugh, with her eyes tearing. "Oggod, that is so funny. Vibrators. Wait. I can't breathe. Let me catch my breath."

And then suddenly, thinking abut Les. Les and his long, lewd fingers, "funny you'd give it that name. That's what I was thinking when I um… never mind. What was I saying? Why did you give it that name?"

Absidy grinned. "It's kind of obvious - 'gigantic orgasm', but with a 'j', or 'jumbo omgasm', if you like."

"Right. That's what I was laughing at. You're right, I totally get it."

"Get what?" said Jasmine. "I mean I do get the joke, but it isn't all that funny."

"No. It is, don't you see? It's their way of telling the rest of world to fuck off, while making

money at it. I love it.”

“It is funny. You’re right,” Faraday said, “although maybe no so much about telling the rest of world off. Not in so many words, anyway. More like ”screw this. You’ve screwed everything else."

“I’d say they’re the same thing, Michael, but whatever. See it your way,” Absidy said.

“And since you have no mail service, you have someone ship them for you. Let me guess. Bangkok?”

"Precisely. Most of our ads use the obvious, on-line porn shopper’s approach at the end of the text: *’send her to the moon with Joom!’ and ’give her the thrill she that she needs, gratify your lady night and day!’*

“And people buy really buy these things?”

“Oh yes. Absolutely. If it’s cheap enough, they’ll even buy it out of curiosity. You’d be amazed at how many we sell. Our Psyops team also suggested a more demanding ’No time for doubts! Life is too short to hesitate! Have sex!’ ”You have a Psyops team?"

“Absolutely. This is war. We’re fighting our own, undeclared war against humanity. Right from here on Longyan.”

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