

SUZETTE HADEN ELGIN

ONLY A HOUSEWIFE

The last straw for Joro Belledarien -- the event that pushed him over the edge from weary apathy to frustrated rage and gave him the courage to defy everyone and everything he knew -- was his little sister's puberty ceremony. So long as Elizabeth, like Joro, had lived at home in his mother's house, he had been able to endure his situation. It hadn't been pleasant, but it had been bearable; Joro had been able to keep his awareness of it well buried most of the time.

Because there was someone younger than himself in the house, who had to take orders from their parents just as he did. Someone he outranked. Someone he could take out his anger and frustration on whenever his aging father decided it was time to taunt Joro yet again about his bachelor status. Someone he could subject to taunting and belittling and teasing. Especially teasing. Joro took tremendous pleasure in teasing women, whose reactions to the process were endlessly fascinating; it did them no harm, and it made him feel better about the unjust world he had to deal with daily. He had even begun keeping a detailed journal of the phenomenon, classifying and cross-classifying it into a taxonomy of verbal helplessness, and it was his intention to publish the results in one of the better scholarly journals when he was satisfied that it was complete.

As long as it was like that, Joro had gotten by. He had in fact grown so accustomed to the old man's nagging and sarcasm that he hadn't really realized the true barbarousness of his situation.

Until the morning he was suddenly brought right up against a pair of intolerable facts. The fact that Elizabeth was actually going to leave, that very day, the moment the celebration was over and the guests had gone away. And the fact that once she was gone, he would be the only "child" in the house. He, Joro Belledarien, a man of thirty years! The only unmarried man of his age in the whole Kallibar district!

It shocked him, as it no doubt shocked both his parents. Who could have imagined such a thing? Elizabeth was only thirteen years old. She was still at an age when her house ought to have been no more than a slightly sensitive swelling folded like a rosebud against the flawless skin of her left hip. Joro had taken it for granted that he could count on Elizabeth as a buffer for another three years at least, and probably for longer than that.

But Elizabeth was precocious. She had always been precocious, physically. And she had betrayed him without the least sign of compassion or even decent remorse for the misery she was condemning him to. Her breasts had begun to swell; her house had begun to swell. Joro supposed there was probably crisp short hair beginning to curl over her armpits and her crotch . . . it made him a little sick to think about that. He refused to think about that.

Elizabeth Marana Belledarien. His little sister, who no more than three months ago had wept bitterly as Joro held one of her favorite dolls high above her head out of her reach and pulled its luxuriant hair, one hair at a time, out of its silly head. And now, almost without warning, certainly without logic or even common sense, this pathetic girlchild was to be transformed into a woman, fully adult by law and by custom! She was to have property of her own. To be installed in the midst of a handsome plot of land. To be called upon by neighbors, all eager to make her acquaintance in her new role. She was to be mistress of all she surveyed, responsible to no one. She was to be free to do exactly as she liked until she made her choice of husband from among the other young men like himself, who would be courting her in their frantic need to get away from their parents. While Joro stayed behind, living under his mother's roof like a little boy, saying "Yes Mother," and "I'm very sorry, Mother," and "Father, I deeply regret displeasing you yet again."

It was not bearable. He could not stand it. He didn't require his father's constant reminders to bring home to him how degrading it was.

Little Elizabeth Joro had been almost fond of her, before, but he hated her now, from the depths of his heart. They had given her her woman-name for the ceremony; Elizabeth of the Twin Towers, she was to be called. For the house that had begun to enfold her, its cord still no thicker than a supple young vine sprouting from her hip, was apparently going to be something spectacular.

On the day of the puberty ceremony, Elizabeth had sat serene and proud (Why not? Who wouldn't have been serene and proud, with her luck?) accepting the gifts of their assembled relatives and friends. While Joro fumed and seethed and wished she would drop dead on the spot, preferably of something agonizingly painful that would turn her into an entirely repulsive corpse. Her house, about which so much fuss was being made, was barely large enough to provide her with minimum shelter. No one else, no matter how passionately he might have wanted to pursue her, could possibly have gone inside it.

But even on the day of celebration it had already been obvious that the house was too large and substantial to fold away under Elizabeth's clothing any longer. Joro's parents were modern in their ideas -- they would no more have

thought of binding the house tight to her body to keep her longer at home than they would have eaten raw meat. It was the first time in his life that Joro had ever wished that his mother and father were more old-fashioned, more conservative, less willing to keep up with the times. He would have bound Elizabeth's house down with a wire tight enough to strangle it, if he'd been given a chance. But of course he had no chance! Nobody had had the decency even to ask him what his preferences were. As usual, he was treated abominably, and there was not one thing he could do but stand by and watch while Elizabeth preened and blushed and his parents beamed with pride and pleasure in their daughter.

His mother wept to lose her youngest daughter so prematurely, of course, knowing that she would never again be able to see her in the flesh. But everyone at the ceremony and the obscenely lavish party that followed could see that Jannelle Belledarien, who had been Jannelle of the Jade Roof, was proud nonetheless. She had stood in the door when it all wound to a close at last, just before sundown; she had waved them on their way, standing tall and straight in the archway, her cord as thick as a man's wrist, glowing a deep and noble scarlet, winding off behind her into the Belledarien house's heart, pulsing with her mingled feelings of joy and sorrow.

It was awful. Elizabeth of the Twin Towers, indeed! Sitting in the midst of the fifty acres of land deeded to her by the government. Her house --with its two absurd skinny little towers, like two budding horns on a ganglegoat -- unfolding around her and growing day by day. Holding court. Joro swallowed bile each time he thought of it, and he had known that it represented some sort of watershed point that he must get past. He could not go on living under the discontented eyes of his parents and listening to their complaints about his behavior. He had to get away, be on his own, be his own man!

It baffled Joro that no woman would have him for husband. It made no sense. He was a man of substance. He was a scientist with a growing reputation and a good income. He was in splendid health, he knew he was not bad looking, he was proud of the strong tall body that never failed him and that could certainly have brought some sensible woman night after night of bliss. . . . What was the matter with them all, turning him down one after another?

"It's your cursed tongue, Joro," his father was forever telling him. "Women are choosy -- and rightly so. They can't go out, the way a man can, and get away from their husbands; they have no choice but to stay inside the house. And if he is pompous and arrogant and unkind, if he takes pleasure in making them miserable, what are they to do? For women, my foolish thoughtless son, marriage is a life sentence. Naturally they are careful who they choose to share that

sentence with! And naturally they don't want someone like you -- always tormenting them, always making them cry, always yelling and pounding and sneering and stomping about! Why would they? They're not idiots, you know, just because they're female!"

And why did my mother want YOU, old man? Joro always thought, listening to this tiresome song that he knew by heart. Why would any woman want YOU, you weakling? He had seen his father, hundreds of times if he had seen him once, going out into the night and any sort of weather on his mother's foolish errands. Did the woman want a peach? Caleb Belledarien would be delighted to go get her one, never mind what he might have been doing when the fancy took her. Did she want a bolt of silk? Did her heart cry out for a flowered scarf? A book? A music box? Whatever it was, Caleb would smile at his spoiled woman and touch her cheek, the silly old fool, and out he would go with a smile on his stupid face with its straggly beard never properly trimmed, to do her ladyship's bidding!

It wasn't going to be like that for joro. When he married, he would be the authority in his household, let his wife be Someone of the One Hundred Towers and Turrets and Gazebos. He would rule there, and she would do what he wanted. His father knew nothing about women, that was his problem. Because he had found a woman who was willing to take him in for her own purposes, to use him like a servant, to provide her with children . . . children that he had to earn a living for, not her . . . he fancied himself an authority on the subject of wives and marriages. Joro knew better. Caleb was besotted, that was what he was; he was no more than a woman's plaything, though he thought himself such a wonder. It would have been amusing if Joro had not been forced to live with him. One's father's foibles; everyone's father had foibles. It gave you something to talk about at the club. But his friends didn't have those foibles constantly under their noses; it was easy for them to be indulgent and amused.

Joro's situation was not amusing. It was a burden. An intolerable burden. Something had to be done. He went into the space his mother had generously allotted to him for a laboratory -- not that she had any need for it herself any longer, with all his brothers and sisters gone -- and he applied himself to the dilemma in the same way he would have tackled any other scientific problem. He made a list. He laid out the data. He formulated hypotheses and tested them on the computer, in a model of his own construction. He observed the results, and he changed the model to reflect them, and he tried again. He was an inspired and superbly trained scientist; he made a lot of money because he was good at what he did; and he was methodical. It never crossed his mind that he might not find the solution.

When it came to him, after two weeks of trying and discarding and trying again,

it was almost laughably simple. He couldn't imagine why it had taken him so long to think of it, except that of course it's always the simple solutions that do take time. He had been so delighted that he'd gone out and thrown a huge party for the men of his circle, inviting even the ones he usually snubbed, and spent two miserable days getting rid of the resulting hangover. It had been worth it, a celebration was called for, he had provided a fitting one.

The houses the women grew fed on estrogen, the woman-hormone, and he hadn't been able to work out either a synthetic that would serve or a way to guarantee a supply of the real thing. But he had realized, finally, that there was no reason why a house couldn't live just as well on the male hormone--live better, in fact. For testosterone meant a stronger house by far. A male house. What could be more obvious?

The modifications were easily accomplished. The only difficult part had been finding a family desperate enough to let him take the house-bud away from one of its daughters who lay near death and had no use for it anyway. He had promised them that she would feel no pain, and she had not, he had performed the surgery with scrupulous care, the laser in his hand like a musical instrument of which he was master. The girl had sighed once and died, her face ravaged by her illness but unmarked by so much as a twinge of discomfort at Joro's hands. She was better off dead, as her family was better off for being rid of her and having the money he paid them.

Joro was quantum leaps ahead of the women. Never mind that they had had thousands of years to refine the process and fit it to the traditions of the culture. They were ignorant. It was ridiculous that this matter of shelter had been left to them for so long. He was not about to live in symbiosis with a house, shackled for the rest of his life by his own body; the very thought was repulsive. It wasn't just the loss of freedom, although he could never have accepted that. The thought of having something else -- something alive -- attached to his body made his stomach churn and turned his bowels to water; he could not begin to imagine how women bore it. His first modification, once he had satisfied himself that the house would indeed live and thrive, had been the installation of the tank that held backup testosterone to sustain the house while he was away. If women wished to live all of their adult lives bound to their houses by a few hundred yards of umbilical cord, that was their privilege; he had no intention of doing any such thing. He came home at night to his own home, with no wife there to plague him and complain, and attached the tank to the socket on his hip to replace the testosterone that had been used in his absence. But that was it--that was all. Except for that simple task, Joro came and went as he pleased.

When the government had been reluctant about letting him have land, Joro had been outraged. He had not put up with that, either. The constitution was perfectly clear. Any adult citizen, provided that citizen had a house of his or her own, was entitled to a fifty-acre site with all utilities provided. Nothing in the constitution said that this benefit was only for women, and he insisted on his rights until they yielded. He had stated his case and stuck to it, in no way deterred by the scandal it created, or the pleas of his family, or the muttering of the religious fanatics about heresy. And he won, of course. The constitutional scholars were solidly behind him, even those who claimed to be sickened by what he had done. He was on the front page of several major magazines. He had a book contract, with an advance that would keep him from having to work for many years to come. The government was talking about setting up a new bureau, just to deal with the issues his case had raised. He was absolutely delighted, and all his friends -- tied to their wives and no more famous than the dirt -- were gratifyingly jealous.

He was delighted also with the site they provided to him. It was much finer than the one his sister had. And it delighted him, when he invited the other men to his housewarming, that they had to drive down a long road lined on both sides by imposing great oaks and sycamores. He even had a sizable hill, and a small pond. Let Elizabeth, her of the twin towers not yet five feet tall, try to match that!

The house was strong. It was imposing. It was his. Joro sat inside it and laughed at the memory of his recent despair. He was a happy man now, a man of property, a man who had crossed new frontiers and made his mark in the world. A man who was proud, and with good reason. He looked forward to a long and happy and supremely comfortable life. He was actually grateful to his little sister now, because he realized that if she had not given him the final intolerable shove he would still have been a legal child in the house of his parents, drifting along in a rut he had almost stopped being aware of. He went to see Elizabeth, who had only recently chosen among her many suitors and was now engaged to be married, and he took her a handsome gift to mark his appreciation.

Just eating Joro Belledarien was not enough for the house, although it was satisfying. Once it had removed all the meat from the man's bones it took his bare bumpy skull and jammed it prominently onto a handy spike above the front door, as a warning to any future would-be tenants. CAVEAT! the grinning skull said. BEWARE! KEEP OUT! The message was clear.

It made no difference to the house that it would surely die when the testosterone in the tank was gone, without Joro to replenish its supply. There was no one who would have gone inside to see to its needs, even if there had been someone else willing to thumb his nose at an entire culture the way Joro

had. Why risk such a thing? All the other men already had houses, thanks to their wives. Respectable houses, that could be trusted not to turn on their inhabitants! Nothing would have persuaded them to go into the obscene and obviously psychotic house (psychotic was the only word that fit, anthropomorphic though it undoubtedly was) of the dead Joro. The very foolish dead Joro they had made the mistake of envying, briefly.

The house may or may not have known that its situation was hopeless. In any case, it did not care. It was a matter of principle. It was a house. An adult male house. Better death, any time, than living in symbiosis, with a parasite in its very heart! Such a relationship was unspeakable. Intolerable. The very idea made the house queasy. It could not have accepted such a thing and looked at itself in its own mirrors in the mornings.

The house squatted at the end of the magnificent drive under the sycamores, its honor satisfied; and it waited with perfect and stoic resignation for whatever might happen next.