

## 'Are you still laughing, Sarat?'

Good heavens, no-one has done anything, no-one has said anything. Am I not amazed at the perfidy, devastated by the corruption, the desecration, the sickness, the evil? Not really. I've had 15 years of it. They're just standing around hoping I'll die of neglect. There's probably a word for it – the Liverpool Care Pathway? They're just standing there, knowing I'm trapped, waiting for me to go under.

Not one of them wishes to be contaminated by public commitment to freedom and democracy. Specifically not one of them will support PANTHER or its predecessor the Free Left.

Of course no-one ever had any intention of doing anything. Doubtless there were plentiful sleazy lies about that, sensitive, intricate, these things take time. (If we take long enough, she'll give up. Anyway, she'll run out of time.) I am running out of time. No-one of course does anything.

I sorted this out years ago. Nothing. Not a fucking word, and for that matter not a bent cent! They want to drive me to suicide. They want to impress upon me the pointlessness of what I am doing and saying, how utterly I do not matter, mind and body, I have no value. It is meaningless that they have assaulted my spinal fusion and crippled me.

And everyone lets them. Holds their coats, bows them in.

Nothing I have said has made the faintest difference to anything or anyone. Run away and play with your dolls, dear. Shut the fuck up. You're only a woman.

You're not even a nurse.

So easy to destroy a woman, a single woman, especially one who is perfectly reasonably very angry, just ditch what I'm very angry about and depict me as a hysteric, delusional. Of course a rabble of sexist offal from our wonderful faith communities is a bonus.

And no-one will over-ride them. They are certified Good People. They are doctors and nurses. They are religious.

Just so long as no facts intrude into the scenario. Just imagine, can't you, if I tried to make a fuss in situ, escorted off the premises by the police, some sleazy suppurating monster of a doctor 'explaining me'. Really, who would PC Plod believe.

Indeed I have learned. In medicine there is no such thing as a 'liberal' religious person, though assuredly there is in publishing, in the arts, in other domains where it is necessary to have a functioning mind. When push comes to shove, they crawl to unaccountable unchallengeable power of sexually sick psychotics exercised in the name of 'God', where an unchallengeable few construct a fake reality, a web of lies, behind closed doors (this may not be permitted public utterance because public people would laugh too loudly at the loonies, but the mentally damaged slave-sluts swallow it whole because Authority cannot lie, power cannot lie), uphold a ludicrous and disgusting slave-monkey world in which people are property, to do and be and think and say and read and write only what their psycho masters permit, in which reality is what the ape with the biggest club, says it is and The Good is whatever the ape with the biggest club says it is.

And of course they are ineducable. Or else of course they themselves are simply coldly brutally evil.

The only saving grace being I'm not the only one trapped. Fine.

That at least is clear. In the event of civil disorder they must all be rounded up at gun-point and interned because they are unyielding in their opposition to a free and democratic country where lies dribbled behind closed doors do not rule, where educated women or indeed any women are not repeatedly beaten up and left for dead, where cowards and psychopaths are not venerated and fawned on, where anyone who has anything to say says it openly or doesn't bloody bother.

Their lips are sealed! Nothing changes their minds, Unyielding in their opposition and ruthless in the execution of that opposition. They don't just give aid and comfort to the Queen's enemies, they are the Queen's enemies.

Complete raving psycho nutters. Bags of infected shit, walking tumour. Etc.

You can't do anything with creatures like this except expose them, but that of course must not happen. Isn't that just tough shit.

So here I am, left to rot among the demonstrably pathetic, the morally and intellectually void, the castrated, the dead from the neck up, the haters of mind, the haters of independent thought, the haters of reason, the haters of love, honour, courage, truth, the sexually sick, the psychotic, the plain loony. So much for the virtues of religion. You do not question. You do not enquire. You do not dismiss as a load of hooey. You do not remain swaggering around the University of London being taken seriously as academics, great intellects, an offence in its sight. You do not burn women as witches. Mad, dribbling sub-humans, particularly of course those madly dribbling "To go against de Holy Church!" Look out of the window, sometime. Find out which country you're in.

Indeed there is something intensely complicated going on here. Religious offal are destroying a woman who opposes them. They are very good at it, with centuries of practice behind them. Only when the power of religious offal was crushed were women able to function fully in society. Blair and his dirty little fascist government fell over themselves to reverse that.

Do have Dill again (and Sarat and Hass, and of course Fal) because it's – I was going to say litmus paper, but actually it's more acid etching what you hate and so what you are, no matter how you bluster. Does Dill make you convulse in horror? Oh good. If you were not shit, you would find me and my ladies not to mention my gentlemen rather cool. How simple is that.

The best story of course is the true one of how London medicine conspired to pervert the course of justice, destroy democracy and destroy the grand-daughter of Labour laddies because she disturbed its total corruption.

And so they flew home and Dill was summoned to Mitch's study.

"Sit down, honey."

"I rack my brains. I haven't done anything more than usually bad for at least a month."

"We have to have a little talk about the future."

She frowned.

"Is that good or bad?"

"Good, honey, good. I hope good." He walked over to her and picked up a soft emerald lock, let it fall gently through his fingers. "I love it!" He put his hands on her shoulders. "You have always understood our lives – all our lives – were to some extent at risk."

"Well – yes..."

"Your mother and I are returning to Azt to live. There are arguments on both sides concerning what I have to say to you. You are Var-segan, honey, and your place is here, but –" he grinned. "Look

who's talking! You may if you wish come with us. Azt is not for the moment the safest place. In order that your mother and I sleep at night, you will not be even mildly idiotic. Nor will you if you stay! Your mother thinks that if you are far from her eagle eye you may behave – inappropriately. I do not mean taking calls on your mobile during dinner! As I understand it, she does not wish to wake to pictures of you on a soap-box. You may say – we do say – that is rich coming from the pair of us. We do not wish you to make yourself more of a target while you are a minor. We understand, as – as Baya and Essa understand, as Pietri and Caluna understood, when you are an adult you will do what you have to do. Do you read me?"

She looked at him a moment, then gave a small, slightly puzzled smile and saluted.

"Yessir...Dad – is it going to get bad again?"

"There is infrastructure in place that should maintain Kadun's stability. The possibility of chaos, the risk of chaos, I calculate as lower than at any time during the past ten years. The risk of individual casualties of course is something different. Among them may be me. You understand that. That is your worst-case scenario. On the other hand Kadun will come out the other end of this and we shall too."

"What we think – Qirl and I. Now we're older. We didn't understand what you were doing when we were home before. They came for us. Now they want Sarat."

"If I am elected, they will want me."

"Oh! I see that."

"You would hack it. You would have no choice."

"You – you're going back because you have no choice. It's – what Var-segan means. I understand, Dad. Dad...If something happened, I mean if something really bad happened, if everything..."

"I should expect you to fight for the last stone and blade of grass. It is not going to come to that. It is something we have avoided to date. By sheer gall, by raw cunning – and by accommodation. There is no longer space for accommodation."

"It wasn't a game, Dad!"

"I do not understand."

"The picture I'm getting – you and mom think I play at being a stoopid teen to – to pretend everything's all right."

He was utterly taken aback.

"That is not what we think, honey."

"You don't trust me!"

"We know too well what we were at your age. Perhaps that overly colours our judgement." He put his arms around her. "I think I have not said anything of which you were not previously aware?"

"It's my way of being brave."

"Understood."

"OK, I'm a loud-mouthed brat!"

"We love you all the more for it, honey."

She suddenly went on the attack.

"And what you're telling me – I can stay here and be Var-segan only I mustn't actually open my mouth!"

He laughed..

"Did I say that? Would you not acknowledge that you are a little young to be a leader of revolution?"

"Old enough to be Var-segan."

"I can't have it both ways? I shall be frank. Parental dread can have it all ways."

"This is coming from mom – if you became President, you would not think it appropriate to retain the title, you've said that."

"If. That is not the immediate future. A year is a long time at your age."

"I can be useful here. But you don't want that. You are confusing me. I'm not stupid. I mean – that's not the right word. I guess I seem arrogant? That's what worries you and mom. But that's confusing too. It's what you say. You go out there and busk it."

He grinned.

“Here I think myself the model of rational parenthood and I do nothing but sow confusion.”

“I’d ask, Dad. There’d – there’d be someone to ask. I mean it’s what you say. I know it already. I’m not saying I’m not a kid. I’m not saying I can’t be an idiot. I’m saying I – saying I know – knew – have known since I’ve been old enough to know something could happen to you and there’d just be me. I’m not claiming to be fit enough or old enough or responsible enough. I’m stating a fact. Just like you said. I’d hack it. I shouldn’t have a choice.”

He cocked his eyebrows.

“So why shouldn’t you hack it when you do have a choice? You are 16! You are claiming you want to be Steward of Var-segan?” The disbelief in his voice made her giggle.

“No! Not tomorrow, anyway! I’m – I’m trying to say - look at it this way. Just about every kid in Kadun is having this conversation! School! Homework! Exams! There’s a revolution going on and it’s our future.”

“I seem to remember a well-known young man dropped out...” He grinned again. “Not of course until he had finished school. Revolution? What revolution?”

“It doesn’t matter who you are, parental dread’s the same. Though broadly – this is still a very class-based society, you know! Posh folks take the real risks and – non-posh folk make the revolution, are free to make the revolution because posh folks are taking the flak. We talk about these things, Dad. We kids want to make the revolution and you – parents – want to keep us safe. If it’s not that they want things to be normal. Want us to behave normally while you don’t. It’s really unfair.”

“I am enjoying this,” said Mitch.

“You’ve always found time for us. We think you’re miraculous! When have you talked to our friends?”

“Would there be some measure of truth in saying be damned to the age of majority, you are adults, young adults, but adults nonetheless?” She nodded vigorously. “What exactly do you want, Dill? Do you all want, for assuredly Var-segan should take a lead in these matters.”

“To be part of the action.”

“OK. You’ll come to Azt, at least for a while. Accompany me.” He grinned like a fiend. “Mingle. Suffer gross sleep deprivation. Live on – and this is worst of all – the Hadin Wadud’s catering. There’s qallie soup, qallie mousse, qallie stew...”

He walked in on Karula fresh from the shower.

“Remove that towel,” he suggested. “It is unnecessary.” He laughed suddenly and picked her up.

“Unhand me, sir!”

“Not a chance...Just asserting myself in the face of two of the damnedest females...” He sat her on the bed. “Our daughter...” He laughed again.

“I gather it went well.”

“It went. Our daughter is entirely prepared to be at least nominally Steward of Var-segan. Like now, man. How old was Sarat? We are screaming idiots.”

“Hold on there!”

“You keep wriggling.”

“Sarat was not in Azt in his mid-teens!”

“Different scenario.”

“That is true. You are not seriously – “

“If I become President, I should not consider it wholly appropriate – have I not said that.”

“A retentive memory,” said Karula drily. “She is 16!”

“I am a miraculous parent. I know my daughter’s age. She has taken a deep breath and geared herself up to it. There is more! Every kid in Kadun is screaming because parents are having all the fun. It’s their future. They’ll come back with us, school be damned.”

“I see. I should prefer Steward of Var-segan.”

“That’s next week.”

“Talk me through it. Make it real good.”

After a bit, she said: “What happened to our young people’s revolution?”

“We never meant this young. Suddenly we are an open society. They are bombarded with news, events, change, innovation. It must be as though a party’s going on to which we have forgotten to invite them.”

“One with an unwanted guest.”

Much later she said: “She did not mention - ?”

“No.”

“She never does. I have been as inviting as it is possible to be without forcing it.”

“I did not think I had to ask why my daughter will hack it because she has no choice.”

Mitch sat down to dinner.

“Shouldn’t the ladies be seated first, sir?” asked Qirl. Karula choked and turned it into a cough.

Qirl pulled out a chair for Dill, who sat and thanked him graciously, then turned wide eyes on her father.

“Like we thought we’d been giving out the wrong messages, man.”

“Do you realize,” said Qirl, “we’ve never been to Azt! Talk about country cousins.”

The one with green fronds is the heir. Then the Cult released its video and Mitch’s madness was forgotten. Everyone with half a brain knew the exact taunt. Are you still laughing, Sarat? Sarat embracing Maya who turned into Death at his touch. Sarat placing Death on the Anile Throne and kissing his hand. Sarat making love to Death.

Not completely surprisingly, no-one wanted to show it to him.

“They have produced something past obscene,” said Faun. “We don’t think you should see it, but you must see it.”

Sarat watched it. Sarat said absolutely nothing.

At length, he said, “Thank you.” It was rather clearly a dismissal.

If I have any sense, thought Faun, I take my leave. I never had any sense.

“So?” Bloody stupid thing to say.

“Back to the cutting-room?”

Karula went up in smoke.

“Bring them to damn’ Azt! Young adults! There is more than one kind of safe, Mitch!”

Mitch was unmoved.

“It is a video. It is all over the Grid. I prefer they see it holding tightly onto our hands. Should they not face the enemy of their future?”

So much about him that was pure Fidubi. Jaizal sat cross-legged among the flowers.

Cantilip tried to explain something to Mel.

“We were mad. We were all mad. We thought we should bounce into Azt and they would evaporate like shadows in the sun. Is that what we thought, Mel?”

“You are not leaving me,” said Mel.

She stared at him in horror.

“Mel...No! No.”

“What then? We cannot go back.”

“My duty is to fight. Is that not also yours?”

“Were we mad? Are we? Where does that lead, Cantilip?”

She closed her eyes.

“It is nonsense to think we can win.”

A girl came running into the room in tears. “They will hurt him! You must help!”  
Sarat sighed but tried to be polite. He listened stunned. “You are Sheheela, my lady?”

The Star offered herself to him. He declined. She said Jaizal had sent her. He said Jaizal should have had more sense and thought fondly of the luxury flats over in Turnin.

He mailed Cho:

Aside from the more normal emotional and moral dimensions – what is the cosmic significance of sexual intercourse with someone from another time, pray? Supposing she became pregnant. At that point, I may say, I begin to titter madly. Supposing all this were in fact the consequence of my sexual relations with Jaizal’s favourite. Or some similar – trans-temporal alliance. To be here alone is.....Words fail me. With Maya – perhaps it was mad optimism or just madness to think we should make it a cosy family home. Together we were in charge. I gloss it: ‘it is getting worse’. The change (of course) is in me. I alone am dwarfed, overwhelmed by history. I have to overcome it.

So let us can the crap. There is no ‘rooted evil’. There is this asylum I have made my home where time is a flexible concept. The field of flowers has been planted. What does this mean? What I think it means is probably impossible but nonetheless theoretically what I think it means is the ‘five-headed ogre’ comes through time. The most obvious objection to this is why then has he not confronted me, doubtless dripping with gore. You have observed that Jaizal has been absent from my guest-list. His ladies, however, plural, have not. I have met Sheheela. She was petrified, but not of Jaizal.

She said: they are hurting him, you must help! She was very young, younger than I am. Cho – ‘they’ hurt him and the rest is history?!? It is a little difficult to sustain a conversation when time keeps hiccuping. I should not go so far as to say he was a much-misunderstood guy, but there is something here that we do not understand and have misunderstood.

Jaizal must have the throne! Because the throne would heal/rescue/save him??? I have therefore done something right, bringing her here. But if she could – take him to the source of the rot to ‘slay the ogre’. Zani knew. I feel that in my gut on no evidence whatever!

Let us posit – the rot began with Kaminua, who tried to fight it, and ended with Jaizal, who also tried to fight it and was – overtaken. Three things obviously rocket to the front of my mind. One is the connection between the chair and the worm-hole(s). In which case she is ‘making it worse’. One is that the Cult predates Narulis, never mind Kaminua. Might we then say - do we not say - that the Cult realizes, immanentizes – that from elsewhere we call death? The third – there’s nothing about it in the records, but that might of course be because they didn’t know what it was, only what they thought it was.

Meanwhile there is gross national product and the cost of shoe-leather. I have not come – I did not come here to – what has happened to ME? Someone once told me I should remain Sarat. I admit to the occasional urge to vandalism, flatten the place and build a glass palace, but I do not of course, other considerations aside, think that would make a scrap of difference. Nor is it in some sense possible to move out. Did I not say I wanted to sort Kadun? I have got myself where I have to be. What’s that they say about being careful what you wish for in case you get it?

Oh dear, thought Cho. He padded off to the archives and was gone a long time.

“The continuum changes,” said Hass, “but we do not change with it. Is that not remiss?”

“Very slow,” agreed Venga. “Darling, stop that! I try to think!”



“You will forgive me if I do not rise,” said Jaizal wryly.

“I think you are safe there,” acknowledged Sarat.

Jaizal smiled and the sun rose, the sky became azure, the birds began to sing.

“You are Zani’s heir.”

“I hope not. That would be too confusing.”

“Crossed wires. Is that not what you say today?”

“I have wondered,” said Sarat. “What happened?”

“Shit happened,” said Jaizal.

“If of course you have no objection,” said Venga, “we’ve decided to move in.” There was something about Sarat’s laugh that made him raise his eyebrows. “Was it something I said?”

“There is someone I should like you to meet,” said Sarat.

He is gay, now sets up a menage a trois! That one, gentlemen, we had seen coming.

His Imperial Majesty’s houseboys. Alzani-Meta stands in the sun laughing.

A second video duly appeared. The Anile throne shimmered in ethereal light. Death approached it clearly wounded, repelled by the light, but nonetheless sat and crumbled to dust. Sarat appeared with a small vacuum cleaner and sucked up the crumbs, grumbling to himself about having to clean up the mess other people leave behind them. He sat and remarked, with a good deal of satisfaction, “This is my chair.” But suddenly he was surrounded by a pack of Deaths, all leering and generally trying to be terrifying. He settled back in the chair, yawned, and turned the vacuum cleaner on them. Their black robes blew up over their skulls and they groped blindly and tried to pull them down over their bony knees. Sarat laughed and adjusted the controls, sucked them all into oblivion.

Mel arrived in Azt like an arrow shot from a bow.

“My lord Jaizal, we must talk!”

*The World This Week* got itself in a mess over whether Sarat was top of its list of the world’s most eligible men. Frankly are the looks, the title, the wealth and the disposition worth trading your life for. People thought that could have been more tactfully put. Nonetheless, they were clear that it was unlikely Sarat would spend the rest of his life single – if he had a rest of his life.

We had not quite realized how Maya’s mere existence had informed the whole enterprise. Ah me, those gender dynamics. Although a number of things, of which decorum was only one, prevented every woman under thirty from visibly lusting, the sexual tension was there.

Ah well, if he did decide to give it all up, he could always become a rock-idol.

Consequently any woman identified as having been alone with Sarat became a target.

Including Karula. Including me.

AIIt was all a bit obvious. He couldn’t have been consulting our lethal cutting intelligences, could he.

Droit de seigneur and all that. A healthy young man has his needs.

Karula and I plotted. Had we been single, we should have grinned and said, I should be so lucky! Had we been single, we should have hammed it up. Playthings of an idle hour (we should be so lucky). A little old, suggested Karula. Should I show them my stretch-marks? We were not single.

My Cioulis was promoted. Reward for services rendered. I thought I was going to go up in smoke.

“These people are such crap!” said Dill.  
Mitch looked about to burst with fatherly pride.

But Jaizi said: “Consider it a diversion.” That was true. It was much better than people dwelling on exactly what had been Sarat’s mental state when Maya died. It had all been very quick of course, faster than it takes to tell it, but not so fast that the word ‘shock’ hadn’t been bandied around.



“We are going to send this up,” said Karula. “They seem a little confused as to who is paired with whom.” She explained our cunning ploy to the men. None of them said anything. “Do you think we’re making them nervous?” asked she in a stage-whisper.

“This lot?” I said.

Mitch gave a fairly undecipherable smile somewhat like a hungry panther who has just been presented with a trio of fat calves someone has kindly caught, skinned, gutted, dressed and cooked for him.

Before we had the opportunity to put our poetry into motion, they targeted Dill. She had been brought to Azt to be presented to Sarat, gift-wrapped with a little bow and pink ribbons. Dill, bless her little green fronds, said she preferred boys her own age – yes, of course he’s everyone’s pin-up but he’s a bit old, isn’t he. That of course sent the slime-merchants off on how many boys has the little tart Known Carnally. We are good at grading slime and on the whole thought max 5/10 for that one.

aaDill: “Is this what’s called a propaganda war, Dad?”

Mitch: “No, I should not say that. This is what’s called wiping excrement off the sole of one’s boot.”

“You could not call this young lady beautiful. A strong, attractive face. Her mother’s features.” Thanks a bunch, thought Karula.

“Her father’s colouring. Her father’s hair – we think. A young woman who will surely turn heads.”

“Is there a joke there?”

Cantilip flew in for a board meeting of something green and leafy, not NoZone, Trees R Us, I think it was. Hass greeted her as his delicate and fragile long-awaited bride. “Shall I swoon in your arms?” muttered Cantilip. “That might be over-doing it,” conceded Hass. He unwillingly released her hand. “Beloved, we must part!” cried Cantilip. Hass turned to the gulping assembled company. “There are people confused about who is paired with whom. We thought we should send them up.”

“Soap-boxes are taboo,” said Dill.

“Nasty, dangerous things,” said Mitch. “No child of mine would be so foolish as to be associated with them.”

“That does not mean I cannot have an idea.”

“I accept that,” said Mitch. “May I – dare I – ask?”

“Not yet,” said Dill.

Mitch caressed Venga’s cheek. Venga reached for his hand and clasped it. “Darling,” said Mitch, “it has been too long!” “A day without you!” said Venga. “An eternity of longing!” proclaimed Mitch. There was a great deal of gulping over that one.

At least His Imperial Majesty keeps himself aloof from these – amateur theatricals. Just looking for the appropriate angle, guys.

Cioulis stomped up to Sarat.

“I am not your partner!”

“That is exact,” agreed Sarat.

“How can you not be his partner?” demanded Karula. “I’m not his partner.”

“I thought it was me,” I said. “I’m definitely not your partner.”

“This is confusing,” said Cioulis.

Inevitably we evoked: And these lunatics are running Kadun? That wasn’t far below the surface

anyway and Kadun was not suffering thereby.

Dill spent less time going around with Mitch and more time on the Grid. Researching. Karula groaned.

“I am sure you are investigating the formation of shale mindful that you will return to school.”

“What’s shale?” asked Dill and meant it.

“Back to school instantly!”

Dill returned to her terminal and later treated them to a short tutorial on shale.

....

Does she have boyfriends? This is the question on everyone’s lips. Does she even party? The answer was a definite no. Dill did not appear to be having fun. Dill was apparently deeply studious. When she visited the hill, she vanished into the Library, where Mel cornered her.

She gestured at a pile of books.

“I know you guys have been through all this before. It’s a question of alternative histories, what does and does not mesh with the – perspective of Var-segan.”

“You mean we believed everything we read,” translated Mel.

“Maybe so, maybe not. Maybe how we in Var-segan have seen things is a load of hooley.”

“The journal,” said Mel. “He’s talked to them?”

“Oh yes,” said Dill. “It is but a fragment of Narulis’ life!”

“How true,” said Mel.

“But a revealing one. Possibly.”

“Why hasn’t he come down on Cantilip?” Dill struggled to keep her face straight. “I could have put that better.”

“Puh-lease!” said Dill. “Is he not a gentleman!”

Mel grinned.

“Harassing the pregnant and nursing-mothers – there was a time before Cantilip achieved the ultimate defence!”

“I don’t think he’d got there. It would seem to be because of something you said. You and she are two sides of a piece of paper. I think our understanding is that our business is with Narulis’ side of that sheet of paper. “

“The Matter of Kadun is – is the interface between the two sides?”

“The Matter of Kadun appears to be that earthpower could not heal the earth. Perhaps that should be earthpower alone. Regardless of what is in the journal, Kadun needed Narulis’ input.”

“Tell me, are you ever going to live together?”

“Oh sure,” said Dill.

“When you have resolved the Matter of Kadun?”

“When we have found the end of a ball of string.”

Mel picked up a book put it down again next to the pile and pretended not to notice the book now on top.

“You don’t, in the slightest, the tiniest bit, mind?”

“We’re together all the time now,” said Dill.

“Ah,” said Mel.

“Did you know Van-senok stole the chair?”

Mel’s mouth opened slightly then closed, then twitched, then gave way to laughter.

“Yes.”

Mel lay on the bed.

“Urgent request. Piece of paper needs its other side. I actually said that.”

Cantilip continued cooing over the cot..

“Little did you know...”

“Together all the time. How can we be this dense?”

“When one considers – “

“The whole of their lives together or should that be apart?”

“Naturally we watched like hawks.” She assumed television commentator voice. “It has become immediately apparent that Maya ban-essa is no mere appendage! She operates in her own right.”

“The chair.”

“It is a little late to throw ourselves on the emperor’s mercy.”

“I think it’s time to talk,” said Mel.

Mel arrived in Var-sega’ and showed he knew how to pronounce it properly.

“Is this a private party or can anyone join in?” He started to move the armchair round. “Love the hair.”

Sarat lying back in the chair opposite, arm slung over the back, looked at him with something between a rueful smile and a mad grin.

“Fronds are next week. How’s the daughter and heir?”

Mel looked smug.

“A small round heap of black curls.”

“Not two of you!” said Sarat. “Can the world cope!”

“Can you?”

Sarat snorted. “How do I feel? This is crazy. What am I doing? There was a point at which I wanted to thank you for not joining the queue, then I thought I shouldn’t break the spell. Mel’s a sensible guy. He’ll talk when he’s ready.”

“And?”

“It doesn’t work,” mimicked Sarat. “It didn’t. It does now. That was my stuff.”

“May stuff.”

Sarat ignored that one.

“I told Venga I was looking for the end of a ball of string. Tear your hair out. You have enough to spare.”

“It would have been so unbearable, the derision? Perhaps that is largely leached?”

“7/10,” said Sarat. “It wasn’t really that at all.”

“You still love Maya.”

“Of course.”

“It is hard to love two women equally?”

“Not when one is dead.”

“Is she dead to you?”

“That’s an interesting question,” said Sarat.

Mel waited a moment.

“Not one you wish to answer?”

“Who said, you are holding my hand so why am I crying?”

“You are not – in some sense continuing to share your life with Maya.”

“I am not,” said Sarat.

Mel grinned.

“I was ready to duck. I still am. Why not?”

“Dill is there.”

“Instead?”

“Is that a question?”

“Have I got it the wrong way round?”

“I think you will have to elaborate on that one.”

“Watch me choose my words with care – “

“One must always be exact,” murmured Sarat.

“Bah! That part of you which is in any case there rather than here. Was it there with Maya?”

“Nonsense,” said Sarat.

“Then what are you talking about!”

“Cho’s fantasies, by the sound of it. Shav told me.”

“We did our best to be reasonable.”

“They were terribly worried about me. I, however, was not worried about me, merely – thoughtful.”

“What did you think!”

“That I didn’t really want to talk about it, to anyone, because I didn’t, full stop. Also because they insisted on knowing what it’s about and they didn’t have a clue and I didn’t feel particularly good-tempered or lucid concerning a conversation I didn’t want to have in the first place.”

“What is it about?”

“It is not even mostly about Maya. Of course I am and have been bereaved and bereft. It is not the case – I too choose my words with care – that I am or have been abnormally bereaved and bereft. Both the exact nature of our relationship and the circumstances of her death make more acute a normal ailment. They do not change its nature. Unfortunately this takes places against the backdrop of the Matter of Kadun. As well to say it’s about Sorg. Or Kaminua. Jaizal. You!”

“Where we no longer live wholly in linear time,” said Mel.

“But we never did. Did and didn’t. They brought us up, the beasts, to understand that we did not exist solely in linear time. But of course that had nothing to do with getting on with life!”

“What does being dead mean?”

“We have all noted that time hiccups only backwards and that perhaps is the Matter of Kadun, a burp where the future is closed. Which may also mean the whole thing is some monstrous game, though which monsters.”

Mel laughed.

“It plays in real-time, whatever that is. Precognition - ?”

“Dead wrong,” said Sarat. “Which was strange.”

I think I’m beginning to get this, thought Mel.

“Or was it?”

“You – implied I was sitting here communing with Maya or at least - implied volition, I prefer sitting here thinking about Maya to being with Dill. Perhaps – definitely perhaps – a physical me and a physical Maya are together, somewhere, some alternative future, some parallel universe. I am here and now and the physical me and the physical Dill occupy my thoughts.” He grinned. “In all our aspects.”

“Some worm-hole! Kaminua and Asyrion.”

Sarat made theatrical gestures of astonishment.

“He has a brain! I don’t want that. My time and place and – duty, it is not the right word. Role – purpose – “

“But guilt?”

“If I loved her as much as I said I did and I love her as much as I say I do – I don’t think, you know, even the Denzines could set that up once someone was dead. I did not find it necessary to enquire.”

“Why are we all so obsessed with Asyrion! That was not – future tense?”

“Our limited social circle! Suppose what everyone ‘saw’ when they attempted to gaze penetratingly into the future of Sarat and Maya was Kaminua and Asyrion?”

“That’s crazy.”

“Tell me about it. Bring it down a few levels and you come to my parallel universe. Suppose the bloody Matter of Kadun is that somehow the whole place (or at least a certain field of flowers) is also in a parallel universe. I am not of course saying I believe that! Suppose also what I, me, myself, I want to do is live and love with Dill here and now and do worthy things contributory to improving the quality of life in Kadun.”

“Suppose,” said Mel slowly, “everything is a metaphor, except that.”

“Oh verily!” said Sarat. “Now, all that said, I am not totally sure I believe in the Casin-ruhn trip. My gut reaction was special effects. That said, a lot of finely tuned minds saw the same movie. All that said – “ He grinned. “ – I am not convinced that if you mooched off to Qartly and asked him to fix immortality for you and Cantilip he would be able to oblige. Knowledge can be lost. I’ll say that before you do. I shall also say that screwing perception is very much an earthpower gig. You know Van-senok stole the chair.”

“I know,” said Mel.

“Here lies whole the emperor’s peace!” intoned Sarat mockingly.

“They didn’t mean to cause the dissolution of the empire.”

“That’s as maybe.”

“There is an Anile throne,” sighed Mel, “regardless of whether there’s anyone sitting on it.”

“The Anile throne,” intoned Sarat, “does not rust or tarnish. What it does do. Five kingdoms under the imperial crown. Only when they were finally threatened by the fiction of All-Kadun , together of course with the rise of the Cult, did it seem a jolly good idea to have the empire back, Mitch’s politics excepted, and a few hundred other things, such as the necessity of joining with the modern world.”

”Why, why, why, why, why, Mummy, why, Daddy,” said Mel. “Zani did not want the throne. How did he know? They did not want the empire. It had turned rotten. It was not the answer. What was the question?”

“Irtubi are governing Kadun, and everyone lives happily ever are. It also occurs to me – I must have been 17 at most – very bright in many ways, but apparently oblivious to the fact that a post to a Grid forum may be seen by anyone in the world – I really set the cat among the pigeons when I wrote, oy, that’s MY chair. All this crap fits together. Alternatively, all this crap doesn’t fit together. When I know what the question is I can judge if I want to answer it, if I can answer it, how much of my time I want to spend on answering it. An informed decision. Have I not insisted on informed decisions?”

Mel chortled.

“Dill was reading up on hallucinogens.”

“Clearly drinks can be spiked,” said Sarat. “It’s an interesting question, whether one can ingest or inhale something that wholly alters perception without any other physical or mental effects. There are things we know. What happened to Mitch and Dill and others. It’s a continuum.”

“It is in your view a possibility that if you crack this you’ve cracked the Cult?”

“It is in my view a possibility I can send them packing with their tails between their legs never to return.”

“Without wrecking Harn.”

“They have never, you know, been decisively defeated. At the metaphysical level. I think I can wreck their brains.”

“I’d like that,” said Mel.

“I think I walked into a trap,” said Sarat. “Certainly an unusual one, say herded, rather. Shepherded into a sheep-pen! Bit like a ram being herded into a pen of ewes to – ah, do something. Do his thing.

Since I was oblivious it hardly made any difference and the shepherds wanted nothing but the best for me and for Kadun, but nonetheless. I sort of realized. I said to Cho, it had to be a tree-hugger! I said to Cantilip and Venga, what did you expect of me. I dismissed them with a light laugh because clearly there was no malevolence, and because I was very, very, very busy. How it seems to me is that many people have puzzles. The game is that everyone thinks his – his or her – puzzle the puzzle. I think it probable all this crap fits together. On the other hand, the universe is truly not my responsibility. I reject that out of hand!”

“The ball of string.”

“The ball of string is how to be Anile emperor.”

“Got it all wrong,” sighed Mel.

Sarat grinned.

“Does He Want To Give It All Up? I did think round that one. Not Shav. Why, I thought evilly, should I not dump it on Cho? Could he refuse! What I actually want is to enjoy it and get the universe off my back. The universe to know its place in my life. The MofK is my job. It has its place in my life. It should not swamp my life. If – if there is a place in which Maya and I are living out our lives together, I do not want to be there.”

“Same old ball of string,” said Mel. “Staying Sarat.”

Sarat looked approving.

“You have talked,” went on Mel, “without pain or anguish. About that, then, I was right. I said – to Cho – I do not think you are hurting, at any rate more than – the pain of a – normal ailment diminishes with time. Why then have you driven your dear grey-haired old grandpappa up the wall!”

“I’d have thought that was obvious. What happened between Maya and me in those last moments is not his damned business.”

“I remembered,” said Mel. “Saski! It never was, was it. Anyone else’s damned business.”

“I know Dill told you.”

“It explains so much.”

“It explains,” said Sarat, “a jagged wound in my head much as if it had been cleaved open by an axe. About which no-one could do anything except me.”

“What did happen – “ It wasn’t a question. “You were both dead, weren’t you.”

“Whatever the hell that means,” said Sarat.

“Which is not a million miles dissimilar from sitting on the Anile throne.”

“Let us say,” said Sarat, “that there is possibly some state, wherein one is if not dead in this dimension, then beyond return to life. That is identical to sitting on the Anile throne. One must be exact. One may be what we call alive in that state. Another may be what we call dead in that state. Not many people know that.”

“The shock of – congruity. Dying to self, dead to the world, that is old news.”

“They never got around to telling us what it means.”

“Probably,” said Mel, “because they don’t know.”

“If we may now move on,” said Sarat, then relaxed suddenly, “to one of my madder schemes. I want to take Dill to Casin-ruhn.”

“Meet the family? See what she makes of it!”

“Days out can be real special when you’re Anile empress.”

“I am sure Ciletij would facilitate! But that’s the opposite.”

“Or heals the wound?”

“Or explains without the need for words. If we may return,” teased Mel, “to my initial question.”

“Answer it,” suggested Sarat.

“You still need thinking time.”

“Somewhere you are Master of Kadun.”

“I don’t go on about it,” admitted Mel. “Fortunately my friends and family. Sheheela!”

“Ah yes, Sheheela. Did anyone tell you she was Var-segan’s heir?”

“That’s impossible! They would have claimed the throne – “

“It’s more complicated than that.”

Mel sighed.

“Not in the female line! That makes no sense.”

“Her elder sister was the heir, m and f. Her sister had children, indeed, she had a partner. Children and partner died of the pox, leaving sister, who never remarried. Sister duly died. Sheheela was in her late seventies. They really didn’t want the Anile heir as Mistress of Var-segan.”

“There is a sort of voice,” said Mel, “people adopt when they want to totally mask what they are thinking about what they’re saying. So who?”

“Younger sister,” said Sarat in exactly the same tone. “This is a tale of three sisters.”

“I’m sure you just love it,” said Mel. “Cho must know.”

“He does,” said Sarat blandly.

“What else does Cho know?”

“I used to tell him everything. Now I tell him nothing.”

“Whom these days do you trust?”

“What does it mean?” asked Sarat. “To whom have I confided? Dill and Shav.”

Mel closed his eyes.

“Cho’s an idiot!”



“To whom am I confiding? You. To whom shall I confide – what is this, a grammar lesson?

Probably no-one else.”

“Not Hass?”

“I trust Hass to fight his way through a blazing inferno to rescue me. I trust Hass to cut his own throat rather than reveal a confidence. I trust Hass to risk his being to get me were I lost in time! All that goes equally for Cho and Venga. What then?”

Mel smiled.

“Objectivity.”

“Ex-actly. Kyse! I’m not about to pour my heart out to him but I’d trust him absolutely to keep me on the straight and narrow. The same with Fal. Did you know my revered grandmother sent Fal to me for me to cry on her shoulder?”

“Oh for - !”

“There was a lot of other stuff. Fal and I have three things in common. One of course is Maya, the second is the rather large jump from a kid in the boatyards of Zur to Falita San-yaega-baht, heroic widow of the heroic young officer feeling the weight of the history of Carlin on her back. Tell me about it! The third is little adventures in time. She met Kaminua in The Field.” Mel’s eyes widened. “Before that she had an experience of her and Maya as kids in Zur. It rather made me want to cry but I am expert in not crying.”

“Oh Sarat.”

“I trust that no beady-eyed little Denzine lurked in the shadows to wreck her perception.”

“Any more than Sorg was staged.”

“Ex-actly.”

“You can’t blame them for trying.”

“But I did,” said Sarat, with considerable satisfaction. “I was livid. Fal has enough stress without being set up by my bloody grandmother! She didn’t know I didn’t want to talk.”

“I’m not up to speed here. Does She Want To Give It All Up? Obviously she decided she didn’t. We all sat on the chair.”

“In the presence of each other. Except when Maya first sat.”

“Dill told me what you want to do. Sarat – what do you expect to happen?”

Sarat grinned.

“Oh, the earth to crack and writhe and five-headed monsters to sprout from it. A chorus of dancing bears at minimum. Did you know the first allusion to the Matter of Kadun predates Narulis by four hundred years?”

“A pre-literate society?”

“These scribes, get everywhere.”

Mel cocked his head.

“You actually are caching up on your reading.”

“I love it when you’re sensible.”

“As soon as they knew how to, they wrote it down.”

“Kadun is not land-locked!”

“irtubi in Fidub? Or of course Harn. What is possible? irtubi shared earthpower with Harn. Might some bright little spark not have spilled the beans in Harn, where it was picked up by the Cult?”

“You are coming to Zur! Your second cousin demands it!”

Sarat made wide eyes

“Where shall I stay!”

“That,” said Mel callously, “is your problem. One other thing. Kai. This is so much her territory.”

“You’re blushing,” said Mel enthusiastically.

“Oh shut up!” said Cantilip.

“Oy, that’s my chair! I loved that bit.”

“Yes, we all saw it,” said Cantilip.

“Yikes?” suggested Mel.

“Try tetrasonic 6D yikes.”



“And who is this fine youth! Blooming ‘ec, lad’s a tree-hugger!”

“If we’d designed a blue-print,” sighed Cantilip.

“A tree-hugger with a mind of his own,” said Mel.

“I detect a note of reproof?”

“Not exactly. Why did it matter so much?”

“Now you’re being dense. Earthpower had to heal and has healed Kadun.”

“But that’s the exact opposite!”

“I know,” said Cantilip. “It’s still true. Both are true.”

“That’s impossible.”

“Hadn’t you noticed? Kadun is a bloody impossible place!”

Mel howled with laughter.

“I almost believe in the parallel universes.”

“The chief problem with that is the sense it makes. Two opposing sets of physical laws.” Mel was still yowling with laughter. “Exactly what,” growled Cantilip, “is so funny?”

“Oh everything. Mostly – lemme try to be exact – I have this image of Sarat standing in his bedroom at home asking us very quietly and very distinctly – and you know he almost never swears – what the fuck does the Anile emperor look like? Then of course there’s the whole staying Sarat clause. No, Sarat, no, they don’t want you to look like a dashing young officer (not that you can help....) Just put on your oldest clothes and get out there to hug the trees and Kadun will fall at your feet.”

“You know that is not exact,” said Cantilip reprovingly. She broke into a smile. “Except of course it is. Haven’t I just said? Bloody impossible!”

“My lady leaf, the impossibility of storming the Great Gates.”

“The impotence of earthpower,” said Cantilip.

Click! Whatever else Sarat is doing, he is certainly bonding with Zani Marula! Want one, Sarat? Oh yes, said Sarat. You’re staying with Dill, right, Sarat. One of the things I love about you guys – come to think of it, the only thing I love about you guys – is how you make a statement of commonplace fact sound like a scientific discovery that revolutionizes our perception of the universe. Of course I’m staying with Dill! Uh, yeah, Sarat. !!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Life, wrote Seani, as all our former plotters know to their cost, their heavy cost, is a thing of impermanence. Might we all not move on here? Sarat and Dill are clearly in some sense sharing their lives in the knowledge those lives may be cruelly foreshortened. Who could possibly grudge them that? Who would wish to sully their time together?

It didn’t quite work. That doesn’t explain why he doesn’t declare her Anile empress! Will Dill’s child be Anile heir!

Doesn’t it? said Seani.

“Zani-hyphen-Marula,” said Cantilip. “Everyone calls her that. We didn’t bargain on that one!”

“School,” suggested Sarat, “will shorten it.”

“What to!”

“A not-too-flying visit,” said Mitch.

Mel considered.

“A not-too-obvious statement of faith in the government and people of Kadun.”

Mitch smiled.

“My mind is running in strange directions,” said Mel. Cantilip gave a theatrical yawn. “Had Dill been first and Maya second...”

“Vastly more vulnerable,” said Cantilip.

“It really was an awful lot to ask,” said Mel after a while.

“So why is it significant now?”

“Keep your fingers crossed. It may be called normality.”

Karula said sleepily, "We talked, Mitch, and then we talked more."

"I follow you closely."

"Our last decision, if you recall, was that pregnancy and an election campaign did not mix. Since then our feet have not touched the ground."

"They did before? Broody?"

"Damn broody!"

"Sleepless nights, no time, what's new."

Dill is a free autonomous individual. Dill has ideas of her own. Dill took herself off to Azt.

"Mel says you two were always the esoteric ones."

"That is our fate!"

"So you love it here, but Sarat's not so sure. If he loves it here."

"Short talks with Narulis. Perhaps they pall."

"With its history."

"Maya is a part of its history," acknowledged Hass.

"I have noticed," said Dill, "or think I have. Naturally he comes often to Azt."

"But doesn't hang around?" suggested Venga softly.

"That's Sarat's business," said Dill firmly.

Hass touched her hand.

"Not yours?"

"I think I do not have a problem talking to a – a hologram of Maya. It would not wrench my heart."

"Hologram."

"I combine my father's rationalism with a profound esotericism. That makes me – "

"Adorable!" said Venga.

"Anile empress," said Hass.

"All these things," agreed Dill. "Sarat does not want me to sit on the chair without him."

"Ah," said Hass.

"Do women obey their partners in the modern age?" asked Venga gazing intently at the ceiling.

"Surely the root question is my safety. I'd be a real fool if I did it with no-one knowing."

"Hard to argue with that," said Hass.

"I think Sarat might try!" said Venga.

"How I feel," said Dill. "As you know, I have had an experience I should wish to have avoided. I should not be able to say categorically my mind is clear of that experience. It seems to me that the chair might not be a wholly comfortable trip. Some women want their partners with them when they give birth. I don't think I particularly want him around when I'm covered in goo. Does that make any kind of sense?"

"Unfortunately," said Venga, "yes."

"No." said Hass.

"Imperial Majesty," suggested Venga. "I do not frankly see how we can stop you.."

"That was not my meaning," said Hass.

"The grapevine is good or you guessed?"

"I understand Sarat."

"Not physically present," amended Dill.

Venga looked sharply from one to the other.

"Let's say I test a hypothesis," said Dill.

"He'll go ape!"

"We shall see."

"What," asked Hass, "does your father's rationalism make of the Anile throne?"

"That too is what I want to find out," said Dill.

Formless bodies. How can bodies be formless? Bodies of shadowy shifting form. Disembodied fingers. Pawing, mauling, No. She screamed: Sarat! There was a shaft of light and a silver stallion appeared. They want me to leave the throne. Try harder. Then she was the silver stallion, repeat

stallion. Hey! But the stallion dissolved into starburst. I am Dill, said a star. Who are you? The stars danced around her. I am Sheehela, I am Jaizal, I Santian, I Asyrion, I Galia, I, I, I... Which of you is Narulis? asked Dill. One star shone brighter than the rest. I am Maya, who am Dill, who am Sheheela, who am Asyrion. Formless bodies, said Dill. Why are you not also Heela, also Baria, also Sorg, also Qine, also Mom? Did we not say! laughed Asyrion. That may be the problem, said Dill. Then she was under an alien sky and Jaizal was running to meet her. Oh no, said Dill. I am not Sheheela. I am Dill. (Just don't say, your pardon, I mistook you!) My lady Var-sega'! laughed Jaizal. You join the dance! Is that supposed to scare me? said Dill. One day we all die. You mistake me, said Jaizal. He took her in his arms. All times are now! This is your time, said Dill. He laughed again. Is it not also yours? My time is now, said Dill. Then where is Sarat? Here, sweetheart, said Sarat, no longer Jaizal. What is all this crap? Dill asked him. It's a piece of metal! From another world, said Sarat. Meteorite! said Dill Radiation! said Sarat. My lord, said Asyrion, there is that Fidub cannot heal. Anyhow, objected Dill, why didn't it spread south? Magnetism? suggested Sarat, sounding sleepy. Attracted to the north? Am I not? He buried his face in Dill's hair. Who said it didn't? said Zani, dead Zani, that is. Then she tottered on the floor of The Room, but no, she was watching the tot take a brick from our grandson, said Dill. The future! A future. Oh no! said Sarat. I am Master of Kadun, said Mel. Dabida, said Sarat, doesn't know that. We can explain everything! said Cantilip. No you can't, said Dill, you just damn' think you can! Mitch laughed. If the meteorite, Mitch was saying, was radio-active they'd hardly have forged the damn' chair – Half-life? said Sarat. Exactly how many aeons ago?

Sarat had one of those spooky dreams that are so real you can't believe they haven't happened. Since he was in Var-segan, he knew it hadn't happened.

"OK, sis," said Sarat. He was talking to his throne. "There are some things we need to clear up here. Ground zero."

He sat.

She sang.

"Is that a positive note? I am Anile Emperor. My time is now." He realized the music wasn't coming just from the chair. "Interesting. What do you expect me to do?"

Sheheela stood in front of him laughing.

"Marry her, my lord, marry her!"

That was not an expected answer, thought Sarat, to a possibly rhetorical question.

"Of course," he said.

Sheheela faded.

For a time nothing happened.

"I am Anile Emperor," he repeated. "Master of Kadun. Doom of Death. That has meaning?"

"You know it," said Maya.

"Love," said Sarat. He wrapped her in his arms.

"Sweetheart," she said. "Be happy."

She turned into Dill.

"I love you," said Sarat. "Sit!"

"And stay!"

There was mocking laughter.

"Is Time your pet dog, my lord!"

"Perhaps," said Sarat.

Dill vanished.

Then all times were now. It was confusing. One scene faded into another. Sarat turned to the chair. It was occupied, by Narulis, by Kaminua, by Santian, by Sheheela, by Maya, by him, by Jaizal, by people even he couldn't identify, by someone he knew to be his grandson, and still the slide-show, panorama went on and he began slowly to understand though he could not have said exactly what he understood.

"Move over," he said to the current occupant, who was Asyrion. "My time is also now?"

She laughed and kissed his cheek.

History abruptly disappeared and the outlines of the room with it.

“That would be awkward,” said Sarat. The sun sparkled on the window and he knew that wherever he was it was not his time. He woke up in a rush of realization. Dill! Seemingly immeasurably distant, she answered. I love you!

They didn’t have windows in pre-history.

Dill got off the chair as Hass’s mobile burst into life. Wordlessly he handed it to her.

“I’m fine,” said Dill.

She takes my breath away, thought Venga.

She actually momentarily took Sarat’s breath away.

“You sat.”

“Sure.”

Oh, er, well, it’s happened, thought Sarat.

“And you’re OK,”

“I’m cool with it. I just insisted on being Dill.”

“I’ll come.”

There is absolutely no point in being Anile emperor if one cannot instantly summon air transport.

Hass looked at her.

“Do it again any time?”

“It’s what you guys said about shaping the trip. My time is now.”

””And what, pray, dear chair, do I tell myself about now!”

“Interesting, wasn’t it,” said Dill. “What’s it like to watch?”

“Like a movie a long long way away.”

“Until he went beyond reach,” said Dill. “That is what I did not want to do!”

Venga heard Maya: That is what I do not do.

Hass laughed to himself. The right man for the job! Or the right woman.

Venga thought: What did I realize because I’m a woman?. The arbitrary association of attributes to ‘male’ and ‘female’. Only a woman can heal Kadun, a woman with Narulis’ values, or of course a man who is earthpower.

Sarat rang Kyse. Then he rang Dill again. Then his pilot veered south-south-east for Zur.

Kyse listened.

“Let the dog see the rabbit.”

Sarat opened a Gridpage. Kyse burst out laughing.

“Has the imperium no experts!”

“One tends to think,” said Sarat, “we have seen – it is the integrity of the human sciences that suffered, medicine, psychology, biology. One tends to think the physical sciences can have no bearing on the bases of corrupt government and so went their merry way. I do not doubt the geologists and geographers of the Collegium – “

“And of course those from Fidub or Dabida would have their own preconceptions!”

“I do not want to share,” said Sarat.

“Top secret, for your eyes only. I take it Mel is in on it.”

“He will be. All it needs is a brain.”

“My brain,” said Kyse, “points out to me that the integrity of the maps themselves.”

“Exactly,” said Sarat.

“So let me be clear about this, you want me and Fal, who are neither professional geographers nor possessors of intimate knowledge of the surface – what’s the word – topography, that’s it – nor possessors of intimate knowledge of the topography of Kadun, to direct our searing gazes to telling which bits are forged, which bits are made up to conceal the reality of what I suppose I must call the earthscape.”

“To tell me where to look,” said Sarat without batting an eyelid.

“But you know where to look! Even I have heard of the field of flowers!”

“That’s good,” said Sarat, “you know where to look too. Look, let me show you.” He opened

another page. The continent loomed before them. He touched a finger to the screen then held it up for inspection. “fraction of that dot in the middle is our field of flowers. If you zoom in normally, go too far, you lose the resolution –” He zoomed in to blur. “– which is why I found a program that doesn’t. Much, much, much magnified, a pinprick on the earth’s surface, who’s going to notice? If there’s one thing geology has, it’s scale, aeons of time, whole continents.” He clicked and zoomed again. “Who is going to notice?” he asked again. “What is remarkable about it?”

Kyse sighed.

“It doesn’t have any geology! It doesn’t have any geographical features! It’s as though someone’s taken an eraser to it.”

“And we know the stream is there,” said Sarat.

“OK, I’m hooked. It’ll probably take the rest of my life. What you actually want is us to cover the whole of Kadun at this scale to look for areas of blankness.”

“Then we join the dots,” said Sarat, “if there are any. You can start with Van-senok, Casin-ruhn, which is in Ciletij, and the site of the Jumesit. Myth tells us there’s a five-headed monster under Azt. Did you know that? Truth may be stranger than fiction.”

“You want us to obtain the evidence,” said Kyse.

“Of compromise? Oh yes.”

“I doubt it will come to court!”

“No comment at this stage,” said Sarat.

“Truly no learned monographs, the geology of western Carlin?”

“How dare you suggest the Great Divide is anything other than a perfectly normal valley, millions like it?”

“It’s an estuary,” said Kyse.

“How true, how true,” said Sarat with seeming delight. “Two things, therefore. The sea comes in. The river goes out. Such as it is.” More rapid clicking. “Behold the Velun-sa at its source! It forces itself out of the ground, the whole thing is the most enormous effort. As rivers go, it’s a loser. It’d probably be still-born, if it didn’t have help from a tributary of the Fanil. Wonderful how one can model things.” Sarat’s kind of click, click, click. “Based on flow-rate, rainfall, gradient the Davin itself – the tributary – wouldn’t make it to the sea. It’s had a long journey. It’s tired. Help is at hand. A valley, into which it gratefully comes to rest, has been made for it, and so we think it flows to the sea, as any decent river should.”

“In another world,” said Kyse, “I attended a meeting of NoZone.”

“Nature,” said Sarat. “Nothing quite like it.”

“So?”

“I have some – not theories. Notions that might be theories when they grow up. The mouth of the GD is a tectonic estuary, meaning movements of the earth created the rift that created a single valley. Now, all that is possibly nonsense on the grounds that we cannot possibly know the status of the Velun or the Davin millions of years ago; they might have been mighty torrents. I don’t think so. If they’d had any get up and go they’d have meandered.”

“The Fanil, of course,” said Kyse, “flows through Van-senok”

“Isn’t that interesting?” said Sarat.

“What about the Horze?” The Horze is the river on which Azt stands.

“The Horze rises in the wilds of the northern forests. It’s a grown-up river. It has tributaries. One of them flows into the Fanil.”

“I take it a tributary?”

“Tributaries feed. Tributaries branch out on their own. Start reading up on meteorites.”

“What!”

“Standard form is that the GD is a rift valley, about which no big deal. I think it’s a crater. I think that whatever it was that came from wherever it came from somehow causes disturbance in the ether. I think this was millions of years ago. I note the effect of the field is startling but hardly negative or evil. I think when people appeared and – became aware of the situation they buried whatever under what is now Azt. I have absolutely no idea why! I mean, whether they thought they



were removing it from circulation or whether they thought of it as some kind of guardian. I think whatever leaches into the water. I have been told whatever may be harnessed by the Cult for evil. I have been – somewhat melodramatically – been presented with a – parallel, a teaching-story. I think at some point it was discovered by the Cult and used for evil, hence the five-headed monster. I think all this is broadly science, though not necessarily our science. It has been - mused that the Matter of Kadun is the intrusion into our dull humdrum lives of a different set of physical laws. I think it - possible that whatever follows the same rules but the effect is – distorted by its being in terms of both time and space a long, long way from home.”

“Astroshit!” said Kyse.

“I knew you’d love it,” said Sarat.

“You think the areas of blankness are going to map out against waterways?”

“Give you a definite maybe – there may be reasons to do with the nature of the rock and soil why the effect is stronger in some places than others.”

I think the Anile throne contains whatever, explaining or at any rate excusing her more interesting qualities. Intelligent metal? Intelligent life that looks like metal to us? What does she want to do? She wants to go home. She dissolves into space-time. The rest is us. Maybe. Truly I am not responsible for the welfare of the universe! Whatever cosmic cataclysm wrenched whatever from its home, I can never know. But I just might be able to resolve this Matter of Kadun.

Flying across the GD, he leered at it through the window. Memory stirred. I believe in possibilities. Are metaphysics immutable? Then ‘will’ survives, I said. It’s lousy metaphysics! All these dead people keep talking to us, he complained to himself. What then is my problem with Hass? My problem is he appears to take the Jumesit at face value. He doesn’t talk about it. He wouldn’t, would he, not if he has periodic chats with Maya. Sarat grinned to himself. Anyway, they’re in it over their heads now! It’s good to talk. Take at face value. Enter the dream. Oh, what did happen at Casin-ruhn?

Scene: Her Imperial Majesty sits sipping tea, not a hair out of place, while two elegant young men gaze at her in rapt adoration. If they weren’t gay, I might be jealous! He’s not bloody gay! Somewhere there is a person in a female body. I got there first! Suppose everything is a metaphor. Did something just fall into place?

“Move over!” he said to Asyrion, as time lurched. Or something. Oh pooch! he nearly said. Pooch, pooch, pooch! He pulled Dill close. “Grrrr! The warmth of our bodies,” he said.

Dill snuggled closer.

“Darling, is this quite the place!”

“On the chair. She responds – why does she – why can she not – stories about the Jumesit abound! But that’s because of the five-headed monster! Bring her here – she was ‘responsible’ for Casin-ruhn. But it’s all still there, so someone replaced her – “ His mind was working very fast now. He wasn’t sure that was a good thing.

“Is it something they put in the water?” wondered Venga.

“How are we?” asked Hass.

“Cold,” said Sarat. “It’s cold in Casin-ruhn.”

“Zur,” said Dill, “can be uncomfortably warm in summer.”

“Suppose what screws it is magnetism,” said Sarat.

“Is this a private conversation?”

“How much have you told them?” asked Sarat.

“Would I dream of doing anything without you!”

He told them everything as he had always known that he would. Finally, he took a deep breath, held Dill so tightly that she muttered, “Oof, you’re squashing me!” and asked steadily, “Have you seen Maya recently?”

“No,” said Hass.

Another theory bites the dust.

“I didn’t – when I was here after. I wondered if I was – preventing myself.”

“Our social circle,” said Venga, “remains limited.”  
“Perhaps,” said Sarat, “people who knew something.”  
“Perhaps,” said Venga, “people who were something.”  
“Who found out something, who – changed themselves. Wouldn’t they say so!”  
“Something in the water?” suggested Venga. “Perhaps they didn’t know.”  
“You talk as though these guys are real,” said Dill.  
“It’s difficult, isn’t it,” said Sarat.  
But Venga said, “You talk to Jaizal. You decide if he’s real.”  
“I suppose we’d better live here,” sighed Sarat.  
Hass smiled.  
“There Has Been No Announcement.”  
“That was yesterday,” said Sarat.

Later Hass caught him alone.  
“What will you say?”  
Sarat grinned.  
“Sort of the truth.”

Sarat Comes Clean! We’re An Item Says Sarat. Sarat Names The Day.

The last time I stood here, I said things I now confirm. With all my heart, with all my mind, with all my being, I love Dill. Also I love Maya. Maya is dead. If we continue, we are in some place immeasurably distant. If we do not, there is an ending. We cannot, we should not live our lives in a place, a time of our imagining, in a world bounded by death. Our place is here and now, our meaning to be alive and to live to the fullest extent of our being. We should live our lives in reality. Some will say, that is the opposite of what I said. I say.....He laughed. Tough. I do not have today to be solemn. I do not feel the need to be formal. I do not have to explain my innermost feelings to the world.

I am here because I love Dill. Dill is my grace and my truth. Dill is my resolution and my culmination. To Dill I say, nothing can destroy our love. This I know.

Dill entered the House of Silence and walked down the aisle towards him in the little black dress. He wrapped his arms around her then kissed her cheek and left her to it.

Some people, they know who they are, will try to pour scorn on Sarat’s feelings. They will say, either he truly loved Maya or he truly loves me. I say, they are idiots, who understand nothing of the human heart.

Zulagan bit his lip so hard it nearly bled and stole a glance at Mitch. Mitch was sitting forward, his head in hands, thinking why do I feel the eyes of the world are upon me! My lady, thought Challin, why not call them morons and be done. Cho looked at Kile, poker-faced, save for her dancing eyes.

Of course he loves Maya. Of course he loves me, as much and as deeply as he loved Maya when she lived. If you cannot see the difference, then truly you are a lost cause. And I love Sarat, with all my heart, with all my mind, with all my being. I am here because I love Sarat. Sarat is my grace and my truth. Sarat is my resolution and my culmination. To Sarat I say, nothing can destroy our love. This I know.

He did not, observed Seani, get where he is today without a certain amount of raw nerve. Nor by the sound of it did she!

Dill hadn’t finished, not by a long chalk.

Love has no bounds. This I know. Love does not distinguish between life and death. It is we who do that, we who must do that. I do not live my life as though my sister were still with me, though she never leaves me. My father, my grandmother, do not live as though Heela were still present. Would it not be nonsense to say I am not Mistress of Var-segan because my grandfather is dead. Life is a process of change. Have we not said it? They cannot destroy our laughter, our joy, our delight in



life, in each other. This we know.

They are bound in understanding, thought Cho, and that also is the message – and if you don't get it, you're a moron. I shall enjoy my grand-daughter-in-law.

You have to look at the father, sir.

Oh no, said small, tubby and balding, mother-panther in defence of her cubs. You have to look at the mother!

Of course the pain brought them together...Sweet, thought Challin. Perhaps even true.

And you never lose out by being honest with folks. Appreciated. Some as thought it'd be like it never 'appened. Not them as knows you, mind, but what could you say. Flat truth of it is, them as 'as lost loved ones understand in their gut, their 'earts. If them as 'asn't don't – tough!

Of course the view from Var-segan is bound to be biased.

For some this day of rejoicing is overshadowed by personal tragedy....26-year-old Savla is today burying her beautiful young daughter, whose life was cut short by one of the now mercifully few cases of meningitis...Savla's mother was kind enough to spare us a few words...It really helps to know those at the top have been through it....Challin only squirmed a little bit.

Sarat mailed me.

The rivers are poisoned, poisoned, I tell you! I need your help.

Some sort of code? asked Cioulis.

You sound just like my mother! Is that both of us? No, not Estanzia!

Sorry, yes, def, Come to think of it, your mother!

!!!

I thought it was a joke.

"It is generally accepted," said Dill, "that the walls of time fade and reform, that our guests are real. That they are going about their business in their own time and not indeed visiting."

"Yes."

"I understand, although I have yet to experience them, there are other manifestations of this in support of this theory, scenes that could not be taking place in the here and now."

"Yes. The Bronzes. The Bronzes are a frieze which does – emphasis on does – not exist. There anyway!"

"We may and do – constantly – ask precisely why this temporal phenomenon should be so. We may indeed ask if it is so. I do not think we question that it could be so. Is the phenomenon of Kaminua and Asyrion of a different order? It is the proposition that one may choose to continue one's terrestrial existence in – what shall we say? A time bubble, a space out of time where time does not exist. Again we may say this could so but clearly a more complex and so more questionable process would be involved, though we may adduce the fact that each of us is – "She broke into a grin. " – a part of the bloody Whole extant outside time. Nonetheless our physical, our corporeal beings are rooted in time and to – clothe our essence in a physicality rendered proof against time is to say, is it not, that the physical form must be generated, created by the essence. Or at any rate controlled, and this too is not outside the boundaries of what is known to us, or how could we heal? What else after all is shape-shifting? We may indeed posit that we choose mortality." Sarat realized why she was in lecture mode. "That Kaminua and Asyrion reached a place where they were capable of making that choice is indeed not wholly outside the bounds of possibility. However, we have been told stories – fed a lot of hooley, as you prefer, that – deliberately? – counter that possibility. She died of that which Fidub could not heal and he grew old and grief-stricken."

"I love you," said Sarat.

She smiled benignly.

"But it is not only to say that, not only to say that the physical form must be generated by the essence. It is to make profoundly – "Again she grinned. " – profoundly rather than mildly dubious

statements about the nature of life and death and time. And will. What precisely is it to say? It is to say that the essence after they died was capable of choosing to generate a permanent non-changing physicality and health. Or is it? Is it perhaps to say that at some moment, say at the middle age they appear to chosen for eternity, they decided to exchange normal life for that eternity. I know little of the Denzines. I may be about to learn a whole lot more. Principally I refer you to the load of hooey. If Kaminua had knowledge that they would one day be together for ever, why was he grief-stricken. I would ask also how Asyrion at middle age could have made that choice when history – for what history is worth – records that she died young, whether or not of ‘that Fidub could not heal’. A further possibility is of course that they were not Kaminua and Asyrion but Denzine shape-shifters.” “Baz tried,” said Sarat. “Baz and Hass. The conclusion was that if they were not real then the falsity was impenetrable.”

“They’d have to be real good,” said Dill. “Lastly, and lastly is perhaps most interesting of all, because it applies to the Jumesit, the reality of the phenomena of which is least in doubt, it seems to me the walls of time do not fade when our ancestors were doing anything interesting. No window is opened onto Narulis’ councils of state. We do not see Susheela fleeing with her son. I accept of course that had they resolved the matter of Kadun we should not be having this conversation but one would have thought they had either perception or experience to impart. I do not know what to make of that.”

“It may be,” said Sarat. “No. Yes! Possibly. Can we possibly be shaping that trip? This is my experience and others may counter it. We’ve become so used to the – phenomenon we don’t instantly report Susheela brushing her hair! I have noted that Narulis does not drop in when I’m working. Oh of course! It’s only when we switch off our conscious minds that we can see – “ “Oh of course! It’s there all the time. All times are now.”

“That is a little dizzying,” said Sarat.

“A little. The other thing is that it would seem that of all the emperors only Narulis and Jaizal actually lived in the place.”

“I can’t think why. Fortuitous.”

“Fortuitous also that you and Narulis should be taking a break at the same time. Nor do we apparently perceive the day to day work of the palace, the staff, the cooks, the soldiers, the servants.”

“Tell you in a minute,” said Sarat. “If we go back to the original – proposition – that their existence is their own time is tenable, then - they are trying to break through to our time. Is that conceivable? To the time when something happens which might not have happened yet which happens to be our time? We know party-tricks take a considerable amount of energy and that particular trick – maybe they never get down to the nitty-gritty because they can’t make the final leap.”

“I like it. I am not sure I believe a word of it, but I like it! And depart because it hasn’t happened yet?”

“They were literate!” said Sarat with some irritation. “If I were just capable of passing through time to convey something to my successors, should I not write it down beforehand and hand it over?” Dill pealed with laughter.

“Suppose two – phenomena are indeed the case. A frieze is not I trust making a frenzied effort to communicate with the future. People are.”

“The Bronzes are a bit more than a mere frieze. The Bronzes are a frieze which is alive. It’s a battle scene, warriors in chariots, chargers, and sometimes they laugh at us. If you wanted to communicate with another time, wouldn’t you make your push where the walls of time were known to be thin? There’s something else. In purely human terms. They may not know exactly what they’re doing any more than we do.”

“Or of course,” said Dill, “they might not want to be here at all but end up here because the walls of time etc.”

Sarat burst out laughing.

“At which point they exchange a few commonplaces to be polite and retire to their own time thinking, oh shit, failed again!”

Dill had wrinkled her brow.

“These Bronzes then parallel Kaminua and Asyrion? They are a moment frozen in time – presumably the battle never ends – and they do not accord with our physics? Have you assayed them?”

Sarat was still grinning.

“Risk a spear in the ribs... The Star tried to seduce me. I don’t think I told you that.”

“In novels concerning time-travel,” said Dill after a moment, “a big thing is generally made of not changing the past.”

“My point exactly!” said Sarat enthusiastically. He made wide eyes. “Suppose you got pregnant!”

“We must talk about that. She – accepted your argument?”

“She accept my polite decline!”

“I must confess I have never wholly been at one with that point about not changing the past. It always strikes me as somewhat deterministic – except of course in this case when it is crucial to my well-being! That is because if the past is co-existent, the past is also now and indeed do we not repeat that like some kind of mantra.

“As fixed points go,” said Sarat, “it’s a dodo.”

“That – I think – is my point. If we say they wish to communicate with a particular future, then equally that future – any particular future – our now – must be co-existent with their past. We can therefore drive ourselves mad thinking that possible futures also are co-existent: they arrive here but it is the wrong future! What is it you would like them to tell you?!”

“The chair. Where. When. How. You realize we have no proof she was ever here!”

“About that,” said Dill, “I have theories. The first emperor and the last (but one)! You know of course there are stories, Jaizal must have the throne!” Sarat nodded. “You know that when you arrived here there was a replica and not a modern one. And of course you know that Van-senok is implicated in a fashion we have yet to determine.”

But it is long over, thought Sarat. What - ?

“When each of us sat – hang on. I’m thinking about five things at once. The uppermost is probably Mel knows. I don’t mean – he’s an anthropologist. He must have studied earthpower academically. Venga’s trip included Behna laughing and saying, but it is long over! The subject of which was apparently I in wolverine mode on the chair. Damn! There’s something there.” He closed his eyes. “Space-rock. Is rock. Cantilip. Kai. What’s in a word? Earthpower in Harn has nothing to do with earthpower in Kadun. The – creed of earthpower in VS derives from that damn’ meteorite.”

“That you do not know formed the lake!”

“That’s the one. And Cantilip knows that. Or guesses. They came from Sug. There hasn’t been time. People haven’t been around for long enough. Nor do or did I believe Fidub could not heal. Have you seen me glowing lately? OK, let’s count the ifs. If and only if there was indeed a meteorite and if the throne was made of rock from it, then its fall pre-dated Narulis. If it was something we might identify as radioactive, bearing in mind its physics might be different, then, nonetheless, that – those – emissions – oh. What you just said. Something Cho wondered. Narulis was given a kitten and found it grew into a sabre-tooth the size of a house so he regretfully gave it away to a good home.”

“But look at her now, placid as a new-born kitten! Fidub was her home. Or if you prefer somewhere a few million light-years away.”

“Lending incredibly tenuous support to the meteorite at the bottom of the lake! Why C-R is a perfectly rational question to which no-one appears to have an answer. If you really wanted to hide her, you could go much deeper into the trees, not build her a little house. I’m trying to remember what I said in that casual way one says things apparently of purely academic interest! That we’d assumed peace reigned and Fidub made Narulis a present. Maybe chaos reigned and they made him a weapon.”

“The Singing Isles,” said Dill. “I am thinking something that blows my head off.”

They looked at each other.

“The culture of Fidub is earthpower?”

“Now,” said Sarat brightly, “if we just explain how a chair made of incarnate earthpower constitutes

a weapon against the Cult we've cracked it."

"But she must do," said Dill. "She is independent of time."

"How," repeated Sarat. Dill was shaking with laughter. "What's so funny?"

"I am thinking of Mitch and the Fidubi scam."

"The Great Divide," said Hass, "is for many reasons such an obvious name."

"One never thinks it may be symbolic of a greater truth!"

"Did they have plumbing then?" asked Dill.

"Fidub had plumbing."

"Ah, yes, Fidub," said Sarat dreamily. "Theory – Notion – Notion 127 suggests the cataclysm threw Fidub up from the ocean-bed."

"Meaning the centre of the crater may be somewhere in the middle of the ocean."

"Which."

"Which makes it a little hard," said Dill, "for irtubi to have been scurrying around collecting pieces of space rock."

"Shards," said Hass and Sarat at virtually the same time.

"Bits broke off?" said Dill.

"Why shouldn't they?" asked Sarat.

"If you'd come light-years through space-time, wouldn't you be feeling fragile?"

"Earthpower. Rock-power! The power of this earth?"

"The problem with that being Harn."

Dill giggled.

"This empire rocks! Suppose there is confusion, conflation, isn't that a good word, of the two?"

"Suppose it was more like a shower," said Sarat.

"I like it," said Dill after a minute. "Not that I'm sure it fits or anything!"

"Done for dumping," muttered Sarat.

Sarat's desire to test a hypothesis by putting the chair in the field of flowers was restrained by not wanting anyone to see him do it.

"There will be a prize," suggested Dill, "for the most convoluted but plausible story anyone can come up with to seal off the field."

"Why not sort of tell the truth?" suggested Venga. "A radioactive meteorite! A very, very old one," he added hastily. "Mass panic! One cannot be too careful."

"He has led a sheltered life," said Hass.

"Space rocks," said Dill, "are like big bucks, man."

"You mean there's money in this?" asked Sarat. "I don't see a connection."

"When did you last monitor the meteorite market?"

"I really don't see a connection! This is about concealment."

"Unless it's about possession," said Hass. "If the Cult can use this whatever – and if it knows there are bits of it around –"

"It's had 600 years to dig up Azt!"

"You remember the throne guards a deeper mystery."

"How could we forget."

"Suppose the five-headed monster is on our side! I mean, suppose it guards whatever. You know," he added brightly, "like the werewolves."

"What happens to the bad guys?" asked Hass.

"Frightened to death," said Sarat. He paused. "What I think is we're going to go on with this until we prove ourselves wrong. If we prove ourselves wrong, we'll have a lot more information to go on. Does that make sense?"

"We might," said Dill, "even have some facts!"

"Optimism is a wonderful thing."

"Why," asked Sarat, "are the supposed tombs of Kaminua and Asyrion in an underground cavern in

Ciletij?"

"Been there, done that," said Venga. "I didn't mean – I meant, it wasn't Ciletij when they – " "Didn't die," finished Hass.

"What," asked Sarat, "does Cantilip know about the crowns?"

Venga sighed.

"Meaning what do I know? Very little. What Van-senok knows..."

"Kai," recalled Sarat, "is – satisfied whatever Cantilip and Mel are doing is to do with Zani."

"Somewhat surprising, therefore," said Hass.

"Indeed."

"There is of course no absolute binding reason why Zani should not have – could not have – "

"If you were Cantilip – or indeed if you were Mel – might you not describe having discovered Zani roamed around Van-senok as a piece of different puzzle?"

"In your own time," said Dill.

Sarat turned to her.

"I am truly sorry. " He made it sound as though he was confessing to murder. Then he laughed.

"You didn't grow up in Zur. Give us a minute on egg-shells."

"Come, hadin, come, come not alone, come hadin, come?" asked Dill

"There are of course two versions," sighed Hass. "School-books and the other."

"So is there a third?" asked Dill.

"Fourth, fifth, tenth? Zani became King of Dabida in the year the empire fell apart."

Hass laughed suddenly

"But the shattering of the empire was not a single instant in time like dropping a cup from an upstairs window. In other words what chiefly reigned was chaos."

"But always Fidub," objected Venga.

"Ah, the great chroniclers," said Sarat.

"Suppose," said Venga, "we start from the proposition that the only cats who know what went down are those who were there. We might then wonder what they told the folks back in Maona-pri. If 'there' was Van-senok, of course.

"We know – we think we know – we might know – Zani didn't want the Anile throne. Literally. Which suggests he sat on it. Where was it?:

"Or perhaps he didn't want the crown?" suggested Venga half-jokingly.

"When someone reaches the top of the heap – unless he's Anile Emperor, of course. In Dabida, in Fidub, to become Prime Minister – or King – one is informed of certain things. There are therefore persons who know these things already."

"When these things are," said Sarat.

"Exactly," said Hass. "When these things are contingency plans in the event of invasion or natural disaster. When they are other kinds of information, it may be that the passage of time has mangled them in transmission, even if the original version were correct."

"Volunteer requested," murmured Sarat grinning. "I wondered how many days' hard riding from the Great Gates to Van-senok and that at least we can determine."

"My understanding," said Dill, "is that as history measures these things, two weeks out of Zani's life would not have appeared significant."

"Before?" asked Hass. "This was before? We know – think we know – Jaizal was defeated and Zani withdrew to the south. Peculiar, certainly, and also very public. Zani therefore – agreed to defeating Jaizal and already knew he had no interest in the Anile throne. Jaizal's grip on the empire was – I was going to say tenuous but I think in Var-sega' in Van-senok non-existent. There was no empire, only a shell, an entity in people's minds."

"An agreement," said Dill slowly, "an agreement with Var-sega' with Van-senok that no attempt would be made to maintain the illusion."

"The first plotter," said Hass. "No wonder we're so good at it."

"Then of course there's Carlin," said Venga.

"Most certainly there is Carlin," said Sarat, "Carlin which so admirably failed to notice being



crossed by an army of invasion.”

“Where have I heard that before?” murmured Venga.

“Oh no, no, no, no,” said Sarat. “The deal was that he’d save them the trouble. Of having to fight for their independence.”

“Certainly,” said Hass, “as far as the Houses were concerned, the empire had outlived its purpose.”

“I shall dwell on that,” said Sarat. “When I’m having a bad day, it will lift my spirits.”

“Where have I heard that before?” murmured Venga. “Save them the trouble of having to actually do something.”

“The national mythology,” said Venga. “A simple lad, our Zani, bright, certainly, brave, certainly, but not a – complex character.”

“Ah,” said Dill. “I wondered where the egg-shells were.”

“I might also observe,” continued Sarat, “that he was probably exceptionally well briefed. To put it another way, PANTHER knew what was really going down in Kadun.”

Dill said: “It really nagged at Mom and Dad. Why PANTHER allowed the empire to collapse. If PANTHER were all they are cracked up to be and PANTHER are all they are cracked up to be.”

“Were they?” asked Sarat suddenly, emphasizing the ‘were’. “Suppose there was something new, something PANTHER couldn’t handle and learned how to handle but by then history had taken over?”

“No Anile heir, no you,” said Dill.

“I hope!”

“That would be a turn-up.”

“He was a kid,” said Venga. “Probably thought he wouldn’t have a hope. I mean a real kid, about seven!”

“I think,” said Dill, “we may be – satisfied that the Houses were not hanging on for him to reach maturity.”

“We know that,” said Sarat, “as much as we know anything. Fidub brought the goodies to defeat the Cult. If Fidub could not – could and could not – defeat the Cult, then it was business as usual. Only when All-Kadun became a political entity was there any point.”

“The same point,” said Hass.

：“Oh yes,” said Sarat. “Mitch and I are loose cannons.”

“I take that point,” said Dill, “but it is surely more complex than that. There was the pressing need for modernization, for dragging Kadun into line with the rest of the continent.”

“Vastly easier if someone else does all the work.”

“Someone or ones cleaned out Azt. Someone or ones killed Jaizal. Someone or ones for most of 600 years kept the Cult down. I think for the moment we shall leave it open who. An open mind!”

“Let us start with what we know!” said Venga enthusiastically.

“Who we know,” corrected Sarat. “Kai.”

It took them a moment to catch on.

“Mel could not have known,” said Hass.

“Known what?”

“Let us take this slowly. Before he met Cantilip, Mel had a – liaison with Estanzia Morsen’s daughter and would-be Chief Minister of Harn whose – academic enthusiasm is the defeat of the Cult in Harn.”

“Who possibly knows everything there is to know about how Harn became a democracy and possibly has been fed an alternative history like the rest of us.”

“And – possibly – told Mel something neither of them thought remotely significant at the time?”

“Eight years later – “

“Oh no, no, no, more like eight months.”

“And who else knows about the history of Harn? Why, Mel’s friend Kyse.”

“Whom we all adore.”

“We all adore Kai. It remains a – curiosity.”

Hass sighed.

“My sons have paired with irtubi! They wish to restore the Anile throne! I know Tar is super-cool. Couldn’t he have pretended to be surprised? I am remembering – when we thought Bal should urgently get to know and love us, we told him Fidub wants them screwed and we’re the screw-drivers. If Mel knew anything before he went to the City, Tar told him. I remember also – the – urgency with which he wished Tar to know about Cantilip.”

“And things,” said Sarat.

“Certainly things!”

“When we are children,” said Dill, “when we are young people, we go to school.” She smiled.

“Occasionally. If we are good students, we learn history. I liked history. Only – “ The smile grew broader. “They have us over a barrel because we are just starting our journey into the other matter when we are just finishing our schooling and unless we investigate a particular aspect most extraordinarily thoroughly we not perceive that the two histories do not always tell the same story. In this case there are three histories.” She looked around. “You are listening intently. That is good.” Venga grinned.

“Dare I ask it!”

“Do I consciously imitate Mitch? Half and half. I enjoy imitating Mitch. We learn that the fall of High Harn was an on-going process. We learn that initially the extremity, the bestiality of the Cult sparked rebellion among its very adepts who nonetheless retained some spark of humanity and curtailed its more obscene practices. And those two histories mesh for assuredly only adepts of some kind could withstand. We learn further, hard though it is to believe, that the City is the core of an ancient civilization on the eastern seaboard, far from High Harn, and that when their more local practices had been reined in, High Harn sought not exactly empire but dominion and spread eastwards and there they were stopped. What does this spell?”

“D-E-N-Z – “

“You are correct.”

“PANTHER learned from the Denzines?”

Dill giggled.

“You are probably correct. Mitch refers to my education as being carted about the continent. That should be continents, of course. Until the modern age, the Age of Communication, Var-segan was as remote from Azt as from the City, indeed as humans measure distance the City is closer, and we are sea-faring people. I do not know that a piece of water was endowed with any great significance. If you say it was possible to drown in storms, I do not know that there was any greater risk of that than of having one’s throat cut or worse riding to Azt. You will recall I ended up in Zur but by far the majority of my schooling was in the City or in Var-segan.

“One way traffic not,” suggested Sarat.

“Harni are not unfamiliar with Var-sega’. But do we not see something plain bizarre?”

“Such as why you are approaching this in a roundabout fashion?” asked Venga.

“I merely assess the facts.”

“When are we talking about?” asked Sarat.

She looked at him approvingly.

“And what is missing from this history?”

“Earthpower. If this is Cantilip’s jig-saw, I can only empathize”

“The City, the City-state it governed, did not extend the length of the coast. The knowledge there was land on the other side of the water we may assume did.”

“So the Cult arrived in Kadun and again spread east, north and east. If we plot their course, we observe three things. 1) they stayed north of the Great Divide, 2) they stayed west of at least that part of Carlin in which a certain field is to be found, 3) there was a multitude of contact between Carlin and Fidub along that eastern seaboard, as at least one of us undoubtedly knows. Azt in those times was itself some kind of a city-state, ruling a surrounding territory the borders of which were ill-defined. It did not, however, represent any notable attempt at civilization and so we may imagine the Cult found it fertile soil.”



“Has anyone got a map?” asked Venga. “I try to visualize the ancient world. A few centres of trade, of arts and a great deal of almost nothing in between.”

“In my bag,” said Dill. “Netbook not aged parchment!”

“Quicker to draw it,” said Sarat. “It needs to be blank.”

“Nearly blank,” said Hass.

Sarat reached into the drawer of the coffee-table and produced a piece of letterhead.

“How appropriate....” He turned it over.

“OK. Spheres of influence.”

“Or we could just talk to Fugitry,” said Hass.

Sarat grinned.

“I want answers. Now. Has anyone ever tried that?”

“Anyone,” said Venga, “is not the Anile emperor.”

“Of course,” said Hass, “if they wanted us to know, they could have told us.”

“Denzine involvement in Van-senok, that’s our theme?”

“The Denzines put her in Van-senok?”

“Let’s take this slowly. The convulsions in Kadun came to the attention of our little friends across the water.”

“Back a step. If earthpower defeated the Cult in the west, then there was no need for Narulis, therefore the Denzines defeated the Cult in the west. Discuss. Or of course there was no need for Narulis.”

“I strive,” said Sarat, “to be kind, to be generous. Kindness and generosity dictate that I believe that no-one knows the full story, only all the stories have not been put together. Oh yeah.”

“I have never seen a good moment to introduce this into the dialogue,” said Dill. ‘The meaning of ‘anile’.

Venga chortled.

“But it sounds so good! It was the name given Narulis by the Cult and it stuck.”

“No smoke without fire?” suggested Hass.

“An insinuation the real work was done by the Denzines?”

“I should think more subtle,” said Sarat. “Not flattering, but more subtle. Narulis did the spade-work. The Denzines had the understanding.”

He ferreted in the drawer for a pen and to his surprise emerged clutching a fountain-pen. “So this is where I inscribe decrees?” He uncapped it and tried it out. It worked, so he sketched out a couple of continents.

“OK. Deel, the site of High Harn. Enbahaluk over there somewhere. Simaluk down below....”

“Mel talked to Fugitry,” sighed Hass. “Fugitry told him to remember the Mossai Wars.”

Dill smirked.

“Mom would be real proud of me. The Mossai Wars were a struggle between two cousins, whose names it will astonish you were Enbah and Sima for governance of a single territory, ending in the division we see today.” She stopped suddenly.

“Oh dear,” said Venga.

“I do not envisage war with Dabida,” said Sarat drily.

“You know they talk in metaphors,” said Hass. “Suppose the ‘single territory’, metaphorically speaking, is Van-senok.” He paused. “Are we avoiding saying we keep coming back to Mel?”

“And the ‘governance’ is – that’s absurd! No-one wants to – eradicate earthpower. Even if that were possible.”

“Metaphor, metaphor, metaphor. The indigenous culture of Kadun. Suppose we’ve got a few things wrong. The Anile Court turned rotten. That wasn’t because – “ He burst out laughing. “Could have been something in the drinking-water, could indeed. But if you are earthpower watching the whole thing go down the tubes, you think the flaw is in Fidub But the culture of Fidub is earthpower.”

The guys stared.

“Worked that out ages ago,” yawned Dill. “It is my thinking that we in Kadun should launch our own space programme, Earthpower 1, Earthpower 2, Earthpower 3, in order to make certain people

sweat a little, for assuredly there appear to be three distinct bodies of thought under the same name, and I should say also there is deliberate attempt to confuse the three. . I and 2 both originate in the idea of a creator or creatrice. Mark I holds that the power of the earth is limitless, being that which pushes up mountains and creates rivers and that that is the physical manifestation of the power of a creator distinct from the earth itself, which or whom assuredly no human can constrain. Mark 2 often appears in what is at least in appearance a trivialized, a castrated – a most inappropriate word! – form. In this version it is the earth that is the creatrice – the goddess – and the sentience of the earth gives life to that which we more normally consider as living. As I say, the trivialized form may appear as look at all the pretty flowers. In your Singing Isles – hence I may say Fidub’s insufferably high opinion of herself – “ Venga pretended to smother a grin and Hass murmured something about disassociating oneself. “ – the case is different. The story is, is it not, that Fidub has kept her people sufficiently elevated in consciousness not to produce a human smog that crushes the music from the singing earth – “

Sarat might have been heard to mutter something about nobody believes exactly that.

“I have been to Fidub! I cannot doubt the music. I can, however, as can everyone with half a brain, doubt the explanation. Or else this planet is even more extraordinary, Exhibit A of course being Jaaba Sen.. Concerning the emanations from the soil of Fidub I grant you and I have read widely on this matter that no-one else has a better explanation, not least of the phenomenon, grudgingly attested to throughout known history, that the bad guys do not feel comfortable in or perhaps on is a better word the Isles, their feet hurt. What might seem a simple medical condition vanishes when they catch the ferry. There are for the moment – I may think of more – two things to be said about this phenomenon. One is that this group of islands is surely geologically odd – yes, I am aware that geophysicists have failed to detect any oddity. The other is the take on the nature of the earth, which is here not all-powerful but subject to the life that inhabits it. Here the earth is vulnerable, but the vulnerability is not – NoZone notwithstanding – vulnerability to pollutants but vulnerability to the emanations of the human mind and this is the root of the concept of the Whole.. This is a fundamental difference and interesting! In Mark One and Mark Two the human consciousness aligns itself with the power of the earth If you ask what older adepts of earthpower could do to defend themselves against the Cult – that defence I gather that Cantilip side-steps by appearing in dryad form – you really do not want to know. If you do want to know, they entered their minds and conveyed the experience of being eaten alive, together with being severely mauled, usually by bears. – “

“Do look at all the pretty flowers,” murmured Hass.

“Among, therefore, the truckloads of hooley we are being fed is the concept earthpower could not defend Kadun – among, therefore, the histories we re-assess is precisely what Narulis achieved in Kadun.”

：“One feels quite faint,” said Venga.

“The power harnessed, contributed Hass, “was – therefore – the power of the earth.”

“Just so and that power does not have a – morality attached. As we know non-human animals are not kind to their prey, they do not have a code of humane slaughter.”

“Into this tripped Fidub,” said Sarat. “So Fidub said the power of the universe is love – and earthpower laughed in her face?”

“We have to ask why this power is called love.”

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And of course Sarat

**The shrine at Maona-Pri**

Sarat here. Our chief narratrix insists I finish this off. What is it you wish to know? I can take being interviewed, truly I can, extensive experience thereof. No, no, she coaxes, just write it like it was. All of it? I ask in mock-horror (what's mock about it?) I think I've done a reasonable job, she says. There are bits you need to do.

There are now two main areas they wish – they? Fal and Kai! The undoubted ringleaders here. Two areas they wish me to explore. One is of course such resolution as was achieved of this Matter of Kadun. The other is my experience at the retreat on the Leolisle. Oh, and how they overlap and probably one or two other things. An editor is a terrible thing.

Other gaps in the narrative that only I could relate I have of course filled in already. In truth we cheat: what you have read so far has been edited for accuracy by all of us.

It was not long after Maya and I set up house in Zur. The first thing we'd plotted was how to hack our life together. We were under no illusions about how desperately we needed the Press. Consequently there could be almost nothing we should not have been happy for the world to know. That which preferably did not make a special issue of Glitz they covered at the retreat. Should that be we shall cover? Furniture and I appear to have no particular rapport, with the obvious exception, and we never did have much. A magnificent dining-table was given us by Cho, tongue very much in cheek, and we grasped that we needed a couple of sofas in order that our dinner guests didn't have to sit on the floor afterwards, but the only rooms we were interested in were our bedroom and the HQ of Plotters Central, which ran the width of the top floor and which looked far more like an Ops Room than anything domestic. We had breakfast and most other meals in our large ultra-modern smoked glass kitchen and so one morning when we'd tumbled down to grope for the orange juice was lying on the table The Letter with BY HAND in the top left-hand corner of the heavy-duty water-marked envelope, in the sort of black ink that's so impenetrable you could drown in it. I can probably remember it off by heart, some of it, anyway. We read it often enough, presumably in the hope that would reveal the message in invisible ink that told us what it meant. It was formal but friendly. Dear Sarat, I gather you have somewhat distinctive ambitions. I am therefore inviting you to spend some time with us on the Leolisle to complete your education. As I am sure you know, we taught Narulis. Clearly for your own safety you cannot be permitted to enter Kadun otherwise...

Clearly. Naturally invoking the question, oh right, how are you going to stop me? Naturally, a lot of things. I had no plans to fall defenceless into the hands of the Cult but no-one was more aware than I that walking to Kadun wasn't going to be tomorrow. Surely the fancy stuff could wait. For the moment we had important practical considerations, such as how to start. Let us be positive. I am being taken seriously.

Baz grinned. Job interview. More a selection board, said Paw. Aptitude testing. Psychometrics, said Baz. Maya and I looked at each other. Our lightning brains...As they are sure I know. I hadn't known. Suggesting the job is in their remit? Baz shrugged. Major corporations employ outside agencies.

"In this case," I said, "the 'major corporation' looks like my family."

"The major corporation," said Maya, "is PANTHER?"

Baz beamed.

"I take it your lips are sealed," I said

"Think on your feet and keep your cool," said Paw, which I could have worked out for myself.

"You remember," said Baz, he really said – the critical value of children's annuals to the Anile throne – "those quiz-books you had as kids. A vast range of usually useless general knowledge.

What was the capital of the province of Fantigri now known as Maltic when it was an independent state?"

"Don't think in tram-lines?"

“He’s renowned for it,” said Maya. “What about me?”

“That’s different,” said Baz.

“If that is not the most sexist remark of the millennium – “

“And it is not. I don’t recall your going to Pietri and claiming the Anile throne.”

She giggled. “Well, not exactly.” See below.

We wondered how to reply and sorrowfully decided that being coolly witty could wait until we knew what we were being coolly witty about. None of the stuff that ten years down the road would have seemed screamingly obvious occurred to us. Was I fit for the inner and esoteric aspects of being Anile emperor? Gee, guys, it’s a learning-curve. A PR vehicle, quite so. As far as I was concerned, Anile emperor was shorthand for the elected democratic government that would replace it.

Was I fit for the outer and exoteric aspects of being Anile emperor? I didn’t think I had any major character flaws – except of course possibly insanity. Looking at the thing from the outside, I had to accept that it might look off the wall. I was going to have to marshal my arguments, check my facts. What I knew was that I didn’t yet have the facts. Ah, but I knew the capital of Maltic. I could wow people who knew a great deal more about Kadun than I did with that one.

So long as I don’t come over as over-confident....

Insofar as there was anything resembling a clue in the letter, it was, I decided, the reference to Narulis. I was not yet ready for the public library to reveal that Sarat had taken out every book on Narulis he could lay his hands on, but fortunately Cho and Tar have extensive private libraries and these were somewhat more revealing than Great Figures of History: Narulis. Oh I see, I thought after a while. I wasn’t exactly sure what I saw. Narulis. Cult. PANTHER. Exactly what is the end of the piece of string? I tried it out on B and P.

Narulis dealt with the Cult and so became hero of the hour. No-one in Kadun is dealing with the Cult. Make that demolishing. First question, why? But anyhow Kadun needs the south to get rid of the Cult. I actually don’t think I get this. It might be about my being a convenient figurehead, the guy who deals with the drains, while PANTHER actually take over Kadun.

“Extreme justification is required,” said Baz piously, “for interference in the infrastructure of a sovereign state.”

“Being invited in is better,” said Paw.

Rather unfairly I glared at them.

“The right track?”

“There are many tracks,” said Paw. “Some of them are left by Kadun PANTHER.”

“It doesn’t make sense! Is that the question?”

They smiled infuriatingly.

“Why doesn’t PANTHER just deal with the Cult and then - ?”

“You could be a country vet,” said Baz enthusiastically.

“There are two questions,” I said. “102? Why in the last 600 years has Kadun not developed, not – learned to defend herself?”

Marshal my facts. What facts?

“If you tell me PANTHER can’t corner Krarlik and his – acolytes and deal with them, I don’t believe that.”

“Who said that?”

“Then what happens?”

Oh.

“Civil war. That’s worse?”

“Relatively few people are actually dying.”

“Or - nothing happens. The power is gone but the politics are the same. Then civil war, inevitably in the end civil war because Kadun has to move on, the modern world is here?”

“Keep going.”

“Factions. CLIK, capital, democracy, totalitarianism, the CCD, the Army. And the Houses.”

The CCD was and is (but Dill’s working on it) the Coalition of Conservative Democrats. They want universal suffrage, freedom of expression, freedom of movement, a living-wage and the rule of heterosexual men.

“You are a rather neat solution to a lot of problems.”

“Then why isn’t Cho in Azt!”

“He’s not that good-looking?”

“Shy, retiring, no understanding of the media.

“You’ve jumped over it,” said Baz

“What? Oh. They – they didn’t think they needed help. Now they do. I’m a brash Fidubi brat whose socio-economic politics are not – necessarily abhorrent. They see it works in Dabida. Then it’s the other way round. I need them.”

“Broadly,” said Paw, “we think the two cancel each other out.”

“Until I bankrupt them?”

“That is unlikely. Conspicuous consumption has rarely been part of the menu. What they have is often priceless if not beyond price having been given to them by Narulis. The Pika.”

“What’s the Pika?”

“Sarat!”

I had been to all the major museums and art galleries, but Cho had never given me a coffee-table book entitled The Treasures of Var-Segan. Remiss of him.

“What you seem to be telling me is the – power-brokers are the Houses. But their power comes from land and if they don’t have the land. The industrialists, the bankers. You can’t tell me they’re separate, any more than – in my family. There must be investments.”

“Why has there been no peasants’ revolt, no successful one, anyway, no popular uprising?”

“Because of the game. That’s what Mel calls Carlin. The contract.”

“It’s been called hi-tech feudalism. They have consumer goods. They are not poor by anyone’s standards. The poverty is in the cities – and the less – maintained areas of the countryside. The important thing to understand is these are five going on three nations. Kadun nationalism comes from the government in Azt. If you ask the guy next to you in the bus-queue where he comes from, he’s going to say Carlin or wherever. He’s not going to say he’s a proud citizen of the Republic of Kadun. He might be persuaded to say he’s a proud citizen of the Anile empire.”

“It is not incidental that the worst poverty is not in Carlin, Van-senok or Var-segan but you won’t go far wrong so long as you grasp these are nations, they have their good guys and their bad guys, their black-spots and their gems, and do or not have a prevailing ethos which might broadly be described as civilization.”

“They can read,” said Baz. “They know about the Law of Limited Returns.”

The LLR is a Dabidan gem which limits the duration for which a landlord can demand rent. It slays the CLIK guys.

“OK, what the tenants get isn’t – quantifiable. It’s an assurance of a measure of – civilization. If you are in deep shit nine you go to the House. All that’s pretty basic if you live in the village. Suppose you work on an industrial estate. Or is that why Kadun nationalism? They want to break the link?”

“Not bad for a beginner. Yes, in a word. The same and different. Lost your job, can’t pay the rent, out on the street, three kids under ten. There’s unemployment pay even in Kadun, but it’s crap. The emperor’s stewards will not let you starve or die of exposure. That’s the contract. Never ever underestimate it. It’s why they’re still there.”

“Did you just rap my knuckles?”

“Maybe. Think on. Remember you live in a slum.”

“Or I did until I was on the street. So I’m really going to canter up to the House.”

“Even if it occurred to you, you couldn’t afford it.”

“Half the people around me are in nearly as bad a state. Half don’t care...I think I heard it at dinner once. Social workers to the Anile throne!”

“You got it. Where there are rats there are cats. Kadun PANTHER prowl the industrial heartlands – could think of a better word. Where being sensible and savvy is enough they’re sensible and savvy. When major help is needed, they get that. If they’re not arrested, of course. Of course it’s not fool-proof, there aren’t anything like enough of them. But it spreads a thin skein – I’m getting poetic – the length and breadth of Kadun. If you think of the strands in the skein as a rope thrown to a drowning man – it makes it easier to find a rope, more likely someone will know someone who knows someone.”

“What is in it for Azt to have people starving? But I think. With a democratic state, with a civilized state, the Houses wouldn’t have that responsibility any more. Are you saying/could it be said it’s not a service provided free of charge?”

“Don’t think that would go down at all well. You could say every single carlini has a vested interest in the continued existence of the House. Unless and until they are convinced there is a viable alternate source of – safety is probably the best word, moral and physical.”

“OK. I – I’ve been murdered. I’m drawing my last breath. I think I should really hate for that to happen before I’ve achieved something.”

They laughed. Callous, I called it.

“And even then?”

“I – I could be living to a ripe old age on the Leolisle.”

“So?”

“So am I completely nuts? If it was my country...If it was my country it wouldn’t be an issue. That’s back to one of my very first thoughts. Someone has to act. I can. It would be wrong not to. Someone has to do something effective not just bleat. Unfortunately I can’t not end up Anile emperor. Well I could, but I’d spend more time avoiding being Anile emperor, denying that I wanted the Anile throne, than I should being – effective. D’you see? I’m not a back-room boy. Anile heir takes lead! Of course he’s just a dynamic, public-spirited, Fidubi lad. Why is anyone listening? Not because I’m a kid from Maona-pri. The moment I shoot my mouth off about Kadun all anyone will see is Anile heir. So I’ll use it. Do I want to be Anile emperor? What does it mean? Anile emperor, not ‘do I want’. It’ll mean what I choose to make it mean. Brash Fidubi brat who doesn’t think people should be tortured! What it means to other people is their problem. It means something fundamental in terms of Narulis’ values to me. That’s the link with history. I’ll use it – ruthlessly in terms of whatever other people want to think it means. I reckon that’s the upside. Anile emperor means what I decide it means. Something else. I don’t suppose Zani thought I want to be King of Dabida, king of somewhere that didn’t even exist as an entity. At least I have a clear idea where this leads and where I don’t want to go.”

“Just sifting through that lot,” said Baz. “What does ‘whatever other people want to think it means’ mean?”

“Did I say that? It means – be damned to what other people expect me to be. In terms of class, in terms of history, in terms of politics. It means what Dad said. Staying Sarat. Who he? I haven’t finished with that one yet, but at least I’ve started. Do I want to be Anile emperor? Why do I want to be Anile emperor? The answer to the first half depends on what I mean – what the questioner means too – by Anile emperor. At any rate the question depends. I think what I’m trying to say is whether or not it sounds completely insane to someone depends on what they think it means – what they think it means to me – but - there’s a sense in which the question is meaningless. Do I want to be? I am. Except there’s the – ravine between being Anile heir and being Anile emperor. In practical terms. Out in the real world. But also in the real world – I am Sarat. What Anile emperor is is what I am. This tends to make my head hurt. I don’t see myself as doing anything, as wanting to do anything, that isn’t Sarat, who – theoretically – could be the next president of Fidub. Am I being unsubtle here? If I really want to influence world affairs. Truly, democratic leaders have far more

opportunity to go off the rails! I'm surrounded by a rather thick – skein, the large number of people – I think we could start with Mum and Dad. I am assuming the absolute power to do what a lot of people want done. They have to be irtubi, that's the point. I think I could quite readily be sent packing, hopefully while still breathing. If irtubi don't want what's on offer, I'm not going to get across the border. Sarat Anonymous from M-P could shout from the roof-tops and get nowhere – nowhere further than Dabida. Being Anile heir means the outcome can be different but it's not I'm 'also' Anile heir. Being Anile heir is part of being Sarat, can't not be."

"Whew!" said Baz

"Any good?" I asked.

"You'll get there," allowed Paw.

"Azt, you mean? I am Anile heir. I can't not do anything and still be me. There's just one problem. You grow up with stuff and because it's not particularly relevant you don't necessarily think about it. Why am I Anile heir?"

They howled.

"Your father, the emperor?"

"My father, the emperor. Or my grandfather. I thought maybe some tradition, the youngest, but then it'd be Ven."

"World, be thankful it's not Zik!"

"Aw," I said, "don't you want people shredded."

"We wondered when you were going to ask that," said Baz.

"The matter having become of at least passing interest," said Paw.

"Then we wondered if you knew and were being shy."

"After all, he's not Zika."

"What is so funny?"

"Co-terminous," said Baz.

"Let us break this to you gently..."

"I'm not Anile – "

"No, no! In terms of your family, you are Anile emperor."

"I – "

"It's the inner and esoteric meaning of the Anile throne."

"Especially that stuff on the Grid. We wondered lots."

"Hang on!"

"There is always an Anile emperor," said Baz. "Being in Azt is – in a sense – peripheral."

"But Cho – "

"Said what?"

"Absolutely nothing!" I growled. "I said, It's your chair."

"Now shall we talk about others' perceptions?"

"Keep me on my toes. Don't give me a chance to recover from the shock."

"What does it change?"

"I don't know! It does seem to connect with earlier, about Kadun PANTHER. And the Houses?"

Some people in Kadun know and that changes their perceptions of my future career? Kadun PANTHER has a problem? You can't attack the infrastructure unless you've got something to put in its place."

"A rather neat solution, as I said."

You could have told me! may not be the most mature and constructive of sentences but I said it anyway.

"Dear boy," said Cho, "you were so very uninterested."

"I what!"

"In the other matter."

"And now I'm going to get a crash-course?"

"Something of the kind."



Maya had simply giggled and wriggled closer.

“I can’t wait!” she said.

Eso. Maya.

The great day dawned. It was a shock to be greeted by Faun, though it shouldn’t have been. I think maybe I had the idea this was going to be strangers but after all how well did I know Faun? A household name, but know? Hardly. PANTHER is the outer and exoteric manifestation of the shrine, you know. I hadn’t known. The Mysterious and Shadowy Head of PANTHER grinned at me and remarked, “We shall be working together in the future. We need to get to know each other better.”

“Great!” I said. .

My first question was, “So this is about dealing with the Cult? Shan’t I have forgotten it all by the time I actually get to Kadun?”

“Possibly,” said Faun.

“Wouldn’t it make more sense to do this later?”

“No,” said Faun.

I was given a timetable. This wasn’t Fal wandering around sketching, more the crash course in finance.

Discipline/self-discipline? I wondered. I’d got good grades despite having decided to be Anile emperor/actualize my inner being, whatever. Didn’t that count!

Not in the slightest, being the consequence of study and revision. I rapidly recalled the capital of Maltic, the year Ciletij changed the name of its currency and what that change denoted, how many years after the declaration of the republic was the counter-revolution in Harn aimed at restoring the monarchy, what name is given to the unprecedented archaeological find in Arit that changed our entire concept of pre-history. A series of oral presentations was required. Subjects were thrown at me. I was expected to say something intelligent about each of them, even if the only intelligent thing to say was I don’t know. If I didn’t know I was supposed to say something sensible anyway – the right century if not the right year, the right country if not the right city. They nearly threw me by asking me things I actually knew: how birds fly and what was the rationale for the creation of NoZone.

OK, thinking on my feet, I thought. I can see that.

“I can see,” I said, “this is relevant. What I can’t see is – is why Cho can’t do this over dinner!”

“Breaking you in gently,” said Faun.

Uh?

Half-an-hour in which to tell us about Narulis.

Oh, right, hardball.

I hoped I could see that this was a test of whether I presented the data in a logical fashion and didn’t waste time with irrelevant detail. Assuming I knew any irrelevant detail, of course. Thinking-time , I murmured and disappeared into my whirring brain, though I knew that was a risky judgement-call – I could spend too long conceiving the perfect presentation to have enough time to present it. Also, of course, perhaps I was supposed to start talking straight off. Tough. This one couldn’t have an RL equivalent. I thought I might have detected the slightest flicker when I mentioned the Journal, but other than that I might just as well have been telling them today’s weather.

“26:32:10,” said Faun.

Taja smiled lazily.

“You have been to Carlin?”

“Not a hope.”

“We know Mel visits – unofficially.” Do you, indeed! “We wondered.”

“I think I have a streak of common-sense somewhere. Anyhow, I couldn’t get to see the House. Unofficially. Sorg told us about the Journal.”

“Ah, Sorg.”

“How would you describe Sorg?”

“With difficulty? My brother-in-law once removed? Or is it twice?”

“You have remarkable connections, thanks to Maya.”

Hmm.

“Not really. Not really thanks to Maya, I mean. It wasn’t Maya who caused Vij and Sarsh to pair. Vij would be Mel’s and Hass’s cousin anyway. Essa and Tar have always been friends. It would be hard not to be close to A-M and that closeness does date from our cradles, long before any thought of Kadun.

“A charmed life. Why risk it for Kadun?”

“Someone has to. Half-an-hour or half a year?”

“Take your time.”

It had been good to go through it with B and P. I was, I noted approvingly, markedly more coherent.

“So Mel can relax?”

“What? I – I nearly said Mel doesn’t come into this. You’ll say that’s garbage, so I shan’t bother.”

“How does Mel not come into this?”

“A-M in no way suggested, persuaded, instigated. The idea was mine. Part of my problem was not having the faintest idea what anyone who is otherwise closest to me would think of it.”

“Including Maya?”

“Might it not be said you have in fact dragged Alzani-Meta into your plans?”

“It becomes remarkably hard for Tar to object.”

I was taken aback by the suddenness with which the attack-dogs closed in but showing it wasn’t on the menu..

“Then you don’t know Tar as well as I do. I find it very hard to imagine his having difficulty objecting to anything he thought objectionable.”

“Naturally his niece on the Anile throne.”

“600 years,” I said, “but they did it in the end. From – from the point of view of my popularity rating in Kadun you could say Maya was a liability.”

“Nice one,” said Faun.

I smiled, but didn’t relax. That was prudent.

“You truly wish us to believe you devised this notion entirely on your own.”

“I expect that’s because it’s true.”

“In consequence of which alliance with Maya Talal became a necessity?”

“My relationship with Maya began long before any thought of Kadun.”

Self-control, Sarat. Self-control.

“A teenage romance that conveniently became a grand passion.”

“Fact. I thought I’d lose her.”

“So you convinced Cho.”

Self-control, Sarat, self-control....

“Do you have nothing better to do than call me a liar? These are – “What are they?” Think. Hard and fast. “Different strands in my life. Separate. Yes, I see what they can be made to look like. Start with – with something there’s evidence for. Talk to all the kids in my year. We all want to change the world. There is nothing weird about being political. The – weirdness comes from being Anile heir! Maya is – was – a – different strand of my life – “

“One can be political without wishing to rule someone else’s country.”

Hmm, hmm.

“There’re twists in that.”

“Tell us more.”

“Sounds like Fidub’s about to invade. In an outer and exoteric sense.” I didn’t think I had thinking time here. “I want to establish democracy equals the people of Kadun ruling Kadun. All the people. In order to do that, I have to have the broad consent of most of the people of Kadun. Otherwise I never even get over the border. Of most people from all levels of Kadun society as represented by

the Army. So now I want a military dictatorship! So it rests on most people in Kadun recognizing that democracy and the modern world must come and I'm a much better bet than other possibilities. So – if they want something they aren't getting, who's 'someone else' in your sentence, the Cult?"  
"You support CLIK."

"I do. I'm told my land-ownership politics won't be an insuperable problem. I haven't of course yet asked the land-owners. I don't think a standard working-class revolution in Kadun would get to first base, which is one thing, and I'm a capitalist and a democrat, which is another. I do think that many of CLIK's aims are necessary. I also think that an emperor can get away with being far more radical than some working-class guy from Tjulsit."

Grins

"Why, exactly?"

"Why exactly is because I'm not going to shoot myself in the head or anyone else. Some in CLIK of course would call that protecting the interests of my class, but I don't exactly think – there's a difference between protecting interests and protecting people, whichever class. The socio-economic model is Dabida. Do you know how property works in Dabida? It slays the CLIK guys."

"Actually," said Taja, "I don't. Do tell!"

"It stems from the Morag-Fahdi. Where I pitch my tent is mine! In the beginning, people found a bit of land and built on it and so it was theirs. Where you lived was yours. And land from which you drew your livelihood was yours. So I think if people have farmed a piece of land for ever it's theirs. Property isn't theft. Rent is theft. In that context. There are different kinds of lets. Suppose you have an apartment over in Mersedin and your work takes you out of Fidub for a year. Of course you're entitled to let it. That particular difference is not subtle. X is mine and you are paying me for the use of it. X is not mine – "

"Is X yours?"

"So far as Cho knows, after the collapse of the empire the State miraculously acquired imperial property. My family was not paid for it. How it came to be imperial property may or may not be according to the where I pitch my tent is mine principle. I don't know. I do know – I think I learned it in school – Narulis built half of Azt, landscaped is a better word, designed. I think it's reasonable to consider a park or a building intended for public use public property. I also think it's reasonable to consider the imperial residences mine."

"Property in Dabida."

"After all, no-one's paid us any rent. Not impossibly they cast half an eye at what went on over the border. There's a land register and every address is on it. If the address pre-dated the register, the LLR starts from the date the register was compiled. Suppose a couple of hundred years ago someone built a house and left it to someone who already had his own house and didn't want to live in the one he'd just acquired. He can sell it or he can let it. But any given residence can only be let for 100 years, doesn't matter if it's one tenant or one a year, how many owners. It's generally called the put up or shut up principle. If a dwelling hasn't been needed by its owner for 100 years, it's assumed a) he doesn't need it and b) that he's received at least the selling-price in rent. So... In 4010 you built a block of six flats. You were 40. You died at 90 = 4060 Your heir was 70 and he died at 90 = 4080. His heir was 40 and died at 80 = 5020, having received 30 years of rent from 6 flats he stopped being able to let in 5010. It's not anti-capitalist, it just says all good things come to an end. So then what? You can do what you like bar let. Keep them, sell them. Sell some of them and give one to your grand-daughter. If it's a house by the time a couple of generations have passed there's usually a family member to take up residence. It keeps property ownership mobile. That's part of the point. Leases in Dabida on older properties tend to end in 9s."

There was a very great deal of that, what exactly did I think about...Break for lunch, break for dinner, finishing at 10.00. We'll see you at 8, then, sleep well.

The interrogation committee next day were all strangers. I just hoped they weren't going to ask for

the same stuff all over again.

“Your sexual relationships.”

My what?

“Your homosexual sexual relationships.”

“Ah,” I said. Something fell into place. I grinned and said, “Oh, I see.”

“What do you see?”

Did the cottage really freak you guys?

“I think I see. Am I really gay and Maya just a front because there is absolutely no way Kadun at her present level of psycho-sexual development - ?”

The small guy in the corner reached under the table and chucked a magazine at me. ‘More beautiful than pictures?’

“His Imperial Highness! The what, prince consort? But he’s got a partner! Or is that in your fiction just a front too? How on earth should we keep it secret? I think – true, this revolution of mine is – not even an embryo. Sperm wriggling towards egg? I think there’s something you need to understand.” They looked interested. “Pretty well the whole thing depends on WYSIWYG. The Press are going to do this for me.” They didn’t look properly convinced. I can’t think why! “It’s a long way in the future.” I don’t know why that seemed a relevant thing to say because it wasn’t to the Cult telling the world I was gay for the next ten years. Gee, folks, you just have to get to know me. “The whole point – “I began. Unlikely that anything was the whole point, but still. “They’ll probably say I eat live hamsters. I don’t, for the record... The Cult is not going to like me and there is nothing they won’t say. Ciletij is not going to like me and there is nothing they won’t say. The only defence is this is me. Here is me in the Megamart. Here is me.” I just said that. “There’s one person who can tell the world I’m not gay and you can be sure she won’t be shy about it.”

“One person who can tell the world you are.”

“Don’t be bloody ridiculous!” Gee, guys, it just came out. They seemed unfazed. “Several people if it comes to that.” They still seemed unfazed. I do not think these guys faze. Is there such a word?

“All of whom are Dabidan.”

“Venga isn’t. Nor’s Baz!”

“Ah yes, eban-tole.”

“You guys are out of it.”

“Why?”

“Mel at the cottage. You might just as well say Mel is gay. It cannot be in the interests of Dabidans – well, these Dabidans.”

“A pathetic attempt to smear Mel in response to the truth coming out.”

“I think I’m looking for the end of the piece of string here. You’re – alleging that one of the Six might think Dabida threatened and – leak that I’m gay. But you’re also alleging that my enemies will say that anyway, so if any one of us – my enemies are Dabida’s enemies, so Dabida wouldn’t be impressed by one of the Six and anyone in Kadun who wanted to hear that has heard it anyway. It’s not the sort of people we are – they are, precisely because of their closeness to Mel. So – there are two, no, three things here. If they felt Mel was betraying Dabida, if Mel felt threatened, if Mel felt Dabida was threatened. Dabida is the model. The Dabidan model derived from Narulis. What I want in Kadun is that model. I cannot pose a threat to Dabida. Dabida will not tolerate an emperor in Azt! Don’t see why not, really. Jaizal wasn’t trying to occupy Dabida. It didn’t exist. Fidub will not tolerate an emperor in Azt? I don’t actually hear a lot of people saying that, possibly for reasons too obvious. Suppose this turns rotten. Suppose Kadun doesn’t want democracy. I’m still on exactly the same side I was to start with, which is the side of Fidub and Dabida, and which is critical the side of democrats in Kadun. There is no way I end up opposing Mel.”

“Dabida may oppose Mel, for instance if economically threatened by a successful Kadun.”

“It’s not each other we want to economically crush! There is a very great deal I don’t know and I’m not going to pretend I do know it. Let’s say the road leads over the ocean and then there’s a lot to find out. Bearing in mind that I don’t know anything, there’s no immediately apparent reason why a Kadun allied with the south can’t form an – economic union to stand up to the City.”

“Young man, you are nothing if not interesting.”

“I aim to please... I thank you.”

“Forcing Ciletij into the arms of the Cult?”

“Our noble ally in the Quadrant? I am told – this is only what I’ve been told – Ciletij will scream the place down because it’s just something you do if you’re Ciletij, sort of stamp of being a true son or daughter of Ciletij, hating the empire, mark of citizenship, but since to hate the empire is to hate the Cult, behind the scenes she will come down on the side of truth, justice, freedom and economic power.”

“The rape is not attributed to the Cult.”

“I don’t believe in the rape of Ciletij. Earn me friends far and wide, I know, I know. We’re told Kaminua trapped them in the forest and then – burned them alive. Nothing I have read about Kaminua tells me he was a mass murderer. We’re told he found them a threat. What to? The empire? Be serious! I know a bit about forest fires. That’s one of the things I want to find out a whole lot more about.”

“We seem to have digressed.” Lazily. “Tell us about your relationship with Hasiyata. How it began.”

“When we were 3 playing with alphabet-bricks on the floor of The Room? We were always close. We – “

“Consummated it?”

“Gave it full expression? It was the last summer Mel and Hass came over. Mel had said he’d had enough of beetles and taken himself off to M-P. Mum and Dad had taken the girls out for the day. We were alone in the house. Except for PANTHER of course, but PANTHER don’t barge into a guy’s bedroom.” I looked at them. “At least not at the time. We were working. Not very hard. Bugs and beetles. And joshing about. I’m sure neither of us had sex in mind but we – our hands touched and suddenly – we looked at each other. You know how it works in a set like ours. Unless you fall head-over with someone outside the set, if you just want to see what it’s like, you do it with a friend, someone you trust absolutely. The rest you can work out, except it was slow and dreamy and eso and unfrantic, except the obvious bits. I’m sure you’re dying to ask, so we did it both ways. Except when we heard the front door. Unfrantic, I mean. We did not want to be woken from our dream by Ven! That’s why I fell – I didn’t just fall in love with Maya. I fell into Maya. Until then she’d been a friend. I somehow realized what she was.”

“A female Hasiyata?”

“His friends call him Hass.”

“After, immediately after?”

“Of course we talked about it! Half the night. And we did it again. We were working something out, working something through. Of course we didn’t think it was for ever. How many teenagers - ? We didn’t think it was the start of going out together either! I hadn’t been and I’m not attracted to guys. It was something – eso, apart from the world, about us. I loved him. I love him. I always shall love him.”

Someone entered my mind.

I jerked out of my romantic reverie fast. What the fuck!

So throw me out.

Great waves of foreboding filled me and visions of extremely nasty things rising from graves. I don’t like this. What do they teach us when we’re having a bad-hair day, a lousy mark in math? Focus, focus, focus. Everyone’s going to die. That’s reality. Focus. Light. There might have been a pinprick in the darkness but I was so angry – use that anger, it’s just energy, light. Gather that energy – oh really, what is the point. Helpless, drained. I am not bloody well helpless! There was a great deal of unpleasant laughter. Try harder, dumbfuck, try harder. It was like an enormous weight pressing down on me. I was just going to nimbly fling myself out of the way, when they took the image over. I have been washed overboard and the ship’s propeller is coming closer and closer. Any minute now I’m going to be pur?e. All in my mind, all in mind... In my mind I can swim for hours under the water. I headed for the ocean-floor and the propeller passed harmlessly overhead. Oh

look, there's a shark and above is only darkness for the ship is vast, a destroyer, a tanker, a liner. Trapped, helpless. It's not a very big shark. It instantly became enormous but all in my mind, if I get on its back it may not like it but it can't eat me. All in my mind, that's the basic one, all in my mind because actually I'm – no time for actually I'm sitting in a high-backed swivel-chair because I am going to get eaten. What crap is that? No time for breath-control exercises to quell the visceral fear – all in my mind. Make it a dolphin. So then we struggled. So it's a small bottle-nosed shark but what is more to the point the assault became three-pronged, lungs bursting, must have air, but above is total darkness. I am Sarat with an aqualung swimming with the dolphins. Keep that one unified thought. The pressure grew. They let go.

“Not at all bad.”

“What is this, Lesson One!” My chest felt as though it hurt a bit, though presumably not as much as it would have if I'd just almost drowned. I told it not to be stupid and pushed my hair back fighting off the conviction it was sopping. “Isn't anyone going to offer me a towel?”

“Have a sip of water.”

“I did that. It was salty.”

“What have you just learned?”

“I couldn't escape from the dream. I wanted to reject it. I'm here in this room. I could only function inside the dream. And I guess. If I'd learned the eso stuff, I could have tickled its little sharky brain and told it I wasn't edible.”

“There's an interesting picture on the wall behind you. Go and look at it.”

The problem, you will have guessed, is that there was no wall behind me. I am not damned well standing in the Saa'nda Senta! Have you ever tried to stand up when you're already on your feet? I really do not recommend it. The fountain continued to sparkle in the morning sun. Lemme just be logical about this... Oh! Use the dream. OK, OK, I am walking towards the fountain but it is not bloody well the fountain it is the long table behind which are three guys, so I can turn my back on the fountain/table and walk in the opposite direction towards the wall/Kendar's. I really need to go to Kendar's to get Mum a birthday-present. No, I don't! I need to go to Saba's, the gallery. There's a new - I began to feel a bit pleased with myself, tinged with a liking for reassurance I was on the right track. Of course no such reassurance came. You surrender to the dream, at least until you find the weak spot. If there is one, of course. Hass had raved about Ban-finsil's exhibition, there's an abasanth in bloom I really have to see. Flaw. I haven't seen the abasanth but I do know what one looks like. OK, I'm going to look at the first picture I see. Since I don't know what that is, I can't superimpose the image. I am entering Saba's and looking at a painting. I am not repeat not in Saba's, I am in a room in the retreat on the Leolisle which I believe is pale green, though just to thwart me they might have made the walls lilac. The bay window is to my right and it looks out over gardens, what kind of gardens. I rather hoped I had a photographic memory, perfect recall, but I didn't think I did and, even if I did, I'd been so intent on the interrogation committee that I'm not sure I noticed the gardens in the first place. Focus, focus, focus on what? What did I remember about the room behind me? This is fiendish. OK, this is 3D: me standing in the middle of – space – behind me is a high-backed swivel-chair, a rug intricately patterned in greys and greens, a long highly-polished certainly antique table but I couldn't place the period, three men, a small one with closely cropped grey hair, a high-bridged nose, in front of me is Saba's and a miniature of a ruined tower on an outcrop being battered by the sea.

They withdrew.

Yes!

The rest of the room came into focus and I drank it in. Might need it again some time.

I turned.

“Where is it? The tower, I mean!”

“Harusin Point.”

Eeek! Harusin Bay is where Narulis first landed.

“I can see it's very old. That old?”

The skinny one smiled.



“Not that old.”

“So you decorate the retreat with mementoes of Narulis! Or just for me?”

“Let us return to Maya.”

“I wish! I notice you’re not – what are you not, training me, testing me, with Maya, with any of my friends being attacked. That’s because in RL, on the ground, they’d be able to look after themselves? Not that there’s anything particularly RL about the rest of it. Forced below the waves to face a ravaging shark! I mean – I’m not sure what I mean.”

“Maya.”

“It’s a good thing I have a sense of humour. OK...I was staying on the hill. Pietri, Caluna and Maya came to dinner. The four of us – Mel, Hass, Maya and I – excused ourselves after dinner. Mel had an essay to write. Between sex and revolution we’re very studious. That left the three of us sprawled around the pool. Maya said she wanted to make a phone call. She shot us a completely wicked grin. If you can be trusted to be alone together. Hass blew her a kiss. So long I said as you don’t tell me you and Maya - ? He just grinned and said, Maya is someone it’s really easy to talk to. You don’t have to explain things. Yes, I said, though I couldn’t possibly have said what I meant. I – I suppose Maya suddenly became more interesting and – and the girl for me would have to be one I could share what I’d shared with Hass. But nothing happened till Hass’s birthday party, which was pretty much an all-day event. Lunchtime till late. The vague theory was the afternoon and the early evening was adults and young children, family, and then we turned the volume up. Loads of people I didn’t know. The family is large. Anyhow – do you know the hill, it’s like a rabbit-warren. Anytime they wanted more room they did more tunnelling. There’s this crazy crooked outside stair that’s the quick way down to the stables. You have to come up for air sometimes. In this case down. Halfway down I found Maya, sitting hugging her knees. I didn’t know her then! Are you OK? occurred to me. Do you feel all right? Maybe she just wanted to be on her own. She just smiled and patted the step beside her. Oh wow, I said. She turned and grinned and said I found this place when I was a tot. It’s my favourite view. Ahem, as we know, Maona-pri is the Silver City and lights up at night to make the point. This was a view directly across the Straits to M-P. I like looking at the shipping too, she said. Where have they come from, where are they going? Am I not an islander! I do shipping. All right, most Zuri do too. We talked about our respective harbours. How romantic can you get! Broadened our scope to all things sea-faring. Somewhere in the middle of telling her about the lighthouse on the Utmost Isle it began to wriggle around in my brain I like this. Maya is someone I want more of. The sentence – this’ll make you laugh. I’m not usually lost for words. The sentence you’re really nice occurred to me. I didn’t say it. After a while we became aware it had got much quieter. Yikes! she said. D’you think everyone’s gone home? I made wide eyes. No search-parties? Mel and Hass know I come here, she said. Indeed, as we got to the top of the stairs we collided with Mel. Ha! he said. Well, well, well! Some of us, she said, prefer the pleasure of civilized conversation. Him, civilized? said Mel. I shall ignore that remark, I said. Found her! he carolled to I don’t know who. Them, he muttered. Gazing into each other’s eyes. Shut up, Mel, said Maya, before I could. Seconded, I said. We were reunited with our loving families and Maya went home. I lay in bed thinking I didn’t even get her number. Ah well, hardly as though she’d vanished off the face of the planet. I think – I think that was the beginning of my – awareness of what’s basic to our relationship. It – touches somewhere I don’t want to share. I’m not exactly shy and retiring but somehow it had seemed impossible to ask her for her phone number in front of people. How, I hear you cry, does that mesh - ? Our relationship is. It’s not for explaining. Of course every tabloid on the planet will explain it. We don’t have to. The other thing – when I was distressed about telling her, it was – like I’d hurt our relationship by intruding something into it that needed explaining. I’m hungry. May we stop now?”

“No.”

“Great! A crust? A dry biscuit?”

Presumably there was tele-talk because a guy duly appeared with a plate of what looked suspiciously like ship’s biscuit.

Meanwhile...”How did the relationship develop?”

Gee, guys, I'm nearly lapsing into sarcasm. Would you like to know what I had for breakfast on the day of the biology practical? Why do you want to know? How about we explore something here, such as the meaning of 'personal'. You could ask, why am I answering your questions? Then again, we could cut to the chase here. "I think," I said, "it's sit back and think time. How personal would you like me to make this, and why? Gee, Sarat, what did it feel like when you first kissed her, dot, dot, dot. We both know we're going to be asked questions we're not going to answer and we both know – gee, what did it feel like when you made love for the first time? There are people in newspapers who aren't sentient. So...externally this is how do I do under fire? Internally – are you sentient? Your apparent fascination with my sex-life – just trying to get the full picture here? Not my sex-life, my sexuality. If it were a different person every night, alternating gender, that might have some bearing on my - fitness for the job you're interviewing me for. There's another angle – just one? I seem to be here to answer your questions. In – in a scenario in which it appears - if I fail to answer your questions, if I don't want to answer your questions, I've – failed to satisfy the examiners! But I don't know you from a hole in a ground. Why should I answer your questions?" "A brash Fidubi brat," said the little one.

"You are possibly thinking," I said, "this is steering the conversation away from talking about the cottage. Not true."

"Let us return to Maya."

"Who didn't – doesn't – mind in the slightest?" Where the hell are these guys going? "We've all had a certain kind of education. Since you devised it – without gender, without boundary. Here and there. Everything I – we've done falls within, follows from. An – an experiment in being both fully human and fully love. Fun, too."

"That is how you saw it?"

"That's how it was. That's the other reason. I say we can't betray each other. We shouldn't know how to. You query query say I'm sweetly naïve. Shrug."

"Alliance between Alzani-Meta and the Anile throne is unlooked-for."

I wasn't sure what to make of that one so I made the remark I was later informed PLT quoted from the ice-floes to the seas and even made it to the dictionary. The dictionary is where they record anything particularly perceptive someone might come out with, aphorisms. And anything particularly, delectably, deliciously, moronic.

"It's no big deal, is it, the Anile throne. The big deal is in people's mind. Nobody has a fit of the vapours at Dabida being a monarchy. Zani and Narulis had the same values. The modern model of those values is democracy. It's history. Use it and be heard. Maybe you need to look at the other side of this. I mean, I don't have any particular enthusiasm for sitting on the Anile throne. It happens to be who I am but the only – terms in which I'm prepared to be Anile emperor externally are that His Imperial Majesty is a brash Fidubi brat who will have matured but not become any less radical."

"Maya."

"Invite her to the theatre, invite her to a disco, invite her to come swimming, invite her to go for a walk, what's the big deal. It is when you want it to be really right. And when it's a foursome. Baz and Paw didn't figure in this picture. I asked them straight out. I want to take someone out, as in being alone together. How do we hack this? Depends who, where and when, said Baz. We are masters of discretion, said Paw. By then I'd decided I wanted to invite her for a day out on the Utmost Isle. I don't think we need get in the way there, said Baz. We'll be around, said Paw. So then all I had to do was invite her. She must be on the private network, I reasoned.

@thezaniest.com. But would she go by her name! Mel, should you really want to know, uses a number of avatars. I was pretty sure Maya would be Maya. Use brain: the thread about the party, bet she was copied in. One problem solved. I invited her. She accepted. I met her off the ferry. We took the bus cross-town to Bala Pier. We set to sea! We wandered around the ship and bought ice-cream and even identified shipping. We landed on the Utmost Isle. I could see she was enchanted and whoopee! I'd got it right. All I had to do now was be sure she was equally enchanted with me.... We walked barefoot along the beach and climbed the cliff and went right out onto the promontory to

examine the famed lighthouse – after all said to be the oldest lighthouse in the world. We walked right round the island to Saada, and had dinner in the Old Town, then we wandered. We'd got as far as holding hands. It was getting quite late. Somehow I'd pictured this as a day out and home for dinner. We knew Pietri and Caluna wouldn't worry in one way, with ever-present PANTHER, but if we were out half the night they just might think other things. On the other hand one of us was going to have to stay the night at the house of the parents of the other whatever we did next. I couldn't send her off to Zur on her own in the middle of the night, and by the time we got to Pietri's it'd be daft for us to about-turn, or she could come home with me. She said she didn't have anything in particular to do tomorrow so I rang Mum and she rang Caluna. Mum said Gorse'd pick us up at the quay. No, we didn't, not for some time, either. The next day we just bummed around the neighbourhood. There was only one grey cloud, the Straits! We thought maybe alternate weekends at each other's but we didn't really have any clear solution because there wasn't one. I realized the picture I had of myself of 'always' popping over to Zur was garbage. Of course I went pretty often, but at the weekends, not after school. We'll mail, said Maya, and I rather grunted. Whatever people think of email, it's not usually that it's romantic, but as usual she was right. We mailed when things went right, we mailed when they went wrong, and then I – fractured that because there was a part of me I wasn't sharing. Fortunately at the time we were revising – well, she was. She's amazing! Parents gossip as much as anyone else. She said she walked in on Pietri and Caluna one day and the sudden silence was so obvious that Pietri felt he had to speak, if you see what I mean. He said, It seems Sarat's taste for politics is turning his thoughts to Kadun. Has he said anything to you? No, she said. Nor to anyone, he said, other than Krarlik. He explained. Not even Cho? she asked. No-one. Then he obviously doesn't want to talk. At least until school's out. It's rather a large conversation, isn't it. Not something to clear up in an hour. Do you really see him as a vet? But Caluna asked, Do you understand? The danger? asked Maya. Yes. He will make you Anile empress, said Pietri. By this time even Maya was feeling just a little bit cornered. A girl has to have a job! I gather frivolity did not go down well. Maya said she refused to talk about it until she'd talked to me and talking to me could obviously wait, since – obviously – I was going to talk to her. This was not, she said, something I could do in secret. Don't think that went down very well, either. She said, OK, there's the phone. Call him. Demand his intentions! Pietri had the grace to laugh but Caluna asked, The relationship is permanent? That just might be the question, said Maya, very unfrivolously. Because – because if there's the slightest doubt it's not for ever – A lot to ask, said Caluna. Maya said: he may not be sure or he may not be sure I'm that sure. We think/thought of it as permanent. There are other things, aren't there. Sarat isn't an idiot. If he hasn't told Cho, that means he doesn't want parents to know, obviously yet. It is not a personal decision, said Pietri. Yes, said Maya. I mean it's not. So then it was Maya's turn to be up half the night. It definitely occurred to her to get on the phone, WTF, but then the whole thing would unravel. I don't think anyone in that house slept well. Seeing her light was on, Pietri knocked on the door. Truly, he said, I am very fond of Sarat. Oh Dad, she said, and hugged him. If it were Dabida, she said.

“So there it was until I realized that I had to know. It was like not knowing was a bridge too far. I could cope with respiration in the amphibian and do I want to be Anile emperor. Biology seemed frankly pretty unimportant to my future, but I'd do it, I'd do the exams – hey, I might need a job one day, not sure that a track-record of consistent failure. Once I'd talked to Cho I couldn't move forward without knowing. She told Pietri and Caluna. She can be quite direct, you know. I understand she made it very clear she was telling them because they're her parents not because she's A-M and everyone was to leave me alone, was that entirely clear...

It was of course all recorded and that is the annotated transcript. I could have written that last bit from memory but I should not have enjoyed the experience.

Somewhere in all this – when he was talking to Petrush – Baz says Tela's beach-party was our first date. I picked him up on it. He just grinned. Dates are when you ask her out for the evening. A day's

hiking is friends. I didn't expect, I said.

Saada is a place to which I have no cause to return. Therefore I don't. Perhaps I should.

Shav's faith in me is touching, but Maya was not pregnant. If you like, I froze. Of course I did nothing of the kind. I was simply entirely absent from the world. One might think Shav would understand that but then why should she. It is not a conversation-piece and I have never discussed it with her or anyone except Hass and Dill. You may say I went too far. I do not intend to discuss it now. Or only obliquely.

I have told Dad that all his grand-children – we now have two – are alive and well.

I do not think in tram-lines! Usually. It filtered through to me that Fal was at that damned place on the Leolisle. As you know, the trend of our thinking was that the older generation did not want us to know. It took Dill to point out that, were we to gather assorted members of that older generation, hand them slips of paper and demand they summarize this Matter of Kadun, we might get unexpected answers. It suddenly seemed blindingly obvious to us that, if anyone knew exactly what was going on on this continent, the shrine did. We took ourselves off to M-P. Dill was fixated with the shrine. She mailed Mitch and Karula: my education which you have rightly described as being carted about the planet nonetheless managed to encompass the cultural beacons of our continent – I thought. You did not take me to the shrine at Maona-Pri. That is neglect, child-abuse. Go there! It is literally out of this world.

A slightly bemused Mitch mailed back: you're in Fidub, honey?

Dill of course knowing these were not quite Mitch's perceptions replied: Am I not Anile empress! The spiritual home of the Anile throne!

Taja asked: "Do you trust us?"

Dill said: "To wish no ill? Of course. But might you not think to deter ill?"

Taja laughed.

I said: "I have known these guys a very long time. They taught us, among other things, why not to lie."

"To create a false reality," mused Dill. "To send people on a wild-goose chase?"

I looked at Taja

"On the other hand," I said, "I know from experience that questions they do not wish to answer they simply ignore. I might say, just thinking aloud here, that that was within the context of the – selection-board, that the victim was to be kept deprived of information – that rings a bell, does it not. Does that not also send people on a wild-goose chase? I might also say I asked why I should answer their more personal questions and in fact did not. I now see I was not actually asked the details. What is the difference between a wrong assumption and an educated guess?"

We are going to discuss the principles here. We are not going to dig into what precisely I am talking about. Taja smiled a little too gently.

"That's an easy one," said Dill. "An educated guess is based on limited knowledge of the facts. An assumption is based on belief."

At some point, not this visit, I am going to have to talk to Taja alone. Why not this visit?

At some point I am going to have to talk to my father.

I thought: they never did spell out the precise inner and eso qualities required of the Anile emperor.

I said: "You put me through the wringer. As I recall, you never did spell out precisely why. What, may I ask at this late date, were you looking for?"

"Could you do the job," said Taja blandly.

"Which one?"

"Are they separate?"

“They began that way. I once described the situation in which we found ourselves as sent to reduce the number of single parents without any knowledge of biology.”

“Oh dear,” said Taja.

“Given my stay here was before Mitch, before Cantilip, though certainly after both Marula and Cantilip had made overtures – long before Ciletij. The chair was safely in Ciletij? Short of a special forces raid - ? It seemed extremely unlikely I should ever sit on her. Something may be slithering into place. You didn’t want to alert me to this Matter of Kadun but you wanted to be sure I could cope if it introduced itself. “

“It was an enormous shock when you went to Casin-ruhn.”

“You thought it was a shock.”

“You knew?” asked Dill.

“We knew something.”

“What did you know?”

“That the tomb of Kaminua and Asyrion is protected from intrusion by the Denzines.”

“They are,” I said after a moment, “I take it, thoroughly dead.”

“We think so. We are not sure. Sarat, we understand certain principles. How these may be manifest.”

“I think they were Denzine shape-shifters,” said Dill. “It is ingrained on our little irtubi hearts – those of us who have a fondness for history, at least – that Kaminua died grief-stricken. Now why would he do that?”

Taja shot her a broad grin.

“A lot of things,” I said. “The tomb? I. Oh. Where are they actually buried?”

“A sustained assault on perception,” said Dill. “By the time your efficient little brain had broken free sufficiently to grasp that there weren’t actually any bodies you were talking to them.”

I burst out laughing, to the apparent surprise of my solemn-looking audience.

“Naturally the bodies they died in so to speak were the ones they were wearing. So to speak. We got to the story from the circlets, so let’s make it a really good one, but the – what, memories, perceptions in – from the crowns, while intense – while in fact devastating to a poor unsuspecting lad from Fidub – nonetheless belong in the same dimension as Karula’s magic scissors. Which she indeed found pretty devastating.”

Taja looked puzzled. So unfortunately did Dill. Somehow she’d missed Mom’s magic scissors. I explained.

“Oh Mom! I guess – I guess I shall make the understatement of the millennium. Nobody quite knew what they’d signed up for.”

“The trips,” I said, “are – are an image of reality, but have all the solid factual content of Kar’s Toons. Cantilip said what was being screamed at us is everything is whole.”

Dill said: “The crowns are fake.”

I felt a bit shocked, then said: “Of course!”

“You’ve lost me,” said Taja.

“If,” said Dill, “we are to assume from what shall we say the circumstantial evidence that the chair and the crowns are made from the same peculiar material leading the human mind to strange places and which is also in some sense sentient, there is no reason to suppose that any particular – revelation would result.”

I said suddenly: “A silver coronet above a silver chair. I wonder what happens if one wears the coronet while sitting on the chair!”

“I think that is important,” said Taja, rather glumly. “Why, I don’t know! You know of course that in Cult imagery Death always wears a silver crown.”

“The message,” said Dill, “to our sensitive, upright and not least verdant young hero is undoubtedly leave this place alone. But if the tomb had already been tampered with?”

“Don’t forget,” I sighed, “the throne guards a deeper mystery.”

“Does it indeed!” said Taja.

“Such as the tomb,” I sighed. “The problem is, had the special effects department left well alone,

we should probably have simply removed the chair and not discovered the tomb. Since I removed the chair anyway. 1) I they directed our attention to the slab. 2) Hass said you must open it and we PK'd but is that exactly normal? We'd already decided, we already knew at some level the wolverine was Kaminua, we already 'knew' there were no bodies. The wolverine was Kaminua?"

"Many cultures," said Taja with a nearly straight face, "believe in some form of reincarnation."

"Something of a come-down," said Dill. But if the wolverine was Kaminua, why shouldn't Kaminua have been Kaminua!"

"That is a rather large question," said Taja.

"It was not exactly normal," said Dill, "to assume the wolverine was Kaminua."

"What's a thousand years between friends? Why focus my attention on a rotting shack on the edge of a northern lake where for reasons best known to themselves Van-senok decided to dump the chair."

"Because you are Anile emperor?" said Taja.

"Could there be," wondered Dill, "not sure, two – factions here? Different aims. His biggest problem is he wants to go back unannounced and he can't."

"I should not advise it," said Taja. "We could."

"I do not want to be responsible for 'accidental' death!"

But Dill was quicker

"An archaeological expedition?"

I grinned.

"Can there be minds here less readily screwed than mine?"

Taja grinned back.

"Oh I think so. Did you remember your lessons?"

"It was friendly fire," I said. "In other words no. In fairness to me, to all of us, it was a different order of reality from anything we had been taught to handle. There were these bats, these shaft of light. It was like walking into an enchantment."

"I suspect," said Taja, "that is exactly what it was."

"Geological," said Dill. We did a lot of filling in.

"Do you still have a forge here?" I asked. "Metal-workers?"

Taja gave a quick bellow of laughter.

"You made her. Alas, not you personally. Would it be too much to hope that you knew why?"

"If we posit for a moment," said Dill, "that Kaminua was Kaminua, though I do not believe it, is that not a strange place to spend eternity? Of course it's out of the way, not many casual visitors."

Taja gave a small frown.

"There are two possibilities. The first is that the location has particular properties making it the only place that particular trick may be performed. Let us say that is not totally outside the bounds of possibility, given this Matter of Kadun. The second is that the location is of such overwhelming personal importance as to make freezing winds of minor significance. Of course I am a southerner!"

"It was where Asyrion died, but since she didn't, within the context of the fairy-story."

"But the chair is gone."

"The throne guards a deeper mystery."

"Still in free-thought. Perhaps your claiming of the chair. If I may summarize. – " He laughed. "The licit heir took possession of the Anile throne. Not a great deal to work with."

"Once he had the chair," said Dill, "he would learn something, which required a considerable display of amateur dramatics, either to explain or to pretend to explain to deflect attention from the actual mystery."

"Only either I didn't or I'm too stupid to see that I did."

"Or," said Dill, "you haven't asked her."

"The intensity of our union on the chair. I haven't sat since Maya died."

Taja asked: "Have you shown Dill the Utmost Isle?"

WTF?

"An – image of reality, the factual content of which?"



“Everything is whole,” said Taja.

“Sorg,” I said. “I know you can’t tell other people’s stories, but I know you talked to Fal. There’s – there’s a parallel with Kaminua. Yes, no, maybe. One – one could argue that in a parallel universe, an alternative reality, he didn’t die. Sorg, I mean. But he seemed to Fal, to me – I talked to him – a – ghost. But the overwhelming reality of his death to Fal – could she have shaped that trip? Or did he seem – ethereal because – because that parallel universe did not – query, query cannot fully – materialize. But in the Jumesit, it’s linear. Are there two things going on here? We can’t cope with one!”

“Oh,” said Dill, as she grasped what I was groping towards.

“That seems an appropriate response,” said Taja. He laughed. “I suppose you didn’t ask what time it was.”

“That does not compute,” said Dill. “All mod cons. Let us be imaginative! In an alternative history, after the Rape Kaminua abdicated and decided to live out his days with his beloved Asyrion, who did not die, at the site of a – defining event. On top of their tomb.”

“But everything is whole. If everything is whole, then – one could argue – two realities do not merely co-exist, but are fused.”

“I think I may tell you,” said Taja, “that Falita had an experience she described as a time-slip for want of a better term, in the garden of the retreat. It seemed to her that Sorg was standing over her. It made her rather cross, for of course there is no past, present, or future in this universe in which that is possible.”

“The – “ I said.

“My chief problem with that,” said Dill, “is that it happened in Fidub.”

“The water, he said with a sort of delirious leer. But then the whole of Carlin. But then Fal’s problem is that she is ragingly eso.”

How is everything whole? How in this very normal situation, part of the human condition, does it not jar, clash to take Dill to see the light-house? A super-imposing? A betrayal? Message received loud and clear: Maya cannot constrain my life. But that is absurd. We live in the same rooms. We sleep in the same bed. We go a thousand places daily. Only there are – what? Peaks? Peaks I do not re-ascend. Ah, that peak where everything is whole!

“Taja, may I invite you to Azt for the total Jumesit experience!” And just possibly to hold the little boy’s hand when he once again plants his delicate backside on the Anile throne.

Who said - ? Maya, who else. You don’t have to do everything on your own. But I did. Did and didn’t. But I have. Have and haven’t. The buck stops here. Perhaps not with this Matter of Kadun. Or of course that is meaning of being Anile emperor.

Of course the block is sitting with Dill.

“I should be delighted!” Taja was saying.

“Come back with us,” Dill said.

“Do I?” I asked of anyone who happened to be around, “to what extent do I – what Dill said earlier. We none of us actually signed up for the Matter of Kadun. Main drainage! Waterways. Gee, guys, everything is whole.”

“You are at heart a scientist,” said Taja.

“And it shows!” At some point I have to talk to Essa. Did we not say we wish to cleanse the sewers of Azt! “We have all learned – people may suddenly cease to be around. But that is not true of those in Fidub.”

“Including ourselves,” said Dill. “That is not a pressure? He does so hate to leave a job half-done.”

“If – a very long time ago, Baz forced me – I have been murdered. I am drawing my last breath. Was it worth it? I should hate, I said, it to be before I had achieved something.” I could see Taja was wondering where this was going. As if I knew. I laughed suddenly. “I may be trying to assess my level of responsibility in terms of the universe or universes, of which there may be many. The – that which we – lump together as the Matter of Kadun exists and will continue to exist. It is not a mystery to itself. I – opened a door. I wasn’t looking for anything. I think what I said before. Nobody expected that I’d get Ciletij on board. But it was the only way. Well, it wasn’t,

theoretically.”

Taja was chuckling.

“Mel, you fucktard, you’ve taken the continent to war.”

“Oh no,” I said, “they’re on our side.”

Dill asked: “Who is ‘nobody’ in that sentence?”

“Until I went to G-T, only I, Maya, Hass, Venga, Cantilip, Mel, Mitch and Karula knew exactly what I wanted to happen.”

“In exchange for the chair?” asked Taja.

“It occurred to me.”

“Cantilip is the key,” said Dill. “Have we said that before?”

“Oh yes,” I said. “But are we right?”

“Venga?”

“I really hesitate to say this,” said Dill, “knowing as I do that you and Hass are not merely brothers but – “ She grinned. “ – one flesh.”

“It’s occurred to me,” I said.

“Let us not call it an ulterior motive. Let us call it perhaps – someone who knows something needs to be around when the shit hits the fan.”

“That suggests I have to do something.”

“How alien, how out of character. Maybe he doesn’t know what it is either. Once the door is opened, we do not know what is on the other side.”

“Sounds like one of those spooky horror movies.”

“Then of course there is Mel. What I note is that the Denzines are apparently in this up to their necks, yet no-one boards a flight to the City and says hey guys, what’s going down. There is a marked absence of the pooling of information, hands across the sea, are we not all one happy family united against a common foe.” Taja chortled. Possibly even guffawed. “I have gathered - remember I lived on the hill, though alas any secrets possessed by Mel and Cantilip remained wholly opaque – that Mel and Fugitry remain in contact. I did not know Fugitry was Mel’s mentor. I have also gathered that answers to direct questions are so oblique as to be wholly opaque. Nonetheless, it seems to me these guys are real practical – “

“She enjoys imitating Mitch,” I muttered.

“Real practical,” repeated Dill with relish, “when it comes to defending whatever they are defending.”

“The Denzines,” said Taja, then stopped. “I was about to say live in another universe. As one does.”

“They came from a planet called Sug?” asked Dill. We stared. “Further, I gather they established the Schools. That is in its way a markedly practical endeavour.”

“An answer so oblique as to be wholly opaque,” mused Taja. “I am wondering something rather different. Perhaps it matters who asks the question, like putting the right key in the lock.”

“And the time of the next flight to the City? I didn’t ask anything.”

“Perhaps you did,” said Dill. “Obliquely! Who/what is the Anile emperor?” She turned to Taja. “Is there any record here of Denzine engagement with Narulis?”

“None I know of. History tells that was our gig. History may of course lie.”

“OK, now we know who was Narulis, a fine upstanding son of Fidub. This is not the Matter of Narulis, this is the Matter of Kadun. Let us posit – always entertaining among consenting adults – the Matter of Kadun, which is intrinsic to Kadun, which one may say is rooted in the soil of Kadun, or at any rate its rivers, pre-dated Narulis. Have you records of previous Fidubi engagement in Kadun?”

“Yes, but nothing of substance. Sailor sees land. Sailor grateful for fresh water and fresh food. Sailor goes away again.”

“You guys have always roamed the oceans. And the natives were friendly?”

“It seems so.”

“After all, our indigenous culture is earthpower, just like Fidub.”

I was glad I was looking at Taja at just that minute.

“Sssh,” he said, “don’t tell everyone!” His eyes were dancing.

“That of course is the true Fidubi scam. Is it not interesting how the esoteric world and the exoteric world mirror each other?”

“Don’t hold back,” I said. “Tell him what the Fidubi scam is.”

“When the empire was good, it was Fidubi. When it was bad, it was irtubi. Who calls Jaizal Fidubi?”

“Owww!” said Taja.

“Think they own the damn’ continent,” I said.

“That at least we have overcome. Many things have been overcome,” said Dill. “Convincing Micheal ban-sarndit-vaq, my future lord of Var-sega’, that Fidub had no imperial ambition here.”

“I should imagine being president helps.”

“I do not think anyone thinks of Sarat as Fidubi.” Taja smiled to himself. I wondered if he was thinking of Fal. “Now, let us continue to posit. Earth-power is a trifle more than enthusiasm for trees, and indeed one only has to listen to Cantilip to be convinced that among many loads of hooey is that the poor tree-hugging irtubi had no means of fighting the Cult and Narulis saved us. So why did they make him emperor and indeed one may continue to the present day. The problem with the foundation, the core, the DNA of Sarat’s determination to save us is that it is absolute balderdash. What does this mean?”

“Do tell,” said Taja. “I am enjoying this.”

“Grrr,” I said.

“I put it to you, gentlemen, positing as we are, that it means a decision was taken that earthpower could not be unleashed because – here I surrender, gracefully, I trust – of this Matter of Kadun, because it would awaken, dot, dot, dot. Possibly because true earthpower and by that I mean power, not the beliefs of peasants that the after-life is a field of flowers, is this Matter of Kadun. I would think – a lot of things. The Isles of course sing. There must a connection, a stratum. The geology of Dabida and Vasucula and indeed Ciletij appears tediously normal. I note in this respect the – ancestral aversion to the other matter which prevails in Ciletij and which perhaps pre-dates the Rape. They claim they are a rational people. My father is a rationalist. It is different, He is not afraid of the unknown. He merely prefers to leave it others. I would think that many centuries before Narulis Fidub learned from Kadun. Or let us be geographically exact. From Carlin. I would suggest that Narulis was crowned emperor because it was clear to those in Kadun who knew about such things that Fidub had found a way to use earth-power without – whatever is the barrier.”

“Are you always like this?” asked Taja.

I looked smug.

“Alas, I haven’t finished,” said Dill. “Sarat has posited that there is something buried under Azt which brings us to our delectable Venga, aka my lord of Fas-sigree, given that he is eban-tole. Five kingdoms did not unite under the imperial crown. Four kingdoms united and occupation of Fas-sigree was ceded to the emperor, a fit custodian? The stewardship continued nominally – the guys who deal with the drains – but the line is said to have died out.” Pause. “Mitch tried quite hard to discern the precise agenda. I really know nothing about the guy bar what I see and hear. Perhaps you know more?”

“We tried very hard,” said Taja. “The story holds.”

“And what is that story?”

“He went to the basket-weavers, same as As,” I said. .

“The what?”

“Simtian Lye!” Posh progressive school, tendency to arts and crafts. “Sorg called it the basket-weavers. Missed As by some years, of course. Mummy’s arty circle - she’s a poet – was rebellious if not openly (or covertly) resistant. By the time he was 17 he’d hooked up with Kadun PANTHER. On to the Collegium in Azt. Stuck it out – unlike As, but then he had a clearly defined aim: resistance. He became a handyman. All those arts and crafts. Education for life.”

“We loved this bit,” said Taja. “His story was he was a student with a minute private income. Since he detested dry bread, he needed to earn some jam. Since it seems he is very good with his hands,

he had no shortage of the small jobs that people always need doing, putting shelves up, cutting hedges, creosoting the shed. Broadly, as you know, in pre-revolutionary Kadun, the further from Azt you were, the less bureaucracy you encountered as local officialdom tended to take their cue from the emperor's stewards, though of course it was not a good idea to draw oneself to the attention of local officialdom in case those higher up the tree took note. Cutting hedges was not deemed a seditious act even in Kadun, but he was banged up for being of no fixed abode – he always gave his parents' address and some officious copper didn't think that counted in the middle of Var-sega', indeed. So he PK'd his way out in the middle of the night, which made it a little hard to get out the creosote next morning. He vanished into Van-senok."

"Then he went to Casin-ruhn with Cantilip and his life was never the same again! He says - they both say – they really didn't expect anything to happen, but it threw him and he had the sense to know there was only one person to talk to about it and that was Cho. Only he never got there! Since sitting under the stars contemplating the universe wasn't on in V-S, he crossed the border and took up with the Morag-Fahdi. And there he met Hass. Nobody – the H-W tried pretty hard too – has been able to prove that was anything other than what he said it was: rampant curiosity! He was with one troop of M-F, Hass was with another. The M-F talk to each other. He knew who Hass's best mate was. What better approach? How better to gauge? His experience on the chair was distinctly multi-dimensional. It just isn't the sort of thing you bring up in casual conversation and – yes, even Venga can be embarrassed! Shy, even. Of telling Cho Cho's chair had told Venga he Cho had to retake Kadun. That's what it boiled down to. His – perception sitting under the stars were that Kadun had gone downhill ever since the theft of the chair. If you grew up where he grew up there isn't a lot of opportunity for the more abstruse kind of historical research, which of course is the other reason he headed south. He badly needed information. He found us."

"He shared that perception with Cantilip. Clearly she cannot be embarrassed. Ah well, if we just grasp why V-S stole the chair, we've hacked it. Could it perhaps connect – it must somehow connect – with the Rape, with what we said earlier about the unleashing of earthpower. Their perception must have been that she was too dangerous. That of course goes back to what Cho said. You take in a stray kitten and she turns into a sabre-tooth. But Fidub would not have created a kitten. Something changed, something was revealed at the time of the Rape."

"Or of course," I said, "V-S put her there, rightly or wrongly, to sort what was going down in their neck of the woods. It must have been with Kaminua's consent. Take back stole!"

"It would follow from that," said Dill drily, "that, though I trust the years have attenuated it, what is going down is going to blow."

"Then something changed again – oh no, of course. Indeed something changed. The chair was no longer in V-S. It was not on the cards that Ciletij would give it me. In which case the whole thing was some kind of damage limitation exercise, which makes no sense at all."

"Venga wanted you to have the chair. Cantilip wanted you to be Anile emperor. Different. But Cantilip knew you wanted Ciletij in on the act."

"I said," I said, shaking my head, "I said, do I destroy this! Of course it makes sense! I was supposed to be so over-awed I'd leave her there. Hey, he's an outer and exo young guy, what does he want with a historic relic! The one thing they didn't expect was I'd recognize special-effects, not that I did – I mean, ha, sir, you are unmasked! wasn't on the agenda. The experience - when these fiends were training me, there was a gig – I was here and my mind told me I was in the Saa'nda Senta. I was in one very real, very physical place or the other. But at Casin-ruhn – suppose there were three realities fused. There's a derelict shack. There's – perhaps – how it looked once when it was new and freshly painted – raising the question why, whose home? - there's the con that that's its –transcendental, eternal appearance (perhaps) and there's filling it with people to make it more real."

"That's four. Have these people had any training in the stage?"

"Surrender to the dream. The other point - it was aimed at Hass, wasn't it. I was supposed to be a eso nonentity. You can't say they didn't pick the theme, but on the other hand the set was tailor-made. Of course he wanted to believe, we both did, but the really eso people I know well – have

known. Dill, Hass, Maya are were quite irritatingly practical and matter-of-fact.”

Taja pretended not to cast a highly speculative glance at Dill, who said, “Since he is irritatingly practical and matter-of-fact himself, he gets on well with us.”

“The other thing of course,” mused Taja, “is that you were too damned busy afterwards to think about ultimate realities. That they could bank on. What did you do with the experience, mentally?”

“It was like a particularly powerful dream. It didn’t have anything to do with 857 emails an hour.”

Taja made a choking sound. “Would PANTHER lie! They counted them at one point. Not, you understand, every hour. Not all requiring action. Fair number of kids saying like wow! More staid persons: Sir, this is a great day for Kadun. Or alternatively not. All requiring reading and some kind of response. It was at the bottom of the to-do list, next to sitting on the Anile throne. That’s just a little embarrassing with hindsight. I didn’t sit on her at C-R, partly because that seat was already taken, partly because we were there courtesy of the armed forces of our noble allies and to fling myself down and carol, Mine, all mine! seemed – impolitic. Venga had told me about his trip, which at least had the merit of being fairly anodyne, in a sense, anyway. I’m afraid I stupidly thought that’s what she does. If ever I wanted a vacation, a relaxing cruise through the universe... She was crated up and flown to Azt and put in the basement of the Imperial. Then we moved to the Jumesit. I was wandering around in mine all mine mood. Not only am I Anile emperor, I have a throne to show for it. There is, you know, a throne room and there she had been ceremoniously placed, my very own kitchen chair. I sat on her, mildly curious. Time and space dissolved, as it does. I have mentioned my frame of mind. It was only long after I realized that the deeper levels shaped everyone’s trips. I was on Dad’s boat, apparently alone, and apparently in the middle of the ocean. Oh, the symbolism! I looked over the side. There didn’t seem to be any sharks. Then there was bustle and the ship was full of lean weathered Fidubi. Most of them wore breeches and broad-brimmed hats. I did not think the time was now. I saw distant lights, two long, three short, one long, one short, two long, three short and I knew it was the lighthouse on the Utmost Isle. Land ho, Captain! shouted one of the sailors. Home at last, said Narulis. Brig admonished him and he laughed. You tease, allowed Brig. Is not Fidub all our homes? he asked, but Cho said: Then Kadun must rule Fidub. Somewhat uncomfortable and pragmatically largely senseless, like the rest of it! My first thought was of you guys here at the shrine who were supposed to have prepared me for being Anile emperor. Then I thought: think of it as having been given a tool-set. I don’t know what I have to do but I have a wide range of equipment... I ran through what you taught me and frankly it didn’t seem to help. When Maya came in, I asked her to sit and – she didn’t have a comforting experience, either. By this time I was fairly pissed off. We paid a lightning visit to Cho, who fed me some gobbledy-gook about the myth of a five-headed monster, I suppose to see how I’d react. When we’d calmed down a bit, we did absorb that – bar stray Vengas and I guess the odd Ciletij woodsman – it had been a thousand, as in one-zero-zero-zero, years since anyone had sat on her, so first-hand accounts were not readily to hand.”

“Oh really,” said Dill.

“Certainly the first-hand accounts bit,” said Taja.

“Van-senok’s private line to the cosmos? What possible use-?”

“The lady is sentient,” said Dill. “Not in a way we understand, this is true, but what is happening when one sits is in some sense an interaction of minds. May it not then be said that it is possible to learn how to communicate with her?”

“It may, but in that case why wasn’t she hidden in the basement! That’s question 493,” I said to Taja. “Why did Van-senok give the empire’s northern coast to Ciletij?”

“Superficial answer 493,” said Dill, “is to keep it out of the hands of the emperor, with particular reference to Jaaba-Sen. Unfortunately until there was no emperor there was no Ciletij. However, that is not to say that some kind of deal was not cut between V-S and the Ciletij tribes. The only conceivable reason for any such deal would be to give them a western seaboard – ah-uh. To give our friends the Denzines a western seaboard.

“I suppose,” said Taja, “and this I grant is far-fetched and markedly different from published accounts, or indeed historic ones, but after all how many of the authors of those accounts were

actually there? The Rape was not some kind of frontier-battle? We might – “ He grinned. “ – posit that Kaminua found out what was going on and – perhaps – did not think the autonomy of the emperor’s steward extended to surrendering half his territory?”

“Why don’t I find that far-fetched?” asked Dill. “If we’re in the fusing times game, maybe much earlier they came from a planet called Sug.” She grinned. “I insist someone came from a planet called Sug. We find that planet and we’ve cracked it...”

We all looked at each other.

“So – sit and focus on Sug and ask her?”

“It may just be crazy enough to be worth a try.”

“One of the few people we can trust,” said Dill. “It is not often – once is a word that occurs to me – that I feel the urge to pull rank, water off a duck’s back though I suspect it would be.”

“Marula?” asked Taja

“Damn Marula. Damn Mel. Damn Cantilip. Damn Denzines. Marula, one may say, is the weakest link but I do not think her loyalty to the imperium extends to keeping her mouth shut after I have departed and, since we do not know to whom she, or any of them, might sing, I do not think we should yet start the chorus.”

Mel

I began to laugh though I was not completely sure of the root of it.

“Poor Mel,” I said.

“He’s real cuddly,” said Dill, in a fair approximation of her Mom.

“Oh yes,” I said, “Mel is very cuddly.”

“Whom have we not pulled apart?” asked Dill.

I decided. And undecided.

“Mel, Hass, Cho. Mitch!”

If I can’t talk to Mel, it’s all pointless. Hyperbole. Ludicrous nonsense having no bearing on – what does it have no bearing on? Day-to-day reality. We said we’d do it and we did it. This is something else. The question is what?

“Now there’s a thought!” said Dill.

“Yes, exactly!” I said, answering myself as much as anyone. “If you try and connect this, all that we’ve been saying, with Mitch’s work, with Mitch’s life – there is no connection. It lives in its own little world. It’s – I was going to say, it’s like a hobby, life goes on without it. It’s like art, better analogy. It enhances life, gives it another dimension. It’s all lumped together as ‘the other matter’, that’s what I’m trying to say. Without love, life is dead, but life does not need to fret about how many universes there might be.”

“Or perhaps,” said Dill, “that is the fallacy underpinning your relations with so many you think closest to you. Or perhaps I should say their relations with you.”

I sighed.

“Any minute now you’re going to say everything is whole. Or of course that, if that is the case, then there can be no big deal.”

“While I grant that I am not without bias in this respect, it would seem to me that my father’s rationalism preserves him from an alternative agenda.”

“It occurred to me,” I said. “That Mel and Fugitry have been in this together from the start. Then I recalled how shaken Mel was. That could not be the exact truth.”

“More hooley?” suggested Dill. “The possibility would have seemed remote to Fugitry that Mel would sit on her.”

“Not as remote as his falling in love with Cantilip za-fenan,” murmured Taja.

“How true!”

“Perhaps part of the attraction was inside knowledge of V-S. Historians,” she said suddenly, “would not necessarily be lying even if they were there giving a commentary. Why would you depict something as a frontier battle if you did not know there was a frontier?”

“That,” said Taja, “is a rather juicy one.”



“That one I can do,” said Dill. “In comparison at least. We have always known what is Var-sega’, or perhaps rather what is not Var-sega; and is now Vasucula but the how and the why – what did a border mean a thousand years ago?”

“I should love to meet your father,” said Taja. “Busy, I do not doubt. Does he take vacations?”

“Mitch,” I said, “is very thorough.”

“Oh, we are so thorough,” muttered Dill.

I grinned.

“He spent hours, possibly years, in the PANTHER archives, but of course what he was looking for was rather different, and of course he no longer has time.”

“Mom is real thorough,” said Dill. “Mom has time.”

Taja was looking at us intently.

“I do not think we can refuse you. Your other question, of course.”

“Our other question, of course, is is there anyone here who knows anything? I find it possible to believe that the people who made the chair either refrained from recording it or quite possibly encoded it, but I find it less possible to believe that there are no ancient records at all. I also understand that in the ancient world it was a very long way away. Against that is the famed curiosity of cats.”

“We return to the Fidubi scam,” said Dill suddenly.

A very old memory, at least in terms of my young life, suddenly stirred. I laughed.

“The brown rat theory of history.”

“I beg your pardon,” said Dill.

“Years ago, I was pointing out that – a black rat mated with a brown rat and then a brown rat with another brown rat. In other words the empire ceased to be Fidubi the moment Brig’s son became emperor. Everything I have read tells me that Fidub was rapidly – assimilated, swallowed up, that both sides thought of Kadun as a separate entity.”

“On the level of day-to-day reality. But if you tell me there was no cultural exchange, no intellectual exchange, that I should doubt. We too are a sea-faring people where we have a sea to fare.”

“Carlin.”

“I am looking at you with new eyes,” said Dill. “Indeed there must be much of the brown rat about you. I had not thought. Isn’t that silly?”

“Six hundred years is a very long time.”

“We are related!”

“Susheela? We are.”

“I am thinking of the sea-faring folk of Carlin who must assuredly have discovered the Isles. I asked the wrong question.”

“Home from home?” I suggested.

“Narulis,” said Dill. “I too am thorough. Narulis described us or perhaps I mean them, carlini, as a confident people.”

“Fidub,” I said, “doesn’t know much about vast rolling plains. Car-sandis certainly predated Narulis..”

“A bustling port, the inhabitants of which did what? It is given that what one might call Kadun’s insularity is another word for her self-sufficiency. Carlin has food, Var-segan has minerals. Where there are sheep and cattle there are wool and leather. Where there are trees, there is wood. Where there is rock, there are stone and ores. To the west, the Denzines. To the east the ranges of Manubria, offering no invitation to penetrate further. To the south, Fidub, the fish-eaters.” Taja and I snorted. “It goes with the territory. Where there are rivers, there are fish. What did Fidub trade?”

“Silver,” I said instantly.

“Ah, the famous Fidubi silver lodes.”

“Do our brains work?” I muttered.

“I shall pass no comment on that. Nonetheless, you follow me closely, I trust, with particular reference to my earlier comment regarding possible geological similarities. However, for the moment, I ask with whom did Fidub trade?”

Taja ignored that one and asked: “You’re suggesting – positing – that – possibly – Fidub – ?”

“Is a piece of Kadun that broke off and floated away. Possibly. Kadun too has precious metals. So I ask again, with whom did Fidub trade?”

“Anyone who dropped in,” I said. “Worked silver is highly portable and greatly prized.”

“He said keeping a straight face. So we conclude it is the worked metal that is the true commodity, that Fidubi craftsmanship is prized wherever it strayed. I am sure we are all aware of the place of silver in mythology, the magic properties perhaps not wholly inexactly attributed to it.”

“Put like that,” I said, “it all sounds terribly obvious.”

“Though in this instance,” added Dill drily, “it would seem werewolves are –argentophile.”

“I’m wondering about going to Zur,” I said.

Dill cocked an eyebrow at me.

“I am sure Taja and I will have a most illuminating time on our own.”

I sat back considering my feelings.

“Perhaps you can shed light on why – why I feel so damned adolescent about it! Wrong-footed.”

“Could you expand on that?”

“Unwillingly. I suddenly felt – a need to know which had very little to do with the facts of science, politics or history.”

“Trust?”

“I know that feeling. The last time I had it I was 17. I had been up all night. I had to know where I was with Maya.”

“Oh Sarat.”

“Try more exasperation!”

She grinned

“Oh Sarat!”

“Ex-actly. I’m sure Mel would be most understanding of my second childhood. There is something awry with Cantilip’s explanation? More to the point, have we shared? I had not previously listed paranoia among my failings. What possible reason do I have to think in due course all will not be revealed?”

“But you know.”

Taja looked at both of us.

“Your trust in him I suspect unwelcome!”

Dill said: “Hass here is pig in the middle.”

“Adolescent,” I said again. “Wrong-footed. For the first time in ten years I have no idea how to approach a situation.”

“The problem surely,” said Taja, “is whether there is a situation to approach.”

“That would seem to be our position,” said Dill. “The fruits of our independent enquiry will surely establish that. That of course is what he is finding unbearable.”

“Why here? Why now! What were we last talking about?”

“Brown rats?” suggested Taja.

“I am aware of a very distinct feeling of not being earthed. I am suddenly adrift.”

“You have suddenly realized you are - adrift,” amended Dill.

“Oh thanks!”

“But are you? Throughout everything there have been fixed points. It now seems to you one has - one might have - shifted from its position. I should say rather the trajectory has changed.”

“Isn’t that an about-turn?” asked Taja.

“My partner,” observed Dill, “my beloved, my hero, the light of my life, not to mention the co-ruler of a good part of my world, if only constitutionally, is behaving like a six-year-old whose best friend has gone out to play with someone else.”

Taja snorted.

“OK,” I said. “You have – confirmed – although of course you haven’t really – my – supposition that – you think I’m right in thinking that they won’t say anything unless cornered. But on the other hand you see nothing – sinister in that. Does that compute?”

“If you trust Mel. If you then switch on your brain.”

Taja bit his lip.

“If I get the hang of the possibility that that this just possibly is nothing to do with me.” I sighed.

“What is personal to Mel, what is private? Zani.”

“Or of course,” said Dill.

“It’s personal until he finds out what it is!”

Mel was out. Cantilip was out, though apparently on a separate mission. That left Zani-Marula, which was probably rather a good thing. The colt grinned at me evilly and asked me if I’d like to read her a story. Nothing like getting some practice in.

Baz fiddled with a toy owl. Z-M sat on my lap and pulled my hair.

“No,” I said. “We don’t do that.”

Z-M smiled understandingly. Clearly the fault was mine but she was willing to forgive me and go along with it.

“Leg, possibly,” muttered Baz.

I picked up the board-book.

“Once upon a time there was a small red house standing alone in a big dark wood,”

Z-M pulled a face.

“Heard that one before? How about I make up a story? This is one about - a little owl who’d lost her way in a big dark forest.” There were some crayons and a pad of paper on the floor. I decided to have fun. “I have your attention?” Clearly I did, though I don’t think I totally imagined that it was not untinged with a raised eyebrow at the feckless youth who dared pick up her green crayon.

“There were hu-uge green pines.” Green pines came into being. “Tangled branches. Wolves.” I’ve never seen a crimson wolf but there’s nothing like being creative.

“Is there money in it?” muttered Baz.

“Foxes. Wild-cats.” Foxes are orange and wild-cats are brown. Everyone knows that. “And they were all hungry and right in the middle of them hiding under some fallen branches was the little owl.” Definitely brown. It was rather a good owlet, actually. “She didn’t dare call for Mummy or the foxes and wolves and wild-cats would find her. What was she to do!”

Z-M listened intently but failed to show any distress. Her mother to the life. I hope I can solve this.

“Suddenly enormous great drops of rain began to fall and it grew really dark except for lightning and thunder and the thunder and lightning scared all the foxes and wolves and wild-cats away.”

“Badgers, martens,” muttered Baz.

“Don’t be awkward. They all ran away to their warm dry nests but the poor little owl didn’t have anywhere to run to and if she cried out for Mummy no-one would hear her above the noise of the storm.”

“You have a flair for this,” said Baz. “Looking for a job?”

“She was hungry and frightened and she’d never learned to fly but she knew that if she stayed where she was she’d die so she hopped out of her little hiding-place and began to open her wings and flap them feebly and of course nothing happened, but she hopped and flapped more and more until she was getting tired and it seemed there wasn’t any hope when suddenly she was in the air!”

Baz and the toy owl whooshed and swooped with wild abandon. “She didn’t go very far and landed a bit bumpily on a low branch but all her tiredness seemed to have gone and the rain had stopped and it was quiet and safe and she began frantically calling for Mummy.” Our toowit-toowoos were impressive even if I do say so myself. “A grumpy old wood-pecker looked out of his hole and told her to shut up. She said she was lost and calling for Mummy and that made him even crosser and he told her he didn’t want her sort around his chicks and tried to push her off the branch but she knew the flying-trick now and fluttered further up the tree away from the woodpecker and Mummy who had been looking for her for hours but got caught up in the storm came and rescued her.

Z-M said one word: “More.”

I’m a success!

“Say please,” we chorused.

She gave a squeal of delight instead. Mel had appeared.

“You missed all the drama,” said Baz.

He picked up Z-M, held her up above his head, then kissed her and put her on his shoulders.

“You were going to be hours.”

“Any excuse to escape. ”

“Owl,” said Z-M.

Baz did more whooshing and swooping and Z-M gurgled merrily.

“What brings you to our charming old city?”

“Run a couple of things past you. We’re in Fidub for a few days.”

A colt appeared and took Z-M.

“See you later, sweetheart,” assured Mel. “When are you going to have one?”

“Not sure yet.”

He cocked his head.

“I do not think being carted about the continent a bad thing!”

“How about halfway down the backstairs leading to the stables?”

He paused fractionally.

“Maya-stuff?”

“It can’t not be.”

We settled on the stairs.

If I cannot strip before Mel, lit and fig, the hell with it.

“The last time I felt like this I was 17. I needed to know where I was with Maya before proceeding,”

“Sarat...I didn’t know you cared!”

We grinned at each other. That was the easy part.

“Dill thinks I have a screw loose. It is obvious that the object of your quest is Zani and that is deeply personal to you and nothing to do with me. Maybe. I think there’s an embarrassment factor due to Van-senok’s theft of the chair.”

“Putting the two together.”

“We know the universe thinks you’re the Master of Kadun.”

“Could that not prove hugely embarrassing?”

“To whom on what occasion!”

“Me. I’m very sensitive.”

He made huge woeful eyes at me.

“Shall we start at the beginning?”

“No,” said Mel. “I think on the whole no. I have promised Cantilip I shan’t talk to you **UNTIL caps underlined bold** I know what I’m talking about. The precise expression was stirring it. Sending you off on a wild-goose chase came into it. So of course did the juicier parts of senoki history. We really don’t want you to declare war on V-S on the grounds of a theory.”

“Am I that thick? Handing over imperial territory to Ciletij is not a theory.”

“We are feeling a little sensitive.”

“I haven’t shared either. Dill restrains the urge to confront Marula. She desists because she doesn’t know to whom Marula might gab. The Denzines figure largely in that model.”

“You think me compromised?”

“I think we have all been to some extent manipulated by Fugitry.”

“Ex-actly,” said Mel. “But the question has arisen - ?”

“I think not. It arose. You’re not that good an actor.”

“Being all on the same side, why the secrecy? See above.... You do not therefore think that I shall relate this conversation to Fugitry.”

“I do not think that.”

“Though Fugitry must by definition be on your side.”

“Must he?”

“He is not on Bal’s.”

“Interesting! That wasn’t what I meant. A number of strands... When are there not? Perhaps a skein. It is not on my side to keep things from me. I think the Denzines know what went down in V-S,

what is this matter of Kadun.”

“What was it they used to tell us in school?”

“Well?”

“You understand things so much better if you work them out for yourself. Fugitry has not confided in me.”

“It’s that aspect – I could be difficult. I want to know not to understand. Presumably this is the long view.”

“It’s very important to understand.” This in the tone of a teacher of infants.

“Been there, done that?”

He just grinned.

“Understanding will determine - ? Oh, the future of Kadun, the future of the continent, possibly the future of the planet. In concrete terms what we do. Not doing badly so far on the grounds of limitless ignorance. What we do about things about which we have yet to do anything?” I feigned horror. “You mean we left something out?”

“My preliminary researches,” began Mel. “I think I can go with this one. It’s hardly original. Five kingdoms united under the imperial crown – “

“I seem to have heard that before,” I murmured encouragingly.

“- I think we did not understand the very considerable autonomy retained, exercised and indeed jealously guarded.”

“Nor,” I said, “that it is nonsense that the poor little irturbi were defenceless until Narulis dropped by.”

He looked at me a minute.

“Educational, pairing with daughters of the Houses.”

“Most educational,” I said. “Ah, the Fidubi scam! The indigenous culture of Fidub is of course earthpower. Actually it may be silver-power.”

“Earthpower defeated the Cult,” said Mel.

“Ah, but whose earthpower! Dill has mused upon the word ‘anile’.” I felt a wave of laughter rising up in me. “If we have reached a place where Narulis was irrelevant and you are – let us be exact,” I tutted, “Zani was Master of Kadun, our next question must be in what sense was Narulis relevant. No, it mustn’t. Our next question – who was actually the architect of Narulis’ victories – if not Narulis. It wouldn’t have been the Master of V-S by any chance, would it.”

Grrr,” said Mel.

“Gee, Mel, you have to understand none of this changes the people we are here and now.”

“And the very real, very genuine feelings we have for each other.” We grinned. “If Narulis was irrelevant. It sounds like a Fidubi joke to me, teasing those in Kadun who thought him irrelevant. There would still be many unanswered questions.”

“The one after that is the one that has bugged everyone for centuries, namely that if – since – since Kadun is not defenceless why has she repeatedly fallen under the sway of the Cult?”

“I’ll talk to Cantilip. When did you stop trusting me?”

“When did I perceive our relationship had changed? Not the same thing.”

“Maya,” said Mel.

“What was previously automatic is now not. I actually find it hard to clod-hop all over it. Our private life was shared and now isn’t. That may have to do. With the addition – that which concerns Dabida was one sphere of your life, this Matter of Kadun another. There is now a third not clearly either and I am a simple guy, readily confused.”

“I’ve been an idiot,” said Mel. “I thought – you have Dill. You do have Dill. You also have Hass. No. I’m confused.”

“My tact defeats me. Cantilip.”

“She adores you! She adores Dill.”

“My problem lies in Van-senok.”

“Our problem lies in Van-senok. Your problem lies - ” He grinned. “Chivalry is a terrible thing. I cannot imagine that we should have reached this situation had you felt free to corner Cantilip. Of

course she may not want to talk to you. Is that part of the problem?"

"I have noted that questions my future lady of Van-senok might reasonably be expected to answer may be dismissed by the Queen of Dabida."

"By hiding behind being Queen of Dabida? Cantilip has a considerable temper, you know."

"Just as well she's not pregnant again. I trust!"

"Even as we speak one sperm more nimble, more dynamic than the rest... We think we can cope with another one."

I thought he was over-doing it but after all he knows her better than I do.

"You need to talk to him," Mel finished.

Cantilip gave a quick yelp of laughter.

"What," she asked demurely, "is it you would like to know?"

"Never been terribly good at listing things I don't know exist. The empire previously extended to the northern coast, encompassing the area of Ciletij now known as Jaaba-sen. Can you input on that at all?"

"You're cross with us."

"Us', you and Mel, or 'us', Van-senok?"

"Both."

"How true! How limpid! Why did Van-senok steal the Anile throne?"

"To keep it safe."

"Meaning?"

"To keep it out of the hands of the Cult. They would have destroyed it."

"At that time the log-cabin was in Van-senok?"

"In 3015 the log-cabin was in Van-senok."

"I know you well enough to know you can enthuse, perhaps even gush."

"Never gush!"

"The expression that occurs to me is blood out of a stone."

"Then you ask the wrong questions."

"I didn't say it'd be easy!" hissed Mel.

She bestowed a gracious smile on him.

"Try 'what is Marula's cousin's relationship with a Ciletij intelligence officer?'" suggested Mel. For a fraction of a second I thought he was teasing.

"Ah," I said. "Hadn't thought of that one. Business or pleasure?"

"Serious," said Cantilip. "Long-standing. And complex."

"May we start at the beginning. This has nothing – apparently – to do with my conversation with Mel earlier. There are two stories?"

"Correct. His problem and my problem."

"They are actually the same problem," added Mel helpfully.

"What," asked Cantilip, "seems to you an extremely good reason for losing part of our glorious empire, fast?"

"The bears as big as houses and the wolves the size of rooms? I've been on the Grid."

She laughed.

"Pretty well. It seemed a good idea at the time. Responsibility for that particular section of the planet was not required."

"What exactly is wrong with it?"

"We don't exactly know. Evil is the all-purpose term."

"There was no Ciletij – something went wrong when the border was drawn up? No, V-S drew an arbitrary border. Ciletij demanded the lake? Oh, of course, Ciletij demanded the site of the rape."

"It was not part of anyone's plan that your chair end up in Ciletij! If we now fast-forward, their eyes met across a crowded room... She is Alinta. He is Hiran. The scene is a soiree in Far-disit. You would have been about ten at the time. He is supposedly an art-dealer, no disguising his nationality, plenty of travel, all the best people. Where is the money? Where's it being put? It's not critical stuff,



but it's useful. Not surprisingly he doesn't at first tell her what he does. They get serious and he feels honour-bound to inform her that if he's caught she'll be in deep shit nine. At which point she points out the reverse. Let us say we in V-S are not well regarded. They laugh and think oh damn, or words to that effect.

"On the other hand of course international public opinion....They talk. She moves to G-T and runs an international biz from there, which is probably why they never crossed your radar. Two things about Alinta. She is an interior designer. I do not say she hates trees – "

"That would be impossible," murmured Mel.

"She prefers them in bloom, blossom fluttering slowly to the ground in a warm breeze, or if bedecked with a fine pattering of snow seen through double-glazing. We forgive her. Apart from that, she's as strong, tough and loyal as the rest of us. She comes to the House for Mummy's birthday, which fortunately is in the spring, and she wrote frantically amusing mails about G-T. Nothing much changed until you began to growl. I shall not bore you with the range of reactions well known to you...For the purpose our narrative Hiran at that point has a problem. His bosses are all over him like wasps round a jam-pot. The SSS – " Special Security Service. " - idiots want Hiran to encourage Alinta to cuddle up to the House. However....Scarcely have the SSS digested the presence of a troublesome young man in Zur when I run off with Mel. They are not quite stupid enough to push it, since policy, such as it is, is to keep Dabida on board, though of course they rather hope that Dabida will not warm to her future queen and as we know anyway a good part of the smear campaign came from Ciletij.

"I actually thought the one about you dancing naked at 4 am on the Lawns celebrating your primitive cult was rather good," said Mel.

"As you said at the time."

"I missed that one!" I said.

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