

GO FOR IT, ARDESHNA, JUST GO FOR IT

Just whine to the world how 'it's all obviously because I'm anti-gay'. Destroy yourself, please do. Don't forget to follow it up with how the bedpan-washer chimp 'can't possibly' be illiterate. After all, I'm only a modern languages graduate of the University of London, a writer and the daughter of an author. What can I possibly know about literacy? Not as though I were a stupid cunt of a bedpan-washer, is it, a tard from a poly, You and your cronies really don't like my Marxist novel, do you, and you really, really don't like its strong, brilliant, independent females. Shall we have a little chat about your contempt for women? I do think we should go into the detail as to why that room wasn't changed around, despite having been condemned by Health and Safety, despite the duty of care. Do tell how objecting to your desire to injure me is being a self-willed little girl who just wants her own way and how I must learn to do what I'm told, and of course how accountability and transparency are my stupid female jokes. Who could adjudicate? How about Mary Warnock? Or Mary Beard? But maybe you're so neurotic you'd claim anyone who wasn't male and of Indian origin would be biased. Well, how about Salman Rushdie?

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1. THE QINE AFFAIR

Narulis kumsit var-goan Kada. Narulis kumsit var-goan Carla, Fas-sigreen, Van-senokka, Vaudon, Var-seganin, var-goan Kada. Narulis, author of Kadun. Narulis made Carlin, Fas-sigree, Van-senok, Vaudos, Var-segan and so created Kadun.

No, says Mitch. Five kingdoms united under the imperial crown.

Mitch is heir to Var-segan.

It is helpful to think of the empire as a coalition, a pact, says Mitch. In business terms, it was an agreement, a merger: we were stronger together than apart. Of course there was a Chairman of the Board. In the end neither side complied with the agreement and so we went our separate ways.

The facts of the matter are these: invaders from Harn brought the Cult to Kadun from across the ocean. Narulis, outsider, scion of the House of Fire, formerly rulers of what was even then the Republic of Fidub, happened to be around at the time, together with 22 of his doughty shipmates. In consequence of his contribution to the war-effort, they made him emperor and the Masters of Carlin, Fas-sigree, Van-senok, Vaudos and Var-segan became his stewards to hold the land in trust.

Since this unlikely sequence of events actually happened, historians have tied themselves in exquisite knots inventing reasons for it.

Cantilip tells it differently.

Earthpower is the energy of the cosmos, the erosion of valleys, the movement of continents, the orbiting of the planets, the heat of the sun. As the source of life, it encompasses life. The true ancestral culture of Kadun is power in balance, the union of life with the physical world and the union of male with female. However, the universe is generative, begets life, and so is seen as female. The 'female', the universe, is both complete in herself and creative; the 'male', life, is not; life cannot exist in vacuo: the 'female' is capable of independent existence and the 'male' is not. This was not of course a perspective tolerable to the Cult. Most reproduction naturally requires both equally, despite the practices of High Harn - I believe some worms are hermaphrodite? Sarat would know. Our men did as much running around waving swords and bashing each other as any other group of men. They did considerably less bashing women. The female was regarded as equally human. Kadun before the Cult was marked by some semblance of civilization. We had literature, learning, art, rather than human sacrifice. Invaders came from Harn. They tried to burn us. We fought. Into this tripped Fidub, who took the glory and replaced irturbi culture with her own.

Cantilip is heir to Van-senok.

History or herstory? Either way, it's a long one, long and sticky. You have probably heard of the Lays of Cafanine. Possibly you can even quote them. It is less likely you know they were originally written in irturbi. (If you haven't heard of them, the reason so many people have is that the lays as in songs are also the lays as in

sex, early examples of erotic poetry).

The empire turned rotten. Some 900 years later, when the great experiment had failed, the empire was in tatters and the Emperor Jaizal deranged, Zani defied him before the Great Gates of Azt. A framework had been breached - what, again? Prudent men slipped away to discern the new new world order. In the slave-states of the empire, rumour grew. Sea-dogs told of a kingdom in not-yet Zur. What passed for Jaizal's mind broke and the empire shattered. They killed Jaizal. Later other prudent men wished Kadun to endure. Jaizal's killer, usurper of the Anile throne, was murdered in his turn. That sort of thing went on for some time. One Cuisa-ban-paduan-coan said, Enough! Enough or there will be nothing left. Slowly, fitfully they reached an accommodation: the return of oligarchy. Gentlemen, if we do not squabble, then all are supreme. For four hundred years nothing much happened. For the literate few, newsheets reported from an apex of ineffable superiority the prancings and prattlings of the barbarian hordes. The covens were abased, castrated, content. Where there is no justice, a veil is drawn over the odd human sacrifice. The Cult was a pestilence, always there, incurable. Our power is absolute over our serfs and vassals. Let us draw in our horns and be content.

Susheela, last Anile empress, daughter of Var-segan, fled with her children, and so the Aniles returned to Fidub. It was congenial. No-one bothered them with the ludicrous notion of ruling Kadun. Some 600 years passed. For old guard and egalitarian alike, there had been no benefit in restoration of the Anile throne. There were no Grid, no satellites to signal the Anile heir's mildest criticism to 160 million irturbi, make him the pin-up of millions of radical teens.

Sarat-ban essa, licit heir (Anile emperor, Master of Kadun) was born, so they said later, mobile in one hand, modem in the other. In fits and starts the generations ran in parallel and Essa, his father, close to Tar, King of Dabida. But Essa was an ecologist and so there are two sides to our hero, the brash Fidubi radical, and the other. "Try seeing Sarat as the middle-class son of professional parents," Vij will say. "I know it's hard! It may make more sense then."

"What are you trying to say?"

"How the other half of Sarat lives? Has lived."

"I suppose Mitch is also the 'middle-class son of professional parents'."

"Mitch is Mitch and things aren't always how they look. Sarat is not running off with Var-sega's heir. OK, you can laugh at me for fatuous remark of the year. What bonds them is radical politics. Position gives them a vehicle, a relationship, the means to rock the world - do you understand how radical Sarat is?"

Sarat can't rock Kadun without ending up on the Anile throne. It's a problem. We are getting ahead of ourselves. Sarat starts obsessed with the natural world. He is going to be a vet. Bar a few genealogists and those of similar mind, people had forgotten there was an Anile heir. We need to go back just a bit, to Cho, Sarat's grandfather, and Airoch (not Sarat's grandmother nor yet President of Fidub) walking the river-front at Azt, straying into ill-lit streets where shabby workmen hurry home. Darling, one cannot say, I abhor your urban conditions, I wish to restore the Anile throne! One has, said Cho, a responsibility. And so Cho entered Fidubi politics and changed the world.

Why not? Sarat did. But Kadun had changed - regressed. In the Age of Information, with a thousand Grid-sites from which to recruit, the Cult will be back.

Well, all right, it never went away. The graves opened, the creatures from the pit of desecration once again walked the earth. Something like that. What actually happened is a question more of economics than of cerement.

The world discovered mass production. The wealthy literate few saw Kadun finally become a museum-piece, a fossil preserved in amber, powerless. Labour was cheap in Kadun and wealth not lacking, a manuscript sold to Mukal's, a handful of diamonds to Enbahaluk - Kadun gained her factories and her trade. All-Kadun, rich in both oil and ores, verdant, is essentially self-sufficient. For this reason, the Houses elected to remain All-Kadun. As Karula will put it, it is a geopolitical convenience, a place at the world-table. The men who make things became a new power in Kadun and the men who make things knew nothing and cared less and were gobbled alive by the Cult's bankers in the City and so were spawned the squirming guts of our story, Capital Warz. To keep it simple, Kadun doesn't have an economy: it has two economies, which interact. The guys at the top deal with their own and the guys at the bottom don't know who the hell they're dealing with, hence the interaction. Broadly, Var-segan, Van-senok and Carlin kept the Cult out and everywhere

else welcomed it in. At the time of which I am about to get around to writing, the City owned half Kadun and naturally wanted to own the other half.

Kadun's other problem is geography. Between Var-segan and Van-senok in the west and Carlin in the east lie the badlands. If this were not the case, Kadun would have long since split, but it is and it didn't. Borders in the head maintain the integrity of Narulis' Kadun and make unthinkable for the moment Carlin allied with Dabida and Fidub in the south in one blocs and Var-segan and Van-senok with Vasucula in another. The maintenance of the fiction of All-Kadun keeps open communication between west and east.

Vaudos, which is not nice to be near, holds the bulk of the coal, but oil and natural gas spurt in a huge band along the northern border. Borders between the Houses were historically as currently largely a matter of people ceasing to call themselves senoki and starting to call themselves segani. The border between Kadun and Ciletij to the north is largely a matter of trees. Historically as currently the Morag-fahdi roamed the entire continent and so formed such trade-routes as existed, north to south and east to west, and the south and Ciletij equally content to let the MF be middle-men; foreign traders clung to the edges, the general consensus being that the interior was neither welcoming nor safe, with the chief exception of Tjulsit, at the junction of the great crossroads, but Kadun's great ports were ever bustling cosmopolitan centres. Wicked people like me thought it was all rather like the advice given to women out after dark: keep to the main roads and areas that are well-lit and populous, and never ever accept lifts from strangers.

The world began to speak in bits and bytes. As information lacerated Kadun, the people learned desire. The vast hinterland of Kadun was slow to become a consumer society and no People's Revolt had propagated the strange notion of human equality but now there were stirrings. What happens to a bright boy who goes to the city and gets an education is he becomes a Nudra. It is debatable whether this constitutes progress.

Elementary education is good in Kadun; the people can read, write, calculate. Thinking is discouraged, there being too much it is distressing to think about, but bored soldiers hop about the Grid and senior officers turn a blind eye. Neither Army nor Fleet is attuned to what is happening in Kadun.

"It cannot be a question," says Mitch, "of changing just one thing or indeed of many persons working separately. All of us have tried that, the unions, my grandfather setting up hospitals. It makes not one whit of difference to the whole. There are lines you do not cross. Many people live decent lives. So long as they do not challenge the indecent. Not least the assistance of people like me enables some semblance of civilization to prevail in the country. In the cities people are buried alive. They think that tomb is poverty and lack of education. I say that tomb is there if you are me. I just get to stand upright. There is a granite slab above our heads and its name is infrastructure. You make people better and you send them home to damp rat-infested tenements. You shorten their working-hours but they can barely afford to eat, let alone engage in what the south called leisure-time activities. And the food is crap anyhow. I hold there is that which is not negotiable, over which there is no choice. What Fidubi landlord asserts his right to let property unfit for habitation? Everything must change, what and how people think, whether they respect all people. Entrenched power shifts only with revolution."

How can you charge rent when you don't own the land? Oh, right, in trust. Imperial Majesty, here's 600 years of back-rent! How come he owned the land? Thus Mitch at 16, the age when every compromise, every inconsistency of the elders is an offence. Mitch at 17 wanted to give the whole lot away. There are a lot of stories about Mitch and Qine. Some of them are even true. It's nonsense that Qine left school at 14 to work in a factory. Qine went on to college, too, not the Schools, but a decent education. Qine worked in a factory to pay his way and there he joined the union. Qine's good with numbers. It didn't take him long to work out he was being paid 50% of what it costs to live decently.

The pixie, they call Mitch's lass in Var-segan. Big bloke like Mitch, doesn't he squash her. Apparently not, because they have one, two, three in quick succession, the get it over and done with school of child-rearing. Karula's friends have been appalled by the whole thing, marrying a rich man and settling down to breed, as the less than friends put it, even if he is a fellow-revolutionary. Karula argues her corner forcefully. Correct me if I have missed something, but the revolution is not I think tomorrow. I could be menopausal before there is change! As I see it, there is possibly only one thing worse than being in a crisis situation with teens or tweens, and that is being in a crisis situation with infants in arms. At least the tweens are mobile and able to feed independently and fetch Mom more ammunition should she need it.

Mitch too comes in for flak. Mitch has established a marketing consultancy in the City, Harn's horrendous

capital. Glam biz, Mitch. That has what to do with the struggle? There are powerful international civil liberties organizations with a Kadun section, gatherings of exiles, but these too are part of the furniture of stasis. Mitch subscribes to Liberty Now!, the Movement for Economic Reform and the rest, but as he has matured and reached his own analysis of this matter of Kadun it seems to him they don't understand. Anyhow, says someone, conditions in Kadun are a non-issue. Unless you're living in them, shoots back Mitch. Worse places, look at Enbahaluk! Beneath this Mitch detects something dirtier. Bloody irturbi! They don't want to change anything. They like it like that. They're cattle. The lads in the union have had a lot of time for Mitch, but now it seems Mitch has mellowed, too much to lose, and anyway it's the way of the world, young men start families, have other commitments. Mitch clearly dotes on his daughters.

Not Mitch, says Changri

The lads consider. There's reasons for thinking not Mitch, all right. Ask Qine! The thought niggles. What's he doing then?.

Changri chuckles. Lad and his lass...What do you think he's doing?

"Taking a little R+R, I reckon," says Changri. "Before the real war."

Regrouping, Mitch calls it. Unfortunately I am a group of one. So I start my own organization! He ponders. I want this to work, not unravel at the seams because all they see is Var-segan. We secede from All-Kadun? He grins to himself. Now there's a thought!

Someone has to make a non-issue into an issue. What else is marketing for?

Karula logs on and gets on with the real family business, Kaduna-gar-jaht, this matter of Kadun. She reads through the economic reports from the Schools, makes notes and intermittently nurses, soothes, gets on the floor in the playpen, recites nursery rhymes and constructs castles out of brightly coloured bricks.

Mitch too has problems with Fidub.

"I hold there are human values and anti-human ones. We do not wish to go the way of Harn! That is the cry. The south ripostes: we do not go the way of Harn! That the way of Harn is precisely – is a powerful counter-argument in certain circles where values antipathetic to those of Fidub are held to be indigenous and Narulis' values alien. The empire civilized almost a whole continent. It then uncivilized it, made Kadun so hated, so base... We abandoned the values brought from Fidub and reverted to those that had been dominant. That is the kernel of truth. But it is argued no native held those values called Fidubi, which is belied by history or how did thousands back Narulis. And it is argued that after 500 years Fidubi culture remained separate, imposed. And it is argued that Jaizal represented the true culture of Kadun. All these arguments are trash. There is of course the anomaly. When the empire was a force for good it is held to be Fidubi. When it was evil, it is held to be irturbi. I do not think anyone has ever called Jaizal Fidubi. Narulis' values were squeezed out of Kadun on the pretext they were foreign."

For most of 600 years, the Cult has been contained by PANTHER, formed by Narulis to eliminate the Cult from Kadun. PANTHER cleave to the simple notion they're the best there is. They've been at it longest. Neither of these statements is entirely true, as we shall see. Pioneers Against Nutters Threatening Harm to Everyone's Rights is a bit contrived, but when you've been called PANTHER for 1500 years you have to make it stand for something. Where there is FATCAT (the Federation Atrocities Tribunal Can't Abide Torture, just never does anything about it), there must also be PANTHER to chasten it.

PANTHER was not in the Age of Jaizal so sensitive of academic freedom that it refrained from destroying the odd grimoire and much knowledge was lost that only the rampantly psychotic would miss. PANTHER taught a public lesson. For six hundred years the Cult had had much the significance of a sect of snake-worshippers and the big cats had become part of the mythology of Kadun, oral history garbled in transmission. To this day, historians, not zoologists, true, but they really ought to know better, teach that PANTHER took its name from an indigenous wild cat now extinct and naughty children are told the big cats will get them. Kadun is kept from closer links with her friends in the south by the sensation the south is not quite safe and travel does nothing to dispel these ancient notions. Fidub, the Singing Isles...Shaken visitors return - well, they sing. What, demand the scoffers, is the tune? It's not like that it's more like - I don't know what it's more like, it just makes you feel that life is wonderful. The Institute of Geophysics in Arit has failed to find a satisfactory explanation and those who are less than lovable are made distraught by the Isles, as though the heat of the ground was burning through the soles of their shoes, but Kadun always had sent her young men abroad, to further their education, let them experience the wider world. To become civilized, though Kadun did not admit the word.

There were other links. There had to be. Dabidans had always got on well with the Kadun Fleet. They're honest sailormen. Coastguards, meteorologists, rail-engineers, road-workers - sweet, lovable people they found them. But there's a case to be made that the power of the past is stronger than that of the present; at any rate the multiplicity of contacts with Ciletij along the northern border has never noticeably done much for cementing bonds of friendship between their two great nations.

PANTHER maintains a presence in Kadun, loose, transitory, mentors, artists and itinerant labourers, curling up by the hearth only if welcomed. These proved enough to keep the Cult abased but the debt is rarely acknowledged. There are 1500 years of reasons for this which we shall unravel slowly. When the young reach an age to question, they find their elders disparaging. Nothing like a good ratter, only let him stay in the barn. Cats and rats, the image is as old as Kadun. But when they meet the ratters they find them educated, entertaining, and sometimes even people like us. It is the kittens, they discern, who are unwelcome, freedom, democracy, disrespect. The workers and peasants have less difficulty with the kittens. Working-people, country people, above all know which end is up. It is not my lords and ladies invited to gatherings under the stars. From generation to generation it has been passed down, Kinsqol, Xu-laman, Vasemalis and Jihina, solstice and equinox, the four Days Celebrant as the Cult called them. On these they performed their repulsive rites but because these days are equally the festivals of earthpower they are celebrated throughout the entire continent and (bizarrely) known even in the free world by their Cult names not their irturbi ones and so on Kinsqol Dabidans take the children to the zoo or visit Aunt Marsilva, but if you are invited to a celebration in Kadun, you say no – politely, mind. You got your cooking, your carving, wood to chop, kids to tend – more latterly, you got calls to make, you got your homework. You stay inside. But we are in the modern world. Things like that don't happen any more.

From Zani Fidub established the dynasty Alzani-Meta, a second attempt at the great experiment, ruling the lands south of the Great Divide, the ravine that separates Kadun from what is now Dabida. To understand fully the curious history I relate, you have to grasp the vital role played by the hotel trade and the food-processing industry. The source of A-M's lucre is Alzani-Meta Industries - the Cannery, the Confectioner's and the Cooler. Well, actually it's fish. In days of yore, Zuri dried fish, which they bartered. Then they canned it. Finally they froze it. Later, they dried, canned and froze fruit. You get the gist. What you probably don't get is that it's irturbi fruit. The relationship between Dabida and Carlin you could, I suppose, call fruitful. What one wants the other has, Dabida possessing apparently limitless supplies of natural gas, about which in due course even worse jokes will be made. Carlin stretches from south of Azt to the Great Divide, by which time it's scrub and the Master of Carlin lets it grow wild rather than struggle to cultivate that which resists cultivation, but in the spring there are flowers and people bring their kids for picnics and wave if they see someone on the other side. There's a bridge. For the more athletic there're cramponing down the almost vertical face of the ravine, spanning the torrent (poetic licence; in the dry season you can wade across) and cramponing up the other side.

OK, let me try to be chronological. A number of young persons of roughly similar age could become confusing. It may be better, though not much better, to delineate them by their year of school and later college than by their birth-dates; Mel (Dabida's heir) and Asdinan (Carlin's heir) are in the same year, though Asdinan will confuse things by dropping out and starting again. Cantilip (Van-senok's heir) is in the year below. There are only two months between Sarat and Hass (Mel's brother) but, the cut-off point of the school-year being what it is, Sarat is the year below Mel and Hass two years below, with Maya (Mel's and Hass's cousin) in Sarat's year. Despite Asdinan's being the heir and his papa, Saryulin, the elder of two brothers, the twins Sorg and Sarshi, Asdinan's cousins, are seven years older than he, and Mardis, their younger brother, two years older. Vij, Maya's brother, is 11 years older than she, she having been something between an accident and an after-thought. Fal, Kyse and I are the year below Mel. Lastly, you may be relieved to learn, Mitch and Karula are some 14 years older than Mel and As, with whom we shall start. 'Where the woodcock sleep and the fox-cubs leap/Carlin, the prize'.

Saryulin, darling, there is nothing to do. The new Mistress of Carlin had been young and beautiful and kind and even loved animals; for a time she and Saryulin were besotted with each other, but she was bewildered by Carlin. She was also an airhead. She put up such struggle as fitted her self-image as the perfect mother to sweep her grey-eyed boy off to Azt. He would be deprived? asked Saryulin coldly. Indeed he would have been, a mere accessory to be shown off then tidied away. If she missed him, she hid it well. He grew not to

miss her, pedalling around Carlin after his father on a little blue tricycle with special wide puncture-proof tyres. Thus Asdinan, at 4 much as at 24, pink of cheek, ruddy the word, indeed, stocky, wavy brown hair. Sorg looked the dashing heir, a cause of irritation in years to come. Worse, Sorg looked soulful. As was the bookworm. So we saw it at least. It took a long time, after Sorg's head had been blown away and Fal stood trembling with her knife at the murderer's throat, for us to learn Sorg wrote good poetry. Most of us lived. Duvi returned to Carlin. She had left when she was 17 to travel the world, thought now to explore closer to home. She had spent 10 months at the commune on the Delta my mother was at three years later. My mother of course is Estanzia Morsen, Harn's leading exponent of womanspirit, as they think they call earthpower in Harn. To get Cantilip on this subject is dangerous, her basic position being that Mum's main achievement is to make all women look as stupid as she is. True, this is much the conclusion I reached by the time I was 15, but she is my mother and she is actually not stupid, it's just she has crossed wires on a couple of basics.

Soola (Carlin's mentor) invited Duvi to talk about her travels. As was 6. Saryulin had fallen hard for one of nature's morons and in retrospect was surprised at himself, mistrusted his judgement in these things. That Duvi was a non-moron was evident but that she had passed 30 without settling seemed to indicate she had no great desire for her own children, let alone anyone else's. Nonetheless he invited her to the house and soon all three of them were on the floor with Asdinan's trains. Duvi talked of the wider world, and even to As it was obvious Duvi was more interesting than his mother.

The following afternoon Duvi turned up at Soola's cottage.

"I've come to gossip. What happens to As during the day?"

Soola laughed.

"The hairless terrier school of child-rearing. Loike un pup. Half the business of Carlin is conducted with Asdinan curled up on someone's lap. He behaves himself as tiresome pedagogues might put it because he has no reason not to."

"It must be hard for him, though. May I ask?"

"It's a complicated story. She had certain preconceptions. These were not met. A constant social whirl is not Saryulin's style." Sweet and stupid. And she came to me in tears, said no-one respected her, everyone laughed at her. He must have been mad. "Nor – other things. Deference is not part of the package." He smiled

"You know that. Farvia didn't. They met in Azt, of course, at Pilo's, a whirlwind romance. For a start she was appalled at the size of the house." At twelve rooms Carlin is hardly bigger than a large farmhouse. Sorg called it our little wooden hut. "I think you get the picture. Even were Saryulin persuaded to entertain, there is nowhere for the legions of guests to stay."

They talked on.

"Change must come," said Duvi. "He said, we do not know how to be different."

Soola laughed.

"I do not think Saryulin intends Carlin overtaken by history."

"What, then?" challenged Duvi. "No, not what. We know what. How?"

"Half Kadun asks itself that."

Duvi found herself a small flat in Car-sandis, continued her freelance work and after a while wondered if she intended being overtaken by Saryulin, whose hostility to entertaining clearly did not extend to not inviting her to dinner, tea, As's school's Open Day and anything else he could think of. When she went into the village, everyone was very, very, very nice to her, as though she were someone special, and she had no doubt tongues wagged.

"We should go away," he said. Their eyes met.

"I think that would be nice," she said.

They planned a trip to the Lausanne suitable for small legs. While As dissolved into the coma of a particularly weary little log, they sat by the fire in the bar and discovered each other. Now she is telling him of camping on the Leolisle and he is reciting poetry, a dangerous sign, if not terminal. 'O know ye not the Singing Isles!"

"We must go again to Fidub," he said.

"We?" she said.

He laughed and took her hand.

"There are difficulties?"

"We are independent," she said.

He laughed again.

"We are."

"There must be a party!" said Duvi.

"We require no public ceremony," said Saryulin.

Soola nodded approvingly.

But the neighbours must come to the party, if only to maintain the link which is never wholly acknowledged and never wholly severed, and so Mel, Tar's eldest, first visited Carlin when he was nine.

Por stroked the house. The whorls and spirals smiled back at him.

I was not prepared.

As threw open Ye Greate Door of Carlin. More poetic licence there, but it's shorter than listing every step of enabling a nine-year-old to pretend to fling wide a door that weighs about ten times more than he does.

The sun pranced through the Window, bouncing off a thousand prisms.

"Zeshanzesh," breathed Mel.

The Dacunine Window shimmered remorselessly in the afternoon sun.

"Who is that?" asked Saski.

"Kaminua."

"Cho!" said Mel. "That's some profile!"

"It is Narulis' Window," protested Tar.

Kaminua lived 600 years after Narulis.

"It was – repaired," allowed Saryulin. "Carlin has not always been so tranquil."

The hall in Carlin stretches to the foot of the stairs which rise to a half-landing dominated by the Window.

Beyond it is the Great Hall: there is another Window on the other side, but people never get so excited about that one. Beyond the Great Hall is the courtyard, around which the remainder of the house is built. There is music trapped in the Window, but Mel doesn't know that yet.

It is a wedding-party with many guests and even the lizard (the Azt slime-machine) can't make much of it, even though the guests do include Mitch's parents, Heela and Kile (Marula, Cantilip's mother, had a prior engagement; Vastulis, Master of Vaudos, is not the sort of person with whom one cares to mix, and Fas-sigree had been subsumed into Azt, another long story, not immediately relevant), but Mel and Hass discover 'Opshar's Glade and fall in love, and worse, hit it off with Asdinan. They stay on a few days.

Of course you must come to us! carolled Mel.

When the children had gone to bed, Tar bit the bullet.

"And the next thing is why don't we all go and stay with Essa."

"And then we can all have dinner with Cho," added Saski.

"I see no objection," said Saryulin. "Perhaps in the summer, towards the end of the holidays."

Plenty of time for Mel to babble about Carlin to Sarat and Sarat to demand to be taken to Carlin, but that would have happened anyway.

"It's educational, it's history. Anyway, it's my heritage."

"You do not enter Kadun," said Essa. He didn't use that voice very often, the one that meant N-O, no, no room for negotiation, no space for argument.

The boys retreated to Sarat's bedroom to confer.

"It's politics," said Mel. "Azt will think Carlin is plotting."

"Plotting what?"

But Mel couldn't make the leap to Cho on the Anile throne.

"Plotting against them."

"Conspiring with the enemy!" said Hass.

"You are the enemy!" said Sarat. "The hated, the loathed, the despicable, the foe, right?"

Mel was unfazed.

"That's different."

"How?" demanded Sarat.

They went back to Essa. We're not arguing. We just don't understand.

Hmm, thought Essa

“Sit down, kids.” You understand, he thought of beginning, but what do you understand, you’re eight. “You understand we are all us protected by PANTHER.”

“Because Cho’s leader of the Senate,” said Sarat. “Because I might be kidnapped!”

“Because Cho is head of PANTHER,” said Essa.

Mel’s eyes widened.

“He’s head of intelligence and it’s top-secret!”

Essa laughed in spite of himself.

“Not exactly.” Then he wished he hadn’t said it, because it’d do. “It’ll do. PANTHER is active in Kadun.

You would be a target to get at Cho.”

“OK,” said Sarat. It was impossible to tell what he was thinking.

But Mel said: “It still doesn’t make sense! Aren’t we targets too?”

“Tar’s head of the H-W,” said Hass.

“But not Anile emperor,” said or possibly sighed Essa. “To some people the Anile throne is significant, whether or not there’s anyone on it.”

“It’s 600 years!” said Sarat.

“Being head of PANTHER sort of makes him emperor,” hazarded Mel

More being emperor makes him head of PANTHER. It’ll do

“The simple bit is we, the Aniles, are hated. The complicated bit is that Zani’s heirs have a formal position in the world and Narulis’ heirs do not. As Mel said, it’s intelligence! The rules are different. Anyone of course may be targeted by some lone wolf, some stray nutcase, but what we are talking about is action by government agency. We think Azt would try to kill us if we set foot in Kadun.”

“Wow!” said Hass.

After three years of hard labour, Zulagan was thrown out of Kadun, for there are still powerful elements with an older and relatively more civilized approach to dissent: the door is over there, let us hold it open for you. He founds the Campaign to Liberate Kadun (CLIK) in Zur. That is not part of the jolly old game and he is mauled by the lizard, an ex-convict, a common criminal. Do his politics not amply display his criminal mind! Zulagan has little time for the rights of property and CLIK an agenda more radical than is usual among the earnest. People imagine groups of honest working-men in floppies and dungarees sitting at slatted tables, probably with sawdust on the floor. Clean sawdust, mind.

Anyone targeted by the lizard must be a good bloke and there are plenty of hardened bruisers in Dabidan politics spoiling for a fight. Zulagan is a good bloke and readily makes friends. At a conference on Kadun: which way forward? he gets deep in conversation with a trio of Fidubi.

“Interesting chap,” he says afterwards. “Knows an ‘eck of a lot about Kadun.”

His Dabidan comrade chortles.

“Well, he would, wouldn’t he!”

“Why’s that, then?”

“I’m really not sure you want to know this. Guy’s full name is hoit-ban-varna-eban-Narulis.”

“Flaming hell!” says Zulagan. “You’re kidding - I understood he were in politics.”

“Oh he is. Thirty years in the Senate, my son. You want to know how things work around here, you talk to Cho.”

Working-people know PANTHER is not on the side of the ruling class.

“Social workers!” said Mellow. “If someone’s ill we make him better. The problems are ingrained, part of the fabric of society. What are we achieving for Kadun?”

“What do you suggest?”

“There’s nothing to suggest. There has to be a whole new infrastructure, someone who can form a government, hold the asylum together. Narulis had a policy! All we can do is destabilize.”

As the young Krarlik bent to his books, as he deepened his unique personal knowledge of the Cult, so he knew in his bones the Great Master ultimately must triumph, the flaw in irturbi at the critical moment they had weakened, his mission to crush the barbarian Ciletij, avenge. Jaizal’s weakness had been his pride. He had not thought serfs and peasants capable of wielding such power. He Krarlik, must be humble, learn. Meekly he must defer desire. Krarlik has an interesting streak of self-abnegation, his ancestress no Mistress of Kadun but a concubine, a worthless whore.

Cho and Zulagan had dinner. The agreement lay on the table between them.

“Call it giving something back,” said Cho.

“Looks to me as though it’s giving rather a lot back. Without wishing to seem ungrateful, I would like to ask – to note that our policies are not – I would not be suggesting because frankly I do not see we pose any threat.”

“The opposite,” said Cho succinctly. “If there is a price, it’s turning the heat up, not down. Someone has to put a bomb under them.”

“You have a reputation as a radical,” conceded Zulagan. “We have not talked frankly about – “

“My other aspects? We have not. “

“Kadun is a personal concern, should I say.”

“There were,” said Cho. “accommodations. You may call it a protection racket. In sum dues became paid to the Houses, taxes, security.” He smiled. “By them as int paid nowt before. In Carlin and Var-segan, much has been given back. In Van-senok no charges were levied. In Vaudos the word is extortion. Fas-sigree of course disappeared up its own. And then there is the sale of land not theirs by right to sell. There is an issue, charging rent for land one does not own.” He smiled again. “What duty can one owe to a non-existent emperor? They went their own way. Effectively each became an independent state. Only in the modern age did they agree once more to be All-Kadun to be a power in the modern world. The propertied class. I think the propertied class needs shaking up.”

Saryulin received notification tank-traps were to be laid across the meadow, barbed wire fences erected.

Clearly it was insufficiently macho a nation of the importance of Kadun cease as a matter of mere geography.

He responded tartly. This is twice nonsense! Shall our friends in Dabida invade? Do their tank have wings?

Duvi drew irresistible little winged tanks fluttering across the Great Divide. The Straits Times published both letter and cartoon.

The actual problem of course was it's perfectly easy to get out of Kadun if you're reasonably athletic. You walk out.

Bluff? thought Tar. They wish to see what they provoke? Whom? Let us be provoked!

"Darlings," said Airoch to the journos, "Fidub would have no alternative but to see it as a hostile act. We seek closer links with our friends in All-Kadun. Are we not both signatories to the Convention?" You know, the one that upholds free passage of peoples.

The Dabidan Representative at Fidub looked plaintive.

"Don't talk about us as though we don't exist! Makes us feel in the way."

A buffer-state between Fidub and Kadun.

Naturally Alzani-Meta resists any threat to her lucrative trade-links with Carlin!

An old war, not even sabre-rattling, more like kicking tin cans, verbal wall-paper, a radio permanently burbling in the background. This time it might be serious, but as ever 95% of the people on both sides of the border spared it five seconds' attention then got on with their lives,

That is how it was, but how it was was not precisely how it would have been, but for Qine.

By the time the summer came, Duvi was pregnant, and in fact she too had three in rapid succession, first Omnian, then Liande, then Auscu. She subscribed easily to the hairless terrier school of child-rearing. The tiresome bit, surely, is having them, get that out of the way. There were other perspectives. At it loike rabbits. No-one had ever thought Saryulin short on hormones. Nor did he lack former-single-parent guilt but, like most sufferers from this dismal ailment, he was not sure what to do about it. We must act as a family! he thought fervently. How, when the age-gap is so great? Mel and Hass went regularly to Carlin but the Great Visit was postponed and family holidays taken at 'Dunswimming', the beach-house. Asdinan seemed content to tag along, build or help build sand-castles, and read and scribble. True, he was soon more than old enough to go to Zur on his own, but that too was postponed until the dust had settled from the Qine affair.

Wandering the Grid instead of doing his homework, As suddenly went, “Waaa!” and ran downstairs, but it was spring and a warm one for Carlin, everyone was in the gardens soaking up the first hot-rays of the sun. Aargh!

Try the herb-garden. There Duvi was pottering, Saryulin lounging and Omnian failing to help,

“The news!” babbled As. “Turn the TV on!”

Reverie turned to consternation.

“It's Micheal!”

Not harmed, we trust. No, no, it's just, look, just come!

Mitch was in his final year at the Schools. Now he was speaking to the world from Var-segan..

“I have known Qine since we were born. I do not think I am a bad judge of character. He is not capable of not having done it. His politics come from his being a decent man, are in fact those of CLIK, which you will know is a wholly legitimate organization based here in Zur. Qine stands, as do I, for a society in which people are not executed for crimes they did not commit, a society in which there is the rule of law, a society in which people are not executed for their opinions. Qine is a workers’ democrat. He is outraged, as am I, by the condition of the working-class. That condition rests in good part on the right of landlords to let property unfit for human habitation. When you have finished fulminating, nowhere else on the continent, though there are rich and poor, large houses and small, is that right accepted. No Vasuculi landlord is allowed to let rat-infested hovels, as no Vasuculi employer is allowed to fire workers who reject unsafe conditions. I did not think Kadun had sunk so low that it hanged the innocent for their politics. There is not one scrap of evidence. You cannot even bring a man to court with no damn’ evidence. There is something called Justice and there is something called Evil.”

Kadun on trial.

You next, Mitch?

Mitch at home.

“Qine, you stupid, stupid bastard!”

He’d been shooting his damn’ mouth off about the capitalist class, rich bitches, bloated bastards, exploiters of the poor. One poor little ‘rich bitch’ had been raped and murdered and Qine had no adequate alibi.

Mitch displayed an awesome talent for agit-prop even at that early age (that and getting the best damn’ lawyer in the entire City). Var-segan became packed with every student agitator the Schools had spawned. Then the world’s press arrived.

Mitch remembered to mail his tutor.

There is a quota of permitted international incidents. There may on occasion be points awarded in camera, as opposed of course to on camera, for bringing such an incident to a successful close. You will return to the City to sit your Finals if you have to commute daily to do so.

There was a rally in Var-segan.

A red-headed pixie called for revolution. Mitch thought: I like red-headed pixies.

“Great speech. Sorry, I didn’t catch your name.”

“Why, thank you! Karula.”

There was a rally in the Saa’nda Senta.

“Hi, I’m Vij. I’m Tar’s nephew if you be folk from far away – Tar’s the guy called King who lives in the rabbit-warren on the hill. So I get to speak on behalf of Alzani-Meta and everyone yells at me that I’m talking garbage.”

[Shouts of hey Vij, we love you!]

“I have fans!”

[Of course he has fans, muttered foreign journo. He looks like a bloody rock star.]

Vij, like Mel, is striking: large with lots of black curls and on this occasion the attire of a beachcomber.

“I just grabbed the mic to say that as far as I can tell there is no-one at all in this country who is not on the side of Mitch and Qine. I’m also of course a beneficiary of AMI, not to mention a share-holder. Mitch isn’t the only one who knows guys in unions. I was at school with some of their kids. What is the big deal? And if they think things aren’t right, they say so, which is how it should be. That’s it, really. Except of course they are both very, very brave. They say what they think in a society that goes ape over people saying what they think. As we all shoot our mouths off here, I think we should remember that we’re fortunate to be able to without fear.”

Mitch spilled his coffee.

Heela smiled.

Chants began of so-li-da-ri-ty!

“Shut it!” said Vij (amicably). “Guys have serious things to say.”

Several hours later Vij plugged ‘Varsegan’ into the search-engine.

Did you mean Var-segan?

Vij scowled. Since when did search engines do hyphens?

Var-segan's Gridsite invited anyone who cared to go join the party.

Anyone? thought Vij, anyone at all?

He rang Tar.

"An excellent notion," said Tar. "I do not think they will close the border with Alzani-Meta on the wrong side."

"Alternatively," said Vij after a moment, "my quiet unassuming life just got interesting."

He mailed Mitch.

Love to have you, mailed back Mitch.

Even with the H-W? Tar doesn't want me to be lonely.

Always room for one more, mailed back Mitch.

He wandered into his parents' bedroom.

"How does one announce a prince of Dabida?"

"Look it up," said Kile.

"You invited him?" asked Heela.

Mitch looked shocked.

"Oh no, papa. He asked if he might come."

"You require my consent?"

"I suppose," said Mitch, "actually I do."

"Meaning he is coming anyway?"

Mitch nodded.

"I shall speak – " said Heela with mock ferocity, " – to the guy who lives in the rabbit-warren."

Vij walked into a barrage of cameras.

This official, Vij? You representing A-M, Vij? What does Tar say, Vij?

"I sit back," murmured Essa, "and count the tripwires."

The Zur Star picked up Vij's line. What is the freaking big deal here! Nothing, nothing in the politics of these two guys would merit more than two seconds' attention in the civilized world.

It's that word again. Kadun has not thought to be democratic but considered herself on the whole civilized.

Rape the Dabidan model. It's all garbage, put on for the camera. Bollocks! said three million Zuri.

The lizard gave its first belch in Vij's direction. This disreputable juvenile presuming to comment on the internal affairs of a sovereign nation. Surely Dabida is a constitutional monarchy.

The Dabidan Press guffawed. You know what they say. Dabida is a constitutional monarchy: the monarchy wrote the constitution.

Enter the Dabidan Constitution, smiling engagingly for the camera.

Effectively there is only the Constitution. If the State tear it up, there are the Crown and the people. If the Crown tear it up, there are the people and the State. If the people tear it up, demand anti-democratic legislation, there are the State and Crown. It is not classic democracy. That is why it works.

Mitch blinked.

"Who in hell devised that one?"

"Need you ask!" sighed Vij.

"Fidub?"

"PANTHER! We shall establish a kingdom in Dabida! cried Fidub. You know, like the last one we established that's just gone right down the tubes... We shall devise further checks and balances to ensure that this time it works!"

Come on, Tar. Mitch, Tar. My lord of Var-segan, Tar! You got views on Mitch, Tar?

"Certainly I have views on Mitch. He seems to me an excellent young man. We are all of us aware that differences of approach exist between the south and Kadun, differences that have been respected. There can be no respect for indecency. Clearly if one shred of decency remain in Kadun, if she is ever again to hold her head up in the community of nations, Qine must be instantly released."

The lizard dribbled over the personal power of Alzani-Meta and attempted to convince Dabida she was an absolute monarchy.

"Cho is livid," said Vij.

"Cho?"

“Micheal!”

“Have I put my foot in it?”

“Choit-ban-varna-eban-Narulis, head of Sohenoil, former leader of the Senate of Fidub. Known universally as Cho.”

“I feel myself blushing,” said Mitch. “I rarely blush. It is a strange and novel experience.”

“You wish me to present you?” teased Heela.

“It is with the deepest regret, sir – this appalling object is my son. You know the guy.”

“I know the guy,” admitted Heela.

“Essa and Tar are like that,” said Vij. “Mel and Hass spend the summer with them.”

Pause.

“Ban-varna has grand-children?”

“Four. Sarat’s the eldest, then three sisters, Shavli, Zika and Ven.”

“Your cousins visit Carlin, I understand.”

“Mel and Asdinan are about the same age.”

“And - Sarat?”

“Sarat’s more Hass’s age.”

Azt continued to treat the affair as though it were a trivial local incident involving young malcontents.

Consequently when Mitch dressed up and went to Azt to see the ‘Minister for Justice’, the Minister refused to see him. Nothing continued to happen.

“No-one,” said the hot-shot lawyer, “really believes they’ll bring it to trial any more. Digging their heels in.”

In such circumstances the Press tend to lose interest. Fortunately there was the story behind the story.

Even here in Fidub there are guys with a strong personal link to Kadun. One such man is

Choit-ban-varna-eban-Narulis, head of Sohenoil, eminent politician, notorious radical. Cho lives in Narulis’ family residence, no less. You have seen shots of Var-segan. It’s a pre-fab in comparison.

Camera dwells lovingly on the family home.

All-Kadun convulsed.

A little it is like the Summer Palace at Khole, Cho's des res on the Sohenisle. The front consists in one enormous highly polished room supported by pillars, ball-room, throne-room, who can say for it is not precisely a room but roofed space, the front open, protected from rain by a covered terrace. Perhaps it is the scene of amateur dramatics for there is a stage along the right-hand wall, stage or dais. In the far left-hand corner there is a small door to the rooms beyond and the courtyard.

“It would be slightly less appalling,” said Essa, “coming from me.”

“Would it?” asked Tar.

Essa shrugged.

Press-fiends at the gate, Cho.

“We say the Anile throne has a symbolic significance, regardless of whether there is anyone sitting on it. That significance, the fight for truth, justice, decency, is epitomized by Mitch’s current struggle. I am delighted to see we still breed ‘em right.

Ciletij began to froth at the mouth.

“I maintain close ties with PANTHER. I have seen the file on Qine. He seems to me an excellent young man. The conditions of the urban working-class in Kadun are an affront to all civilized people. They are wholly unacceptable and from Wintawa to the Leolisle they are not tolerated. There are no unfettered rights of property. There is gross cowardice, is there not, in the refusal of open debate on the matter. No evidence exists against Qine. Must I really turn the screws?”

Airoch cold.

“The Republic of Fidub does not presume to dictate to Sohenoil with whom it may trade, still less to AMI.”

“He has threatened Kadun!”

“He has expressed an opinion. Darlings, one understands that to express an opinion is in Kadun a capital offence. This is not Kadun.”

“One says,” murmured Vij, “what one thinks not what others would wish one say.”

“Of course,” said Heela.

Brazen it out, thought Vij. He began to laugh.

“Couldn’t you have tried, Cho!” He grinned what he hoped was engagingly at his hosts. “To sound like any other outraged democratic politician.”

“We need the south,” said Mitch hesitantly.

“Ciletij too is part of the Quadrant.”

“How damn’ dependent are we? Surely the banks in the City - ?”

Eggshells, thought Vij. It is his politics that are offended or his nationalism? Both! Ah me, the global power of capital.

“Between us,” sighed Vij, “we can turn screws in the City.”

“Zeshazesh!” said Duvi. She took Saryulin’s hand.

“His Imperial Majesty,” said Saryulin, then stopped.

“Who?” said Qine’s mates in the union.

Zulagan said: “He’s just bloody declared war on Kadun!”

“Notorious radical,” said Hunri.

“You gonna boycott Kadun, Cho?”

“That would scarcely benefit the urban poor.”

The lizard didn’t hiss. Why should it have when Ciletij was howling the door down?

Kind of inflammatory, Cho, why did you say that, Cho, walking a tightrope, Cho, careful you don’t fall, Cho.

“Fall where? The true empire,” said Cho, “united five kingdoms under the imperial crown. It had no designs on neighbouring territories. The perversions of the years of decline have come – perversely – to represent the whole. Pick,” added Cho, “my lord Krarlik, on someone your own size!”

Who the hell is Krarlik?

Statements are being made, thought Mitch. I am not sure that I understand the language.

The summer holidays began and Mel and Hass went off to Fidub.

Essa and Tar are like that, babbled some chatty Zuri. The camera arrived at the white house on the dunes.

Click, Ven is talking to the donkey, click, Shavli is just off to a party, click that is Zika in the pool. Click, the camera rests adoringly on the pin-up.. Darling, he is delicious! Death, really one had thought the Aniles atrophied! This pin-up the Anile heir. There is an Anile heir. His father is an ecologist, I understand. How – extraordinary.

Sarat’s first encounter with the press, Gorse was to recall fondly, was not harmonious.

“Why don’t these guys get a life!”

“What happened to the agreement?” asked Mel.

There had been an understanding with the hill. Take all the pictures you like of Tar’s baby boys, so long as you do it with a zoom lens.

Rumour, new evidence, rumour, discussions at the highest level, rumour, gross miscarriage of justice, rumour some poor dumb bastard will be scapegoat. Qine was released.

“I’ll be off in the morning,” said Vij. “Books to read, essays to write.”

“Tell me about it!” said Mitch. “I really cannot thank you enough.” Pause. “I have written thank-you letters. I should appreciate it if you would be so kind as to deliver them.”

“Not a problem,” said Vij.

Qine, leaner, paler, harder, walking slowly up the drive to the House. Mitch came out to meet him and they went off into the Orangery. Only two people know what they said to each other and they aren’t telling but to his mum and dad Qine said, “I can’t repay that. Can’t stay here, neither.”

“I understand that,” said his dad.

“There’s one more person I have to talk to,” said Qine.

“So I should hope!” said his dad.

Heela looked up.

“I have brought more trouble to this house.”

“Nonsense. We thrive on it.”

“I don’t know how to thank you.”

“No matter. What will you do?”

“Go underground.”

“We won!” howled Mitch.

Heela raised his eyebrows.

“We?”

And so now it is acknowledged there is another player in the game of Kadun or, as people put it more succinctly, the cat is out of the bag. On warm summer evenings when all is still the strange sight can be seen of people lying on the ground on their sides, grazing their hip-bones and getting dirt in their ears, listening for the sound of money talking. It is thought. It is understood. It is believed. All these are good beginnings for sentences that people don't know how to end. The emperor (not that there is one, of course) concerns himself with this matter of Kadun. The empire is 600 years distant and as near as the expression of taut fury on Searc's face when he is out-manoeuvred. A lot of years will pass before I rejoice in the ludicrous title of Economic Liaison Officer to the Anile Throne. For the moment Cho's main achievement is probably contributing to men and women of good will doing exactly nothing. There is a variety of reasons for this. As Cantilip was more or less to put it, lads 'ave their pride, don't want ter go cap in 'and ter big 'ouse.

No-one knows what Cho would do in the event of whatever the latest plot was coming to fruition and no-one wants to ask him. Asking the leader of the Fidubi Senate for assistance in overthrowing the government in Azt is treason and overthrowing the government in Azt oneself is patriotism. What is asking assistance from Narulis' heir? Wicked people like me said that Kadun was like a teenager pretending it could operate independently of its parents. Even more wicked people said that Kadun was schizophrenic about the empire. By this they meant not that the empire was both its glory and its shame, thought that was true too, but that empire was both Fidubi and irturbi. After all, Fidub had spent the last 600 years being the official enemy and the unofficial friend.

Grid-sites appeared devoted to the Cult of Death of High Harn. Denzine Master Chief Preceptor Fugitry contacted Alzani-Meta, Fugitry who was to be Mel's tutor and also mine: later Kyse will describe me as 'world-expert' in the Cult of Death, but there are a lot of years to go there too. The number of titles I shall accrue, deservedly or not, is itself ludicrous, and that's just the flattering ones (I'm also the Harn-bred whore, a camp-follower and Sarat's little joke, the more printable ones). For the moment thinking irturbi were disturbed by encroaching centralization not encroaching sorcery and nobody much was getting excited, except of course PANTHER: snake-worshippers have Grid-sites too.

Kadun is old, Kadun is subtle. You went for meetings with the management team of the refinery at Tjulsit. They were civil enough (in, you said to yourself, the inevitable, patronising irturbi way) but you knew you never wanted to meet those people again. Telecoms as advanced as they are now, what need? You skied in the purpose-built resort in the Lausanne Heights. The scenery was magnificent, but the hotel was awful. I swear the staff tried to make you feel in the way! Next year, you tried Ciletij. As a gust of cold air on a summer's evening drives people indoors, fewer people visited Kadun.

Small-ads in thick smudged lettering promised charisma and pornography flooded Kadun. Grid-sites multiplied, bureaucracy festered and PANTHER were grim. Rules for a past age! What price derring-do in the sands with the world's media watching? Shall Dabida invade Kadun to stamp out sorcery! Shall Fidub violate the integrity of a sovereign state by sending the Aniles to conquer, occupy and rule? And what is PANTHER in this modern age but a bunch of castrate tom-cats? In this modern age, with its electronics, its telecoms, its in places free Press, its Federation, its technological warfare, rules could be broken.

Kadun has never led the world in respect for human rights, but now the allegations grow darker and even insane. Malcontents. Blown out of all proportion. Any bloody fool can get a load of gobbledy-gook off the Grid. What is unbearable cannot be real.

What are PANTHER doing!

But it becomes evident that though things are bad they could be worse, that the Cult is being stayed, covens blossom but shortly afterwards wither and perish and this of course adds to the schizophrenia. The old gentleman in Fidub who keeps cats is clearly operational.

Ship of the Vasucula Fleet Torrential Haze (some people think Vasuculi are a bit strange) mooched into northern waters, supposedly, if anyone were so gross as to ask, or search them or something, loaded with materiel for their gallant allies in Ciletij, though why their gallant allies in Ciletij, whose life-blood is heavy industry, should want materiel from Vasucula is less clear. Anyhow, they ran out of steam before they reached Ciletij and found it necessary to put in at the naval base at Samandit in Van-senok, which they could do since technically there is absolutely no war, and even if there was even Corsin acknowledges that the cunt witch bitch Marula, Mistress

of Van-senok, far away in the northern forests is a law unto herself. The only way to get Van-senok is to kill every tree in sight. The Kadun Fleet joined them on board for a drink and found it regrettably necessary to requisition their cargo. The Vasuculi smiled. The first time they had wondered how much of it actually reached the resistance, but they're good capitalists in Vasucula and of course the middle-men get a cut. It turned out to be 20%.

Long-range weapons are at a premium in Kadun, their distribution curiously limited. This is because ordinary guys can take on Cult guys so long as they can stay out of the range of the Cult guys' minds. What that range is depends on the degree of the Cult guys and people can make and have made bad mistakes. You will swiftly riposte, ah, then ordinary guys can take on PANTHER guys. The key is of course that ordinary guys do not on the whole want to take on PANTHER guys because the PANTHER guys aren't threatening to tear their brains from their moorings.

The most obvious long-range weapon of course falls from the skies. Most of the Kadun Air Fleet cannot be wholly relied upon to bomb the right people. There are people in Azt who would actually rather most of the Kadun Air Fleet didn't exist but since clearly its non-existence would leave Kadun a sitting-duck, its existence is grudgingly tolerated, if not its possession of long-range weapons from Vasucula. Gosh, one never knows when they might come in handy.

Anyway, think of the bears: if Kadun is perceived to be not merely divided, which she obviously is, but fragmented, Ciletij opportunists may seek to join the party.

The Cult achieved governance in Azt, but really, mused people, it appears to be more they have achieved governance of Azt. There had been troop movements and a flurry of ill-reported incidents, even air battles. Civil war in Kadun! But then it became clear to outside observers that Kadun both resisted and succeeded in resisting and large swathes of territory continued to behave largely as normal. Borders have been redrawn. Only a matter of time before Kadun splits. From time to time something exploded somewhere, there was a vid on the Grid of rubble and a few guys were reported dead. If the bang had been loud enough, the southern Press asked: Is this civil war in Kadun? The furore quickly died down as it obviously wasn't and in fact Kadun appeared to be in stasis. Why is Kadun not bombed into submission! The word was rather that, if anyone was bombed into submission, it would be Azt. Certainly Azt terrorized people but it had failed miserably to terrorize the right people and in particular the military, who clearly held the balance of power. Some people who'd never had much time for Kadun's officer corps now markedly warmed to them. Others continued to wonder when and if they were ever going to do anything about the conditions of the poor. Why on earth does the Kadun Air Fleet not simply bomb Azt! I guess some of the guys are loyal to the government? They don't want to fight each other? To horrific allegations of torture and murder were added stories that, thought outside observers, were just plain weird. In the age of the smartphone complete with video recorder, both sides tended to a maidenly coyness regarding the exercise of the more graphic aspects of mind-war, at least until Caniba, but from time to time stories surfaced of air-battles which didn't look like air-battles, but much more like firework displays or maybe the kind of stuff you get at air-shows with pretty coloured smoke. Someone is making this stuff up! Like maybe cat-people. Everyone knows what kooks there are on the Grid. Probably made up by a kid in Harn. Close analysis would have revealed two sets of aircraft, both apparently members of the Kadun Air Fleet. But one had VS emblazoned on its wings and occasionally a silver birch, and the other had FV and a death's head. FV is the motto of the Cult squadrons. It stands for Forever Victorious. Depends which circles you move in: others render it Fucking Vampires.

Corsin collectively describes the six Cult regiments. The vampires are their air-arm. There's a very simple concept at stake here. What your mind tells you is happening to you is what is happening to you, unless you tell it to stop drivelling and start freaking out the other guy, and if your mind tells you there's a very large boulder falling on you and that notion overwhelms you, you will curl up into a ball to attempt to shield yourself or try to run, without the other guy working on your bones and soft tissues, which if he is Corsin is what he will do next, slowly separating the constituent parts of your body while holding your screaming mind intact and alive. Not a lot of people know that. Fortunately, not a lot of people can do it, either. Also fortunately, some people can resist and destroy it. Corsin are based around Azt and do not routinely concern themselves with events in the vast hinterland of Kadun, which either do not require their control or are for the moment at least beyond their control. True, if they scent fresh blood they may suddenly appear, torture and kill a large number of people and go away again, but there aren't so many of them as to be expendable and being hanged by

PANTHER is not part of their agenda. They like to know what's on the ground first. Still, their mere existence exacts a certain docility.

And their growing numbers. Couple of things here about training-times. If you are PANTHER, you can fairly rapidly adapt your skills to other media but it takes much longer to become either Corsin or capable of destroying Corsin. An air-arm is of no use to Corsin if all it can do is drop bombs and provide transport like the regular guys. It has to be able to do what Corsin suspects Fidub can do, but doesn't know. Of course Fidub being able to do it doesn't mean KAF can do it. If Corsin dominate the skies, then it's all over. On the other hand an expensive mistake could cost them everything. On the third hand, insufficient aerial mind-warriors could still be defeated by very large numbers of regular guys. Finding out how to do things on your own by trial and error takes longer than being taught how to do them. Lastly, Corsin do not think it inconceivable in the particular eventuality they conceive that Dabida and Fidub would come to the aid of KAF. All they would have to say to the public is that the Cult tried to get the regular guys. Since they scarcely even govern Kadun, Corsin are not ready for war with Dabida and Fidub.

KAF can think too and what it think was how to get our guys trained by Fidub.

Couple of things about the skills themselves. There is the mechanical skill of acting on muscle and the more complex skill of acting on mind. Thus you can stop someone shooting you without interfering with his free will, just as you can physically. Acting on his mind somewhat deflects his attention from shooting you to the giant cat lunging at his throat. It still doesn't interfere with his free will: he reacts as he would physically. Thus Kadun is two countries. One is Cult. No-one is quite sure what the other one is. Some people are loyal to an idea of Kadun which leads them to obey what they like to call the lawful government, oblivious to the cat-calls asking what is lawful about it. Others are loyal to a different idea of Kadun whether that be Kadun before the Cult crawled back or the ideals of Narulis' Kadun. Some people want democracy. A lot of people are loyal to their Houses but it is not as simple as wishing Carlin or Var-segan seceded from All-Kadun; Narulis generally creeps in somewhere. Then of course there are the rationalists, some of whom back or at any rate obey the 'lawful' government because they have never seen the Cult in action and so don't believe it can be as black as it is painted. Obviously there must be order. So far as there is a government of Kadun at all, that government is Corsin, who are something the members of the civilian administration which is the face Azt shows to the world are not: intelligent and informed. Thus when the Minister squawks there must be a show-trial of General Prog or of Nodsi, Regional Commander (air) for the entire Lausanine, Corsin say get real. Or at any rate not yet. For the moment the keys to the submission of All-Kadun are stealth, cunning and undermining the moral authority of the old ruling-class. Corsin understand that if they do anything stupid they can lose, particularly if Kadun were to split, Var-segan and Van-senok in the west allying with Vasucula and Carlin in the east allying with Dabida. Thus the fiction of a united Kadun must at all cost be maintained and the Great Divide between the south and her neighbour imprinted on every irturbi's brain. Their ways are not our ways, particularly of course with regard to women and gays. To be a gallant flier fighting with every brain cell and sinew for Kadun's soul does not mean you want a woman in the cock-pit next to you.

That said, few in Kadun think the south would be a push-over because of the composition of her forces and the gender of the President of Fidub. Beyond the knee-jerk reaction, all possible futures are on the table, though some less likely than others. There is general recognition among civilized people that Kadun must change at the socio-economic level. Grinding poverty must be alleviated. People should not die of readily treatable diseases. And of course the criminal justice system could be improved upon.

If Kadun wished to come into line with the south and become a freedom-loving democracy with equal rights for all, Sarat's story would be a simple one, but Kadun has yet to be persuaded of the necessity of these things and it isn't. In a nutshell, for the moment all shades of sane opinion are united against Azt. Nonetheless, people acknowledge a time may come when they may end up fighting each other. The Army in particular regard this eventuality with horror.

So much for the backdrop against which our heroes and heroines grew up.

2. MORE BEAUTIFUL THAN PICTURES

Mitch has a boat on the Delta. She noses through the reeds, emerges in clear water, moors at Kreeel. The family book in at the inn, fake ye olde, with ten-year-old timbers. After dinner Mitch and Karula relax on the

veranda, the babies safe in the arms of the gophers. Later they dance. Besotted with each other. “Impatient, charming, dominant – and kind. Maybe even tender. Oh, and bright.”

A veritable paragon. The sort of guy who could really rock Kadun.

PANTHER watch Mitch and Mitch watches everyone.

Sear and Ravish launch their new campaign for Marquis. A beautiful woman in a cage. Upper-class porn. Harn’s feminists rage, midst the counter-cries of Prude! Censorship! It echoes an older image, the feminists say, can we not move on! Any spotty adolescent in an agency can pick on an image. There is no censorship in Harn, at least that kind. The ancient spidery things behind the scenes keep their activities well concealed. These guys do what? Is not something you would catch the Chief Minister of Harn saying. Torture, murder, general humiliation and abuse? We know, guys, we know. So Harn is seamy. There are boats you do not rock. You let PANTHER rock them. PANTHER, a little discreet enquiry tells Mitch, hang out in the cat-house, an annexe of the Fidubi Rep Centre.

The Jumesit Palace still stands in Azt, its delicate ironwork gates padlocked, and people go about their business just as though it weren't there. Where else could it be? is a surprisingly good question, but of course Krarlik didn't know that as he slipped one night inside the gates, dogged in his search for the throne. There was a banshee howl. Good evening, brother, riposted Krarlik. Children ran across his path in the broad daylight of their time. One has heard something, muttered Krarlik.

There is a step up. It is all pale green and white and gold; no harsh bands of solid colour here despoil. A huge floor seems to stretch endlessly, giving an impression of limitless space and light, and beyond it a garden, the people-space where Azt met and talked and laughed. There is an arch. Krarlik walked through into more of the same. The Star came tumbling into the throne room, naked, shaved, lithe, every fraction of her body covered with fragments of silver, an intricate metal head-dress cascaded, cartwheeled, twisted turned, tumbled, then fell to the ground before Jaizal. Master. He smiled. Krarlik continued his search. There came the Bronzes, so called because against a copper sky in a copper world unfolds a panorama of line and curve and perhaps those are horsemen but who can tell, at least until one stops, silhouetted against the skyline, and raises his spear. The walls of time and space are very thin here but there is no passage. Our radical young heroes and heroines are in for one or two shocks.

Occasionally Mitch visits his parents.

“It is nonsense,” said Heela.

“History written by the victors? It’s the biggest con in history. How many people subscribe to this garbage?”

Mitch rambles on. “You ever think CLIK has a whole load of money behind it?”

Heela and Kile exchange glances.

“Truly you do not know?”

“Know what?”

Heela logs on.

CLIK is proud to list its sponsors.

“Sohenoil! Oh come on!”

And who does the PR? And who does Sohenoil’s PR? Lo, it is the same firm. I am so surprised.

Mitch sits back cackling.

“Fidubis are good democrats. Maybe the decision came from elsewhere. What do we actually know about sir?”

Steamy affair with Madam President in her wild youth. Well, well, well! Rumoured to have trounced his chances of her job. Don’t get that. If holier-than-thou Fidub operates a double-standard, wouldn’t it be her chances?

“Perhaps he had no chance,” said Kile.

“Maybe, maybe. Even Fidub baulks at being governed by the Anile emperor.”

I see. He lives in the Summer Palace. He is almost never seen without PANTHER. He is hand-in-glove with PANTHER and probably is PANTHER. Sohenoil makes generous donations to CLIK (I love that one!). Former leader of the Senate of Fidub, thirty years in democratic politics. Of course he has absolutely no interest in this matter of Kadun. Who knows that better than I. It is absurd, is it not, sir, to think that you would be interested in anything so uncouth as putting a fire-cracker under them.

“I should prefer,” said Mitch, “to be hanged for the coup I am plotting not the one I’m not.”

"Indeed," said Heela.

"Meaning?"

"Talk to him."

"I have your consent, father?" asked Mitch, suspiciously meek. "Why?"

"I trust him to protect the interests of our class? I do not." Heela assumed the expression ordinary parents might assume for initiating discussion of contraception. "Micheal, there is the question of your education. You must speak with PANTHER!"

"You just told me that, papa."

Sarshi took herself off to college in Zur. She met Vij not through Carlin but at the party. That's the party, not a party. The party is what they call the caff attached to the shrine. You go to the party if you're distressed, you go to the party if you're cool and of course you go to the party if you're curious.

Sarshi held her glass up to the light.

"The wine they sip..."

"This is the question?" asked Vij.

"The vision gone now, stars are laid to rest, the moon lies sundered. Comes to every stricken breast the weird of night, the tapping of the blind man's cane and governance. By death! Isn't that our version?" She laughed.

"I spoil the party."

"No chance," said Vij.

"What about your average ego-maniac?"

"We're not naive."

"In the worst there are hidden depths! Everyone's all right, really. Excuse me, I come from a country where they torture people."

We were out all night! wrote Sarshi. We talked about you-know-what. Enlighten you when I get home.

My daughter becomes Hadin-Wadud.

"A few steamy affairs," said Pilo wistfully.

Sorg is Sarshi's twin. He completed basic training and crossed fingers and toes. Where would they post him? Some transport depot in the back-streets of Tjulsit! But no! But worse! Aargh! Caniba.

Caniba Base is an odd place, a law unto itself. It accommodates Layat, General Commanding the Fourth Army, on the grounds (according to Caniba) of being the Fourth Army's brains. The cultural arm, they call themselves. Caniba is the home of the cerebral, the educators and the intelligence gatherers, the odd-balls, according to the rest. Officers and men come from all over to attend courses. To the relief of the residents, they go away again.

"We do not squander talent," said General Prog smugly, Uncle Athanou to Saryulin's children, not a real uncle but an old friend. Saryulin made positive noises. Sorg from a tender age had been described as 'difficult'. Sarat 16 babbled only about a demo to be held outside the Ciletij Rep Centre against development of the northern wilderness. He's signed the on-line petition.

Baz and Paw exchanged glances.

"A little talk, I think," said Baz

"Birds and the bees," said Paw.

"Wanton destruction of one of the few remaining -" said Baz. "The Anile heir thinks they're a bunch of total savages, right?"

"Him and half Fidub," said Paw.

"And whose name are they going to pick on?"

"Oh come on! You mean anyone reads these things?"

"And then he went to the demo!" said Baz enthusiastically.

"Thinking of it," said Sarat.

"If no-one reads them, what's the point?"

"Numbers!"

"We, the undersigned, we think you should talk about this."

"Make a speech, you mean? Are you telling me I can't sign petitions?"

"You can't pretend you're just a citizen of Fidub."

"Of course I'm just a - Cho."

“Cho.”

“OK, somebody tries to make something - I didn't mean it! I bleat. I do mean it, just not like that. Everyone can say what he thinks except me?”

"You have to think it through," said Paw. "You can't be just Sarat. I know you don't like it. If you so much as said you like Crumbles, it'd be Anile heir endorses Crumbles!"

"Calm down. Be a good little teenager and talk to your mum and dad."

He talked if not calmed down.

"I thought," said Baya cautiously, "you wanted to be a vet."

"I do. I care. I'm not going to have my caring bit cut off to satisfy a load of prats in Ciletij. I mustn't care enough to actually say so, right?"

"You will be defined," said Essa. "Others' expectations, others' behaviour to you. they will assume you are something you are not. You must resist definition, remain Sarat. Think before you speak. Or sign petitions.

“People will see,” hazarded Sarat, “a whole lot of stuff that isn't there. I can't make a speech about all the stuff that isn't there before I – add a note to the petition, no, I'm not winding up Ciletij, I just care about trees.”

“Just be aware,” said Baya.

Essa suppressed a sigh. Kadun must blow. It is important Dabidans, Fidubi play their part in her reconstruction. Steer her away from pernicious elements bent on turning the Caniba Plain into a multi-storey car-park. It is just possible Sarat's chosen sphere is such he may escape - definition. Fat chance.

Sarat went off to see Cho.

“The message I'm getting – you and PANTHER – people will think - “

“What?”

“That – I'm somehow part of it. I want to go to a sit-in.”

“About what?”

“Ciletij want to rip the forest open. I do know about the rape.”

Emperor Kaminua massacred Ciletij by burning them alive, setting fire to the forest they hid in, or not, according to whose version it is.

“A sensitive issue to this day.”

“I'm not completely thick. Most people don't even know about you and PANTHER.”

“Sarat – the people you talk to in, what is it you call it, RL, they know you. Once you speak to the world, you speak to people who know nothing of you, who can readily be manipulated by – the people who know about me and PANTHER.”

“People will think – I'm making some kind of statement.”

“Fidubi moral supremacy springs to mind.”

“Then I can't speak out. No way!”

“Use it, then. Use it and be heard. But think first. What are people hearing?”

“I can't help what people think. Dad said I had to – reject it, just stay me.”

“Do not be drawn by it. Do not explain. Your turf is – fairly clear-cut. The chief polluters of the continent are Kadun and Ciletij, but that is at least known to be the south versus the rest. The micro is better than the macro. Perhaps not bacteria! The threat to feeding-grounds or migration of a particular beastie, perhaps. Pictures of its cute offspring.”

“Aw,” said Sarat. His particular obsession was the skagga, a sort of large and repulsive hairless rat. “Lichen! Truly, there are lichen on the ancient trees of the northern forests found nowhere else.”

“Lichen are excellent.”

“Would it be right – steer clear of people. NoZone is about people.”

“Be especially clear about that. You are a biologist or a politician?”

“I'm me,” said Sarat. “That'll really impact, talking about lichen!”

Cho looked at him thoughtfully.

“We are not in fact discussing your profound scientific concern - ?”

“There's no point if you don't get people's attention.”

“We appear to have moved on from a voice in a crowd.”

“You're making me think,” said Sarat reproachfully. “What you're saying - “

“People will hear you if you say grass is green. Except they won't. They will find an alternative meaning.

Fact is better than moral judgement.”

“What they're doing is wrong,” said Sarat. “Mum said be aware. Of – of people making an issue of what they think I've said, not what I have said.”

“Sarat – if you envisage a future in front of the camera – I do advise not yet!”

Ancient spidery things take a discreet interest in the proclivities of Var-segan, and here is Mitch, with difficulty containing his temper, while around him is spewed contempt for the rest of humanity.

It has been made clear these are men-only gatherings or at least business meetings at which the attendance of partners is not expected (to which it happens that no female business-persons are invited). Mitch wants to tell them where to put it, but Karula wants to know what the bastards talk about on their own. I have my babies!

What more can a woman desire?

“I do not think that is the case,” says Mitch.

Searc (known as Shark) smiles.

“You have a reputation as a radical!”

Beejay thinks to rescue him.

“We are all radicals when young! Dear boy, you must dine with me, present your case. A certain intimacy with Kadun may be required to understand you. Then of course I shall demolish your arguments.”

“Indeed? I think I did not catch your name, sir.”

“Karba ban-jaizat-stoan, Kadun Representative at Harn.” Shark’s voice is expressionless.

“A charming habit of the Vasuculi, is it not, calling the aged and decrepit ‘sir’. Come now, we shall leave these gentlemen to their own devices.”

We shall? Out of the frying-pan....

“Offal,” says Beejay in the safety of the car.

“Lord Shark has an interesting reputation,” says Mitch.

Mitch returns.

Make you some coffee? Well.

Ha!

He is wicked, Mitch reports. He is wicked about Shark, he is wicked about Dabida, he is wicked about Zani, he is wicked about the workings of the government of Harn. He is especially wicked about the machinations of Azt. He is universally wicked, witty, a delight.

Only how does he survive if he’s not a front?

He asked me about my education! I dished back some tripe about life being a continuing process of education.

Mitch can’t help laughing. Here I sit, product of some of the most rigorous and not to mention expensive education in the world and people hover over me like I was some poor kid in a tenement.

“He told you,” said Karula, “what to do to survive.”

“Interesting, isn’t it.”

The Imperial Air Fleet is a group of Fidubi pilots wearing Kadun uniform who have appeared out of the mist and built a nest in the heart of Regional Command. They are instructors. They are providing training in special ops (an elite corps, you understand). They are also PANTHER. Intricate negotiation had been required, culminating in Cho meeting senior officers of KAF. Clearly assistance from Choit-ban-varna-eban-Narulis is entirely different to assistance from the Republic of Fidub. Indeed, Cho had made that most clear. There are two distinct aspects to this matter of Kadun. That thing does not sit on a silver chair. The other of course is the future of Kadun after the Cult is defeated. These subtleties would be lost on Azt and indeed most people do not care to look too closely at the deep water under them and all the sharks in it. We are practical men. All cats are grey in the dark. (Joke: Kadun uniform is pale grey.) Whatever else they are, they are hardly a threat. We have other concerns. Can they do the business? How can we use it? What is life like in FAF? About half FAF are female. Life’s little difficulties arise over gender politics and other questions of mores, not enemy aliens training our pilots. These are friendly aliens, but aliens nonetheless. Of course it could never work in Kadun.

“You cannot tell me the female mind is not weaker.”

“You want to meet some of the girls, you really do.”

“It is not appropriate. It is not feminine.”

“What is feminine?”

“You accept a woman in command?”

“I have a woman in command.”

Evil Fidubi grins.

“We all do. Her name is Airoch.”

“The exception that proves the rule?” teased one of the Fidubi, but there was a certain tension in the air. Time to talk about the weather again. Maybe when we know each other a bit better. Just what is it, guys? What is your problem? We are guests.

Thus too of course in Carlin but in Carlin they were more used to our good friends from the south.

Mel returned babbling from Carlin.

“You could have warned me!”

“About what, darling?”

“About the music!”

“Fidubi timbers.”

“Window. Music. In the.”

“Oh that,” said Saski. “Hardly our business.”

“Cho’s, possibly,” said Tar. “Not ours.”

“What is it!”

“That’s a rather long story,” said Tar.

“Why has no-one let it out!”

The music. Window. In the. Trapped.

Tar grinned

“Ancient legend has it,” he intoned. “When the emperor returns.”

“Oh,” said Mel. Pause. “Couldn't they let it out anyway! I mean things have changed.”

I don't suppose they know how to, thought Tar. Should I teach them!

“You made that up,” accused Saski afterwards.

Tar grinned again.

Professional advice, thinks Mitch. One should not be too proud to take professional advice. So I walk into the Fidubi Rep Centre? I think perhaps we should be a bit subtle about this.

The PANTHER site is uncompromising. If you have a problem with the guys with the strange head-gear, click here.

“Gulp,” says Mitch.

“The trees,” says Karula.

He laughed.

“Oh indeed the trees.” He played with his pen. “The Isles sing. Carlin sings. These things are troublesome, are they not, to the modern rational mind. Because they are indisputable.”

“It would be a pity,” said Karula, “if we ended up at the bottom of the river because we didn’t know how to look after ourselves.”

“But that is in any case true,” said Mitch. “It requires no mind-games. Let us just have a little look at the other matter.”

The true face of Kadun. Death sitting on a silver chair and wearing a silver coronet leers at her from the monitor. The image of desecration, they have been taught to call it, but now she wants to be exact. The name of the Anile Emperor is mud. And if this is perceived to be his true face who is surprised. Something stirs in her mind, something she learned as a child, but she can’t quite remember. More links to click on. Same old image. What do they actually think, so to speak. ‘The mystics confuse with an objectivist overlay the fundamental truths of existence.’ Oh, right. Death the only and ultimate reality.

Discussion forum? OK, who shall we be? Kaminua and Asyrion! But there are many Kaminuas and Asyrions already, which may or may not be revealing, since opinion is divided as to whether Kaminua and Asyrion were the good guys or the most evil people who ever lived. Asyrionn32 and Kaminua19@irite.net begin to read the messages. They post: oh puh-lease! What century is this? They post again: I have never in my life read such a load of confused babble. They’re rather enjoying this, but duty calls. They return to the search engine. “Anile Throne” +myths. Got it! ‘The Anile Throne permits only the true Master of Kadun to sit upon it.’ So Death is Master of Kadun? “Silver coronet” +”silver chair”. ‘Beyond the edge of

the sea lay the legendary kingdom of Va, the realm joyeux, the earthly paradise. Here in truth no pain, no death, no fear, its symbol a silver chair. This Narulis took as his symbol. This may be considered just a leetle presumptuous, but explains a great deal about the subsequent history of the empire. It was supposed to be inviolate. It is. People aren't. ' It is? little Grid-site author. You are who? But they looked in vain for a bio and couldn't find anything about the coronet. They went back to the results of the search. And Carlin and Carlin and Carlin and the Dacunine Window and Carlin. They grinned to themselves wondering if Saryulin quite understood there were approximately 30,000,000 mentions of Carlin on the Grid. Indeed the world changes. "Dacunine Window". Now we are out of fantasy-land into academe. One of the masterpieces of the Silabrian School. We must visit, Mitch! I have to see that Window.

"Death is Master of Kadun. Do you not find that a somewhat unyielding piece of baloney?"

Marketing. Looks like someone's had the same idea.

Man, there is such shit on this Grid!

"It sings? The Anile throne sings? Oh come on!"

Mardis raged about urban blight.

"Let's pretend it doesn't exist, then we don't have to do anything about it!"

"What do you suggest I do, take my trusty revolver and shoot the bloody rats!"

"They'd just come back."

"They would indeed. You tell me truly Fidub is rat-less, devoid of rodentia."

"What I'm telling you is it's like Carlin!"

Sorg fiddled with his ear.

"Come again, I fear I may have misheard - "

"The cities are like they are because no-one gives a shit. Saryulin gives a shit. Fidub gives a shit. It's not difficult."

"Perhaps a trifle shitty? So what you're saying is someone has to give a shit."

"That's what I'm saying," said Mardis. "One has a responsibility."

Whoops! What says the sage elder now?

"One, perhaps. Two, no. Finish your education first!"

"Don't start!" said Mardis. "Would you help?"

"Mardis, for - you're recruiting me?"

"No! Just curious." Sorg took a deep breath. "What we have to do is work out what we're going to do next."

"We?"

"You know you're a good chap underneath it all. Everybody sits on the fence."

"There are worse places. Under it, in a shallow pit pushing up daisies."

"Why shallow?" asked Mardis.

"I don't know. Sounded more sinister?"

Cho looked at the message from the cat-house and laughed: Karula preppers again.

"Darling," challenged Amida, "name me one theory of revolution that takes into account both the necessity of reproduction and the primary role played therein by the female of the species."

Cho laughed again.

Sarat and Hass at the annual conference of NoZone in Zur were ravished by the camera, followed back to the hill. His short presentation on lichen and liverworts even earned him a nod of approval from his biology mistress.

Sarat bought his first pair of mirror-shades.

Mel edged around the subject of the Window.

"It's my heritage!" Sarat growled mutinously, but said nothing more.

That's sick, that's garbage. Such were the sounds of the Sarat in its natural habitat, but his head remained firmly in the ozone layer. There was school, there were family, the menagerie to tend, the skagga to be saved, that unappealing little beast with its pink piggy eyes, probably threatened with extinction solely in order that someone with an exceptionally soft heart dive to its rescue, but Kadun could not be dismissed from consciousness, a pimple under the skin, a whitehead an unreachable itch, the bane of his life, a part of his being. Every grown-up he knows is concerned about Kadun. It's getting worse, not better.

The quickest way to Var-segan is through Vascula and so Cho, delegate at some conference or other in Wintawa, turned into a black cat at midnight and disappeared into the dark.

“Dad works in the estate office,” said Changri.. “Like his grandad and his dad before him. Qine thought young Mitch was a right pain in the – all his talk about rights. What does it mean to a bloke who’s starving? Qine got his pecker up. Oh well, if the young master says so, that’s it, isn’t it, sir. It doesn’t mean anything, you stupid little prick. There was people around. They got a bit – flustered, you could say... You have to understand..”

Cho laughed.

“I understand.”

“Say what’s on yer mind but be polite about it. Mitch said, you call me sir, you mean it. You call me Mitch, you stupid bastard, you mean that. You do not say what you do not mean. That’s how I see it. Qine said, all right, you stupid bastard, you come with me! Took him down the tenements.”

“That were when it dawned on Qine Mitch couldn’t do owt. His dad couldn’t. Because they didn’t own the land. Live on the estate, you live decent, you get a good school. You get a chance. Other places, you haven’t got a hope from the time you first see the light of day.. The whole of folks’ lives, their health, their kiddies’ schooling, it all depends on the capitalists.”

“Young Mitch went off to college, had his young friends to stay, took them to poor folks’ places. Bad as him? They were worse! Qine had his mates. So there they all were, up half the night drinking and arguing. Lads behaving as lads do, and then of course.. But then lads find lasses, get more settled in their ways.”

“Or more measured in their plotting,” said Cho.

Changri laughed.

“You want this straight up?”

“Being polite about it, mind,” said Cho.

“Bugged to that! What Mitch wants to do and what Mitch can do, they’re poles apart. You want to know what I think his problem is?”

“Aye, lad, that I do.”

“He can’t do it on his own, can he. Him and his radical friends can no more hold Kadun together, so all he ends up with is a civil war and lot of people dead.”

“So?”

“Needs to talk to people. Marula, she has her own views. Carlin, I don’t know. I know young Duvi were right radical before she got herself Mistress of Carlin and I would not think Saryulin would wed someone opposite in views. The three of them, that’s what do-you-call it, a pincer action, but as you well know, it’s a lot of other stuff besides.”

“The Fidubi model?” asked Cho.

“Ah well, there you have it. Now we get to the juicy bit. He does not like Fidub, calls it the Fidubi scam.”

“Calls what?” asked Cho cautiously.

“Everything good the empire did was Fidubi. All the crap was irturbi.”

Cho bit his lip.

“A certain amount of horrible truth in that.”

“Aye, Jaizal, our last Fidubi emperor. There’s one other thing you might bear in mind. He’s a rationalist. I don’t ask how you crossed the border on your paddy-paws because I know. That, you will see, is an – aspect, the Cult is trying to retake Kadun and Micheal ban-sarndit-vaq dismisses the other matter.”

Cho looked perplexed.

“How can he! By which I mean how can he be a frequent guest in Van-senok, as I know he is. Marula could show him.”

“That, you’d better ask him. Or her! What I am trying to say is he doesn’t understand Kadun. I know that sounds very terrible. He has all the facts and figures, probably knows everything from the movements of the Fleet to the cost of a loaf in Tjulsit, but if he moves he will fail because he has no idea what he is moving against.”

“Die,” said Cho. “Is Heela mad?”

“I would suggest also you put that question. I think you are asking me if he’s given up. Never. Like the rest of us, if we knew what to do, we’d have done it.”

Cho and his party proceeded on their way.

"I don't believe I heard that," said Fox.

They slipped into Van-senok. From deep in the forest there came a howl.

"The werewolves," said Cho.

"I'm a southerner," said Vax then after a while. "Uh, Cho, the path is opening before us."

"Of course," said Cho. "Note equally it is closing behind us."

"This experience," announced Fox, "gives a whole new dimension to the word 'safe'."

In Van-senok is the headquarters of the underground because nothing penetrates the trees. They learn fast, the rebellious, the resistant, the scarred, the enraged. Little in Kadun is as they thought it. Qine has changed. He walks better, no longer challenging the world but confident of his place in it. He talks better, don't help to lose your temper. Someone wants to see him, head of PANTHER, they say, that'll be interesting, no doubt of it. A tall bloke, but slight, bit like an ash. Face seems familiar, but I can't place it.

"Tell me about you and Mitch," said Cho.

"On me own I'm just a piece of trash shooting me mouth off but I weren't on me own. 'Course I'd never have admitted it, but I thought I was protected."

"Instead you were a threat."

"So when he's back at the Schools, it's his final year, they thought he wouldn't be bothered. Tell you something, would have shot meself if he'd failed!"

"You may not wish to answer this. Does he want to be Master of Var-segan?"

"Or do you mean why?"

"Both?"

"How the world works. Opens doors. It's his family, his history."

"His views on land. Rent, for instance."

"He doesn't think that's right," said Qine after a moment.

"But you don't think it's your business to talk to me about it."

"That is correct."

"Why?"

"I think you are here because PANTHER is thinking of backing him and if that is the case there is only one person you should be talking to about what he thinks."

"Mostly right," acknowledged Cho. "The trouble is no-one knows what there is to back. He's dropped out of politics entirely."

"Don't believe it," said Qine.

"Nor do we. But we're not quite sure what to do about it."

"I assume you – investigate people. My future lady Var-sega'."

Cho grinned.

"Oh yes," said Cho, "we have investigated the politics of my future lady Var-sega'."

"They're plotting, all right." Pause. "I'm not the only one as found people hate him."

"I understand that," said Cho.

"Do you understand," said Qine. "Mind, I'm not quite sure how to put this. There's some say, in the City he's seen what the odds are. I would not wish to be thought to be speaking for Mitch but –"

"He can't do it on his own," said Cho.

"I would not think he likes that," said Qine. "I would not think he likes that at all."

Sarat and Hass were profiled in The World This Week: 'More Beautiful Than Pictures?' Tar and Hass went into a huddle. Tar knew Hass was gay. So far no-one else did. Sarat beamed at the camera but the shades veiled his eyes.

"Gods' teeth!" said Saryulin.

"Wa-a-a," said Karula.

"Photogenic," observed Mitch. He doodled. "CLIK + Ban-varna may be bad enough. CLIK + a media-savvy and photogenic grandson."

"Boys become men real fast these days," said Karula. "It can't work in Kadun, Mitch."

"It did once."

He typed in Alzani-Meta +protocol.

Alzani-Meta is of course notorious for its rejection of all propriety.

“Oh this is sniffy! I love it.”

According to A-M, the point is that everyone is fundamentally a fellow human being and one can say anything to them one would normally say to anyone with whom one is on first-name terms. One may note that one is answered in kind! I have observed that to be dashed rude to His Highness earned the comment: Are you always this rude or is it something you ate? spoken, I may add, with great good humour. This is clearly an alien form of communication to us. I would not hesitate to emphasize that what it is not is meek acceptance of incivility.

It may be useful to contrast this with an alternative approach most notoriously articulated by Micheal ban-sarndit-vaq. Mitch, as he is commonly known, said: You call me ‘sir’, you mean it. You call me Mitch, you stupid bastard. You mean that. You do not say what you do not mean. One hesitates to associate the heir to Var-segan with vulgarity; there is, shall we say, a crude honesty in this approach

“You suggest I am vulgar, sir? How dare you?”

Sarat +family. Sarat +friends. Sarat +education. Sarat +politics

“Eeek!” squeaked Karula.

“Eeek?”

“His Imperial Highness is an item with Maya Talal, Vij's sister.”

“I do not believe it! I suppose if one considers they all grew up together.”

“They're kids. It won't last!”

“Honey, why do you not look up Vij?”

Mitch went on doodling. It looked like a little daisy, five petals around a central core. Karula knew what it actually was.

“OK, the kid has a brain. He has access to more money than most people can conceive exists. The camera falls down and worships him. He is clearly deeply socially aware. He is 17. His grandfather, however, is not 17. Nor are his grandfather's politics apparently centred on the ozone layer!”

“Mitch, it's obvious to whom we should be talking.”

“Carlin, the prize. From where did Narulis start? I cannot think Ban-varna unaware of these things.”

“1500 years!”

“Much has changed, indeed. Our question may be what hasn't. There are things here of which I should like further clarification. I do not think I shall get that by walking up to the front-door. If there is a plot, it must surely eventually show itself. There is something here we are missing. Fidub, Fidub, Fidub! What in hell is the relationship between PANTHER, the Aniles and the Republic of Fidub?”

Karula grinned.

“Lost in the mists of pre-history!”

“That may not be a joke. These guys have been going so unspeakably long...”

“Notes my lord Var-sega’. The House of Fire used to run Fidub.”

“Used to? Let's just try...”

Choit ban-varna +PANTHER.

Protected by PANTHER. Lives with PANTHER. Yeah, yeah, know that stuff! Oh.

“According to this dude, His Imperial Majesty heads PANTHER. Implicitly. PANTHER are Narulis' cubs and agents of the House of Fire.”

“That's crazy.”

“Most things we read these days are. Ever notice that?”

They return to the PANTHER site, sift through the dreary but necessary stuff about lines of accountability. So this Faun guy reports directly to Airoch. And the rest? History of PANTHER Ah-hah. Huh?

PANTHER was founded by Narulis and spread to Fidub, not as is commonly believed the other way

around....After the collapse of the empire, PANTHER came from Fidub to assist our comrades in Kadun...

For a history of PANTHER in Kadun, click here.

“There are two PANTHERs?”

Oh dear.

PANTHER were left up a well-known creek without a paddle, betrayed by everyone in sight – the Houses, the Aniles, the people, everyone let us down! We do not forget that. The fact remains we are Narulis' cub. We

stand for Narulis' values. Narulis founded PANTHER. Narulis was a sprog of the House of Fire. The House of Fire ran Fidub. PANTHER spread to Fidub. Not, note, the other way round. Some 900 years later, a handful of limping cats, scarred mentally and physically, arrived back in Fidub. The House of Fire did not want to know that Narulis' little venture had gone pear-shaped. PANTHER understood, Fidubi PANTHER, that is. They paid not the slightest attention to the House of Fire or of course to the cavortings in Azt. PANTHER obey no-one, never have and never will, especially after the Kadun cock-up.

In the midst of all this a guy called Zani had a personal quibble with the Anile throne. PANTHER was re-established in Kadun as watch-cats. As some tell it, we ran off with Zani. But we weren't going to travel the same road twice: we could have but did not put Zani on the Anile throne. Jaizal was defeated in front of his court, in front of what counted as his world. We got Jaizal's empress out to Fidub with her children. Jaizal went over the edge and was assassinated elder sons. The collapse of the empire began.

So far as our relationship with the Aniles went, Sheheela, Jaizal's Mrs, and daughter of Var-segan, who (poor girl) had spent her every second in Azt being scared out of her wits, felt she had a duty to us moggies and we had a duty to Kadun. We argued about it. We came back to where we started. We're Narulis' and this is what we're supposed to do. In between we had to rethink the universe. We say the Anile Court turned rotten. They didn't see it like that. Metaphysically they arrived at a sort of amoral detachment. This they called the doctrine of essence. From it, it was easy to go either way so they did. Consider Kaminua's Court. They discuss UnMaking. Do they not look as though they discuss the weather! Hunger, weariness. urination, menstruation, the messy parts of being human, these they do not care for. The doctrine of essence leads them to wish not to be human. Comes now the Master of Kadun. Enough! My lord Heba. shall I command my servants strip the clothes from your body and the flesh from your bones that you become this essence of which you prattle! Is not all One! he mimics, pain an illusion, life and death but one continuum? The Anile Court believed – arrived at affecting to believe – the Creator separate and detached. Nothing human had any reality. They were mad. Consequently they became indifferent to human suffering. Human suffering no longer evoked human responses. A man viciously beating a screaming child. PANTHER could not and cannot be everywhere. After Casin-ruhn we felt a Creator concerned with its Creation would have intervened. PANTHER arrived at its current metaphysic. 'Can Light fill Light/The One become more whole?' The Creator is co-terminous with the created.

"There are things we learn," said Mitch a little drily. "You get dirty. You get sweaty. You roll up your sleeves. One had not previously endowed them with metaphysical significance."

"Mitch, what is this all about!"

Mitch typed "Kadun PANTHER" into the search-engine.

Jaizal all but destroyed PANTHER in Kadun. When after the collapse of empire help came, it came from Fidub.

So Kadun PANTHER became Fidubi PANTHER. Then our pet cats are foreign agents? I do not believe it. That is not the tradition.

He clicked on. PANTHER allowed Jaizal. Someone's made a conspiracy theory out of it. PANTHER engineered the collapse of the empire. Here a voice for the defence. PANTHER found themselves out on a limb. Yup, I got that bit. He reads on. This is heavy stuff, man! And the thought niggles: this is the modern world. All of it, it's so much hooley. Party-tricks. You check your facts. You do your research. I cannot play this game until I know which game I'm playing.

"Look at the Hadin-Wadud," suggested Karula. "If anyone knows about this crap, it has to be Alzani-Meta!" Mitch grinned.

"Why don't we just climb the hill!"

"Why don't we? Because, Mitch, if you don't I shall."

"Honey..."

"We have all heard the stories, Mitch. They only have to be one tenth true."

Jaizal +"Great Gates" +Zani.

"Oh man, what a story now! This has only to be one tenth true!"

"Zani smashed the empire, Mitch."

"PANTHER smashed the empire. PANTHER built it. PANTHER knocked it down. I wonder, I wonder, I wonder."

“How about you stop wondering and ask!”

Other people thought like that too.

I am, said Hass. I'm not, said Sarat.

There was of course a very great deal of lizard spittle. Their ways are not our ways. Inconceivable the perversions of the south gain a foothold in our glorious Kadun. Etc. How can I put this? Sarat's choice of best friend did not immediately earmark him as emperor material in the eyes of Kadun.

“It did occur to me,” admitted Karula, “but then why would he not say?”

“Waiting for his sister to marry?” suggested Mitch. “Heirs are expected to produce successors. They do not do gender, any more than we, but all the same.”

Karula arrived at a gay forum where the matter had been enthusiastically discussed, not least by Maya.

Oh, I see! Maya had posted, it's a plot to make me reveal the intimate secrets of the bedroom to Glitz! Guys, take it from one who knows. SARAT IS NOT GAY.

No need to shout, darling.

Scream? Maya had suggested.

Then Hass posted two words: I wish!

That, posted the moderator, would kind of seem to settle...

Of course as far as the lizard was concerned it settled nothing. The combination of 'anile' and 'probably gay' was a gift to the slime-machine even when Hass was paired and Sarat had shown himself remarkably effective.

We ignored it and concentrated on lichen. Reasonably sophisticated people reached their own more or else accurate conclusions about the youthful experiments of upper-class young men, about which more later.

Probably more words were wasted on How The Aniles Got Their Name than on any other single aspect. We didn't bother with that, either, because we didn't know.

Asdinan took himself off to college in Azt in the mood of a man who thinks he has to serve his jail-sentence. You cannot wholly evade, Saryulin had said. As had sighed and even introduced himself to his mother and him who was referred to as her friend. Seems a decent chap, Pilo had remarked. People mature, Asdinan. Farvia was a child. He had hesitated. Not, you know, the most profound of thinkers. Mardis has become a sort of social worker, helping run a soup-kitchen.. Asdinan observed they neither campaigned nor lobbied (argued, questioned, criticized) but merely did. That's observed as in uttered not observed as in saw and Mardis promptly expounded his theory of revolution, which was so far largely limited to appearing to be completely innocent. There is just no point, said Mardis, in getting a reputation as a sort of flea-bite. Fleas get squashed. He talked of the level of disaffection in the Army and assumed at some point there would be a coup, saw the Army as establishing a framework in which change would take place slowly but surely rather than the instigating overnight change, a framework in which people could talk intelligently about how to do things. As had murmured, PLU? and Mardis had laughed. Exactly! Anything so long people don't get any power. As remembered something he'd read about revolutions taking place not when people are at rock-bottom but when things have improved enough for them to have the strength to revolt and suggested the possibility of working-class revolt being crushed. Mardis pointed out that the squaddies are the working-class and that the working-class as a whole was pretty conservative. Of course they wanted better food and housing and pay but all the stuff from the south about women and gays was hardly on the immediate agenda. Unless you are women and gays, suggested As, but took the point that the Kadun masses were unlikely to go to the barricades in support of gay rights.

In other words it was like hundreds of other conversations taking place in Kadun, the nub of which was something must be done but we're not sure what.

Karula dug further and discovered the Seismic Six, Mel, Hass, Reakoed, Maitlan, Fal and Tet. Since Sarat now spent his summers mostly in Zur to be with Maya, Mel and Hass no longer went to Fidub but cluttered up the Saa'nda Senta with the rest of the Six.

“Schoolfriends,” she said to Mitch. “Seem to be real ordinary Zuri.”

He looked at Fal.

“If that's the Dabidan model, who's objecting! That would be Mel's girl, I take it.”

“That too is the subject of hot debate! She is apparently Maya's best friend.”

“But Maya is not - “

“The word,” she said cautiously, “they use for Maya is eso.”

“What in hell is eso?”

“Inner and esoteric as opposed to outer and exoteric. Hasiyata is also held to be eso.”

“These terms are common currency?”

“That would appear to be the case. At least in certain circles. The nearest I have got is – expressing a relationship to the other matter, an enthusiasm for – what shall I call it?”

He grinned.

“What will you call it?”

“The inner journey. I picked that one up.”

“We all know dreamy poetic types.”

Karula took to reading The Straits Times.

Oh my word!

“Show you something, Mitch.”

“Ah-hah?”

“Some cartoons.”

Sarat and Hass armed to the teeth as before them cowered a range of scrawny sly-looking motor vehicles emitting noxious fumes.

Sarat and Hass as young ash-trees about to come into leaf.

Sarat and Hass valiantly barring the path of cross-eyed leering axe-men trying to grab the big bucks behind them..

Sarat and Hass gazing into each other’s eyes and holding hands while little pink hearts fluttered above them.

“I found two nasty ones.”

Sarat and Hass in thick furs, a chauffeur holding open the door of a limousine, while axe-men thin to the point of starvation pointed piteously to their equally emaciated children.

Sarat and Hass wrapped in each other’s arms and laughing at Maya.

“And blog posts of pure hate. Once again the Aniles rape the poor of Ciletij!”

“Inevitable,” said Mitch. “So?”

“To which at least some people have responded, this is a Fidubi kid who likes trees - knock them for AMI, knock them for Sohenoil, but puh-lease! Nonetheless, I should suggest that reaction is complicated by an unwillingness to go for Alzani-Meta. If we assume the relationship with Maya is genuine, that will similarly be the case. I am trying to talk about something it is probably not possible to gauge! If Grandaddy should seek to install himself in Azt, the knives will be full out, I trust not literally. But she is Tar’s niece.”

Mitch laughed.

“Certificate of good character?”

“Not one but two families embedded in the political life of the south. It is more than that.”

“Ciletij making herself look absurd.”

“He has been in Fidubi politics for 30 years. It is hard to imagine the Senate of Fidub doing anything other than rock with laughter.”

“The implications for the Quadrant,” said Mitch, “and of course for Ciletij.”

“Ciletij needs the Quadrant.”

As tagged along with Farvia's set, dabblers in the arts. Though shallow, they were at least clean and great gossips. They asked him about Mel, about A-M, about the hill, and were disappointed, but it was there he first heard 'the Dabidan model' and the consequent cracks which were to become standard – lovely legs, what about the top half? He was astounded and threw out a few of what seemed to him the more obvious obstacles, the chief one of which was there would first have to be a revolution, a new government in place to install constitutional monarchy. Cho couldn't exactly just fly in, take a cab to the Jumesit and announce all change! If we had a new government, why would we need an emperor. The answer from Farvia's set at least seemed to be that it would be rather glam, and As couldn't quite make that a political necessity, but there were a couple of young officers present, clearly trusted, thought As, and they too seemed to think it would be rather glam and more, that they could hold their heads up again, Imperial Army being more appealing than military arm of desecration. As said that he thought it was a pretty common view in the south that if our government got any

madder it might try invasion, and was astonished to hear that 'some of us' thought that in that eventuality they'd just have to do what Jaizal's army did, namely desert and join forces with the foe, and also that, although PANTHER were clearly active, 'some of us' also thought that Cho could only finish off the Cult if he held the reins of power.

“Still,” said someone, “a Fidubi emperor!”

“Not for the first time,” said As.

“I think we can take it Carlin would hardly object!”

“Challin of course appeals to raw nationalism.”

Colonel Challin was generally held to be the only serious contender for revolt.

“Women and gays,” said As.

His new comrade looked amused.

“I do not deny our knees jerk. No-one thinks the south a push-over because of the composition of its armies and the gender of the President of Fidub, Tannan a sop to feminism. Except the obvious no-one.”

“Tannan?”

“General commanding Zur region.”

“Eeek!”

“It's very much a class thing, isn't it. One does have some sophistication - “

“Candidly,” he said, looking at As, “it's very much a House thing. My lady Duvi, I believe?”

“My step-mother,” said As, “has travelled the world, lived on a commune, written a book, and generally made the lives of most Dabidan women look staid. Not to mention Marula!”

“Ah yes, the mysterious Van-senok! Challin trades on being senoki, of course.”

“His exact position?”

“Keep it clean!”

“Change must be incremental.”

Mardis said he thought Challin will just perpetuate the status quo, change would be cosmetic. We've got workers' councils! They have all the power of a new-born lamb.”

“I take the point. Challin is no democrat. He is, however, fundamentally decent. He has a sense of right and wrong notably lacking in the current corridors of power.”

“Sohenoil is hardly going to infringe the rights of capital.”

“Surely in that sense the change would be equally – cosmetic.”

“If southern capital can kick out the City, that can only be to the good.”

As started to do a couple of sessions in the soup-kitchen. Mardis' team was witty and well-meaning but his observation was confirmed. Revolutionary fervour was wholly absent.

“The revolution,” he said to Mardis, “does not start here.”

“I think it's too big for them. Changing the whole system. What we do here, I mean really, mice nibbling away at something the size of a planet!”

“Exactly what do we want?” asked As.

“And how do we get it! What we're talking about is putting a whole new government in place. For a start, some people find that a bit scary. Not that it isn't or anything! But – people say, reform, as though it was just a question of a few tweaks, putting a new fuse in a plug. Who are this squeaky clean new government going to be?”

“Well, there's you and me,” said As.

“The thing is,” said Mardis, then stopped. “We have to understand Ban-varna isn't an idiot.”

“There has to be a plot?” suggested As.

“There must be other people committed to democratic change.”

“Put an ad in the Gazette?”

“This is stupid,” said Mardis. “I mean, if anyone has contacts we do.”

“I suppose we could always ask him,” said As, “time-honoured tradition, everyone has access to the emperor!”

“Whatever you and Mel talk about, presumably it isn't.”

“Mel's quite eso - “

“He's what?”

“Esoteric! Interested in the other matter.”

Mardis began to laugh.

“This relationship with Dabida's heir that is the talk of Azt is centred on the music of the spheres?”

“Levels of reality. Something in common. Both of us have to at least pretend to be exo because of our positions. Hass is the really eso one but it doesn't seem to worry him.”

“Sarat and Maya are still together,” said Mardis. “Of course they're just kids.”

“Her Imperial Highness, your sister-in-law – can't be right, sister-in-law once removed?”

“We're in this up to our necks, aren't we. It would be nice to know what 'this' is.”

“Mel's younger than me. He might not know.”

“His cousin on the Anile throne?”

“Sorg,” they both said.

“I cannot believe Sorg would betray – well, the emperor basically.”

“Do you have the faint feeling this conversation is insane?”

“Time to talk to grown-ups,” said Mardis.

“We think we're at the centre of a web of intrigue!” he said to Pilo. “Despite being innocent as the sky is blue.”

“Well, fairly innocent,” said As, “apart from wanting revolution.”

“Hanging the government, that kind of thing,” acknowledged Mardis.

“The detail,” said Pilo.

“You know the detail! Sarsh is paired with A-M's fourth in line. His sister Maya is an item with Sarat-ban-essa. Sarat and Hasiyata are bosom buddies. As discusses metaphysics with Mel. Half Azt is murmuring about the Dabidan model. Everyone knows Ban-varna is an active force, both in Kadun and in the City.”

“And we're just nice young chaps who want things to change,” said As. “We assume we're not alone but we have no idea what anyone else thinks.”

“Not Mel? Metaphysics.”

Mardis sighed theatrically.

“Of course we talk about Kadun sometimes. Not the future of Kadun.”

“A reason for that?”

“We got there.”

“You want to know if your brother is a traitor?”

“I – didn't think of it quite like that. You know what Sorg is like. Pretends to be.”

About the most unreliable person on the planet.

”Sorg is not working for Challin. Sorg is PANTHER.”

“Wow!” said Mardis.

“I'm impressed,” said As. He paused. “Confused but impressed. If even we – Challin can't think Vij is going to share the defence of Zur.”

“The social circle,” said Pilo, “is as described.”

“Oh I see!”

“You are perhaps unaware of the inordinate amount of time Sorg spends in Zur. It is held at the highest levels that his supposed work transcends regulations.”

“He has to feed them something.”

“A rare talent for disinformation.”

“Is there a plot,” said As steadily, “and if so how do we join it.”

“You have discussed this with your father?”

“No.”

“Do so. Asdinan – we all play complex games. Most of Azt thinks I back Challin. Do you understand what Challin's game is?”

“Limited reform,” said As, “hanging on to power. No question of people getting any real rights.”

“That is certainly the case. Even members of the government exhibit a strange enthusiasm for the frequency with which Alzani-Meta visit Carlin. Sorg has persuaded a number of people that Dabida is truly impressed. No-one starves. No-one dies of curable sickness. Carlin is our model future, the south neutralized.”

As felt a little dizzy.

“When they talk about me and Mel – I’m not supposed to be plotting with him, I’m supposed to be – neutralizing?”

“If Dabida is – neutralized, Ban-varna is isolated. As you know, Saryulin is not a great socializer. Other than with Ban-varna.”

“Waa! He – comes to Carlin!”

“That man,” said Pilo, “does exactly what he chooses.”

“We thought,” said As, “I mean we weren’t really serious about it. Everyone has access to the emperor!”

“They do,” said Pilo.

Mel had become peripatetic. He went to the Schools to study under Qartly but the holidays are long and often enough he was in Zur. He went to the Denzines in the Outlands where there are no holidays. He went certainly to seize the chance of relative anonymity. He went, some people said, to nurse a heart broken by Fal’s pairing with Tet – he went, some people said, to get away from what some people said.

The tribes gathered on the hill for Pietri’s 50th birthday. Sorg was explaining to Caluna’s sister and brother-in-law the finer points of the position of the Army of All-Kadun regarding women breaching the citadel.

“Suppose there were an epidemic, or of course a war. Certainly you may say we are strange, but we are not stupid, and there are many civilian women doctors in Kadun. Some of them are reservists. In the event they were required, they would be called in. What they would not do is wear uniform. I suppose you could say it has a curious logic to it, all or nothing, and even that it is not discriminatory - it is not that only certain roles are regarded as suitable, but rather that women do not exist at all!”

Sarat was passing by.

“You could say they need a bomb under them!”

“You obviously missed,” said Sorg coolly, “my dramatic expose of the rationale.”

“Raw sexism?” suggested Sarat.

“I’m not going to deny,” said Sorg, “but anyone who is not a complete idiot - and particularly you, who should know better - “ By this time half The Room have stopped to enjoy the show. Tar says everyone was imagining it in the Colonnade. “ - must surely understand its roots, a deeply embedded desire to keep the girls safe. It is not the sexism of the Cult, it is a reaction to it. It is easy to mock the notion of universality of gallantry, to drag in class - Mardis does. Oh how delicate and protected is the working-class woman working ten hours a day in a factory. Nonetheless she may be safe at a level I really do not think I have to explain.”

“I can see that,” said Sarat, “but anyone who isn’t a complete idiot must see the answer is regard women as human beings able to protect themselves. Or you could say guys are just as vulnerable. Isn’t what’s deeply embedded fixed ideas of men and women?”

Sorg shook his head.

“You’re still missing the point. Safe from predation by superiors? Get real, Sarat. This is not Fidub. What happens to a woman posted to one of the Cult regiments?”

“Point taken,” said Sarat. “But - oh I see. Gays don’t exist at all in the model.”

Sorg laughed.

“1) They do not. 2) We could hardly have an army with no men either. 3) Of course I hear whistling down the line: the Cult regiments are a recent - innovation. Give or take 1500 years. It would be naive to claim that certain reaches of this man’s army for ever have subscribed to the mores of the rest of us, but rather that they dared not cross the line.”

“Whew,” said Sarat. “I’m trying to work something out.” He grinned. “It may be whether I need to apologize! If anyone touched Maya, I’d break his neck. We all would, Mel, Hass, Vj. But that doesn’t mean we don’t recognize that Maya would probably have broken it already.”

“The male instinct to protect,” suggested Mel, “doesn’t mean the female needs protecting.”

“That’s the one. But of course in Sorg’s example. We’re talking about a lot of things besides what’s ‘male’ and what’s ‘female’.”

“We are,” said Sorg. “I do not doubt for a moment that a woman in the Dabidan Army is entirely capable of taking care of herself. But if she were not, the infrastructure is on her side not that of her assailant. She is free to yell the place down and she would be heard.”

“So what you’re really saying,” said Sarat. “It comes from the whole structure of Kadun society. So if that changed, people could see - what is actually sexism and what isn’t.”

"I think it's time to cut the cake," said Mel, who was later cornered by Sorg: "Imperial Highness, I didn't know you cared!"

Mel laughed.

"No-one really quite knows what Sarat thinks about it all."

Tar and Pietri felt they were beginning to get a rather good idea.

"But then," said Pietri hopefully, "he returns to Fidub. Is it not all rather remote?"

The tribe gathered to debate the matter of Sarat.

"The media interest him," said Amida.

"He interests the media!" said Faun.

"The image, man!" said Cho. "Which he cultivates, I think."

"Oh yes," growled Essa, "he cultivates. Those damn' shades."

"The medium is the message," said Cho.

"The message is what?" asked Airoch.

"Here are all these pretty Fidubi values we wish you to imbibe, so let's make them a bit glitzy, shall we." Faun seemed to be talking to himself.

"Narulis," observed Cho, "didn't wow Kadun by being boring."

Sexy, thought Faun, the Aniles are sexy, as the kids put it, but this in the company of Cho's past love and his current one he did not say. And know it.

"Pizzazz!" he said.

"He'd be so terribly good at it," said Cho.

"Maya," said Amida.

"Ah, yes," said Cho. "Would she not be terribly good at it too?"

"Darling, at their age – it will never last!"

"It's a plus or a minus?" asked Faun.

"That of course depends on who's looking."

"Dabida will not tolerate an emperor in Azt!"

"600 years," suggested Cho, "but we did it in the end."

"Where they're looking from," said Faun. "The Fidubi scam?"

"Fess up," said Cho.

"Mel," observed Tar, "says Maya thinks you do not greatly like Sarat."

Pietri laughed.

"Silly girl! Of course I like Sarat. Is not the problem how eminently likeable - ?"

Tar laughed.

"I thought that might be it."

"True, were he mulish, introverted, shunning the company of his fellow mortals – my daughter becomes a target for every psycho in Azt?"

"You and Essa," said Saski. "Spotty would help."

"So I console myself."

"I had acne," said Tar. "How has he dared escape - ?"

"Probably that damn' diet."

"He's really awfully good about it, as a guest, eats what he's given."

Did someone say macrobiotic?

"You can't even hold that against him," sighed Tar.

Asdinan went to an end-of-term party and found it appalling, left with a girl he barely knew equally horrified.

"Nihilism," he pronounced. "What is good, they destroy it."

"Dad's an artist. Depthlessly venomously hates them. The new barbarians he calls them, draws them as savages with bones through their noses and skulls round their necks. Exploits them, dare I say. Paints the crap they want to pay for painting what he wants."

"Have I heard of him?"

"Smudge?"

"That's brilliant!"

As they talked on began to feel he'd hit gold but she laughed.

"Oh come on! Can you really see me as Mistress of Carlin? I've got it. Whether I've got it with a capital I. Maybe I'll never be as good."

He reached for her anyway.

"One for the road Celebrate life!"

After he said: "I want out. If one more facile piece of tedium expounds to me his career plans - they are twisted!"

"Have a little tolerance," said Midi cautiously. "They do have to earn a living. They're frightened of being poor."

As pondered.

"No."

"Arrogant sod, you are, metaphorically speaking..."

"No," he said again. "They don't like sunsets. You're the artist, you have to understand! Sunlight on autumn leaves, the sky at night. Haven't you ever felt you could sit and look at it for ever? Something is - completed. It's nonsense, whoever you are. People have to eat, sleep. Something is filled. There's a need. They fill it with things. They are - need, gaping holes. That's what's wrong."

And Midi said she didn't entirely disagree, they were shit, essentially, but all the same he'd never been short of money in his life (though she didn't quite know why she was playing devil's advocate) and As got quite cross and said they never would be poor, they'd be accountants, salesmen, managers, it was all acquisitiveness, talk to Mardis about poor and Midi was so surprised that she shut up and listened and later in the week wrote to Smudge. Unlikely recruit to the cause of the urban poor.

What planet do you live on? thought Smudge.

Back to civilization next week, mailed As. Mardis is coming for a week. Masses to talk about.

"The whole place stinks. As for the course! It's completely - " He searched for the word. "Soulless. Metre! What about meaning!"

Worse was to come.

"It's great to be back," he said after dinner.

"A walk would be good," muttered Mardis guiltily. Nobody smokes in Carlin, not out of concern for mere people but out of terror some ill-extinguished butt send the house up in flames.

"OK," they said to each other. "This is it."

They wandered, they hoped nonchalantly, into the drawing-room.

"May we talk? Grown-up stuff?"

"Indeed," said Saryulin.

"We see," finished Mardis, "if we get some kind of reputation as radicals, it could rather mess things up."

"We also see," said As, "think we see, anyway. Whichever side people think we're on, they're going to think we're in it up to our necks, because of who we are."

"It makes us feel fragile and insecure," said Mardis, "not knowing anything."

"The immediate question," said Saryulin, "is whether Sarat wishes to involve himself in Kadun. That he is no shrinking violet at least is clear! It is a large step from that to the face of the Anile throne. That determines how Ban-varna moves."

"Whew!" said Mardis.

"There is broad agreement with Challin's analysis. Thereafter the paths diverge. Were a democratic government to be installed tomorrow, it would fail. There is therefore to be a campaign for hearts and minds. Thus Micheal – I understand he is in marketing. As you perceive, there has first to be revolution. Whether it is followed by the Dabidan model or the Fidubi, Kadun will decide. Ban-varna has no curious desire to live in Azt! He has a responsibility. As instigator of change, naturally it is a possibility."

"Marula?" asked As.

"Certainly."

"Challin is senoki."

"Challin is disowned. Naturally he does not make that public."

"Does Marula?"

"I gather if the question arise."

“What should we do?”

“Continue with your studies.”

“We thought of joining PANTHER.”

“I see no reason why not.”

“And go on as usual! Begins to sound a bit interesting.”

“Does Mel know?”

“Only Tar, Vanya and Airoch.”

“Just quite big,” said Mardis.

“Is any of this for sharing?” asked As. “For instance if the question arise. I haven't seen Marula for about ten years but people don't know that. They assume we all talk to each other.”

“Disinformation,” said Mardis. “Da said Sorg disinformed. Why on earth should an elderly gentleman enjoying his retirement in Fidub wish to move to Azt?”

“You may possibly have a talent for this,” allowed Saryulin. “Remember to take very great care.”

Karula thumbed through a back-copy of Glitz

“Whey-hey! I thought you told me Saryulin was a reclusive old bird.”

“He's in Glitz?”

“His house-guests, hon.”

“That is a nice shot.” Mel sitting on the stairs, the Window sparkling behind him, Sorg lounging against the bannisters, Auscu sitting a couple of steps down pushing a toy train.

“I have to see that Window! All that's missing – oh my word!”

Mixed doubles. Maya and Hass versus Asdinan and Sarshi.

“This is flagrant!” said Mitch.

“And you love it!”

“What else is it? I know, I know, ask! If we consider AMI is a major employer, then any shadow of distress or disruption falling on Carlin necessarily impacts on Dabidan pay-packets, quite apart from the more obvious considerations.”

“Mitch...”

Returning for the second term, As felt something inside him had hardened. He wrote a short (for him) note to the Preceptor and went back to Carlin. He threw his cigarettes in the bin at the station. A perversion, an aberration of Azt.

"What will you do?" asked Saryulin.

"Write."

"Write what?"

"Propaganda! I'll find a way."

It wasn't enough. He sat by the stream and scowled at his lap-top. His mood was not good. Shit, he thought, I'm an addict

Nor was this his only souvenir of Azt. Asdinan, my dear, come in. And Asdinan knew, the way young men who've had one-night stands do know when the girl's parents turn up three months later. Fortunately Smudge was more interested in Carlin than continence. Carlin must have the baby. No-one else wants it. She is very young, thought Duvi. The hairless terrier school triumphs once more.

"Cretin," said Saryulin.

"The miracle of new life? The will to life that will not be gainsaid?" For the first time he talked about Azt.

"They're clever, no? Rebellious youth is not suppressed but encouraged to shock, to deaden sensibility. Our rising generation of artists portrays decay and mutilation. But they are innocent! our glorious public education system ensures they know nothing. Ten centuries of power and privilege have taught me to recognize evil.

How do I convey that, Father? In this modern age."

"You look terrible."

As grinned feebly.

"I know."

He was spending most of the night writing long letters to Midi he hadn't the faintest intention of sending. He regarded himself as having been motherless though he didn't go on about it because it upset his mother. To have brought another semi-orphan in the world hurt somewhere he was still struggling to reach.

He considered his options. Do a Sorg and become Challin's right-hand man! His admiration increased as he realized he really couldn't do that. Continue his studies somewhere sane. Zur? Maona-Pri? The City? Would they have a drop-out! Lounge around Carlin with a baby on his hip. Find himself some kind of job. Although it had been made clear to him he wasn't wanted, he visited Midi and offered to make an honest woman of her. She looked at him with interest.

"We could make it work," he said. "It's not as though we were - culturally separate."

"You're very sweet," she said. "Do you want to feel?" He must have looked shocked. "If you'd been that shy in the first place..."

It's alive, he thought. The horror of what he'd done threatened to overwhelm him.

"Brill," he said.

He returned to Carlin.

Either I get to the bottom of what's freaking me or I dismiss it and get my act together. Or I cage it and examine it when I feel inclined. Let me start by asking myself a few intelligent questions.

Eventually he pitched up in M-P having attempted many letters beginning, I walked out of college in Azt. Does that instantly disqualify me? Then crossing out or qualify me? He made his way to the campus and asked to make an appointment with the Admissions Tutor, murmuring slightly mature student, unusual circumstances. To his surprise he could be seen in about an hour. Asked why he had dropped out, he gave a succinct talk on the failings of Kadun education on the basis of which, together with exam results and his analysis of Silban-Hi's Theory of Revolution, he was accepted. Feeling rather better about himself he wandered off to explore M-P and would have bumped into Baya, had he recognized her. The usual, the Admissions Tutor murmured to his colleagues. What have you read lately? I just managed to keep a straight face. Your next question was how far is this applicable to Kadun? Oh no. I didn't have to ask.

Karula decided the immediate problem was her other half. OK, what he wants is what he gets from the Grid, a one-sided 'dialogue' where the other guys spill the beans and he gives nothing away and retires to process the data, then tells them his conclusions. Life ain't like that, honey! Except it's considerably more like that if you're top of the heap. Ain't that the truth, Your Imperial Majesty. Now, Mitch, I do not think you insist on being top of the heap. I think you know you will not lead this pack. I do not think you reject the idea. Nor do I think you have fully come to terms with it.

Mardis came to stay with As for a few days to see the new pad. Mel was invited over.

"I grew up with it," said Mardis. "People so bloody cold and hungry. Of course at the moment all I can do is alleviate it. Everyone knows there has to be some kind of revolution."

"People in the south don't know what poor means," said As.

"Tell me," said Mel.

The Alzani-Meta Gridsite is formidable. The nook called Mel's Place appeared shortly before he went to the Schools. It was originally intended as a virtual table in the Saa'nda Senta, a conduit for people to talk to him when he wasn't around, but in these troubled times a lot of people besides Zuri wanted to talk to Alzani-Meta. Karula arrived at Mel's Place and multiple allusions to people she didn't know and places she'd never heard of. After a while she thought, I guess this is where you find the real Zur. She went on reading. Interesting!

It is appropriate that I post here. Is it appropriate that I mail him? Dashed classist! She wriggled her way through that one. Dear Mel, Mitch and I are going to move to the south, from where we intend to start a revolution in Kadun, and we should appreciate your perspective on this. I think not. Dear Mel, Mitch urgently requires a little basic education. I think not! I shall make a list. It will (might) clarify my thinking. Possible approaches. Mel, Tar, Cho, Airoch, Vanya, PANTHER, CLIK. Does that not depend of what he wishes to establish, without seeming to appear too grossly ignorant? Or committing himself to a single course of action.

Exactly what is going on here? It does not intimate anything concerning your political intentions, Mitch. What, then? It makes contact, establishes a link. Mitch, if someone said you had to live in a tree, you would not hesitate to learn from others who lived in trees! What, then, do you perceive as the baggage attached to instruction in tree-dwelling?

If the Cult is real, and the Cult is real, if the danger posed by the Cult is real, then we cannot do this on our own and we cannot in any case do this on our own, because Var-segan cannot lead All-Kadun, Carlin cannot lead All-Kadun

Only the emperor can lead All-Kadun.

It's crazy.

In unison why should the Houses not lead All-Kadun. After all, they are All-Kadun.

Van-senok is imperialist and Carlin appears to have colonized Zur, the precise implications of which are at present unknown. Sounds better than we don't know. What, then, can we say? We can say there would appear to be a bias towards monarchy. I am deflecting myself towards the political. Let me amend the above. We cannot do this on our own unless – unless what? Unless there is a purely irturbi PANTHER independent of Fidub. Which is probably impossible but even it were not the last irturbi on the planet to putatively lead it is Mitch! But all PANTHER is Kadun PANTHER. That was then. This is now.

On both levels he has no-one to play with. Except Ban-Varna. And of course me.

Damn this! Do I not believe in direct action!

That was before I discovered the world is complicated.

OK, let me calm down here. We shall move to Zur. There we shall conduct extensive fieldwork. In the mean time, I think I can do a little preliminary work of my own.

I read the whole site,” reported Karula two days later. “What this place is is a virtual party. You could think of it as that bar we went to on the quayside, real friendly towards lost tourists, but it is more than that. No-one is put down here for dumb questions. You may say Mel is a well-brought-up young man and would not tolerate the kind of crap you get elsewhere on the Grid but it is more than that. It is a hub. There are Harni, Vasuculi, Fidubi and indeed irturbi here.”

“No on-line courses?” asked Mitch. She threw a cushion at him. “Guess you’d better post under your own name.”

It had not occurred to her not to but she knew what he meant.

She tried one more time.

“There is no commitment in hearing the theory, Mitch.”

He laughed.

“I have heard the theory. You know that.”

“You do not want anyone - not even Marula? She is old enough to be your mother!”

Boys do boys and girls do girls to avoid the pupil getting hooked on the teacher, unless of course the pupil is gay.

“We have been through this before. There are questions of violation, questions of privacy and questions of politics.”

“We know,” she began, but they’d been through that too: the moment they engaged in politics, if they remained in the City, Searc would be after them. Solution One: get out of this damn’ City.

“You need to see this,” said Vax. “An irturbi mother of three under-tens by the name of Karula is real pleased to be relocating to Zur. She and her partner are currently in the City but that sure is no place to raise kids.

Several posts later, she is murmuring that she really knows very little of these things, but she and her partner have visited Van-senok and have some experience of earthpower and she is curious to learn more of the model standard, so far as she understands, in the south. There are of course many sites dedicated to the other matter but it sure is hard for someone who knows nothing to distinguish what is accurate and what is not, so we thought to learn from the horse's mouth.”

“I can't wait to meet her,” said Cho.

Mel had looked at Hass.

“You're the eso one.”

Hass: Hi! Welcome to Dabida.

Karula: I thank you. Hi to you!

Hass: Obviously, I'm just a kid, a beginner. I thought maybe we could chat and all the pros could tell us when we're talking garbage.

The Army of All-Kadun read Mel's Place but found Karula's posts, which were either eso or domestic, somewhat underwhelming.

“What the hell is he playing at?”

“He is segani - “

“He is Var-sega'!”

“Presumably when they ‘relocate’ all will be revealed.”

“Nowadays we ‘raise kids’ in Kadun? Is she a City-chick?”

They searched their memories.

“Irturbi, I’m sure. Think her father is something professional, dentist, architect, can’t remember.”

”””

The Zur Gazette will always use a name rather than an event. So Sarsh woke to Sarshi in heroic escape from Azt!

But later editions carried PUT YOUR HANDS TOGETHER FOR KAF!

Surely, mused Tar, the strangest headline to appear in Zur.

Time we got off this continent, said Mitch. Later he said, I believe Duvi has three who cannot be much older.

I am quite sure they do childcare in Carlin!

Karula said: we get bombed, we all go together.

Mitch said: Always look on the bright side.

Karula consulted her tablet: Actually they’re way older. Still pre-teen. Omnian, Liande and Ausculan.

The H-W at the border rang the hill

My lord my lady Var-sega’ have just driven into Carlin!

One for Cho, I think, said Tar.

Lindy and Auscu were sitting on the stairs remarking to anyone who bothered to listen, which was no-one, that they didn’t know exactly what had happened but obviously something had.

“We’re terribly good with young children,” said Lindy, “after all, we are young children, we know what it feels like.”

“Mom will not be far away,” Karula assured her brood.

Apanin flung open the drawing-room door, grinning like someone with Hanif-Altan in mind.

“My lord my lady Var-sega’!”

“I did not think,” said Mitch, “this is a private war.”

“Hi,” said Vj.

“We can’t keep meeting like this!” said Mitch.

“Why,” demanded Sarshi, “have we not seen you? I’m Sarshi, by the way.”

“That is a long story,” said Mitch.

The Dabidan Senate passed a defensive alliance with Carlin, apparently oblivious to the fact that Carlin wasn’t strictly speaking a nation, but entirely aware that if Carlin ended up a battlefield a lot of Dabidan pay-packets would suffer.

Tedious ceremonial parades were held in Azt and the raids continued

One of them was Smudge. Azt hadn’t realized.

Family, said Mel. Family, said Sarat. In-law twice removed or something. He had a rather taut conversation with Essa, but only some of it concerned his safety; the rest concerned Mitch, whose politics, it had rapidly become apparent, were much Sarat’s own.

“You are 18. You are ready to lead a revolution?”

“Dad!”

“One of you is bad enough.”

“Mitch isn’t 18.”

“How can you be other than leader of this pack?”

Sarat entered Carlin with Mel, the H-W and what looked like half PANTHER.

As met them at the border.

“Welcome back.”

Sarat made an indeterminate noise, but it was drowned out by press-fiends.

Sarat! You’re - some mouths couldn’t quite form ‘Anile heir’. Others got there.

Narulis’ heir, said Sarat, pretending to sound meek and patient. Tell you when I get to the House.

Uh, sure, Sarat.

Think of it this way, said Sarat. Who is my partner? You got it! And who is Maya’s brother?

And who is his partner!

Family, said Sarat. I never miss family parties.

Sarat!

Baz put his foot down and they whizzed off.

If we go now to the House, Mel, Asdinan and - Sarat? [Sarat? Sarat!] Have things to say.

“My family,” said As, “were fortunate enough to escape. Others were less fortunate. Among them is the internationally renowned artist Smudge, who is the father of the mother of my son.” He gave a wry grin.

“You didn’t know that, did you.”

“Asdinan!”

“How - no, OK,.OK, I’m not that stupid!”

“We met in Azt. It didn’t work out.”

Mel said: “Asdinan is Sarshi’s cousin. Her partner Vij is of course my cousin.”

Sarat said: “My partner Maya is of course Vij’s sister. As far as I’m concerned, Smudge is family, though pass on what it’s called.

Sarat - you are - Etc.

“We were talking about wrongful arrest! Stick to the point, guys. Obviously we want Smudge’s release but also we want the - “

He realized they weren’t listening.

The Anile heir is standing here in Carlin taking on Azt. Etc.

“Sssssh!” said Mel.

Time passed.

Sarat made wide eyes.

“It’s all gone quiet.”

“Don’t exaggerate,” said Mel.

“We want the release of everyone arrested by the government in Azt,” said Sarat. .

“Actually,” said As, “we want the arrest of the government in Azt.”

“First things first,” said Mel.

“The world just stopped,” mused Seani.

“You can’t say he doesn’t look the part,” said Num.

“It is not conceivable. Is it?”

“Sssh!”

“I guess I need to do the dear world bit,” said Sarat. “The full handle is Sarat-ban-essa-eban-narulis. Don’t think I’ve ever said it before. I’m a Fidubi brat who used to keep a lot of hamsters and thought he was going to be a vet - “

Even Essa laughed.

“Choit-ban-varna (eban-Narulis), notorious Fidubi radical, 30 years in the Senate of the Republic of Fidub, is my revered grandfather. OK, Kaduna-gar-jaht, this matter of Kadun. I heard CLIK, As, Mardis - conceivably one or two members of my family - on urban conditions. I reckoned I wanted to do something about them. I studied science. I’m quite good on water-borne parasites and the relationship between air quality and lung disease. I hope no-one’s going to say that’s some big deal. Hysteria break out because a Fidubi brat says he doesn’t like rats crawling over babies? I didn’t exactly see defeating the Cult as my remit. I’m an exo kind of guy, the sort of guy who fixes the drains. Being at school might have had something to do with it. Get involved in Kadun’s future when I’ve grown up a bit. But this war is now. I’m Narulis’ heir. I can’t not be. So I guess this is my war. I do not accept.”

“I’m Zani’s heir,” said Mel. “I do not accept.”

Sarat! Mel! Etc.

“Hysteria,” mused Seani, “just broke out because a Fidubi brat doesn’t like rats crawling over babies.”

“Cho’s grandson! What does anyone expect?”

“Not this!”

The trio had escaped inside, Mel burbling cheerfully, then stopping abruptly as he realized Sarat had never seen the Window before. The others had come out into the hall and equally fallen silent as Sarat climbed the stairs to the half-landing. This is a spine-tingler, thought As. One for my memoirs, thought Baz. Narulis’ heir examined Narulis’ Window. He says he didn’t think anything terribly clearly but if he had it would have

been so this is what all the fuss is about. Saryulin stood beaming at the bottom of the stairs.

“Welcome to Carlin!”

“I thank you. Image of Cho!”

He is very shaken, thought Mel.

“Mitch and Karula,” said Asdinan. “I think you have a lot in common.”

“Plumbing,” said Mitch “is a specialty of mine.”

“Sound!” squawked As.

“And here is Maya. I guess you have one or two things to say, Maya.

There was a cordon at the bottom of the hill and a scattering of trucks and vans, both Press and H-W. Maya sat on the bonnet of an H-W van.

Duvi and Karula exchanged complex glances.

“I’m Zani’s heir too,” said Maya. “There is no point in us, in any of this - “ she gestured at the hill. “If we’re not in the way.”

“Sure, Maya...”

“You want to fix the drains, Maya?”

“You and Sarat want to sort out social conditions in Kadun?”

“You’re Tar’s niece, Maya!”

“I know!”

“The Anile heir and Tar’s niece want to sort out the drains?”

“You may be getting this!”

“Dabidan model, Maya!”

“Is there a joke there about a cat-walk?”

“We all know Cho loves cats!”

“Anile empress, Maya!”

“Free-born citizen of Fidub, mate, free-born citizen of Fidub! The way Sarat sees it, probably his biggest problem is you guys squealing Anile throne! Sarat doesn’t have a prob with the Fidubi model. I thought we should make it a happening, get kids in from all over the continent to see what we’re doing, help if they want.”

They said afterwards everyone over 30 grasped the nearest piece of furniture for support.

“Maya!”

“You called?”

“Kadun will never - “

“Ciletij!”

“Even if he is President of Kadun!”

“He’d have to be elected,” pointed out Maya. “I want to tell you about Tonsa. Tonsa is a huge fluffy pink electronically controlled toy rabbit.” Yes, well, people did look a little puzzled. “She does bunny hops and probably eats carrots. When I was about seven Pietri had to represent Tar at something in G-T. Varchulan darling gave me Tonsa. It’s just a little bit hard to make ye ancient foe out of a toy rabbit. What Airoch calls the Cile,” she added helpfully.

“Women in Kadun, Maya?”

“We think people in Kadun should have the rights and liberties everyone else on the continent has.”

“I guess Hass has some pretty strong views on one thing!”

“He does.”

“Kadun will never accept gays.”

“Why not? Everyone else does.”

Hass got up and skidded down the hill.

“You really need to talk to As,” Maya was saying “Obviously he’s got other concerns right now. He’s talked to a lot of the guys. Basically - obviously their knees jerk, but they’re not idiots. They don’t think Fidub’s a push-over because of the composition of her military and the gender of her President.”

“I’ve been to Carlin,” said Hass. “Often.”

“You’re Tar’s son, Hass - “

“I’m a human being,” said Hass.

“Me too,” said Maya.

“Dear lizard,” said Hass, “don’t even bother hissing because we know what you’re going to say. Did it ever occur to those guys they have a problem?”

“We know the real pervs are the Cult,” said Maya. “BDSM isn’t in it!”

Vanya made a noise somewhere between pride and hysteria.

“They get off on pain,” said Hass. “Having people crawling.”

Dare you to say that in Kadun, thought Vanya. The trouble is you probably would. The trouble is you probably have.

“Now, ladies and gentlemen, if we might just start to use our brains and think about what went down when the young people played so nicely together in the fields of Carlin.”

“They grew up,” said Sabatin, Minister of Defence, only slightly helplessly.

“Dear world,” Mitch said, “the full handle is Micheal ban-sarndit-vaq. My father is Master of Var-sega’. Now we must go back to Carlin. Var-segan is going to speak!”

“I think the world just stopped again,” sighed Seani.

“For the moment,” said Mitch, “we are of course at war. All shades of sane opinion in Kadun are united against the vermin in Azt. Nonetheless, we must begin to discuss the peace. It cannot be a question of changing just one thing or indeed of many persons working separately. All of us have tried that, the unions, my grandfather setting up hospitals. It makes not one whit of difference to the whole. In the cities people are buried alive. They think that tomb is poverty and lack of education. I say that tomb is there if you are me. I just get to stand upright. The granite slab above our heads is infrastructure you make people better and you send them home to damp rat-infested tenements. You shorten their working-hours but they can barely afford to eat, let alone engage in what the south called leisure-time activities. The food is crap anyhow. Everything must change or else we hack at the tentacles of the hydra without destroying its brain.

“Kadun is bought by the banks in the City. The Cult corrupts individuals. The City banks provide apparently limitless funding for the Cult. Central government subsidizes the building of housing that is dangerous and the manufacture of food that is poisonous and so claims to assist the poor. If you ask how the housing is dangerous, how many ways can housing be dangerous? The wiring is unsafe, the foundations are inadequate, the roofs crack under heavy snow - I swear that actually happened. Fortunate indeed we are not in an earthquake zone. Fine shiny hospitals are built by big pharma, setting an example to the world, only down the road people are dying of pneumonia because they afford neither heat nor medicine. If you went to Tjulsit on business, you’d probably think it looked like anywhere else, shops, supermarkets, theatres, but you probably wouldn’t stray into where the workers live, you would not wear the clothes they are offered and you would not eat their food, especially the meat, unless you have a penchant for rat. Azt will tell the world it has public health inspectors and food hygiene laws like everywhere else. It forgets to mention no-one pays the slightest attention to them.” Sarat said: “Sorg explained some stuff to me about women in Kadun. Some of it’s just pure sexism but it’s all tied up with keeping girls safe when they don’t have any rights. Exactly what he said - he was sure a woman in the Dabidan Army could look after herself, but if by any chance she couldn’t, she has the right to speak and she’s sure she’ll be heard. That’s basically what Mitch said about infrastructure.”

“Exactly so, said Mitch. “I have two daughters. I should not wish them in any barracks I have ever visited, but that is because of the nature of the barracks, not the nature of the female!”

“Who one is,” said Challin.

“Who two are!”

“Pray silence my lady Var-sega!” Only slightly sarcastically.

“As Mitch has said, we have two daughters. I do not wish my girls growing up in a society in which they are second-class citizens in law and in practice. To expand upon what Mitch has said, that barrier is there even if you are me. It is implicit in every exchange with the unreconstructed Kadun male. Like Mitch I went to the Schools. Like Mitch I have a fully functioning brain. Like Mitch I have never ceased to be committed to change in Kadun. Mitch and I decided together to have our kids first. I stayed at home with my babies. I used that time to conduct a great deal of research on this matter of Kadun.. The number of persons who assumed that infants in arms proof of mental inadequacy, ignored my contributions to conversations between men was to say the least depressing. I recall indeed that so appalled was Mitch by the behaviour of two supposed radicals that he told them to leave. The innate superiority of the male is too often taught from birth. It is explicit in those schools funded by the Cult, where there are a two distinct curriculums, one for boys, one for girls. A

working-class boy may be encouraged, though that is by no means always the case, a working-class girl, never. Her role is to reproduce and look after the men who do the important things.”

The Ciletij Representative at Zur looked at Vanya, appalled.

“Yet another shrinking violet.”

Well, well, well, thought Qine, so that is Mitch’s lady

Mitch’s lady pointed wordlessly at the screen.

“Cantilip has changed,” remarked Mitch nonchalantly. The last time they’d seen her she’d been at school and school didn’t do dark green hair and nails and a silver dress that looked painted on.

“I am Cantilip za-fenan. My mother is Mistress of Van-senok. We in Van-senok of course have never subscribed to the sexist paradigms elsewhere in Kadun. That is why the hebade Cult burned us as witches - when they caught us, which wasn’t often.”

I have heard some opening-lines,” murmured Mitch.

“Of course there must be revolution,” said Cantilip briskly. “Social revolution, sexual revolution. Kadun must join the real world.”

Burned?

Three of them? Four!

Mel caught the ball in mid-air and ran with it.

“I am a student at the Schools in the City. My subject is Anthropology. I chose that subject partly as a result of my having come to Carlin as a child and having discovered the indigenous culture of Kadun, the true culture of Kadun, earthpower. Partly, of course, you could say it’s my job as Zani’s heir to know about cults and rites.

“I am now going to plunge into ancient history. Please bear with me, because it matters right now. Contact between Fidub and Kadun long pre-dated Narulis. Fidub of course was and is a sea-faring nation. Kadun, as Asdinan puts it, is when there is any sea to fare. There’re Fidubi pottery, coins, weapons in the museum in Car-sandis and equally there’s a whole gallery in the National at Maona-Pri devoted to irturbi artefacts from the Utmost Isle. When irturbi discovered Isles that have the dashed temerity to sing, they naturally thought them evidence of the power of the earth. To most irturbi of that time in the east, the Tradition was simply a variant of earthpower. Certainly there are differences, but to all of us life is a question of unity, of balance, of creativity, in direct opposition to the fracture and destruction of the Cult.

“I want to state categorically my belief we are all of us, Dabida, Fidub, the vast majority of sane people in Kadun on the same side here. I also want to thank publicly my lady Van-senok, Marula-za-fenan, and Sardun, the earthpower equivalent of PANTHER, for the limitless aid and shelter they have provided to those resisting in all parts of Kadun. Among these, I might add, are Hadin-Wadud. This is something of which I have had first-hand reports. There are more than a few of us galloping around making trouble. I thank you.

Mitch, thought Karula, if you grin any more broadly, your face will split.

“I too wish to share history with you,” said Mitch. “Mel has given us the ice-cream with chocolate bits. I have the cream topping.”

Those in the Room observed Cho trying not to choke with laughter.

“For those unfamiliar with Kadun, Var-sega’ occupies about two-thtrds of the west coast and Van-senok the rest. In the middle is a nasty lump called Vaodos. Carlin of course you know. Tacked on the top of Carlin is not merely a nasty lump but a festering pit of disease and infection, our glorious capital of Azt. Narulis’ Azt is also one of the most beautiful cities in the world. I hope any bombing of Azt may be avoided.

“Nonetheless it is necessary to clear out the rats’ nest. Among the possibilities open to Kadun are to split, Carlin and Dabida as one bloc in the east and we, Van-senok and Vasucula as a bloc in the west. It would be an admission of defeat. It would leave dangerous bacterial life-forms on this continent ready to re-infect. Most of us, I think, wish to remain Kadun.

“Now we come to the nub.

“What Mel has described is what many of us in west call the Fidubi scam. I do not say we are not fond of them. I say we observe elisions of reality, for instance the assumption that what we good guys in Kadun think and believe is what Fidub thinks and believes. It is not. How we welcome new-borns, pair, bury our dead is how Fidub does these things. It is not. Most people in Var-sega’ will tell you either that when you die you go to a field of flowers or that that is what everyone used to believe. I suspect that most people in Var-sega’ have never heard of Va, the Silver Homeland. Despite this, of course, each of the Houses has a shrine, as do the

towns and cities. What those represent is I think not what is represented by the shrine at Maona-Pri.” Nobody had ever seen Cho laugh like that. Nor for that matter had anyone ever seen the Dabidan Press silent and bug-eyed.

“As you may know, Narulis had 22 men with him. There was no question of conquest. Narulis and his guys joined with irturbi because they had shared values, because they knew each other, because as Mel has said, Fidub and Kadun had for ever been like that. The unfortunate consequence of the unwitting assault on our indigenous values is to have squeezed them out of Kadun on the pretext they were the Fidubi import and so alien, the true culture of Kadun being held to be that of bacteria. You will see this is a little annoying.

“Kaduna-gar-jaht, this Matter of Kadun, is no simple subject. Mel used the word hebade. I know that word is commonplace throughout the south to evade the charge of using impolite language in polite company and I shall not sully your ears by translating it but I do wonder how many people know it is an irturbi word. I do not think it it worries us that we speak the language of Fidub but nonetheless we have our culture, our own language, our own literature.”

“Hebade-dan!” muttered someone. Mitch grinned.

“Further, and you will see this is more than a little annoying, in some circles everything good the empire did is held to be Fidubi and everything bad irturbi. I do not think anyone has ever called Jaizal Fidubi. For 700 years the empire was one of the coolest places around. For 200 years it was a crock of shit. I do not think I can put it more plainly than that. I do not know more than the next man whether Kadun will choose the Dabidan model or the Fidubi but I would underline that that is a conversation we in Kadun will have with ourselves and Ciletij has no part in it.

“Meanwhile, I have a message for Azt: Remember Hanif-Altan! Hanif-Altan, dear world, was the decisive battle some 1500 years ago when the armies of the west met the armies of the east and the Cult was annihilated.”

“Shake on it,” said As.

“We have a deal,” said Mitch.

Cho - what - have - you - done!

Press-fiends at the gate, Cho!

What they got was Amida.

“I, dear world, am Cho’s other half. We are both of course immensely proud of Sarat and of them all.”

“Doting granny, Amida.”

“Oh where is my embroidery.”

“Amida, dear world, was a Preceptor at the Collegium.”

“I have four,” said Amida enthusiastically. “Sarat, Shavli, Zika and Ven.”

“This is Sohenoil’s revolution?”

“If there’s one thing you all have in common, you’re rolling!”

“Tell Tar people with more money should not care about people with less.”

“OK, OK...”

“May I suggest you listen to young people more or indeed older people. There is nothing outre in Sarat’s politics, any more than in Mitch’s or Maya’s. IT happens they have both the money and the connections to I trust succeed where others have failed - “

“And the history!”

“Oh yes, we all have history.”

“I have to say I found it a little strange - of course we love Fidub but!”

“Do you?” asked Amida.

“Better out than in?”

“Better clarified at the start.”

“I guess we’re sometimes a little.”

“We are,” said Amida.

“I have to say I thought earthpower - healing crystals and candles!”

“Is the Flame not a candle? You should have listened to Sarat and Hass. Balance is the essence of earthpower. We are a part of the planet, not an accretion on it.”

“Narulis wasn’t a tree-hugger, was he!”

“In a country as large as Kadun,, it is more correct to say that variants of earthpower formed the indigenous culture. In the northern forests, tree-worship was prominent. Wood and fire are not good friends. When Narulis reached Van-senok, they refused to let him in because he carried the Flame. You may say he convinced them he was a tree-hugger.”

“Amida!”

“My lady!” breathed Challin, who is of course senoki.

“OK, but this is now! You don’t tell me senoki are tree-worshippers!”

“I should imagine what Sarat and Hass believe is much what the average senoki believes.”

It is reported the following exchange took place between ship of the Fidubi Fleet the Silver Sheath and a Kadun cruiser on patrol.

K: Great goodness, our old friends from Fidub. You require help?

F: Just pausing to enjoy the view.

K: Reminisce.

F: Nothing like remembering old times.

K: Narulis of course landed at Car-sandis.

F: That was a long time ago!

K: I have heard no-one noticed his ship.

F: Fog, perhaps.

K: I believe it is forecast. Heavy fog.

K. drifted slowly away. Not far away.

Received wisdom went they won’t sink you because that would mean war with Fidub and that’s the last thing they want. They might board you to provoke a phony war with Fidub so they can gracefully surrender to Fidub. They might of course be loons and actually want war with Fidub. Nobody quite believes that they’ll try to stop you protecting the House - but they might do.

Searc has flown to Azt, reported PANTHER.

K: We’re expecting company. Don’t want you to feel overwhelmed.

F: The fog has cleared?

K: No.

F: A private party?

K:Some chaps from Car-sandis.

Fidubi captain makes tearing hair out gestures. They’ll protect us? Inter us? Play with us? We’re the cats, we do the playing with mice.

There was an awful lot of comment and commentary and some of us was at the same time in different parts of the continent, but one of the best bits, or any rate, apparently relatively trivial though it was, as in fate of one man as opposed to fate of continents, was Tet, who started by ringing Hass.

“We need to go out onto the balcony,” said Hass.

A battered green van drew up and Fal got out one side, Tet the other.

“Help, then,” said Fal.

Wires were connected to screens.

“Now,” said Tet. “If you’re not knowing who I am, I am Tet, and I too am a gifted artist, and indeed Mel’s friend and I am thinking a number of things. Have we not in zero seconds moved from the fate of one man to Sarat as an incarnation of Narulis! Indeed the human animal is grist to the artist. And I would say also - and who in Zur does not know it - anyone who thinks we the Seismic Six would let Sarat and Maya screw it is talking out of his nether regions.”

“Dear world,” murmured Fal.

“Dear world! There were six of us, Mel and Hass and Junin, who’s now Army, Maitlan, who’s now Fleet, Reakoed and Fal who are now H-W and Me, and we spent all our holidays cluttering up the Saa’anda Senta arguing with anything that moved. But meanwhile before the Great Revolution I’m thinking there are people who need to know about art.”

“Am I not looking at your face now, Da?” said Hass.

On Tet’s screen appeared a cartoon of Mel as a large hairy sheepdog looking guiltily over his shoulder at the huge muddy pawmarks he left behind as he padded from The Room..

“Who'll not be remembering this one!”

The crowd erupted.

“Me,” muttered Mel, “I pretend to be suave and sophisticated.”

“Or this.” continued Tet.

Sarat and Hass armed to the teeth as before them cowered a range of scrawny sly-looking motor vehicles emitting noxious fumes.

“Or this.”

Sarat and Hass as young ash-trees about to come into leaf.

“Or this.”

Sarat and Hass valiantly barring the path of cross-eyed leering axe-men trying to grab the big bucks behind them..

“You'll understand this is not the first time Sarat has upset Ciletij.”

“Ref, ref!” said Mel.

“But now let me change the picture. Spoilt striplings of the privileged classes, indeed!”

Sarat and Hass in thick furs, a chauffeur holding open the door of a limousine, while axe-men thin to the point of starvation pointed piteously to their equally emaciated children.

“I'm saying to you, you know these guys, you have known them since their cradles, and you know which is true.”

“Here are two more pictures, one from the site of Brantin Steel – and they'll try to extradite me for breach of copyright, I do not doubt – and one from the site of NoZone, whom I'm thinking I can square, and which is true, the smog or the sun? If you have not been to Tjulsit, you may say how can I know, but were we not talking about chest disease and air pollution and it is not the camera that produces those figures but doctors, irturbi doctors, international environmental agencies, and the like, and so on balance which is true?

“And here are some figures, figures for the use of torture in Kadun's prisons, and here are pictures from our refugee commission and you'll be seeing I've blacked out the faces because you know these guys too, they live here in Zur, and as we know there is a large refugee community in Batna-kri.

“And here are some quick sketches I have just done.”

Sarat as a panther-cub curled up on the Anile throne.

Sarat-panther pouncing on Nudra-rat (President of Kadun)

Fat well-dressed rats gathered round Kadun's heart, so busy guzzling they don't see the pack of panthers about to descend on them.

“It is my contention that anyone with a problem with what has been said here today needs his arse kicking into next week. And I would add that the Grid is full of ‘anti-government art’ and to arrest anyone for what is universally available is not just malign but stupid. How thick are they in Azt! We'll be going inside now. Getting hungry.”

Someone started clapping. Someone else joined in. Then more.

A creep moved hastily to the front of the crowd to grab airtime.

“No need to push!”

“Most people watching won't know about Mel and Fal. Mel's so mad that she left him. Bet Fal could tell you a good few things! How long has this crap being going on for?”

Both Fal and Tet have short fuses but they also have presence of mind.

Fal turned slowly and stretched languidly, such that most men watching, being but human thought not, what's all this then or even that was below the belt but cor! It gave her time to think.

“You forgot to tell them Maya's my best friend. Everyone knows A-M's friends. We don't talk. Ever. About anything. Kind of a pity, really, or we'd be multi-millionaires! Do you know what Glitz would pay right now for anecdotes about Maya's childhood! But there it is. Stumm.”

Tet put two fingers between his lips and gave a whistle of approval.

“Me too, now. Would you like to be taking on the whole Six?”

“You were Mel's lover, hey!”

Por, who knew that was a rather complicated question, looked at Mel and murmured, “This was never going to be clean.”

“I was always Mel's friend. I was his girlfriend for a bit, yes.”

“One girl, five guys – well, four real guys. Some people say....”

“That you're a slimy little shit, some people say! We'll not be wasting our time with turd.”

“Put it around, did you, Fal-girl.”

“No,” said Fal. “Sorry to disappoint.”

One of the H-W said, “Want an apple, Fal?”

Give that man a medal! thought Tet.

“Throw it over,” said Fal.

She bent over to apparently check her sandals and still caught it on her knife.

“Guess you're the reason Sarat has to take Kadun. Some sort of baboon.”

Tet said: “You were forgetting to tell them my Fal-girl is H-W. I'm not wringing your neck because she's perfectly capable of wringing it herself.”

“You threatening me?”

“Don't be silly,” said Fal. “How can you be threatened by a woman?”

“I'm noticing,” said Tet, “the turd are sickly cowards. They will not be abusing Tar's niece nor my ladies of Van-senok and Var-segan, but an ordinary Zuri.”

“Guy,” said someone, “what you need to do is ask Maya about her sex life.”

“Please!”

“Course the poor little girl will need all her male relatives to defend her!”

“And Sarat!”

“Oh come on, you can do it!”

“Or me,” said Zeph, not yet Chair of GASH. “What was that again about real guys?”

“Whoops!” said someone.

Tet and Fal made their way up the hill, smirking at Hass coming down..

“I am so sorry,” said Cho.

“Kill, kill, kill!” trilled Fal, “Kill, kill, kill!”

The others looked a bit startled.

“It's a song we have. Usually reserved for the slime-machine.”

“You mean it wasn't?”

Sarat was on the phone.

“The panther-cub on the chair, “ said Sarat. “I want! For the forum.”

“Say please!”

“Pretty-please!”

“Sssh!”

“Easy meat,” said Hass to no-one in particular. “Not a real man.”

“Course,” said Zeph, “Mel's the heir because he's the elder. Hass is second in line. Do I think that would be upsetting, dear Zuri?”

“We love Hass!” yelled someone.

“Careful,” said Hass. “He might take you literally.”

“Bet you him and Sarat...”

Por closed his eyes a moment.

Hass looked puzzled.

“Sarat isn't gay. You'd need to ask Maya the details.”

“Oh come on, walking round arm in arm, bleeding inseparable.”

Is this happening? thought Hass.

“We have never walked around arm in arm. Too busy cuddling skaggas. Did you know the skagga breeds only once every two years?”

Zeph choked.

“If celibacy is your bag, guess you could really learn from the skagga!”

“Oh, I don't know,” said Hass, “maybe it's bi, one year gay, one year straight.”

“People have to breed! Stands to reason. Otherwise there wouldn't be any people.”

“People do not 'have to' breed,” said an elderly lady. “I have had no children.”

“Plenty of people who do want kids,” said Zeph.

“Believe it,” said Hass, “the skagga's problem is not its sex-life. The skagga's problem is that it's so stupid that when it does produce young it drops them in open land and they get eaten.”

“The real question is...” said Zeph, pausing dramatically, “has the baton passed to Hass, is he now the skagga's sole defender and advocate?”

“Can I shoulder,” said Hass, “that terrible burden!”

Por looked at Sarat.

“What do you do with a direct question? Not this time. Maybe next or the time after.”

Saryulin gazed into the middle distance. Mitch and Karula exchanged glances saying plainly we did wonder.

Cantilip looked interested.

Mel said: “The precise sexual dynamics of the Six-cum-Eight.”

“Hass and I,” said Sarat. “Maya and Fal. Separately, I hasten to add.”

“I am most relieved to hear it,” said Cho.

“I don't think they will,” said Por. “Innuendo.”

“But they might,” said Baz.

“Tell the truth,” said Sarat. “This is the real world, guys. People have had more than one partner.”

“But usually stick to a specific gender.”

“Tough,” said Sarat.

“I take it it can't be unearthed.”

“Not remotely. In my bedroom at home.”

“I don't think,” said Mel, “any of us is required to explain. Beyond the bare facts. So to speak.”

But Fal in the Room said: “Mel and I never really had a relationship at all. He was protecting me.”

Cho thought of blandly saying, I see! but realized he didn't see at all.

Fal continued. “I knew about Sarat and Hass. I knew from Maya Sarat isn't remotely gay. It wasn't really about sex. An expression of their relationship. I wanted – to see what that dimension was like with Hass. He didn't. Mel – saw I was hurt and gallantly put his arms round me. I was chewing it all over with Maya and we sort of took it from there.”

Not the exact truth, but damned if we'll tell him everything!

“Reakoed, Tet and Maitlan regarded us like a bunch of - “

“Adorable lunatics,” said Tet. “Then I went off to Enbahaluk. By the time I was back they were moderately sane.”

“We'd all grown up by then,” said Fal.

“Like Mel and Maitlan,” Zeph was saying. “Be saying next Mel's gay.”

Hass appeared to take that seriously.

“You know, I'm sure if he was, he'd say so. I mean, this is a civilized country. No-one would mind.”

“There wouldn't be any heirs and successors,” said Zeph. “Who's next, Hass? Pietri, right. And if the older generation had gone to a better place Vij.”

“Just don't say the Silver Homeland!”

“Field of flowers. I think that is just beautiful.”

“Don't worry about it!” said Hass.

“What, the field of flowers?”

“The succession! Mel adores kids. He's going to have loads of them.”

“Better not let you anywhere near them.”

“Guy,” said someone, “you really need to appreciate freedom of speech. It's why you're still living.”

“Everyone knows they can't keep their hands off kids.”

“Do we?”

“We have big shiny hospitals,” said Zeph. “There's one over in Carabatin. Most cases, you're polite about people who are mentally ill. Some of them are just nutters. You really want a referral.”

“Hostile audience, dude. You're not making any friends here.”

“I suppose ‘everyone knows’ straight men can't keep their hands off kids,” said Zeph. “You want to read the papers some time.”

“Bet Mitch could tell you about that case in the City couple of months ago, whole ring of them. All Cult.”

“Like Maya said,” said Zeph. “They're the real pervs. Need their heads rewiring.”

“Shall we get back to the Theme for the Day?” asked Hass. “Mind you, I’m not sure. It’s either poor Smudge or Sarat as Narulis!”

“Can’t say he hasn’t got the balls!”

Hass wisely refused to be drawn on the subject of Sarat’s balls.

“Oy, Effers, I may be a Fidubi kid who kept hamsters but I am Narulis’ heir!”

“No-one,” said Hass, “ever thought Sarat was shy and retiring.”

LIVE FROM GULA-TOON!

Here we go, here we go, here we go!

“Naturally,” said the Cile, “Ciletij supports the integrity of creative endeavour and the rightful exercise of individual liberty and we trust this man and all who share his terrible plight will be speedily released. We can, however, only express our sorrow at repeatedly ill-chosen words by clearly headstrong and ill-informed young people some barely out of school! Indeed, we note Sarat ban-essa's admirable enthusiasm for the biosphere. We cannot conceive how our good friends in Dabida permitted this performance. There can of course be no question of the Aniles interfering in the internal affairs of the sovereign nation Kadun other than in what is the duty of us all in the Quadrant, the prevention of gross miscarriages of justice. I do not think I need to remind Ciletij of the true meaning of the Anile throne.”

And an immediate response from Carlin, Sarat - no, oh my word, PANTHER!

“Zur knows us,” said Baz. “Fidub knows us. Now everyone knows us! Isn’t that cool. We’re PANTHER and we’ve been in Kadun slightly longer than forever. What some people need to remember is whatever it was, whenever it was, we were there.”

“The PANTHER version,” said Paw “It's in ancient-speak and when it's not it's in irturbi ancient-speak so may somewhat suffer in translation. Ye greate evil among the trees, nature unidentified. A fire was lit to smoke it out. The wind changed direction, the trees went up like tinder and a thousand years later we are still paying with earfuls of Ciletij crap.”

“You have to ask yourself,” said Baz, “even if Asyrion had been evil – why on earth would she have travelled across the whole of Kadun to personally order the massacre of a handful of Ciletij. If she wanted to burn people, there were plenty nearer by! All the evidence is the rest of Kadun was clean. I understand the once again the Cult came to the west from Harn argument. Small snag, Asyrion was in the east.”

“Put those two things together,” said Paw. “Just use your brains and ask yourselves what could have summoned the empress o’er leagues without measure - would have taken weeks, if not the Seetles from Harn. Cult. CTTL, stands for Change The Third Letter. Our archives are open to historians and other interested parties. Every reputable centre of learning says the matter is open. The Houses have their own records. Van-senok cared for the survivors. How were there any survivors if there’d been a massacre? And now we have to interrupt Baz there because this is special, this is coming direct to us from Van-senok, this is -what is this!

A chalet in the forest, a lot of guys and girls with machine-pistols. A guy of about 40

“Sabit. Head of Sardun. We fight. Mel Talal at least is informed and intelligent. As for the fool in Gula-Toon - does he not read his intelligence briefings. The whole of the Ciletij military is a target for Cunt infiltration. A lead is taken and he listens only to those who wish Ciletij neutralized, allied with Azt against the south. They sit there, the big-wigs, the fat-cats, dribbling to each other. They do not risk their lives, their souls. They do not live wild in the forest. Indeed, they do not die in the torture-chambers of the Cult, though that is only rarely, since we are very, very good.

“Many of us in peace have good friends in Ciletij. We share a common and inhospitable environment, the lore of snow and wind, of wolf and bear and lynx. But they are not their leaders and their leaders assuredly lead Ciletij to disaster.

“It is as Var-sega’ said. Only by taking Azt can the hebade garalis be cleared from this continent. Ingat-re Carla? Carlin has answered. Ingat-re Var-sega? Var-sega’ has answered. We too in Van senok answer. We of course have actually been in Kadun slightly longer than forever. We have learned to appreciate PANTHER, nonetheless -

Sorry, Baz mouthed at the screen

Without them night would have fallen. Without PANTHER, there would be no Carlin, there would be no Var-sega’, only ashes and the grave. Without PANTHER this day’s events would have been impossible.

Everything is owed to Choit-ban-varna-eban-Narulis, who heads PANTHER, and everything must be given. The fools in Gula-Toon deserve to die in the torture-chambers of the gerialis. Alas, the implications for the continent if Ciletij falls are too great. That is all.

Hang on, thought Seani, the world has already stopped.

Mel raised his hand for silence. The babbling slowly lessened.

“Where to start!”

“Here,” said As. “Fe-Barsinge, ingat-re Carla? Fe-Narulis calusissa Carla. Ban-narulin Carla varsavian cilerat. My lord Barsinge, what says Carlin? To us in trust Narulis gave Carlin. It is our honour to serve Narulis' heir.”

“Cho heads PANTHER! What is this crap!”

“PANTHER are Fidubi State Security!”

“No, we're not,” said Baz. “It's rather a long story.”

“You have to remember the Kadun cock-up,” said Paw.

“What in tarnation is the Kadun cock-up!”

“What,” said Sarat, “do you think is the Kadun cock-up!”

“Right,” said Baz, “let's jump in at the deep end. Sardun are correct. They always are. Right from the start we, PANTHER, said, Azt is not the problem. G-T is the problem. Heads in the sand.”

Seani thought: I am somewhere between suavely murmuring, this is a turn-up and screaming.

“These are Narulis' and Zani's heirs. They are against the Cult. Got that? We have evidence. We gave a copy to ISS.” Ciletij Internal State Security.

“It is not Sarat's problem the bigwigs don't read their intelligence briefings.”

Varchulan darling examined his Minister of Defence, who looked grey. Did he also look guilty? A plot to set us against each other? If we do not trust PANTHER, who is there left? But PANTHER are hand in glove with Ban-varna. He did the only thing left to do; he rang Vanya.

Baz got into his stride.

“An intelligent analysis of the scenario would look like this. I take it we all know what the continent looks like. OK, borders have been fixed for 600 years. Nobody moves because nobody has anywhere to move to. And we're all happy little bunnies, that's just the way we like it, right. However much Ciletij loathes Kadun, then, now, whatever, Ciletij isn't going to invade Kadun because Kadun is bigger than she is and would eat her alive. However much the current regime in Azt, or past ones, loathes Ciletij, Azt isn't going to invade Ciletij because Dabida, Vasucula and Fidub would come up from the south. Bye-bye, Kadun. Now the current regime in Azt doesn't like anybody, especially southern-type people. So what would happen if it thought of invading the south, which by the way we think it did, past tense, to attempt to wipe out the sworn enemies of the Cult, destroy A-M, destroy the shrine at M-P. It won't happen but they can dream. Two things. One of course is The First Event, which they can't do anything about. The other is the prospect of Ciletij coming to the aid of her noble allies in the Quadrant and turning Azt to rubble. Which they can do something about.”

“I think perhaps - dear world,” said Mel.

“Evil grin.”

“Now, dear world, once upon a time there was a guy called Jaizal. This guy Jaizal didn't like Fidub and he sent an army south to conquer her, but the army didn't like the guy Jaizal, did not like him at all, and so this guy Jaizal's army joined with Fidub - oh, and a guy called Zani - and they defeated Jaizal.”

“Turning now,” said Baz, “to my renowned lecture on geopolitics, which actually wasn't what I was going to say, Mel of course lives in impregnable fortress Dabida. Geography is a wonderful thing. If it's not the Great Divide it's vertical cliffs. In ye days of yore, they scrambled across. In days of now, the Dabidan Army's on the other side. OK, now the chances of the south being invaded by Azt are pretty well nil and falling. Which is not to say they might not try to take Carlin and some of us at least have our heads screwed on and are alert to the fact that all hell might break loose at any time. I would remind you all we are not in the sovereign state of Carlin, we are in what Azt thinks is hers. However, they could try it via Vaudos. Wouldn't get them anywhere, but they could try.

“So let's move to Act Two. Sarat, Mitch, As are in Azt. Act Two mostly depends on the maybe Imperial Army. If it's virtually solid and Ciletij loathing of the empire makes her doing something silly, then we just ask them politely if they've lost their way, maybe give them a coffee for the return trip. OK, one of the stupider ways

to conduct foreign policy is to embrace your enemy's enemy as your friend, even if you do hate each other guts. If people are going to be silly, and I really can't believe either our noble allies in the Quadrant or the gallant men of the maybe Imperial Army are going to be that silly, but however. Nearly left something out. We're not silly, either. We know that there are people who aren't so keen on democracy or women or gays who are still on the right side of sane and not Cult. Such as Colonel Challin, maybe. It's not what you think, it's what you do. You might in principle think - oh, I don't know. Women shouldn't be doctors. The thing is does that matter to you when you're sick. Most conservative guys I've met, the answer is no! The less intelligent ones of course can be and are readily manipulated by the Cult. If the maybe Imperial Army is not solid or virtually, both Cult and non-Cult in Kadun and both Cult and non-Cult in Ciletj may fall into each other's arms to fight the empire. That would not be good. That would be a pity. Blokes would end up dead.

"Only staying in the Quadrant can keep Ciletj clean and of course if Azt did try the south because Ciletj assured her she'd sit that one out, I really don't think we'd love her any more. In fact, only Sarat in Azt driving the Cult out of Kadun can keep Ciletj clean. Kadun is essentially in a state of civil war. The only way war can come to any of the rest of us is through the actions or inactions of Ciletj. I would like to think I am being heard."

Ciletj Chief of Staff Bris turned slowly from the screen.

Hearing you loud and clear, pussy, hearing you loud and clear. Isolated, vulnerable, do we believe the south would come to our defence? Therefore accommodation

The Cabinet of Vasucula was in extraordinary session.

"Do we actually want to stop it?"

"Not a lot."

"We are of course much closer to Dabida."

"We can't stand damn' Ciletj any more than anyone else can!"

"That may be a little exaggerated. They are a democracy."

"Don't forget we all love them really."

"That is a guy who loves the skagga."

"Sure, the influence of the Houses – there are other determining factors."

"If they had no damn' influence, they would not still be there."

"One or two other things, such as they clearly reckon they speak for the folks back home."

"Mum and Dad clearly included?"

"What do you notice? I notice there is nothing in these guys suggesting they feel they speak out of turn."

"That's class, man."

"That is they do not feel they speak out of turn!"

"We have to ask ourselves to what extent we too – irturbi do not need democracy."

"We have to ask ourselves to what extent – certain things given, men and women alike content with the status quo. The face of women in Kadun is that?"

"Karula ban-sarndit-vaq."

"And Maya Talal!!"

Meanwhile on the ocean blue...

F (by now surrounded, but politely, while somewhere yonder, an equally polite distance away, are vessels Dabidan and Fidubi): Isn't this fun!

K1: We find it fascinating.

K2: Never have liked bears.

F: How about cats?

K3: Curious creatures.

F: Vital in the country. Keep down the rats.

K2: Especially in old houses.

F: Are you interested in architecture?

K1: It's so much a question of one's heritage.

"PANTHER, Baz! What is this garbage?"

"Rent-a-cat," said Paw. "PANTHER lend themselves to Fidub to do what PANTHER think requires doing. If Fidub requires something different, she must find someone else to do it."

“When the empire went ack-over, we starved. Not good times. The empire had paid us. The empire stopped paying us. Some of the guys were well-off in their own right and helped out. Some of them had ordinary jobs. Some of them took any work they could get. People stopped paying attention to us. We’d been the emperor’s representatives. Or else they suspected us of still being the emperor's representatives! People didn't join because they were scared of being associated with us. We’d had the moral authority of the emperor. Remember that, Varchulan darling. Suppose you were PANTHER and you came across a few dudes planning something for Kinsquol and a lot more people just a little scared and you said something like, I command you cease and desist in the emperor's name! It meant something to people. PANTHER are not and never were an army. We just don't have the numbers. Consequently when the entire infrastructure was stacked against us, things got a little hairy. After the defeat of Jaizal we limped back to Fidub to rethink. Twist a few arms, rethink. The House of Fire really did not want to know that Sonny had screwed up. PANTHER in Fidub were not impressed by that. We reached a few basic conclusions about ourselves and sat down to rethink the whole PANTHER thing. There's a job to be done and we can do it. Not if we're starving. First and foremost, we set about making ourselves financially secure. PANTHER pay PANTHER. Second, and nearly as foremost, we don't provide freebies. Cho pays for the protection of his family and certain other things, refunds. PANTHER in Kadun are paid by PANTHER. If it's the business of the Republic of Fidub, the Fidubi government pays, so Fidub pays for the protection of the government and things like that.”

“That just answers so many of my questions!” said Karula. “Two things are generally held. That PANTHER was not able to stop the rise of the Cult historically. That after the defeat of Jaizal PANTHER destroyed the Cult. These did not seem to totally make sense. The rot set in because PANTHER were starving! PANTHER were starving because the rot set in!

“Faun is Head of Fidub State Security,” said a journo, feeling this at least was firm ground.

“Faun is PANTHER. PANTHER pay Faun and claw it back from Fidub. Faun’s job is - “ He shrugged. “ - Head of Fidub State Security, where the buck stops if Airoch’s safe is burgled or something!”

“But who is Head of PANTHER?”

“Faun, Cho, no-one. It depends. Mostly the guys on the ground in Kadun work things out for themselves. If it’s purely admin - computer’s eaten my salary - Faun heads the admin side. If it’s something that’s got a political dimension, it ends up with Faun and Cho. We’re Narulis’ cub. Always have been, always will be. The Anile throne has a symbolic meaning, whether there’s anyone on it or not. I could put that better. Va, the Silver Homeland stuff, if I haven’t said a naughty word. Death does not sit on the Anile throne.”

“This is doing my head in!”

I suspect, thought Mitch, it’s doing mine in too.

Essa said: “One-way trip.”

“I think so,” said Cho.

Maya had reached the same conclusion The throng was parting to let a car through, Mel’s navy-blue petrol guzzler, in fact. Maya got out.

“I brought my toothbrush.”

Sarat wrapped his arms around her.

Don’t they make a lovely couple!

Still no response from Azt.

K2: May we ask a personal question.

F: I shall not say fire ahead.

K2: How many of you are persons of the feminine gender?

F: About half.

K2: Including the aircrew?

F: Yes.

K2: FAF has a certain reputation.

K7: I saw them at the Round-the-Islands Race. A spectacular display..

K2: I gather more recently.

K3: Gentlemen of the Imperial Air Fleet, I understand.

F: Ladies and gentlemen. We are, yes.

K2: At least...

F: The wearing of Kadun uniform would have been a little difficult.

K2: For the moment?

F: That rather depends.

F to Base. Extreme courtesy. Civilized conversation. It is not meaningless but no idea of the meaning, where it's going. Maybe they don't know either! Out of range in all senses. Could be Corsin playing with a mouse but why?

Base to F: You need to get aboard.

F to Base. I figured it.

LIVE FROM AZT!

A woman in a black evening dress gathered the papers on her desk preparing to speak. A voice off said, "Most elegant, my dear. Silver, dreadfully common." "As for the hair!" said another voice.

Cantilip extended her nails like a panther unsheathing her claws.

The woman appeared to notice she was on camera.

"Pros," muttered Mitch.

"The Spider," nearly spat Karula.

"Cult?" asked Maya.

"Certainly Cult," said Mitch.

"And the third letter," said As.

"Sssh!"

"Good evening. It is our understanding there have been certain theatricals in Zur concerning the arrest of an artist. Clearly my lord Var-sega' has a remarkable talent for marketing. My lords, my ladies, it hardly becomes you, admirable though is your concern for the creative arts. It appears His Highness has extraordinary friends. Of course we shall release Smudge. His more formal works, shall we say, are a credit to Kadun and we are neither barbarians nor fools. Nor, may I say, are we devoid of a sense of humour, a great human quality, to be able to laugh at oneself.

"We feel it only just to repay Dabida for the pleasure of the sheepdog by displaying two of the works for which Smudge was so stupidly arrested.

"We trust governance by grown-ups may now prevail. Really, children, return to your play-pens! Your homework, indeed. Coursework I presume.. Not of course that you need concern yourselves about future employment. How touching, the concern of Sohenoil and AMI for the poor. My lords, my ladies, they wish their fine houses palaces of the people, a redistribution of capital? I think not. My lords, my ladies, your estates await you.

"As to water-borne parasites, we find generally that such unfortunate infestations float in on the tide from Fidub. We at least would not stoop to examining the affairs of Madam President, financial and otherwise, but certainly we do not hesitate to ask what benefit Sohenoil and AMI might think to accrue from this mad charade. I believe in commercial circles there is a saying: all publicity is good publicity? Really, this nonsense about women. Do I look oppressed? I thought better of my lady Var-sega' A little gratitude is perhaps in order. Indeed she attended the Schools and what enabled a woman of really rather humble origins so to do but a government scholarship. Are such the actions of an oppressive and misogynist State. You must decide. We must of course distinguish between a simple equality between men and women and the somewhat febrile doctrines of Van-senok. We state plainly the common belief of humanity: children require care. That that care is best provided by their mothers we think unexceptionable. Who does not? Or my lady Var-sega' indulged her flair for marketing, my lord house-husband, I believe the term current in the south? It is my misfortune to have no children - "

"Probably eat them," muttered Mitch.

" - but certainly I should consider the cultivation of growing minds a more rewarding occupation indeed than addressing the follies we have seen today. Surely the purpose of schooling is preparation for adulthood. We do not for a moment deny we think boys and girls have different needs. That is not to say the intellectual content of the curriculum should differ. Or my lady Var-sega' thinks joinery more taxing than the chemistry of nutrition or balancing the household budget?

"We do not deny the existence of poverty in Kadun. We must ask ourselves how plausible it is my lords, my ladies surrender their power for good, or indeed bend the knee to a rusting throne. Sohenoil perhaps in financial

difficulty, Ban-varna wishes former imperial property in Azt, now of course the property of the people, our common heritage? We do not know. But we are not fools and assuredly this is a charade.

And – Cho – laughed.

“Worth waiting for.”

“I am a non-person,” said Sarat. “Apart from being a parasite!”

“Interesting in itself. What can we do with it?”

“And me,” said Maya.

“You’re the youngest,” offered Mel.

“Where’s my playpen?”

“I would think Dabida is not swayed by attack on Tar’s niece.”

“To appeal to nationalism would be to accept the empire is even a possibility.”

“You’re the biologist,” said As.

“A positive parasite!”

“Symbiosis?”

“If we ask ourselves,” said Mitch, “why not attack Sarat?”

“What do they not want to talk about,” said Cantilip. “Death on the Anile throne.”

“To put the image of desecration on line is to risk a screenshot.”

“To put The Spider on line.”

“That’s my chair,” said Sarat.

“I think in this instance,” said Mitch, “the target-audience is essentially irturbi. It does not matter that most in the south will not recognize the more illustrious members of the government in Azt.”

“Just popping out,” said Sarat.

“Ah, and here is Sarat, I do not doubt come to respond to Azt!”

“Me? I’m a non-person. Just perfecting my impersonation of a water-borne parasite. I don’t think Madam Minister is a biologist. I guess it’s true girls don’t get taught science in Kadun. I think she’s confusing parasitism with symbiosis. Symbiosis is where two organisms get together for the benefit of both.” Even the Ciletij Representative at Zur laughed.

“It’s really interesting,” Sarat continued enthusiastically. “For instance, there’s a really no-account fungus called coradium. It’s quite pretty to look at, green and mossy, but really what does it, can it, do? The point is it secretes an enzyme. Beetles lay their eggs in it and the enzyme enables the eggs to hatch. Of course it’s a fungus so it doesn’t think, great, lots of strong healthy young beetles.”

“All right,” admitted Vrin. “I am in stitches.”

“Wonderful thing, nature,” murmured Karci.

“What, I hear you cry, does coradium get out of this biologically? The baby beetles get covered in its spores and when they go out into the world they spread the spores. Spores are pretty tough little guys. Sometimes they’re carried by wind and sometimes by water. Obviously they can be picked up by people’s shoes or by tyres. Whatever. I think that’s what she meant.”

“I doubt it!”

“What about Sohenoil, Sarat?”

“Cho’s surely rolling!”

“Spoilt striplings of the privileged classes.”

“I did not say that. You have to admit there is an element.”

“AMI is a problem to Zur?” asked Sarat.

“Nor did I say that!”

“Didn’t you?”

“My uncle works for AMI. Loves it.”

“What’s the point?” asked Sarat. “Mel mooches into Sorito’s. Sabi - “The bar-tender. “ - has a whole lot less money than Mel. And?”

“I guess no-one in Zur is really poor, like Kadun poor.”

“A bunch of rich kids,” said Sarat, “don’t think anyone should be really poor. Is that by any chance familiar?”

“That’s one thing. Big capital is something else. New markets. Investment opportunities.”

“Killings to be made?”

"I'd have to be pretty dumb to deny that," said Sarat. "What you have to look at is what we want to kill. The Cult owns the banks in the City. The banks in the City own half Kadun. OK, finance, I'm really in my playpen. I have a really good financial adviser. If we hold the Kadun economy, we can get the banks out. Sure there'd be southern capital in their place. You do need to think a bit. If all southern capital was after was a quick buck, why isn't it investing in Kadun now, when the overheads are so much lower. Just about the first thing we want to do is put up wages. There's a whole range of things that are costs to employers. They're so standard here in the south it doesn't occur to business to think they're extras. Ooh, ooh, Sohenoil has bought Brantin Steel. And what does it find itself doing, having to rebuild every foundry, pay for every worker to have adequate safety gear?"

"Then you're saying businesses could go bust. You'll put people out of work."

"Not a chance," said Sarat. "Of course one of the things that'll squeeze the banks is smaller profits.

Co-operatives are one thing. If there's one place that's really rolling, it's the Republic of Kadun. Kadun is rich, rich, rich and of course one of the reasons why is she doesn't spend on healthcare and all the rest of it. Everyone knows AMI and Sohenoil do profit-sharing, everyone knows all the workers get heard and everyone knows why. People prefer to have a stake in their jobs. OK, apart from the human cost of unemployment, isn't it better for the State to offer start-up capital so the workers can sort the company out themselves. State loans to small businesses genuinely struggling. That's a moral decision not a financial one, of course. Anyone with Cult links gets zilch. Apart from anything else, there are incredible amounts of work to be done in Kadun. Wiring, plumbing, building, fixing. It'd be crazy to have anyone out of work. Maybe the State employs them - that's pretty standard too. If you get a pothole in the highway, you don't call a private firm. Other things, sure southern investment."

"People of The Times!" proclaimed Seani. "I think this just might be real."

"They've thought about it," said Venzat.

"Oh yes," said Seani. "They've thought about it."

Mitch materialized by Sarat's side.

"I have one thing to add. Make that two. Who knows, it could be three? Capital is power. It is by no means the only manifestation of power. Being dragged from one's home on a trumped-up charge springs to mind. As does equally having the ear of the entire world. We do not delude ourselves that were we the kids in Sarat's class you would be hanging on our every word. Power is the capacity to commit evil and equally the capacity to stop or prevent evil. Power is neutral and so is capital. When I was 17 I wanted to give the whole lot away but really, what would that have achieved, other than to render me powerless and penniless. I saw that with power and capital I could change things. The buzz-word is transparent. If people do not know what capital is doing, they cannot object to it. Up in The Room is an elderly gentleman who I am sure enjoys watching the children play. I know one thing, which is indeed quite possibly all I need to know. If you were to ask Choit-ban-varna-eban-Narulis about his affairs - have I just realized what I just said? Perhaps I should rephrase that? 1. He would completely accept your right to ask. 2. He would not think it conceivable to shrink from responding. Oh and 3. Except he probably wouldn't bother because the fully audited accounts of Sohenoil are on line. Together with, I may add, to my considerable delectation, his personal finances, including monies made over to Sarat, monies paid to PANTHER. Have I not said, we are calm, we are resolute, we are informed - and oh, we are prepared! Perhaps if you have questions after you have perused the facts? If on the hand you were to pry into the affairs of bankers in the City, you would probably end up at the bottom of the river. Have I just said Searc is a murderer? I shall repeat it. More than one financial journalist has met an unexpected death. A particularly tragic case concerned a young female environmental activist indeed, though undoubtedly considerably more naive than certain other environmental activists. She thought she could get certain factories shut down. It seems the poor girl hanged herself. Nothing is ever said. No charges are brought. No investigations are carried out in order than charges may be brought. And that is in the City. I do not think you have reason to think Kadun in any way superior. The creature who addressed us from Azt. Our pet name for her is The Spider. You do not surround her in the Colonnade and demand she elaborate on her remarks on capital. Nor or course do you mock the lamentable lacunae in her knowledge of biology - despite of course its being a great human quality to be able to laugh at oneself. Here in Zur, in one of the most vigorous democracies in the world, we appear to be having an argument over which is the better system. I have to say I find that extremely bizarre. I guess we have to thank our friends in Ciletij."

“They have always said,” remarked the President of Vasucula, “watch Var-sega’. I cannot imagine why.” The Times’s leading cartoonist was heard feverishly remarking, “What eats spiders? Does anyone know any damn’ biology?”

“Ask Sarat.”

Mitch hadn’t quite finished.

“By the way, if you ask why The Spider, it is rumoured that she ate her partner, if not literally, then mentally, emotionally. Madam Minister is not something you would wish to meet on a dark night; Madam Minister is not something with whom you willingly share the same planet. As Asdinan so rightly said, indeed she is Cult. It is also useful to change the third letter.”

“Language, diddums, language!” murmured Sorg.

Everyone said that Mitch had just burned his boats, if he hadn’t already. The only way he was going to see Var-segan again was in a tank flying the imperial standard. He was either supremely confident or completely potty.

Meanwhile on the ocean blue...

K7: Many people are profoundly arachnophobic.

F: Spider-bites can be nasty.

K7: Anti-venin should be carried at all times.

Naturally the airwaves twittered on about Sarat. Well, he hasn’t done the o loyal irturbi hearken unto me bit, has he. He’s 18. It’d be dumb and he knows it. Or alternatively: doesn’t have to, does he. He’s behaving like a team player. Why not indeed. Whatever he is, he isn’t stupid. Between them, Mitch, Asdinan and Cantilip are a walking encyclopedia. The only problem with that is they essentially acknowledge he’s leader of the pack. Well, Cho is. Whatever. What we know for sure is he’s a Fidubi kid who doesn’t keep his mouth shut. That is bad enough without being who he is! WYSIWYG for sure. As for Mitch! Where has that guy been? Cantilip. The maybe emperor’s future stewards are so far outside what we might have thought. Well, that goes for a lot of things! That guy from Sardun was scary! He’s fighting a war, man. Zesh, man, I even found Baz and Paw scary! We’re so used to - what do we think, just because they’re looking after Cho’s baa-lamb they aren’t real PANTHER. I think we have to understand something here. Something like add two years to their numerical age. They grew up faster, exposed to more. Exposed to people. I guess those years in the Saa’anda Senta really paid off!

Karula held court in the conservatory.

“As has been said, contact between Fidub and Kadun along our east coast long predated Narulis. When guys whose belief-system was the power of the earth arrived on islands not only powerful but vocal, they naturally regarded them as their spiritual home. What is fascinating is the critical role of silver. I know it is all myth, but that myth dominated a more superstitious age. Silver was seen as a kind of universal warder-off of evil. Fidub believed she was clean because of her silver-lodes and the singing of the Isles came from the native silver. In myth silver destroys evil. In fact, it’s an anti-bacterial. It’s really easy to see that the medical use of silver could have been seen as magic. We have silver, but for some reason we didn’t know it. If there is one thing Fidub taught us it is the mining, refining and casting of silver. I was researching the Dacunine Window! Silver was and is used in the making of stained glass, particularly the yellows and golds.”

....

I Kyse must intervene. Stable, me?

If I resign and return home or install myself in Azt what actually should I do? Historical research. I guffawed. By the way, for whom should I be working? Things get complicated when you think about them too much. I guessed most of the people in the Imperial saw themselves as good citizens of Vasucula or Ciletij carrying out the aims of Vasucula or Ciletij. My new friend must have some views on this and in the sprawling apartment that was home in the City I mailed her. The bit in the middle wasn’t a problem. It was the end and the beginning. Hi, Fal? Dear Fal? Dear, dear Fal? Love, Kyse?

Lots of love?

Neither of us had said anything. Make that Said Anything.

I clicked Save not Send and sat back and started to think about something difficult.

It must be said at this late date... One of the reasons I hadn't cast aside my books and rushed off to the pulsating hub was that I had been in a relationship. It was a perfectly good relationship – I guess I mean imperfectly good. We were very alike and that I saw with hindsight had been fatal. On-lookers on life. Chroniclers. I understood that if I became involved with Fal I shouldn't be able to sit back and watch. Or want to. But was it for me? Mel had opened that door for me. I'd looked inside, smiled approvingly, gosh, you do lead a varied life, and withdrawn. I doodled the word 'extremes' with lots of curlicews on the 'x'. Surely there were normal people, people who found a happy medium. I considered Fal and my mind and body wandered off into a rather enjoyable fantasy. I reined them in and drew a vertical arrow down from the centre of the 'x'. Hmm. No-one who'd known her ten years ago would have dreamed she'd be living alone growing pettifer in Carlin. Life is both, I wrote. Congratulations on that vast glimpse of the obvious. Ah yes, the balance. So my life was heavily out of kilter – and at the other extreme that of many others too obvious to name. But there would be an election. There would be respite. It'd be Fal who'd be Senator, not me. So she'd be in Azt. So – my mind went blank a moment. So she could be killed. I felt a sort of fury that that was a possibility. The Matter of Kadun stared at me and said do something. Oh.

What are they all in it for? A society in which people were not assassinated. The rule of law. I do the rule of law.

They didn't need me to write the laws. Conceivably they needed me to write the history.

I wrote: the unknown and possibly the unbearable, then underlined 'the unknown' a lot.

I couldn't in all honesty, I said to myself with a sort of leer, even if I wanted to, say 'it wouldn't work' because I didn't actually have the faintest conception what 'it' would be like.

There was of course also the small detail of whether she'd want me.

Dear Fal. Lots of love, Kyse x.

Dear Kyse.

It was a long answer and some of it was hilarious. She spared herself no pains telling me about being handed over to Sarat. People like us, she wrote, are so obviously Mel's team that we shock ourselves when we find we aren't. I think the ground rules are some automatic assumptions. I trust we all know our Constitution. Let's say we're functioning solely in the context of Dabida a minute. We assume the whole thing isn't going to go pear-shaped, which is to say we assume the interests, values etc of Crown, State and People are identical. It doesn't occur to us that by being 'Mel's team' we're being in any way divisive. Mel had to take the other two-thirds with him and he did. In the context solely of Kadun, there's Mitch, absolutely 'Sarat's team' and the same applies. There the assumption is a bit bigger and its roots are more complicated because pro tem anyhow the State and the People are all represented by 'Sarat's team'. But really it's not a question of that three-pronged animal 'the nation' it's a question of the interests and values and, as I said to you, what you do to further those values, so there is no conflict. Only that there might be. In the long run that 'might be' is real, but I don't think it is in our lifetimes. In other words Kadun is not going to declare war on Dabida! What could happen, though I don't think it will, is I could find myself in a Senate with an anti-democratic (and nationalist) majority. So who would 'the People' be then, the people who'd elected me or the people who'd elected them? If Mel, Sarat, Tar, Vanya, took a pronounced anti-democratic turn, I'd oppose them. It's so easy for the little hierarchical brain to say 'Mel's team' but I'm not, you're not. We're irretrievably committed to certain values, we're not on anyone's side, except the side of those values. Consequently, theoretically, I could yet find myself a resistance fighter holed up in the Lausanne. It is – fortunate the power bases of the continent are equally committed to those values, but that's all it is, true for now, not true-true, a law of the universe. That's what I mean, it's a shock. Shock to find I'm something apart from a loyal little Dabidan. But that's what they mean when they say PANTHER works for no-one, not Kadun, not Fidub, not the Emperor. We mean, I mean to say, of course, yes...It gets embedded, doesn't it. It doesn't really matter unless the chips are down.

There was a bellowing in my brain: soul-mate.

I realized that I wasn't really all that interested in chairing a seminar for the planet's brightest on exchange rates

and the Mosai Wars.

Oh dear.

But honing the minds of the leaders of tomorrow is so rewarding.

I took that one on in 3D. They'd been honed. If the Matter of Kadun still went pear-shaped, it would take more or rather less than finely honed minds to straighten it out. Sub-machine guns sprang to mind. Was I not then a leader of today? Oh yikes. No, whatever I might become I was not leadership material. I grinned to myself. If Fal was leading the resistance from the Lausanne I'd be in the back room organizing the communications.

You're in a program, Kyse, I told myself and many are the cunning snares programs lay to trap the unwary because you think – thought – you made a free choice.

Highly successful academic career. Moderately successful human being. Help old ladies across the road.

All the right instincts. So why aren't I acting on them?

Fal and I continued to correspond. How dry that sounds. I think we had an understanding that I was winding up my life in the City when suddenly the chips came down.

MAYA DEAD

MAYA ASSASSINATED

SHE DIED IN HIS ARMS

Can you be numb with fury? Or maybe stripped? All I can really say about that moment is all the intellectualization and introspection fell away and all that was left apart from the pain and fury was WHAT THE HELL AM I DOING HERE?

Oh and a little insanity. I resigned. I walked out. Instantly. No notice. Sorry about the classes and the timetable and the committees and the rest of the crap. You'll manage. You're bright enough.

Where I'm going I shan't need a reference.

Calm down, said Qartly. You knew her of course.

Not really, I said. That's not the point.

Give my love to Mel.

I am behaving abominably.

About time, said Qartly.

I wasn't about to go into that one.

Thank you, I said.

The buzzer had gone off on the hill, the alarm, the one that never went off, the one that meant fire, invasion, flood, freak wave warning, catastrophe. Someone was screaming. Mel had been talking peaceably to some minor politician. She started. He jumped up.

"Fire, flood..."

She picked up her papers.

Mel was at the door cannoning into Por.

"Maya," said Por. [Unspeakable image.] He picked up the remote. Maya died in Sarat's arms in front of them.

It was the third re-run of the day.

All the minor politician would say afterwards is I should not have seen that. I should not have seen Mel see that. She vanishes from our story.

"Auto-pilot," said Mel. Por clasped his shoulder. "Somewhere I'm screaming." He reached for the intercom.

"Turn the alarm off now." He walked slowly out. The worst has happened. We should try – he said

afterwards, words a moment failed him. Why should we try to keep calm? Bomb the City. How calm I feel. The worst has happened, he said again. Now we must grieve. We do no good to ourselves or others, to the living or the dead, by being deranged, no matter how we feel.

The 'phones started to ring, incessantly, mindlessly, thought Mel, were abruptly silenced.

"Pietri," said Mel.

"Fal," said Por.

“I must ring...” said Mel. He meant Sarat.

“I should imagine,” said Por, “at this point Sarat is beyond words.”

Cantilip had been in the studios of Zur Live admiring their new technology. There was a flurry, then a sudden silence then people who’d been calling her babe two minutes earlier were on their feet, tears running down their faces, and looking at her and saying gently, my lady, and her heart turned over.. I see, she said. Then everyone stood up and they played the national anthem and then the imperial anthem, over the air, because it sort of seemed the right thing to do, but as Cantilip told Mel with that devastating honesty for which he loves her so the truth was no-one had the faintest idea what to do. Least of all me. Seize the mike. It gave me time to think. Cantilip will speak. It – it perhaps not for me to speak for Kadun nor even for Dabida on this terrible day. All of us involved in – in this Matter of Kadun have long lived with dread and now it has happened. Mel and I send all our love to Sarat, to Pietri and Caluna, Vij, and all those who share our devastation, in Dabida, in Kadun. This shared loss of our beautiful, our entrancing, our wonderful Maya – I nearly stalled, she said after. What about our shared loss? Some piece of sickly nonsense about how it may bring us still closer? There are few who did not, who do not love her. I salute Maya Talal ban-essa, Anile Empress, our darling Maya.

Mel was trying Fal’s mobile. It went on ringing. Hallo? she said eventually, sounding perfectly cheerful. You’ve heard? Heard what? Oh no, thought Mel, it gets worse. He put all the love and support into his voice that it’s possible to send down a telephone line. Fal, my dearest, my darling – Maya’s dead. No, she said. Mel, you didn’t say that. I can’t leave Zur, he said. Of course you can’t bloody leave Zur! she said. Someone needs to be with you. I’ll call As, she said.. Oh Mel. Love, love, love, love, love, he said.

Por looked at him.

“At least Sarat knows.”

“I cannot tell Pietri over the ‘phone.”

There are worse ways of finding out. Caluna had been in the Mall. Like most places, Zuri electronics shops have TVs on in the window. We interrupt this broadcast. She stared sightlessly at the screen. Her legs gave way.

“Normal work is clearly over for the day,” Mel was saying, “perhaps for many days.” This is my culmination? To bury my cousin? “Hot sweet tea I think is in order. Let’s go,” he said to Por.

Por committed what is usually Zur’s greatest crime, driving through the walking-streets. No-one noticed. A small crowd had already gathered at Pietri’s. Pietri came out of the kitchen, shaking his head, looking suddenly old.

“I am going to Azt. The heli is waiting.”

“Pietri – “ began Mel.

“Say nothing,” said Pietri, “nothing is best.”

Mel kissed him. Pietri briefly clasped Mel’s back.

“Where’s Caluna?”

“Vij has gone to her,” said Sarshi. “She collapsed in the street.”

“You have many calls on your time,” said Pietri.

“Blame me,” said Mel

“No, Mel.”

“It is only unbearable?” asked Mel.

Pietri laid a hand on his nephew’s shoulder.

“You have spoken to Sarat?”

“Not yet. Let me try....”

Baz’ mobile was off too. He seemed to have deleted the number of Paw’s.

“I imagine,” said Pietri, “the problem is it keeps ringing.”

“Try Faun...”

“Faun.”

“Mel. I want Sarat.”

“Turn your television on. He’s gone back.”

“TV,” said Mel. Sarshi ran to put it on. “What’s Paw’s number?” he asked down the ‘phone.

Scenes of devastation from Azt. His Imperial Majesty has returned to the scene of the blast that so tragically.

Pietri sat down suddenly.

Sarat talking to rescue-workers, Sarat talking to the rescued. Sarat still bloody.

“You go out there,” said Mel, “and you damned well do it. You do it when your heart is broken, you do it when you’re screaming, you do it when you’re bleeding to death from internal wounds. You just bloody do it.”

Pietri shook his head.

“I have no animosity towards Sarat.”

“The dread,” said Mel.

“That is the same for all.”

His Imperial Majesty will speak

Someone had a radio outside. It was turned up suddenly, hurting the silence.

Sarat finished. Someone outside began to sing the imperial anthem. A few voices joined in, then faltered and stopped.

Pietri looked suddenly resolute, turned and walked to the front door. He opened it and walked out to the crowd.

“On Sarat’s behalf, on behalf of my beautiful Maya, I thank you. Please continue.”

He turned on his heel and returned to the house.

Mel hugged him.

Mel’s ‘phone rang.

“Mel. Papa! I’m at Pietri’s.”

Pietri looked up sharply.

Mel thought: don’t talk to me like this. Don’t talk to me the way you did when I was six and my puppy was run over, because I’m liable to cry like I did when I was six.

“I’ll give you Pietri,” he said at length. “I’ll get a glass of water.”

Sarshi followed him into the kitchen.

“You loved Sorg. You loved Maya.”

“I don’t think I ever knew,” said Mel, “exactly what people meant by a living nightmare.”

“It must end!”

“It must not,” said Mel, “each time become a little harder. No faltering in our resolution. How to recapture - ?”

“I think it changes,” said Sarshi. “Hardens. I – I never thought of myself as having – resolution. After Sorg – this will not fail and that’s that. If I have to fight for Carlin, I’ll do it.”

“Oh Sarsh.”

Pietri came in.

“Your mother.”

Mel drove back with his mobile off. A queue had begun to form, snaking up the hill. He got out and walked, shaking hands, touching shoulders, hugging.

“The following people want to talk to you and your bloody mobile is either engaged or off. That’s without the ones who are actually here.”

“This is hell,” said Mel.

“Worse than that,” said Por. “There is a – contingent who want the funeral in Zur.”

“No,” said Mel.

“Vanya’s in The Room.”

He walked in.

Our deepest regrets, our sincerest condolences. The funeral...

“It is not,” said Mel, “and cannot be my decision. Pietri’s gone to Azt.”

Eventually he escaped.

“I must ring Baya.”

“They may not be there.”

“That’s not the contingency plan.”

Por’s face showed what he thought of contingency plans.

Mel made one more ‘phone call.

“Now I ride,” said Mel.

He made it back to his office once more.

Julin and Maitlan sat watching the scenes from Azt.

Julin turned and smiled

“Reporting for duty, sir!”

“Am I glad to see you,” said Mel.

“Our deepest regrets,” said Maitlan. “Our sincerest condolences. All the rest of the helpless, useless crap.

My poor Mel. Our love.”

“Poor everyone,” said Mel.

Maitlan looked at him questioningly.

“Am I sufficiently detached?”

“Oh yes,” said Mel. “I just hadn’t got around to it.”

“That was Julin’s reasoning,” acknowledged Maitlan. “He rang me.” Julin looked innocent. “What Mel needs now is people to help him do what he has to do without - “

“Wounds of their own,” said Mel.

“Reakoed,” suggested Maitlan.

“Reakoed is too important where he is.”

Maitlan laughed.

“If Dabida turns,” said Julin.

Mel closed his eyes.

“Fortunately that seems unlikely.”

“The nationalists will use it.”

“No-one pays them any attention,” said Maitlan.

“It’s as though,” said Mel, “everything we’ve done was a preparation for now.”

“Real people,” said Julin, “people you know, people who love each other.”

“People who suffer,” said Mel.

“How can we be of use?” asked Julin.

“Go down into Zur. Make sure there are loos, water. Tell them the funeral is for Pietri and Sarat to decide and no-one else.”

“Shit,” said Maitlan.

By the time I ran into Kai at the airport I was a bit saner. Fake sane, the way one is. Good at giving tissues to the Economic Liason Officer to the Anile Throne. When I’d seen Kai off in a cab to the Imperial, my brain started to work. I was just about to hire a car and mutter, Carlin, fast, out of the corner of my mouth, like they do in the movies, when it occurred to me that she probably wasn’t there. I knew she and Maya had been close. I couldn’t imagine how she was coping or not with double devastation. Wouldn’t she go to Pietri’s? But wouldn’t Pietri and Caluna go to Azt? Would she be with Mel? With Sarat? Clearly darling I wanted to surprise you wasn’t on even if it was altogether appropriate. I got out my mobile.

No answer. I didn’t know if that was good or bad.

This you will of course understand is totally unlike me. Hating crowds isn’t unlike me, especially unhappy and therefore bad-tempered crowds. I retreated back into the concourse and spied a giant sunshine yellow steaming mug with a toothy grin. I knew the franchise from the City. At least the coffee would be good. I shrank into a corner, making mountains and valleys in the froth with a sunshine yellow plastic stirrer. Then I realized the television was on. Our heroic rescue-workers. Wreckage. Sarat, silent and unsmiling, leaving the Jumesit. People crying. People angry. People with flowers. We turn now to. Here is. We move now to Zur. I looked at the queue circling the hill. This conveyed to me that wherever the hell I should be it wasn’t at an outlet of Rise ‘n’ Shine. I examined my other self and the barricade around it which said Dabidan which had just been breached, the remarkable human faculty for saying something is over there and not really anything with which I was personally involved. Oh, and the basic response to violent death which is to wrap one’s arms around someone. I really had no reason to think Fal was remotely romantically interested in me or anyone else alive. Did I really want to compete with a ghost? Did I really want to get involved with someone so psychologically complicated and possibly insane? Did I think these things? Only at one remove, through a mist. They were as naught compared to a sort of agonising empathy generally known as love, which

told me she was all alone and needed me. This particular derangement of love appeared to have some basis in reality. Somewhere it seemed to me that the breaching of my defences mirrored a wound to Dabida and I couldn't readily see how any of the Six could rush off to Carlin to hold Fal's hand. Except of course for. Mental squeal of brakes.

She hadn't talked about Tet. Why should she? Tet had never found anyone else. My mind only too readily constructed a touching scenario of shared pain, shared grief bringing them once more together. I hadn't even spoken to Mel! I'd told Kai that what I had to say to Mel was not (puh-lease!) for the telephone. I was going to Zur, I said. Right on cue, the Tannoy had boomed and a military-sounding voice authoritatively told us that Flight Delta Foxtrot Zero-Niner-Seven to Zur was boarding at Gate 15. I expect it's full, she said. I felt a moment's boundless certainty that DF-097 was half-empty, but she didn't ask why I was therefore about to take flight to Azt, which was just as well because I didn't have an answer. Why did I assume Fal was sitting at home consumed in grief? She might have gone straight to Azt – to Zur, to the House, any bloody place. Wherever she was it was intimately bound up with the loss of Maya. Now, Kyse, you moron, is not the time. I tried Fal's mobile again. Off. Why not off? With Pietri, with Caluna, with Sarshi, with Vij, with Mel, with Sarat. Who the hell wants it on. She must be in Zur.

Her landline probably had a nice explanatory little message on the voicemail. I didn't know her landline. I had to get among people I knew who'd know what was going on, probably the most un-me thought I have ever had in my life. That meant the Imperial.

I took a cab to the Imperial, or at least to the Colonnade. Can't go no further, mate. There are things I am incapable of saying to Azt cabbies. One of them is, I'm a friend of Mel's. Pull the other one, mate. Hundreds of people can vouch for me, I thought irritably. All it needs is a routine check. I paid up and got out, armed only with my intellect, integrity and the increasingly strong feeling I should be in Zur. My intellect started to ask me what the crowds thought they were doing there. How could it help? My integrity told me I am an upright citizen of Dabida, not a bloody journalist, because of course what the cordon was about was bloody journalists, bereft at no longer being flavour of the month. My increasingly strong feeling I should be in Zur looked around rather helplessly seeing no immediate means to get the hell out.

I turned to the nearest person who happened to be a middle-aged woman.

"Excuse me, can you tell me where the bus-station is, please?"

"Oh, you're way out, love. Right over in Gizzan."

"I can't walk it, then?"

"Well, you could. Take about an hour. Where do you want to go?"

"Zur! I'm Dabidan. I need to get home."

"Oh love. Tell them we're sorry, we're ever ever so sorry."

"I will."

"That poor young man."

"Yes," I said

"Train's best..."

I realized she was wondering how poor I was.

"That'd do!" I said brightly.

She gave me directions to the train-station and I started walking.

After about a quarter of an hour a metal pole embedded in the pavement near the kerb loomed before me.

Attached to its top was a board reading COACH-STOP.

Hey, long-distance buses actually stop on their way out of this hell-hole! Sorry, Sarat.

Carlin Village. You mean I've done something right in this mess? The next one wasn't due for 40 minutes.

I can wait!

That is how I came to be sitting on the bench by the Memorial in a village that was apparently totally deserted.

Curtains were drawn. A lonely flag flew at half-mast. What did they do at a time like this, go to the House?

A noise behind me made me turn. The everything shop was opening up.

"Loife gotta go ahn."

"Where is everyone?"

“Gahn to un shroine.”

Kyse, you really are a moron.

“I’m a friend of Falita’s.”

“First the Major.” Distinctly more friendly tone. Do I look like a journalist?

“Yes,” I said.

“Int it gohn end.”

“It will end!” She was lugging one of those things you find outside shops into position and it looked heavy.

“Can I help?”

Yes, Kyse, it’s just the word escapes you. Roughly thigh-height, hinge at the top, four legs, two boards.

That is how I came to assist with the opening of the everything shop.

People began to trickle back in twos and threes, Fal not among them. By this time – all that fresh country air – my brain was beginning to resume normal functioning and I’d realized that here among those who’d lost terribly twice was probably, my beating heart notwithstanding, also not the best place for me to be. If Fal was at the House, I could only be an intrusion.

As the new counter-assistant in the everything shop, I attracted attention.

“Friend of Fal’s.”

“I was hoping to see her,” I said.

“She’m gahn ‘ome.”

“Zur, you mean?”

Foot right in it.

“Bark to un cahtage.”

“How do I get there?”

“You’m roide a boike?” asked my new employer.

In other circumstances pedalling through country lanes would have been idyllic.

Oh look, it’s a field of flowers. Lots I didn’t know.

I arrived at a gathering. I can’t think of a better word. Maybe wake? There were people in the front yard, perched on the fence. I dismounted, feeling very conspicuous.

“I’m a friend of Fal’s,” I said. “From Zur.”

Fortunately at that moment she came out into the yard.

I hugged her with considerable enthusiasm.

“Thank you,” she said, “thank you.”

She stood back, holding both my hands in hers. Ecstasy! Holding me at arms’-length as you prefer. She smiled.

“He’m uzz’n.”

I guessed Asdinan smiled and came forward and introduced himself and we all went inside. Around the kitchen table sat two youngsters looking as I supposed you might look if your parents had been slowly disembowelled in front of your eyes. Assorted country people leaned against the dresser or sat on the stairs. It was really rather strange, like a cocktail party with no sound, but it was right. Is there a collective noun for a gathering of the bereft? I wondered. A communion of mourners. I guessed these were the twice bereft sharing something they didn’t even have to mention.

Thus I was wholly superfluous to requirements, other than as a chronicler, an onlooker to life.

“I just wanted to make sure you’re all right,” I mumbled.

I put the kettle on and smiled sympathetically at the kids, not knowing what to say. I am absolutely starving! didn’t seem quite the thing. I looked around hopefully. There were some plates out on the dresser, a couple of broken biscuits, the end of a cake. Clearly others had ravened before me.

“Is Mel all right?” asked Smudge.

“As much as he can be.”

“You must live in Zur.”

“I’m Zuri,” I said, “but I lived in the City. That’s where we became friends. At the Schools.”

“You’m come ‘ome now?” asked Zulan.

“Yes,” I said.

Asdinan came in.

“Rackon it’s toime we was arf neow.” Zulan gave me a long appraising stare. “Zuri. Gaht ‘n lots to tark about.”

“Zo long as we bain’t leaving ‘er,” said Zulan.

Smudge said: “It’s funny – “ then stopped.

Asdinan put a hand on his shoulder.

“What’s that?”

“Nothing.”

Like a big sheepdog, I thought. The sheepdog very gently shepherded the gathering to a close.

At last we were alone!

“I’m frankly ravenous,” I said. Great romantic openings of the age!

“There isn’t much,” she said.

I made myself a great mound of toast, not because I have simple tastes, but because that was about all there was, bar the end of cake and the broken biscuits.

“You need someone to shop for you,” I said firmly. “I have contacts!” I told her about the everything shop.

“Sooty’s a darling. Her real name’s Sootic.”

There are two big armchairs, one on each side of the hearth. We sipped cocoa, goat-milk cocoa. It’s an acquired taste, but it was hot and wet.

“How did you hear?”

“Radio. I then went mad. Got sane. You choose! I just had this one over-riding thought: what the hell am I doing here? I picked up my toothbrush and headed for the airport, pausing only to quit my job. I felt – some brake had been taken off and I was going to jump in. It’s touched Dabida. It’s touched me, as a Dabidan. Is that – not an awful thing to say. Inappropriate?”

“All the stuff endlessly threshed over,” said Fal.

“Making nonsense of.”

“I don’t know,” said Fal.

Fal is not a small woman and I don’t suppose she was feeling all that lost, either, but the L-word had no difficulty seeing her as small and lost.

“Would it be – inappropriate if I put my arms round you?”

She looked at me over the top of her mug, mercifully not sunshine yellow.

“I’d like that.”

I went over to her.

“Ia there room for two?”

They are really big chairs, huge. I mean I wasn’t suggesting she sat on my lap.

“I’ll hudge up,” she said.

It took a few minutes to get comfortable, but when we did comfortable was clearly where it’s at, the apex of delight, or would have been if the phone hadn’t rung from time to time, tweaking my conscience. I hadn’t realized Fal had quite a large family. I have quite a small family. I do actually have a mum and dad. I ought at least to acknowledge their existence.

“I ought to see my mum,” I said.

“I’ll come,” said Fal.

“Shall we put the box on?”

Channel Five burst into life, or death, as you prefer. It’s like the whole city is wearing armbands. Is it really? Dabida does not share the sensitivity of the imperial family towards black as the colour of mourning but out of deference to irtubi sensitivities these armbands have a silver stripe. Some folk are wearing pure silver.

“Sher-it,” I said.

This is for the Anile Empress, the commentator was babbling, perhaps unwisely. Someone walked in front of camera and said loudly. This is for our Maya. For everyone’s Maya, said someone else.

“Start a bloody riot,” muttered Fal.

Including Sarat’s Maya. This is about people, man. Right!

You knew Sarat when he was in Zur? asked the commentator.

“Oh yeah, bosom buddies! Sarat was like part of the scenery.”

“I bet,” said Fal, “he comes from the west.”

I grinned.

“Ah yes, the Two Nations Theory.”

“Bah!” said Fal.

When Sarat had walked into Carlin, and they’d run out of anyone else to talk to, our wonderful media had remembered there was a rest of Dabida and interviewed some folks in Jansi, A Small Town in the Middle of Dabida. On the somewhat tenuous grounds that some folks in Jansi were not going ape like Zur, the Two Nations Theory had been born. If you remember your geography, you will recall that west of where the Great Divide peters out, our border is no longer with Kadun but with Vasucula. The not-so-friendly naturally fell on this like eagles on rabbits to say we can only wait and see if Dabida splits between the east, which is frankly, historically as currently, obsessed equally with Kadun and with Fidub, which, historically as currently, is indeed the meat in the sandwich there and the west, the overwhelming links of which are with Vasucula, a border that has always been open, accents that are almost indistinguishable.

Once it was voiced, Dabida – the whole of Dabida – mostly said bollocks! This didn’t of course stop there being a grain of truth, that being that some folks had no clue about the peculiar and exceptional circumstances of recent history. What the hell they were doing employed by Channel Five was another matter. You only had to have been a student to see Sarat and Maya cluttering up the union caff. Even I knew that.

A queue of people snaked first down the hill then round it. H-W kept the road clear. We slowed. It’s me, said Fal. It must have spread through the crowd. Someone shouted, “It’s Fal!” She froze, then got slowly out. Fal, love! We’re so sorry. I remember the two of you skipping about. I realized we were going to have to walk up the hill. There were actually people who knew me too. Had I not made my name (nailed my colours to the wall) at Sarat’s Pad! Mel’s mate, aren’t you. Kyse, by all that’s! I’d been at school with Holan. We shared commiserations while my ears wagged. We called him our pet spy! ‘Course afterwards, everyone knew who he’d been spying for, the Army, that’s who! Brave, brave lad. I’d come home in the vacations. I knew vaguely that Sorg had been regarded as one of the sights of Zur, sort of tourist attraction. The vultures had been clustered at the arch but now sniffed prey. Of course you were friends from an early age. Remembering the two of you skipping about got an airing too, except it wasn’t skipping it was splashing around in the toddlers’ pool on the quay. Twice now the Cult has stripped you of those you loved most. Yup, said Fal. As an introduction to public life, it was pretty harrowing. It got worse. That sort of day. For the first time in either of our lives we weren’t instantly received. Mel, said Por, was with family. There’s an awful lot of family after 600 years. I remembered vaguely that Mel had once said Maya’s parents hadn’t been entirely keen. I wondered how many people held Mel responsible for Maya’s death and if they included Pietri and Caluna. Don’t give Mel a hard time! I thought. Fal looked at me wanly.

“Lisping six-year-olds. Leggy teens.”

I put my arms around her. What was there to say? So there we were, a vignette of pure misery, when another vignette of pure misery finally emerged to greet us,

“Oh Mel,” said Fal.

“Darling girl.”

We all hugged.

“Everyone must be devastated,” I said after a while. It was really just the small talk I’m no good at – I wasn’t fishing - but Mel briefly recounted his ordeal by relations.

“The words ‘bloody Sarat’ were heard. I am so angry. Most of them barely knew Maya, let alone Sarat. Oh, family parties. They didn’t know her. Fortunately Pietri went straight to Azt, where the funeral will duly, correctly and totally in line with my wishes be held.”

“I know,” said Fal. “He rang me.”

There was a single copper on guard at Pietri, but she really wasn’t necessary. The crowd was practically silent. We were shown in.

“Falita, my dear,” said Pietri. Sarshi ran to Fal and they both burst into tears. That was grim. Fal’s mum was conceivably worse. She was such a good friend to you, love. My parents at least hadn’t been attached to either Sorg or Maya by bonds of steel. Coming back down Yan-sitian, we ran into Hass talking quietly to people and he held Fal as though he’d never let her go, then we came across another silent queue and for a

moment I couldn't think why, then remembered the Kadun Rep Centre was round the corner. The flag was at half-mast. On impulse, Fal, who really wasn't dressed for saluting a toy soldier, walked forward, came to attention, saluted and said – proclaimed: "Her Imperial Majesty! Maya-ban-essa, Mistress of Kadun. My best friend." She turned sharply on her heel and walked back to me, mouthed, "Let's get out of here." Click, click, bloody click. I don't know whether it was a surge of adrenalin caused by fury at the ever-present camera or what, but I suddenly grinned and grabbed her hand.

"Run!"

There's an opening, a few strides-worth of paving, a couple of steps, at the end of Sumesit. We ducked down there and out into the Gilyan Road. She knew what I was doing now and realized I wasn't entirely insane. I do love a woman who can really run. We flung ourselves onto the trolley-bus stopped at the lights. The conductor began to expostulate. See that, it says Danger! He pointed to a red triangle asking people not to alight at the lights.

"Are you a 35 or a 12?" asked Fal.

"12," he grumbled. "Some people use bus-stops."

"We could go all the way to the Lido," I said.

"Turning round at Kanavil."

That was one of the commuter stations where the slow trains stop

"Dabida lies before us!"

"You're Fal, aren't you?"

"Yes," said Fal. "This is a friend of Mel's," she added, doubtless feeling some explanation in order.

"We were escaping the Press," I said, definitely feeling some explanation in order.

"Those farts!"

"Poor little bastard," opined someone. "Brought it all on himself, didn't he."

"Holdan!" reproached someone else.

"These things have to be said."

"Maybe so, maybe no. Now is not the flipping time to say them!"

"I think we've thrown them off the scent," said Fal, slightly too loudly. "If we get off at the next stop -

"Now look what you've done!"

"No, really," I said, "we were just going." Ly-ing, Kyse, the word is ly-ing.

"You give Mel our love, now."

"Don't want him getting the wrong idea because some people have no tact."

Thank you, thank you....

The next stop was Tabin's Merchant-Builders, No Order Too Small or Too Large. Except today, when it appeared deserted.

"Cross over and get the bus back," said Fal in an ever-so-sensible voice.

"Maybe we can avoid paying twice running."

We caught each other's eye.

"We could plead extenuating circumstances."

She was patting her pockets.

"Have you got your 'phone?"

I checked.

"Yes."

"I think I left mine at mum's."

Opposite were some large freshly painted green sheds. The word may be warehouses. We were on an industrial estate, which would have been fine had there been any industry. IMPORT-EXPORT. We reach the four corners of the world! A lorryman embraced the globe.

"Oh look, there's Toy Mania."

"Maybe we could steal a scooter."

"A whole new meaning," I said dreamily. "Fal scooted into Zur."

"I have to get back to Carlin," she said, but not crushingly, or even decisively, almost questioningly, as though it were a sudden realization of which she was unsure, then more certainly, "That is my – duty to Maya."

"Then we'd better steal a helicopter. Fal – " Oh please Kyse, not on the pavement in a particularly unromantic

backwater of Zur. “I care about you a lot.” Oh, the hell with it. “I love you. I understand if you’re not ready to even think about it, but I hope you will think about it.”

“Kyse.” She kissed my cheek and smiled. “I’d like to think about that.”

“I know I choose my moments. I know now is the - I wanted to say it anyway.” She squeezed my hand tightly and didn’t let go. “I’ll be in Zur.”

“Let me get the funeral over. Sarat has asked me to ride in the procession. People who’ve lost to the Cult.”

“Oh my darling girl.” The hell with sensitivity and delicacy. I wrapped my arms round her, about which there is to say that I enjoyed it immensely and she showed no signs whatever of not enjoying it. “I like this,” I said at length.

“I like it too,” she said, leaving me to have the brains to work out that liking it didn’t necessarily mean it was the blueprint for the rest of her life.

The bus back was a 23, confounding us both. How dare it? Been away too long. As such, it stopped just round the corner from mum and dad’s.

“I’ll have to go back to the City,” I said. I patted my rucksack. “All I’ve got is a toothbrush and a change of underwear!”

“I’ll mail you,” said Fal.

It was not of course the most harrowing day of my life ever. That day was the day of funeral while I waited for her to be blown up. Nonetheless, I had previously had a pretty feeble notion of what it is to be emotionally drained. Only later did it fully penetrate that every day of my life would be waiting for her to be blown up. But that, I said to myself, would be true whether I was with her or not.

I wondered what her mum and dad did. They didn’t seem posh people but it was a decidedly posh flat. Oh, of course. I had somewhere absorbed that Falita San-yaega-baht had probably inherited rather a lot of money. How much? Certainly enough to set Mum and Dad up. The last thing I am is a guy who’ll object to his partner earning more than he does. Having the bucks running out of her ears was different – not necessarily worse, just different. Entailed? Property? Hers was hardly a life of conspicuous consumption. I supposed that in Kadun the newly transparent the details of the estate must be available but felt it would be shoddy to look them up, almost prurient, unless it were my business and if it were my business she’d tell me.

“I answered them all, dear. It’s so good you’ve got all these people who care. I told them all you’d gone off with that nice young man who’s Mel’s friend. Then of course they all saw you on the news. Sarat rang himself. I told him, I loved her like she was my own.”

Tears ran down Mum’s cheeks.

I thought: if I can’t cry like a baby in front of mum and dad, there really is something wrong with me. I cried.

After a while, I sniffed, wiped my nose and looked at the list of callers.

I must – I thought. Go to Azt. Karci, Vrin, they’d all rung.

“Do you like Kyse?” I asked.

“Seems a decent young man,” said Dad. “Not pushy.”

That’s right,” I said, rather enthusiastically.

Mum and Dad exchanged glances I pretended not to see.

I am allowed to sleep. I went to bed. Different. Emotional turmoil total, good and bad.

When Mel rang, my first thought was there is nothing more death can do to me. Then I felt – when I shattered, when people talk about people shattering, breaking apart – they mean all the bits they’ve pretended were joined and glued together – it wasn’t like that. All my bits were the same, like breaking a plate. That’s why it was so intense. Unified collapse, no being pulled in different directions. It was – like I had to get down on the kitchen-floor with a brush, find the fragments that had rolled under the dresser, sweep myself into a little heap. When Mel told me about Maya, I felt I should have been there, looking after her, it’s my job. I felt a tremor, like – like the plate was wondering whether to fragment. Then two things. I said no and no to that particular piece of self-indulgence, whipping myself, but was it. Wasn’t my whole life since Sorg a self-indulgence, when everyone else – it’s my life! If we talk about making Maya’s death, Sorg’s death in any way –

meaningful, maybe in a sense avenging – fighting for a free Kadun. I have made my life in Carlin, my life. This is how I do it. My commitment, my conscience, my soul demands it. It – oh, all right, they, they don't demand I fight for Kadun in a particular way. Reakoed understands. Kyse will never ever interfere with my life. Kyse sees that, you see. You think you're making a free choice, striking a blow for your autonomy! It's reactive. It's not you.

And a fat lot of use I should have been to anyone in little bits on the kitchen-floor. That should not have happened.

I had never, until I found myself in a bad dream on the kitchen-floor, lived alone. I knew to stabilize myself I had to hack this on my own. You'll have realized I don't have a 100% positive press. Ice-maiden, nympho, don't touch with barge-pole, and these are my friends, those I'd trust with my life, my death and even to buy the right brand of shampoo. What I'd been doing when not milking goats and harvesting briony is of course thinking about me, my future, my past, where I'd gone wrong, where I'd gone right. Then Kyse appeared, clearly ready to sweep me up into a life of paired bliss, which I appreciated, and equally clearly, which I appreciated even more, with the freaking sensitivity and intelligence to realize that he was not the solution to Maya's death.

I hadn't thought I was going to stay single for ever. What I had in mind was a mature future, a peaceful old age. An assumption therefore, that the Matter of Kadun would be positively resolved, assuming I survived to see that resolution.

Reakoed rang me. Kyse, said Reakoed, is the first one that's good for you. He has a quiet and well-founded confidence in his abilities. He is not the slightest bit fundamentally insecure. He is, however, modest and a little shy. He has no flair for the stage. He has neither a talent for nor an interest in holding a roomful of people in thrall to his words. I had to laugh. He's a lecturer! I protested, but meekly. You know perfectly well what I mean, said Reakoed. I knew. Why is that good for me? It means you go on writing your own script, said Reakoed. I have wondered, I admitted, Tet and I. Don't do it! said Reakoed. I was surprised, make that shocked, at the vehemence. We're both grown-up now, I said. What have we just said? he asked. I sighed.

Among the endless jittering mountain of words brought forth by Maya's murder was the notion that there is nothing more they can do to Dabida. Oh really. And who is the other Zur-chick who has thrown in her lot with Kadun? I saw clearly that once I emerged from my rural hide-away there was no guarantee I had a future. It didn't take long for some bright little spark to twitter of course Falita, San-yaega-baht's widow, you know...List of things to be discussed: of course they might kill me. Put it on the to-do pad. Why not? Everyone else had.

The other thing they blathered on about endlessly was the wound to Kadun's heart. Do they never shut up? Of course sometimes it was the wound to Dabida's heart. Whatever. Naturally we did not think the metaphorical wound was fatal and equally naturally we wanted to stitch it up, fast.

It's very easy to love someone who bundles you onto a trolley-bus to escape the bloody Press.

Really, what was I babbling about, my duty to Maya. I was desperate to explain something in ten words that could have taken ten days about feeling there was no longer a space for this cog in the Zur wheel or the Azt one. My space was in Carlin. My purpose was in Carlin. To – to lead or if not to lead to represent the new Kadun. To bloody do something. I don't know that when I finally got back to Carlin via Azt I did anything more than I should have done in Zur. Perhaps it was simply being there that was important. I got to see Sarat. He looked more awful than I have ever seen him look in the whole of his life, which I told him. It is my duty to Sorg to hold Carlin. What kind of mad crap is that? True mad crap.

Let me start with the Six, who were sometimes the Eight, occasionally the Ten, more rarely the Thirteen and in

some ways the Three. I am going to tell you the Six is a media myth. Mel's set, Mel's gang, it's all horse-manure. Actually, if you've been following the narrative really closely, you'll have worked that out. And they spent all their holidays together. Simper, simper. Mel and Hass spent every summer with Baya and Essa, you know that. It's all nonsense. We're Mel's family. I suppose I have to expand? We are those with whom Mel formed bonds that simply were. I knew you wouldn't like it. If your sister moves to Ciletij and you don't see her for ten years, she's still your sister. I hear you beginning to argue. It did all become rather incestuous, didn't it, in all senses.

Actually I'm a victim of Mum's theory of child-bearing, which is you space them out. My brother's eight years older and runs a fast-food joint on the coast. My baby sister is no longer a baby and just off to college and views my oh so public life like a soap.

The S Factor runs through it all like a knife. If you ask yourself who we weren't, we weren't the plotters. Of course in the end we all got immersed in one way or another but the key to Tet, Reakoed, Maitlan and I was we weren't obsessed with the Matter of Kadun.

Reakoed, Maitlan and I were the Three.

In the mythology, we all spent our teens lounging in the Saa'nda Senta, and 'we' have become confused with Sarat and Maya, even with Mitch and Karula. The Six has become a synonym for plotters. That is the S Factor and it irks. The S Factor changed everything. The S Factor was politics and so Mel in his official role. I am actually finding this quite hard to explain.

It's not coincidental that Tet and Maitlan took themselves off to the furthest corners of the world. As Maitlan put it, one can immerse oneself in the Matter of Kadun or one can get a life. Is the Matter of Kadun interested in me? asked Tet. Of course we understood the politics. We understood Mel didn't want a hostile Kadun on the doorstep. We understood the Cult had to be stopped. It was too big for us, outside our range. I think there's an intermediate step there. We understood Mel would one day be King but that too was outside the terms of the contract, the range of the radar. What marks us is that we don't give a hoot who Mel is. Or didn't. Or don't. I guess what we're really talking about is the point at which you couldn't separate the little boy twiddling his toes in a rock-pool from the shaper of the world, where – where you couldn't have one without the other, and that in a sense ended the Six. The heyday of the Six was when we were about 8. It was over by the time we were 13.

What we're talking about is before and after puberty. The Six was a childhood construct. Doesn't that sound good? Afterwards it was something else.

That doesn't make any sense, does it. Maybe it will later.

To invoke the S Factor is to evoke another myth. Sarat then was the worm in the apple? Sarat politicized things. That too is tripe. I made one friend early, Maya. Mel made two friends early, Maitlan and Reakoed. Hass made one friend early, Sarat. They really did play with alphabet-bricks on the floor of the Room.

That's the same thing, isn't it, it becoming impossible to separate the little boy who turned the white house in the dunes into a zoo and was more concerned about his hamsters than about his homework, separating the little child of nature from the Anile Emperor. NoZone of course marked the transition.

I think really, not sure, but let's go with it, the key to us all was Sarat and Hass. Mel was obviously born camera-food, so there were pictures of Mel twiddling his toes in a rock-pool but when Mel discovered politics it was – what it wasn't was proselytizing to the masses. Mel started to become what parents call difficult at around 12. He argued at home, he argued at school, he argued, yea verily, in the Saa'nda Senta. Kids have fave dives in which they hang out. In Mel's case it was Sorito's. My little point is that, while most certainly

he lounged in the Saa'nda Senta, it was a Mel thing, rather than a Six thing. If Mel wanted a private talk, he had a private talk, many private talks indeed, usually with Reakoed, who is the deepest of us, apart from Hass, usually on the hill, in our homes, on the beach. There's a point where people stretch their legs, let's go into town and have a soda, then they'd go on talking but there was tacit recognition this was no longer a private talk and anyone could join in. What's usually described as Mel holding court outside Sorito's usually meant he'd gone for a soda- ice and Zur took it from there. The point is none of this was standing on a soap-box, handing out leaflets or manning a stall selling fetching little woolly toys. Sarat used NoZone, of that there is no doubt, but equally of course NoZone used Sarat and Hass. Sarat and the petition you know about. There were those who asked if Hass's involvement was wholly appropriate. Healthy criticism, said Tar briskly. He wasn't the Anile heir. As Hass became involved in Zeph's lot and GASH, Tar became still brisker. WYSIWYG.

Difficult. Mel. Became. I am reminded....The rules of Tar's ship were few. One was that his sons and heirs showered, changed and dressed for any dinner at which guests were present. Whether their presence was commanded depended on who were the guests, an exercise in learning grown-up conversation. If their presence was not required they could munch where they liked. At 15 Mel pushed it. Tar looked up and told him to go away and come back when he wasn't embarrassing. Mel argued that he was still himself whatever he was wearing. Yes, darling, said Saski, but others have made an effort to look nice. You are too idle? asked Tar cheerfully. Hass said he thought that stung more than Tar meant. In the presence of half the Cabinet? I doubt it. Anyway, Mel rallied but couldn't yet stop himself turning a truly delectable shade of pink There was no embarrassment until you stirred it. I'd have slid quietly into my seat and so charmed our guests that they wouldn't have noticed what I was wearing. He shook his head sadly. You wish to be difficult. Mel sat down. It's a matter of principle, he said. You tell us to think. I've thought. Tar said: Mel has been a little unwell of late. The disease is generally known as adolescence. I really think, darling, said Saski, you had better go and lie down. Fasting, said Tar, clears the head. Mel looked from one parent to the other. Supposing I stay put. Aaargh, said Saski. Out! said Tar, shoo! Mel looked at him. Tar looked back. Mel gave a heavy sigh and extremely slowly stood up. I apologize for the hiatus in the proceedings. May we continue this later, Father? I look forward to it, said Tar.

Cut to the following morning. The papers had been left open on Mel's chair. The Zur press, you will have gathered, is not an assembly of anal sticklers for etiquette. Zur was fond of Mel, but not so fond that it didn't know a good story when it heard one. Everyone's favourite cartoon was Mel as a large benevolent looking and extremely muddy pooch slinking out of the Room, looking over his shoulder guiltily at the great muddy paw-marks he had left behind..

The question on every parent's lips is: does Tar know how to make them tidy their rooms?

Tar, said Hass, grinned at Mel evilly and said, "I too can play to the gallery."

"Owwwww!" said Hass.

Everyone who saw that cartoon knew it was Mel to the life and that it had been drawn by someone who loved him – well, everyone except Mel, who seethed at the notion the paw-marks were a source of remorse.

The other really good cartoon was Mel raising a clenched fist for the rights of the dishevelled, the rights of the untidy and especially the rights of those with uncombed hair.

Mel, acutely aware that whatever he wore that day would attract comment, contemplated nakedness.

Maitlan's dad offered Maitlan fatherly advice.

"You want to give Mel a ring. Find out what he's going to be wearing. Don't want to clash."

A few of the kids took it the wrong way, glad my dad doesn't drop our rows in the Gazette, but most people grasped this wasn't about a tiff with Mum and Dad, this was about public behaviour.

Mel said he sort of understood that but it was over-kill.

Some people are born waterproof and stain-resistant. Hass was. Mel wasn't. You know those pictures in the

glossies of exquisitely coiffured models with flawless make-up and impeccably pressed shorts who are supposed to be hoisting sails or weighing anchors. Hass was like that, at 8, at 18. Hass could and can come in from the beach and look ready for a formal dinner. Tet called him Non-stick. The rest of us were not so blessed. We hung out in the boatyards. We helped with the catch. The only reason we weren't absolutely filthy at the end of the day was because we swam. Still, I do remember the day we got fishy and mum's bath oil made no inroads. Mum's household disinfectant did the trick.

Let us surrender a moment to Mel's uncertain dress sense.

At the age when most of his contemporaries were working on looking as tatty as possible, Sarat (while still of course remaining Sarat) had understood the world runs on image and the eyes of the world would be on his image. Mel, he thought, could get away with looking like a beach-comber, but he could not, or at any rate not often, not if he wanted to be taken seriously by conservative and/or hostile and/or elderly persons in faraway places. An air of efficiency was therefore the order of the day. Fortunately he liked clothes – clothes liked him. The Look was born.

There was one other guiding factor. Baya insisted they did their own laundry. Or at any rate no-one was going to do it for them. If they wanted, and their allowances were not small, they could pay to send it to the laundry or indeed totter off to the laundrette. Just, therefore, as HIH was determining how best to be a icon of radical chic to astound the entire continent, he was faced with his own ironing. Fraught, was it not, Sarat's early life. Oh knickers!

He had formal clothes. It was what he was going to go to school in, what he was going to wear for NoZone, what he was going to wear lounging around in the Saa'nda Senta – Sarat most definitely lounged in the Saa'nda Senta,

He had (of course) informal clothes. You think Baya let him wander around naked? He didn't look like the Anile Emperor. And what the fuck, he asked himself with some asperity, does the Anile Emperor look like?

What expressed the essential them? Is this not the perennial dilemma of the pubescent? What expressed their contempt for the ways of the world. What precisely Tar thought of his son and heir performing party-tricks in the Rep Centre in a semi-transparent (but spotless and well-ironed) white cotton shift falling off one shoulder is, alas, not recorded. I must ask him. Please take the black silk loons underneath into account as a mitigating factor.

Sarat devised The Look and eventually they all wore it. It was unisex. It was simple. Inevitably it was para-military. Half the tatty radicals on the continent wore army surplus but these were tatty radicals who meant business. Sorg and in fact every soldier knew exactly what it was and was in stitches. He called it army uniform on acid. The austerity of the dress of the young officers was mitigated by the usual inclusion of one or more items of total frivolity such as acid pink flip-flops or a tie-die T, or paste jewellery, of course, depending on gender. Maya and I discovered the true depth of the word 'accessories'. Your clothes, we decided, are like a canvas, a backdrop. In themselves they should not attract attention, unless of course they are grey, or imperial silver, as you prefer. Other kinds of problems would arise in Azt when a noisy minority wanted the Anile Empress to drip with real diamonds, but that was far in the future.

Moving on from that, Maya and I devised the Leotard Look, black footless tights and a skin-tight black T. dressed up with some piece of frivolity. Of course clothes should not attract attention.

You didn't have a problem thinking you were looking at the Anile emperor - except it was impossible. It was too far outside everyone's range. Sarat and Mitch, Mel and Cantilip, I think people understood that something had changed in the world, that the world might as a result eventually change, but no-one outside the magic circle saw how it could be realized, made real. Sarat's Pad electrified everyone who saw it but outside

of the small, tubby and baldings and the Bals there was enormous difficulty attaching any kind of reality quotient to it. It all seemed to peter out. We should have listened more in Biology! I mean pregnancy is just the start, everyone makes a fuss, then there are labour pains, then something pops out and it's small and insignificant but it grows. The apparent flurry of activity wasn't about rocking. It was about finding out how to rock.

I suppose you could call the Six pregnancy. Mel collected around himself a set of young persons...It's all such crap. If anything, we collected Mel. Let me think about that one. I think it floats. We collected Mel and transported him to Planet Normal. We were in and out of the hill and he was in and out of our homes.

Public, private, there we have the nub. Mel has friends you haven't even heard of - you've just heard of Junin.. We are they who did not leak, ever. Boy, do we have stories to tell and now we're telling them, but no scrap of private conversations, with Mel or Hass, with each other, ever reached the Press. Junin will duly tell his own story. Let me just say Junin is the best.

That is the kernel of truth at the heart of the myth and the root of obsession with the myth. That united plotters and anti-plotters. We are a sealed room, a bank vault.

Now I pull the short straw. What is all this about me and Mel? It wasn't about Mel at all. There, you knew I should instantly clarify things. It was about Hass. Some children are born perfect. Hass was merely born laid-back. Nonetheless at 15 he was vulnerable, as we all are, less vulnerable than most but vulnerable nonetheless, and of course with far more baggage, knowing his private life never would be. I was 16. I was vulnerable too. Mel wanted to protect all of us, and Hass most of all. You think our little relationships were on the complex side? You ain't heard nothing yet. What is perhaps what you should most bear in mind is that all of us except Tet had been spoon-fed from the cradle the same amount of gender-bending other matter. It's a wonder any of us knew which gender we were. Teenagers like things simple. The key to Tet in all this was he was fairly straightforward young human male. Also he was in love with me. Like a lot of people, he thought Mel and I were given. There is a girl in the gang because she's Mel's girl. Hass and Tet kept in touch. At some point Hass said something that indicated I wasn't taken. There were a lot of reasons Tet came back. I was one of them. Unfortunately, between Tet's pricking up his ears and deciding to get his act together I...Voice trails off. Very, very complicated.

I knew about Sarat and Hass. I decided I wanted that, too. Hass didn't. I, excuse me, perfectly reasonably, couldn't see why not - if the fact that Sarat was essentially hetero didn't mean anything to the bloody Whole, why was the fact that Hass was gay fundamental here? Of course it wasn't a question of gay or straight, but of that simpler diversion, male or female. Thus was it duly reborn as guy-stuff. Young men fully exploring their female side. Very laudable too. Unfortunately none of us - repeat none of us - actually fully understood that at the time.

There were a couple of other blindingly obvious things we didn't understand either.

I didn't realize how much I was upsetting Hass, meaning to some considerable extent that, not exactly surprisingly, I didn't realize how much he was attracted to me. Mel was pissed off with me. I answered in kind, meaning I told him to mind his own bloody business. Ah yes, some of the best rows of my life have been with Mel. Mel and I had lost our virginity - virginities? - to each other about a year earlier. Because each of us was safe and we wanted to know what it was like and we were a pair of giggling kids. We did it a couple of times and decided not to do it again, but there we were, throbbing with hormones, having a blazing row and somehow it ended in kiss and make up and kiss again. Mel is really very sweet and only occasionally raving mad. I think he thought of himself as a sort of consolation prize. I think there are two things here. One is that other people had noticed the tension between me and Hass, though the last thing they put it down to was sex, which was a problem because that made them nosy. The other is that Mel and I were still in giggling kids mode. Maybe at one level we always shall be. What happened could not have happened if we hadn't known

each other for ever. We plotted, in short. We invented our relationship. If people thought the prob was Hass didn't approve, well, what idiots they were. It was our little conspiracy. It gave us lots of time alone together to yell at each other.

At which point a very fragile Tet returned to Zur. Hass told him hastily that Mel and I was a sham. Nor did he leave it at that! He told him why. But if she's in love with you, said poor Tet, excuse me, perfectly reasonably. No, she isn't, said Hass, any more than Sarat is in love with me. That had a kind of ring of truth about it. Meanwhile I'd debriefed on Maya in considerable anatomical detail. I had reservations about the sexual act. Maya said. Fal, darling, it's not just you sound as though you don't love Mel, you sound as though you don't even like him. I went ape. No! I said, there's a lot of tenderness, a lot of affection, of course I like that. I loved being cuddled and stroked and caressed and generally treated as though I was the most important thing in the universe. But I really couldn't get the hang of the next bit. It's just that viewed dispassionately it's so bloody peculiar. She stroked my hair. I wasn't uninterested. Afterwards I pronounced that it was still bloody peculiar. You don't really want Hass to make love to you, do you, she said. No, I said.

Ice-maiden was a public assessment. It would never have come from Mel. Ice-maiden came from my lack of interest in the dating-game. Ice-maiden means something like 'we think she's gay but she can't be, well she's certainly not interested in us'. When Maya and I had had our little fling I enjoyed it more than with Mel but I certainly didn't think, ah, that explains everything, what I like is girls.

Mel said it was as though I had a hairline crack. Why I was fixated on Hass was because Hass was whole. I'd never be whole, said Mel, until I healed the crack myself, I couldn't use other people to do it. Hence do not touch with barge-pole. Well, thanks a bunch, Mel. Would you like to tell me more? I said that I was no more incomplete, fractured, unwhole, unevolved than anyone else who'd had the same damn' education in the other matter, thank you very much, but he said, you're whole, you're more complete, only there's the crack, a fissure, two halves are imperfectly joined.

Maya went ape. Total male pig-shit. She doesn't want to make love to me so there's something wrong with her. Unfortunately the basic problem with this adolescent crap is that it was largely accurate. The crack of course, Mel said, was between love and sex. Hence don't touch with barge-pole. I just didn't see the point of sex. It was like my heart was a party and sex was a gate-crasher I felt didn't belong. I always slumped with my head in my hands, made tearing hair gestures and rolled my eyes when Mel got poetic. Perhaps I should have gone on the stage. Perhaps I did. The thing was, said Mel, mental, no, spiritual nakedness, getting messy. It was a question of my image. For f's sake, Mel, look in the mirror!

Exactly what he said to Tet, and I only knew about it when Tet threw it at me in Azt, was if I were you I shouldn't touch her with a barge-pole. What the hell did you mean? I screamed. Of course when you confront someone with something like that you rather hope it's not what he actually said. He meant I'd hurt him. I hurt him. He meant I'd reject him. I rejected him. The flaw in this prescience is that I hurt and rejected him for Sorg. I shattered along the crack, you see. Mel might not have been right about what it was, but he was right that it was. Like the two halves fell apart onto a stone floor! But after Maya died the crack wasn't there any more.

Jolly good. That's all right, then. Happily onward into a blissful future – when I understand. I have to understand something to move on. Wouldn't it be bloody wonderful if I knew what?

Meanwhile I was changing. I think it's called growing-up. When someone frankly adores you, and Tet adored me, it's seductive in itself and I was thinking about everything and feeling/deciding/realizing what I actually wanted was someone who loved me. That I'd been experimenting with being someone else who wanted the extension of friendship and blah but my body refused to lie. I found I wanted Tet, maybe I could want Tet because I was sure Tet wanted me. . I did and do love Tet. Am I absolutely sure it's 'like that'?

And of course I went and joined the H-W. It's probably the last thing I should have done. I should have got right out of the magic circle. However, I did it and so was assessed, as we so delicately put it – turned inside out, upside down and side to side. You only have to be mega-together if you want to mess around in people's heads. I definitely did not. I told Bandi the unvarnished truth and she hooted and murmured boys will be boys - it can be a problem. Then she looked inside. Ah, the famous crack. Essentially she told me exactly what would happen and it happened. End of story. She said it was rather a network of cracks – gulp - most young people – PLU, that is – had one – phew! all the same I might kill him – it healed naturally, it could only be a problem if, but this was terribly unlikely of course, I was under extreme duress before it had healed. Yes, but what is it? Immaturity.

So my plate shattered. No big deal. Everyone who knew anything knew why my plate shattered. So what is my problem?

Bandi was much more concerned I should not, repeat not, be a colt on the hill than about anything inside me. Getting me out of the magic circle. But Tet! I wailed, envisaging being sent to some border-outpost. We compromised: airport security.

People like Bandi don't necessarily put things to bright young people in the way they put things to each other but say what's comprehensible to the level of the experience of the striplings.

When Kyse bounded into my life, I rather felt I didn't have any second chances left. My emotional life had been a little hairy, by no means of course all down to me. Whether there were external causes or not, my reactions had also been pretty hairy. A little young for the serenity of age, said Reakoed. Oh shut up! I said. I was going to detox! Take myself through it all and get it right. I didn't know about Venga's wonderful assessment of me but I did strongly feel that – that if I screwed it up with Kyse, it would be all down to me and that would be very bad news indeed.

I realized I wanted to talk to the other woman who didn't want to be Queen of Dabida.

Shall I come to Azt? I asked. I'd love a day in the country, she said. I'm a lady of leisure, right now. The matter, one might say, has passed out of my hands. Not that it was ever in them. Remember, whatever you've been told about my vital role was nearly all bull-shit. Mel's pet-expert on the Cult! What sort of crap is that? They've only been fighting the Cult for 1500 years.

I think I'm going to find Estanzia Morsen's daughter refreshing.

Just two girls talking over lunch. We peeled pettifer. We fried onions. We ate at the kitchen-table. We washed up. And I ran through the stuff that had been bugging me. We made mugs of tea and stayed at the kitchen-table.

“How it seems to me – if Mel hadn't been raised to be leader of the pack, he'd have been a very esoteric kind of guy. He is a very esoteric kind of guy and Cantilip is a very esoteric kind of gal, if she hadn't been raised, etc, etc. Everything that Mel and Cantilip mean and are to each other is indissoluble and inner and eso. That's the relationship he wanted and needed. Same with Hass and Venga.”

“You and I not.”

“Do you want to talk about Sorg?”

“Alive or dead?”

“Alive. Why did you do it?”

“It was like starting my life again.

“And that time it went right.”

“And I couldn't bear it.”

“It's more complicated than not wanting to be Queen of Dabida. It's what Mel is not who he is.”

“You adore him too.” It started as a question and ended as a statement. “But you – you were mad enough to see. I didn’t. I’ve said that.”

“That’s who I am. To grow up in the City is to be angry the way Mitch was angry. It’s inevitable I hitched my wagon to people who were actually going to do something.”

“It was real to you.”

“Searc is very real to me. There’s a sort of innocence about Dabidans.”

“I suppose there is,” I said after a minute. “Was.”

“Sorry. Was. I think Mel collects people. Not you three, OK, that was when you were infants. He collected me! He collected Bal, which is much more interesting. Bal likes and admires Sarat but he’s goo-goo about Mel.”

“He collected Kyse.”

“Definitely.”

“We seem to have strayed from the point.”

“Have we? Is Mel not the sun around which we all revolve? The way it sounds to me is you had a normal childhood. He had a fantasy childhood in which he was allowed to be normal. Reality kept intruding. What did happen about the dress-code?”

“Oh, he came to terms with reality,” I said airily. “That was me busking it,” I admitted. “I hadn’t thought of it quite like that.”

“I don’t think Mel ever wanted to be a regular guy. Far too much fun being who he is. That doesn’t mean it didn’t have its down side.”

“That’s roughly what Tar said. Isn’t it what Mitch says? You are on show. You go out there, you put on a performance. You do not fluff your lines.”

“I didn’t know you could mimic! So Mel didn’t – wouldn’t accept that could apply to dinner with Mummy and Daddy.”

“Mel debriefed on Hass. He was actually more het up about it – I was going to say than Tar knew, but that’s probably not true. As far as Hass could tell, he kept it formal, intellectual when he confronted Tar. He was very, very pissed off about the papers. This is my home! He felt it as a violation. I know he said to Tar that if he’d turned up to dinner at the Ciletij Rep Centre looking derelict that would have been different. He didn’t say he wouldn’t have! Hass thinks there was more to it – it was short, sharp shock time. Mel had been increasingly bloody impossible anyway and to waste Tar’s time – Tar’s words. Drama-queen, indulging himself at the expense of guests.”

“Yeeee-owww!”

“Actually it was Tet who bashed Mel’s head in – Mel’s words. Tet is more than a short fuse, he thinks about things he thinks are worth thinking about! Also he didnae quite like to intrude between Mel and his dad, being a foreigner and all. Tet generally looked like a tramp, but as he pointed out, he wasnae the heir to anything and he wasn’t crawling with money. If he wanted to look like crap, well was he not a penniless student, scarcely able to afford a crust and who the hell cares, a nicely ambiguous one. Tet told Mel it was a flamin’ insult to the poor to make what they had to wear into some kind of fashion statement. Mel never to my knowledge looked – “ I grinned. “ - odd again unless he was wading through cow-dung or something!”

“His secret hobby?”

“Eeek! You didn’t hear - ?”

“No, she said cautiously.”

“There was this sick cow. It was of course in Carlin. What comes out the rear end of a cow with an upset tum is not something to focus on. Mel hadn’t packed bioprotect gear. You know he likes mucking in! Genuinely likes it. I’m not sure about how basically eso he is. Personally I think he’d have made a rather good builder! Anyhow, the vet had said every last strand of straw had to be burned and the whole byre disinfected. I think he actually wanted to burn the whole cowshed down, but they’re a conservative lot in Carlin – “

“Probably slept in by Narulis, “ muttered my guest.
I cackled.

“ - It was midsummer. Basically everyone’s solution to this jolly task was to work as near naked as poss, thus making the hat mandatory. ‘Xcept it wasn’t a hat. It was the brim of a large straw hat, no crown, the very

battered brim, with untamed bits of straw sticking out at angles. The in-between bit was all right, old shorts. It was the other end. It must have been deliberate. I can't believe they couldn't have found him a pair of wellies. He'd made socks out of bin-bags. Click!"

"Tar must have taken an awful lot of crap one way and the other."

"So to speak...And then! And then!"

"Don't follow."

"Venga and Cantilip. Some people stopped talking when I came into the room. Mostly people just looked pleading. WTF? Why don't they just taken Kadun citizenship and be done with it! Questions were asked in the Senate."

"It was Cantilip and Mel who lounged, wasn't it."

I sighed.

"Lived in the bloody place! Why didn't they just set up a tent and be done with it!"

"Little placard above her head. This is a nice lady. Get to know her. It brought Sarat's Pad forward, you know."

"I didn't."

"Mel understood – well, Tar, Saski, Vanya, Airoch! Mel really did understand that he had to lay his cards on the table."

"Do you still want a job when you grow up? Light laugh."

"Sarat really wasn't quite ready but he understood too! Nothing in his thoughts about Kadun included Mel with Cantilip za-fenan!"

"Is this another delicious diversion?"

"You tell me."

"I think Hass is the sun around which. I don't think either of them would do anything Hass disapproved of."

"What did Hass think?"

"He didn't really understand the problem. Partly he was younger, fewer raging hormones. What do you think? Hass the impeccable."

"Mel decided to like dressing up."

"Hass pointed out the obvious. Mel didn't like it. Yes, Mel, it's our home, and if we want, most evenings we can eat where we like, wearing whatever we like, in the company of whomever we like. Am I clear about me?"

"Are you?"

"I think – what you just said about Mel, that's the same, isn't it. I like being female. It's fun. You have to accept the down side."

"You're beautiful."

"Don't say that word!"

"You've edged round it."

"I know that!"

"Sorry."

"Much more fun to be diverted."

"Load of adolescent males slaving over you!" She frowned suddenly. "They didn't, did they. Because of Mel. That's how you were safe. But you knew they were slaving inside!"

"Naïve and Mel," I said slowly, "aren't words that readily go together."

"I don't suppose they did locker-room talk in front of him – well, not about you."

"Do you begin to see - ?" I started, then grinned. "Means I begin to see. How critical it is I knew them all when I was 5."

"Except Tet," she pointed out. "You hated it, didn't you, bitterly, bitterly hated it. That's why you made such a thing."

"I wanted to be loved for me. Doesn't everyone! I've been very lucky. Three men have loved me for me. So why am I wasting our time on this crap!"

"Three not five?"

"Or seven! I understand – understood and understand that Mel and Hass really, really love me. I think – I think I didn't understand that it's not how men love women. But my body did?"

“Not like that ought to be the motto of this freaking story. I take it talking to Cantilip is out.”

“Maybe when we’re about 70.”

“But there’s quite a strong parallel, isn’t there.”

“Yes.”

“She said through gritted teeth.”

“I am reasonably sure that if I had shown the faintest enthusiasm for the proposition, Mel would have been happy to make a go of it. I’m really not sure he distinguishes – how men love women.” She looked shocked.

“Well, then, anyway!”

“You’re not the only woman in the world to fall for a gay guy.”

“I did not fall for him!”

“OK, what did you do?”

“I’m going to crab round this. Adolescent females can drool too. You know what they said about Sarat and Maya. Well, you probably don’t actually. They thought it was a kids’ conspiracy to keep the slavering teens at bay. Now, for obvious and – and less obvious, at least less obvious at 17, Sarat’s choice of partner was pretty limited. She had to love him. Not the beauty. Therefore Sarat and Hass, on both sides. That’s what I wanted to – replicate.”

She grinned suddenly.

“OK, let’s make that you did not fall for him in any sense known to those not more beautiful than pictures, any more than Sarat did. What about the other two, Reakoed and Maitlan?”

“They had girlfriends. They’d got a life. I said, it was over at 13.”

“Did Mel make you feel it was your fault?. Something entirely in you.”

I looked at her.

“You are nobly restraining yourself from saying I’ll kill him, I’ll strangle him with my bare hands. It wasn’t exactly like that. I wasn’t absolutely sure I wasn’t gay.”

“Enough to make anyone gay.”

“I gave as good as I got. You’re missing the point!” Raised eyebrows. “Could that be because I haven’t told you what the freaking point is? It didn’t matter. It didn’t scar me. Haunted not. OK, it wasn’t quite water off a duck’s back. It was other matter stuff. Maybe he had a point on that level. Tet and I were happy.”

“Oh,” she said.

“Oh! I must have been mad.”

“While at the same time being born anew?”

“I wrecked it. That came from me.”

“Do you have any idea how many relationships have been wrecked by this Matter of Kadun!”

“I know. Working together, a permanent high – a sort of insanity?”

“If the crack has gone, what’s the prob?”

“Am I going to repeat the trick?”

“Oh no.”

“That’s how I feel about it. I need to be awfully sure that seduced by the buzz of Kadun’s first free Senate – assuming, of course...I s’pose Kyse thinks the relationship didn’t work.”

“Do you sincerely want to screw up your life? That’s our theme for today?”

“I’ve moved on a bit. Screw up other people’s lives. Kyse is so – blameless and normal. Relatively, anyway! Even Mel can see that Tet is not the most peaceful person to be around.”

“But you liked – loved that. No quesch dear old Tet back home is boring.” I spluttered. “Does it occur to you this is really very simple and you’ve known it all along?”

“The script? Yes. I still think I’m missing something.”

“What? Why? When! Who! Try – I read some of Sorg’s stuff. Mel showed it me. It was brilliant!”

“I am going to get it published.”

“Fantastic! I think – kick me if you think I’m off-key here. The dashing young officer brimming with vim and squat thrusts – he was actually pretty eso, wasn’t he.”

I giggled.

“He never did squat thrusts. He devoted his military career to evading what the Army likes to call physical

training.”

“No-one says he wasn’t a bright guy.”

“Yes. Yes, he was. Eso.”

“OK, now I’m not saying Mel wasn’t tender, gentle, delicate, loving – I know that! It does just occur to me that compared to the high esoteric plane on which you – imagined a relationship with Hass it might have been a quick one behind the bike sheds. Her voice trailed off. Giggling kids. Nothing you’ve said suggests…”

“OK, so?”

“How about Tet?”

“Where are you going, Kai?”

“I’m really not sure.”

“I don’t think I’m going to like it. That doesn’t mean you won’t be right.”

“Thanks!”

“Tet is poetic, but not particularly eso. Tet – recited to me. Brought me unexpected presents. Turned up in Azt to surprise me. Sorg was of course aware that I was someone else’s partner. He did once sneakily pluck a rose and hand it to me saying it suited me more than him. Obviously he wasn’t going to shower me with gifts or surprise me with weekends away. He never touched me. Well, more than he could get away with. I teased him about it, half-understanding and then – it’s actually how it came to a head. He was helping me out of the car and I giggled and said you know what your old-fashioned courtesy is really? It’s an excuse for touching. He looked at me very steadily and said of course and didn’t let go my hand, and I didn’t let go of his hand either. Damn, damn, damn, I’m trying not to cry. Yes, it was all in the head.” She left me to say it. “I think I’m going to get that with Kyse, do I?”

“That would rather depend – you might have reached its – the whole ghost thing. He has gone now?”

“Or I have healed that devastating hole in me.”

“Which must then be a hole in Sarat.”

“I don’t know, Kai. I just don’t know. When people are as hyper, as permanently hyper. Would Sorg and I have lasted? I don’t know that, either, do I.”

“Don’t hit yourself with that one.”

“Is that what Reakoed means by steady. Someone who won’t do my head in to the extent that I go potty when he’s killed. That doesn’t explain the bloody crack.”

“I wonder. Don’t you think Sorg might have healed it and anguish - ? What I personally think, just my opinion, others well-known to both of us, possibly including you, may differ. I think the ghost was keeping bloody men at bay. Which doesn’t necessarily mean he wasn’t real.”

“I am going to cry, period.”

“You’re not over him, Fal.”

“Over? How can I ever be over?”

“Don’t be difficult. The world moves on. People move on. Time heals.” She grinned. “And other readings from the Book of Pious Crap.”

“You’ve never – sorry, that was below the belt.”

“I’ve never. But I live with the possibility. Cioulis escaped with scratches.”

“I’m really, really sorry! I didn’t know.”

“When I met Kyse at the airport I was absolutely ape, even though I’d spoken to him. Cioulis I mean. My imagination had supplied all the details.”

“You and Cioulis.”

“A good lad. Hidden depths. He is of course senoki. He has introduced me to dimensions of earthpower markedly absent from my mother’s ramblings about womanspirit. Fal – I know, though I shouldn’t tell you this, though they’d freaking kill me for telling you, slowly and painfully, you have a genuine military fan club, shall I say, not just looking at the body and the face. For what you are, for who you are, for what you’ve done, for what you intend to do.”

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning you seem to be giving yourself a limited number of options. Like two. You still want safe, don’t you.”

“Owwwwwch!”

“You’re not 16 any more. You have a very public track-record. I know you’re a pin-up, golden girl, legs unlimited. But – but the squaddies who have reasonably decorous pin-ups don’t just think of you as a pair of tits. Nobody does.”

“Exactly what are you saying?”

“Oh, BPC, Chapter 83. Let it all go, let them all go. Do your thing. When it’s right, you’ll know it without agonising. Kyse cannot be bad news for anyone, he’s just not that kind of guy. Tet, I suspect, could be. Everyone knows he has a tongue in his head and knows how to use it. If I were you, I’d tell Kyse I wasn’t ready, because you’re bloody well not. Maybe, maybe, who knows, I don’t know, I’m not declaiming it couldn’t be perfect and permanent with either of them. I am saying, it’s my view that, not starting from now.”

“Being on my own,” I growled, “and public is very unsafe indeed.”

“You share things with Kyse that are more profound than gosh, we both like the countryside.”

“I didn’t say that!”

“Yes, you did.”

“I mean I didn’t say it was the bloody Matter of bloody Kadun. All the stuff I was rambling about. It clicked with me this was the only gig worth playing but it seemed Tet still didn’t understand. He was content with his life in Zur..”

“And now he’s in Azt with everyone else.”

“Including Kyse.”

“I am the total outsider. I walked into this of my own free will. Like – like everyone did who wasn’t in at the start. Does that make sense? It’s like a magnet. Do iron filings have free will! Once it had happened, there was only one place to be.”

“Kyse.”

“Kyse is probably the last fully sane person left on the continent.”

“I’ll be sure to tell him! What d’you mean?”

“If you were a plumber, if you were an electrician, if you were a doctor, if you were a civil rights lawyer, if you were a radical feminist, if you had any kind of specialist skill, knowledge, talent pertinent to this Matter of Kadun you flocked to the happening of a lifetime. Kyse felt he didn’t. Some people came with nothing to offer because it was the happening of a lifetime.”

“Do you have to be getting back?”

“Not really. It’s bliss. A life free of airports.”

“We could pop down to the Rabbiters’.”

“I’ve never been.”

I stared.

“Coat. Scarf. Instantly! There is someone involved in this gig who has never been to the Rabbiters’?”

“I confess it freely.”

“How many more of you are there hidden away?”

Life goes on, as Kai had so caustically observed. It goes on whether you want it to or not. That is not (puh-lease!) a declaration of a suicidal tendency. It’s just that there are some frames you’d rather freeze.

I mailed Reakoed and Maitlan

Have you got an evening, guys, for some light relief? I need to move on here.

Reakoed This is automated response from Matchmakers Unlimited. Anything that propels you in the direction of Kyse automatically has top priority. Anything that may advance the Fal-Tet axis on the other hand – I’m biased, I told you.

Me: Or how about I stay single?

Reakoed: Now you’re getting interesting.

Maitlan: They allow me out most evenings. Office-hours, you know, a bizarre innovation.

Me: Eek! You’re still on the hill?

Maitlan I found I rather liked the job. The captain is intelligent. I meekly requested the transfer we made

permanent and to my enormous surprise my request was granted.

Me: Cutting the cord was enough then. You could come back as your own man.

Maitlan: You have been thinking!

Me: I have been thinking mega.

I took a deep breath.

“They say the spectators see most of the show. I’m going to bend your ears with my life-history and Caithan’s opinion of it – “

“Cai – “

“I seem to have acquired a new female friend. The significance of that is about the only thing not relevant here. This,” I sighed, “is about the men in my life.”

“The passage of time,” observed Maitlan, “and a maturity Mel notably lacked leaves one slightly appalled. Did you actually invite all this crap? Mel, please tell me everything you think is wrong with me.”

“I was a major pain in the arse.”

“We were all like that,” said Reakoed. Maitlan raised his eyebrows. “Except for those who weren’t?”

“You admit it?” he asked Reakoed. “Did you ever think he was subconsciously attacking you?”

I felt my face go blank.

“No. Not possible. Not possible that was it, not possible I thought that. You have to see it in the context of the trip. Aspects of the bloody Whole.”

“I do not recall,” said Maitlan, “having to physically drag you off Hass. Were you a major pain or was that Mel’s verdict?”

“The prosecution counsel takes the stand,” murmured Reakoed. “So you joined the H-W, and Bandi turned you inside out and passed you fit. So WTF?”

“It’s different.”

“What’s different?”

“Me from you, for a start! You don’t have to be mega-realized to do what I wanted to do.”

“I do know the regulations!”

“Stop grinning like that!” I said to Maitlan.

“I have said nothing. I too have no interest in the farther reaches. My own feeling is it came from Hass.”

Reakoed started, then laughed.

“He’s not just a snazzy uniform, you know!”

Maitlan smiled.

“I should say that to this day there are some things – some kinds of things - he runs by Hass. These were Hass’s thoughts.”

“They came out wrong because they came – via Mel.”

“Dogmatic instead of fluid. If a guy who’s just working on being gay starts to talk about being – uncertain, it has a different feel to it to someone you think of as wholly hetero, wholly male.”

“If Hass didn’t want to talk about it with you, Mel would have taken that as major.”

“To the best of anyone’s knowledge - “ he looked around at us, “ – Hass has never been to bed with a woman, yes?” We nodded. “I should imagine most gay men haven’t. There is nothing whatever remarkable about that except in the context of the blah, rites of passage. I should also guess that you holed Hass below the waterline.”

“I’d guess,” said Reakoed, “Hass was strongly attracted at one level.”

Maitlan ruffled my hair.

“Beauty.”

“In the wrong shaped body!”

“The whole theory fell apart, didn’t it.”

“To be reborn,” murmured Reakoed, “as you correctly surmise, as guy-stuff. Interesting you couldn’t cope when the scales should have fallen from your eyes.”

“What scales!”

“I had the grave misfortune – “ Maitlan’s eyes were dancing. “ – to be at sea.”

Reakoed made a moue.

“I wasn’t invited.”

“It was a pact. While the grey and hoary sat around conference tables, Mel had his own unique approach.”

“Doesn’t that make the Matter of Kadun guy-stuff?”

“The Matter of Kadun is the exemplar of guy-stuff.”

“OK,” I said. “I’m going to float something that 1) I hate and 2) I think is crap. What am I missing! What is – supposedly – obscure to me as a female but obvious to all the rest of you?”

They grinned.

“I shall pretend to think deeply,” said Maitlan.

“It’s a hard one,” agreed Reakoed.

Maitlan looked at me doe-eyed.

“I never slavered, Fal. Truly.”

“It’s basically a question of aesthetics,” said Reakoed airily. “The eye naturally follows the line of the legs to its source.”

“You were going out with – oh, what was her name, big hair with streaks – “

“Danit! A childhood construct... There were other people in Zur.”

“That seems,” said Maitlan drily, “to be very much Caithan’s point, with which I fully concur. There are other people in the world. Let me say something obvious even to a female.” He ducked quickly. “Time passed. I do not find it coincidental you recall Mel at his worst. You found the adolescent male a raging nightmare. Every adolescent male.”

“Did Mel hurt you?” asked Reakoed.

“Physically? No, and that’s a bit too obvious.”

I turned to Maitlan.

“Everything you say except it doesn’t work.”

“If,” said Reakoed, “one’s mind and body are not fully engaged in the matter at hand, there isn’t much else to think except, this is weird.”

“Quite the wrong question,” I said. “It was his first time too. He said he didn’t know what he was doing. Unfortunately, that wasn’t the point. It wasn’t just feelings generated by Mel or rather not generated by Mel. It was I didn’t feel anything (much) generated by me. Desire is the word. Just looking at Sorg made me – “

“The juices run,” said Maitlan innocently.

“You have such a sensitive way of putting things.”

“Do you understand what you did to Tet?”

“Tell me.”

“Tet is not a trusting person. He trusted you, Fal, with his vulnerability, his insecurity, his disability. Then what did he say? What, really is eating you?”

“He said Mel was right about me. Do not touch with barge-pole.”

“You think that relationship has a future?” asked Maitlan.

“It would have been all right!” I said. Tears ran down my cheeks. “Aaargh!”

“Tissue Alert!” Reakoed jumped up.

“On the dresser. We were really, really happy.”

“But darling girl, you weren’t, not really, really, really, totally perfect happy.”

“I wish I could be sure of that. It’s too pat. There’s one more thing.”

“No, no!”

“There’s nothing more they can do to hurt Dabida. Isn’t there really?”

Maitlan got up and stood behind my chair, put his arms around my neck and kissed my forehead.

“That would devastate us all.”

“I’m sure Maya could have sorted me out.” Unconsciously I echoed Sarat. “She’s not here any more.”

“There’s one more thing,” muttered Reakoed. “Face it, Fal. You do not want to die.”

“What!”

“I’m an idiot, I should have realized.”

“What are you talking about?” I thought I understood. “I am not looking for a way out!”

“That’s not what I mean.”

“Well, what do you mean?”

“Does apple-stock have medicinal properties?” asked Maitlan.

“Only to knock you out. There’s some brandy in the kitchen cupboard.”

“You have been having a truly absorbing time grappling with your future. It has become all-important. Vital you clarify. Critical you decide. I suspect this is because it’s hit you that you may not have a future. At least Kai had the bloody sense to tell you to stop trying to manipulate.”

“I want to scream that that is total crap but I don’t think I can.”

“We all play a game. Kadun will have free elections. Kadun will have a democratically elected Senate. Such are our charms to ward off evil. These things will happen. That is true. What is not true is that their occurrence will mysteriously mean that Kadun has become safe. You – oh my darling girl, you are not alone in – it was impossible no-one died. That didn’t mean people would go on dying.”

Maitlan returned.

“The kettle is on.”

“Like the rest of us,” said Reakoed, “you can only do what you have to do. It’s not exactly surprising you’d like someone’s arms around you while you do it. Like the rest of us.”

“I wonder,” said Maitlan, “exactly how much Caithan understood. It would seem to me excellent advice to look up Sorg’s friends as comrades in arms doing what they have to do, like the rest of us. Let me make the coffee.” He turned at the door. “You have to decide nothing, today, tomorrow, ever.”

At that point for definite light relief, there was a knock on the door. Maitlan answered it. It was Latic, who took one look, smiled shyly, muttered, “Old friends, that’s great,” and scurried away.

“Who was that?” asked Reakoed.

“Not another would-be suitor,” said Maitlan.

“No way! Latic is one of life’s little casualties. Mel picked him up and rescued him, turning his head inside out on the way. He’s better with plants than people and came to rest in Carlin. Where he has been fantastically kind to me. He says being kind to someone instead of thinking of himself all the time makes him think he might make it as human being. “I giggled suddenly. “Believe me, one can tie oneself in far worse knots over the Brothers Talal than I ever managed. I’m not going to tell you, because I really don’t think that’s fair.”

“Not the relly in the City!” said Reakoed.

“Who told you?”

“Tar, when it looked like it might make the front-page of every paper in the world.”

“I think I can accept that as a reason...”

My imagination is, I should say, pretty average, but it didn’t take creative genius to stand in front of the mirror and ask myself: do you sincerely want to die for Kadun? Nor was it beyond me to close my eyes and visualize Sarat’s image in place of my own, Maya, Hass, Mel, Venga, Cantilip, Mitch, Karula, Sorg, Karci, Vrin, Cioulis - Asdinan, Saryulin, Duvi - inevitably someone known simply as The Unknown Soldier. I tried briefly to jump ship by saying that wasn’t the question, Kyse’s and my deliberations on our over-riding commitment and blah were, but they weren’t. I realized that was why Kyse had stayed out of it. The border was everything here. Why didn’t I enter Dabidan politics? I had taken Kadun citizenship. I was a subject of the Anile throne. By my choice. I realized there was – had to be – one hell of a corollary. Providing it all comes right in the end. I have a scratch-pad in the kitchen for shopping-lists. I pencilled: the border stopped being meaningful to Kyse. The day Maya died. WHY? Then: I may not be the only one who’s not quite as together as he/she looks. But Kyse was no adolescent and (I judged) just about the last person in the world to say ‘I love you’ if he wasn’t sure. It was the tragedy that had prompted him to say it, not the tragedy that had prompted it. No-one, I pointed out to myself, had been exactly sane in the days immediately after the bombs. Nonetheless, he had been.....adult. Really? Towards me, anyhow! I wasn’t sure I could make flinging oneself across the ocean the epitome of maturity. The thing is, I wrote firmly, I love Sorg. Present tense. Time heals etc. For the moment there is only one man in my life and the fact that he is dead is rather irrelevant. Yes, well, that rather settles that.

Kyse by now was back in Zur in a rented apartment. I picked up my car-keys.

“Well, hallo!”. Fond hug, kiss on the cheek that (just) stopped short of being lingering. Both reciprocated. “Kyse....”

“Come in, come in! Sit down. Relax.” He looked mildly amused, if anything. “You are going to Say Something?”

“I am going to Say Something. You’ve got a balcony! Fantastic!”

“I’ll make some coffee.”

Not only a balcony, but one with garden chairs on it. I leant over the balcony, supposedly rapturous at a view of the Old Port I could have drawn in my sleep and I knew I was a fraud, in all things a fraud. What the bloody hell did that mean? Darling, they want you to be real. Maya, Maya, Maya. I half-collapsed into one of the distinctly unreal (fake veneer of age) garden chairs. You’ll gather it was pretty easy for me to say to Kyse: “I’m not as together as I look. Hope I look! I love Sorg. I’ve been through it with – people. Exactly how crazy it sort of is. They all say the same. Time heals. Not yet. I’m – you could say it was the second blow opened a – wound that wasn’t fully healed.”

He touched my hand.

“I can understand that.” I rather wanted to scream why are you so bloody decent! but of course I didn’t. Ah, but wouldn’t that have been being real? “I’m here anyway. Call me if you need me.”

“Thank you.” Light laugh. “Have you got a job yet?”

“Oh yes,” he said. Clearly he was finding something very funny. I hoped it wasn’t me. “Imperial historian. Is there any external evidence to back up the version of history in the journal, differing as it does from the standard version, or is the bloody journal a fake?”

“Wha - !!! Look, I don’t know anything – even I’ve heard of carbon-dating! Can’t people like, well, you, tell the age of a manuscript?”

“Oh, it’s old, all right. It might even be contemporary with Narulis. That doesn’t mean it’s not a fake.”

“They came, the skull-faces,” I said, a bit shakily. “I should really, really hate that to be a fake. Did Sarat know?”

“That is attested to elsewhere. Narulis, so far as anyone knows, said it.”

I touched his hand.

“You – you didn’t come back just for me. I’m glad of that.”

“I didn’t come back just for the journal. I’m always glad to see you, Fal, whatever the – status of our relationship. It’s important to me you know that.”

“I’m going to travel,” I said. “I’ve been far too much in too few bits of the world.” I hadn’t realized that until about ten minutes earlier. “Send you lots of postcards.”

In case you have been too absorbed in my rich inner life to work out the obvious, Sorg’s death had left me with more money than I’d ever heard of, let alone possessed. It hadn’t seemed quite right to take it all but the family wouldn’t let me not take it all.

Effectively I’d been bought. It was a repulsive thought but I was in the mood for looking at all the angles. If I did retreat to Zur, I’d have to do something with the dosh – give it to CLIK! Well, some of it. I didn’t think Sorg would want me actively poor. I’d never even seen most of Kadun – the self-sufficiency trip. You can’t disappear for three days when you have goats or not too often. Barfanu was always willing to mind the shop. Latic hasn’t quite got the hang of goats, but he’s a mean gardener. How much was my support network a self-constructed trap? I’d driven away from Kyse’s intending to give myself a break here, pick up lunch in the deli in Tamsin, sit outside in the sun and like it. I’d got as far as the car-park on the edge of the walking-streets. I knew I was mentally running from that scene in Azt and forced myself to be there. They want you to be real. Maya, I whispered, Maya. Then I muttered furiously, I am NOT going to talk to Mel. There are other people in the bloody world! Cut the cord, come back as your own man. How far was that true of Kyse? I wondered if he’d felt some relief, had regrets over his own insanity, but I didn’t think that was it. He wants me. He doesn’t need me. That was a refreshing thought. I liked that thought, though it was only really what Reakoed had said about how Kyse would never walk over my life. How the bloody hell do I cut the cord? I quite wanted to look in on Maitlan, but I might run into Mel. If such a thing had been possible, I’d have been staring at myself. I’m avoiding Mel? I just let it hang there. OK, right at this minute I’m avoiding Mel. I

suspected that would be because right at this minute anything I said in passing would be pretty fake. But wasn't that just life? But sometimes it matters. I knew that even before Maya's death nobody else had been skating it, either. Now, if I could just get out of the freaking car-park and start enjoying myself, everything would be just cool. The thought lingered that someone else's input would enlighten me and end – what? A possibly fruitless spiral of introspection. Fal, you are a moron. You are a screaming idiot. Why must it always be a struggle? I'm in no-man's land, I thought, Carlin a half-way house. I don't throw in my lot with Karci and the guys. None of the people whose ears I had recently bent was irtubi. I am Dabidan. I grew up in Zur. Would the fact that my friends were largely Zuri be an issue to anyone else on the planet, would it! Duvi, as I knew so well, recognized people in crisis when she saw them, but her remedy for life's lesser difficulties, whether hers or other people's, was generally the herb garden or a brisk walk. I laughed suddenly, imagining myself saying to her, "I've tried the herb garden school of psychotherapy." I thought momentarily of Latic. I too was a good neighbour. I did things for others. I was proud of the relationship I'd established with the kids. I was actually a member of the governing body of the youth club and disco and liked – I began to titter – encouraging the youth of Carlin to expand their horizons. They want you to be real. I'd expressed my pain, largely in the literal sense, like you express milk. Once I'd got over being an uncontrolled wreck I wanted to give back to the people who'd been kind to me. Self-doubt, the bad kind. I suddenly felt a tremendous irritation. There is something going on in my life and I don't know what it is. Come out, wherever you're hiding! I was still in the bloody car-park. By now I was ravenous. Move, woman! I'm going to sit here until I starve to death? But when I got out I didn't head for the nearest caff. I walked a bit, bought some fruit at a stall and went for a wander.

While naturally people recognized me, mercifully I didn't meet anyone I actually knew well, anyone who (oh horror of horrors!) might say, let's pick up a coffee and chew over the fat. I was enjoying myself. There was a swing in my step. I was positively sauntering. Uzz'n wen' un 'ad one of they toime slippages that I didn't know were so tediously commonplace.

Where I was sauntering was down Cobaul Lane, where there's a sweetshop with (and it always had had) a stripy awning, loads of lusciously tempting if you're 7, brilliantly coloured, jars of tooth-rot in the window (some of those were striped too), and a freezer with a sliding-top outside fully of lusciously tempting etc lollies. You have to go inside to get ice-cream because lollies are mass-produced but ice-cream is an art. It says that in the window too, well, not the bit about lollies. This is not surprising, because the shop is called The Art of Ice-Cream. It nestled between a junk-shop and Hadal's Finest Furnishings, lots of stripes and bright colours there too, bolts of cloth, a box of remnants, contrasting prettily with carpet samples in more muted hues. The junk-shop, I was just noting vaguely, was no longer there, when suddenly it was and Maya and I were standing rapt in front of it slurping our ices and possessed with a painful longing for a string of multi-faceted beads which changed colour as the light hit them. That's just so clever, we breathed. Look, we were 8, all right! I knew what happened next, the old guy who owned the place pushed aside the curtain shielding the window-display from the inside of the shop, stepped into the window and with magnificent aplomb removed the beads from the dummy and disappeared again. In all senses. I was looking at or rather through a plain window with an office inside. Samit-va, for a really personal service. No case too small. We serve all your legal needs.

I suppose he must have died, I found myself saying. The obvious thing was to saunter into The Art of Ice-Cream and ask, but I still felt I didn't want to talk to anyone who actually knew me (I'd still been slurping their ices at 20). I drifted on lost in thought, which mostly means I was wondering why I didn't want to cry. Close on the heels of that one came what the hell have I done to myself now! Whether the thing perceived has independent existence or whether it's a hallucination, its starting-point is in you, you have either grossly disturbed your perception or done something to your consciousness enabling you to see other levels of reality. I want to talk to someone who doesn't know me! I want to talk especially to someone who hasn't known me since I was 5. Do I really? And have to explain every last detail? Faun was pretty well permanently in Azt. So far as anyone could tell the whole of PANTHER was in Kadun. That couldn't be right, though. Someone must be holding the fort in Fidub. Perhaps there's some nice old cat on the retired list who's got a few hours to

spare. Probably find she reminisces over the old days with Gorse's mother. The tentacles of the Matter of Kadun stretch far and wide and no more so than in Fidub! There is a barrier here. Intimate details of our sex lives. I mean, mine, OK. I can cope with that. That really left only one nice old cat. Don't be silly. After all, he is the head of PANTHER. I suppose he is. I thought Sarat might be. Whose time shall I waste today? I felt that something possibly serious had happened. I rang Vax.

"Do you think Cho could spare me some time? I need to talk about the other matter. I need to talk about Sorg, about a lot of private stuff, including – Mel and I when we were kids. That rather limits the field. I also need to talk to an older person."

"Tar and Saski are staying."

"Oh shit! Sorry."

"Don't run away. Where are you?"

"Zur."

"Come over. I'll sort it."

"Vax, I can't do that. I cannot tell Tar and Saski about sex with Mel!" I think. I remembered Maya and then Mel having Tet and me in stitches relating Trial by Saski.

"I'm not a complete idiot." He tutted. "People always forget about Amida."

It gets worse. I was sure Mel had told me Sarat had told Cho. Did that automatically mean Amida knew? Or for that matter Vax?

"If – Sarat had confided something to Cho – what you might call guy-stuff – "

"The cottage? Amida knows all. Amida hears all. So, by the way, do I. How in the world – "

"Does that have anything to do with me? My relationship with Hass is a factor here."

"Your what?"

"I didn't say physical relationship!"

"That is true. It sounds one hell of a story."

I sighed.

"Just the story of my life."

"How about we meet you at the quay?"

"That would be incredibly wonderful."

"I am incredibly wonderful."

The car headed off into the countryside.

"Where are we going?"

"Somewhere we shan't be disturbed," said Amida.

"I'm really putting you out. I didn't mean."

"Sssh," said Amida.

We arrived at another town, a mixture of whitewash – well, this was Fidub, pinkwash, applesh, lemonwash – and ultra-chic mirror-glass affairs, but unlike most places these were no higher than the older buildings. They looked much more likeable. We took a nosedive to the centre of the earth, or in other words descended into an underground carpark, took the lift up to what was apparently someone's house.

"This is really rather gorgeous." Although modern, it was not minimalist but comfortable and welcoming, despite being austere in colour. PANTHER have a serious thing about grey/imperial silver. It was also austere in that it showed no signs of being inhabited, no personal effects on view.

Vax grinned.

"How are the goats?"

I grinned back.

"I of course live in a barn."

I hoped I wasn't expected to get through this without coffee, but Vax delved into his rucksack and produced supplies, not only coffee and milk, but two yummy-looking chocolate-cakes, newly baked bread, soft cheese and fruit.

"I hope I'm not going to seem a trivial lunatic," I said. "I've run it past Caithan, Reakoed and Maitlan."

“Caithan?” asked Amida

Vax smiled.

“The city-chick. Usually known as Kai.”

“Ah, Mel’s ex,” said Amida apparently totally casually. I thought I shouldn’t comment on that just yet.

“That’s not what’s driven me here. Something happened today. I had a time-slip. I’m pretty outer and exo –

“ Amida’s lips twitched. Yes, well, she’s heard that one before. “ – and apart from the obvious – I don’t – didn’t make a habit of these things. I’ve been doing a lot of thinking. I’ve been sort of collecting myself. Someone proposed to me which kind of brought it to a head. On the day Maya was killed. So things have been. It rather seemed to me that this was something I’d done to myself and – it’s one thing to – to work on, to train a faculty, as in you’re in control, and another to have sort of loosed it accidentally and not have the faintest idea what you’ve done.”

“My dear girl!” said Vax.

“I know – extreme stress can trigger – I guess I thought that was a one-off – I know the difference between extreme stress and where I am now. Isn’t that implicit? I mean it was a modest little memory of Maya.”

“No chorus of dancing-bears,” sighed Vax. “Reakoed and Maitlan. “Shall I hang around or is this ladies only?”

I said: “This is mostly about young men.”

Amida said: “A common problem to young women.”

Vax said: “Not about the control of psychic phenomena? Is that yes or no?”

“Your input could be good. May I – change my mind later if I feel like it?”

“Sure,” he said.

“Now,” said Amida, “It sounds perfectly delicious. Where would you like to start?”

I sighed.

“When I was 5 and Maya became my bessiest friend?”

Like Reakoed on a certain other occasion, they laughed in all the wrong places.

“Oh dear,” said Vax, when I got to insisting that there wasn’t any rational difference between Sarat and Hass and me and Hass.

Amida – really the only word is guffawed at my poor Maya telling me I sounded as though I didn’t even like Mel.

“That which cannot be told Saski! We did rather assume, darling, some enthusiasm. One is quite relieved,” she added. “It did just occur to us that you had at this late date discovered you are hopelessly in love with Mel.”

“Hopelessly in love, yes. Mel, no.”

“I have always thought Maitlan an excellent young man,” murmured Vax. “Did you invite this crap!”

“But it wasn’t crap,” I said.

“That,” he said, “is the only reason Mel should not be shot.”

“That is a little harsh, darling,” murmured Amida

“Perhaps.”

“I still don’t see it like that. Kai said virtually the same as Mel – the sexual relationship I imagined with Hass didn’t actually have any sex in it.”

“Is that true?”

“Basically, yes, as in to me sex couldn’t have been important in Sarat and Hass because Sarat isn’t gay.”

“Have some more cake,” said Vax. “Keep your blood-sugar up.”

“It may be useful,” said Amida, “to look at this ‘crack’ linearly. Externally is perhaps a better word. You were out of step with them over the inner and eso. You were out of step with Tet over the Matter of Kadun. Tragically, you were in balance with Sorg. You are out of step with Kyse. Lastly, you are out of step with you, a Dabidan ready to surrender her life for Kadun, in a trap which would be hell to escape, should you decide to try, yet having discovered the primacy of your own autonomy.”

Vax stopped playing with the cake-knife.

“There is nothing in that last bit not true of Sarat and Maya. If we think back. The die can be cast before the event!” He picked up a mouthful of crumbs. “From the moment – Sarat came to Cho in some distress, not because he thought himself insane but because he felt unable to as Maya to share the risk. There is nothing – there can be nothing – we who have stayed safe, in Fidub, in Dabida, can say.”

“Maya did not have to do it,” I said.

“Your duty to Maya, your duty to Sorg. Who has spoken to the world of his duty to Maya?”

“Sarat has – absolutely no choice. I could find other ways.”

“Oh my dear, no. Sarat had choice. Bullet-proof glass.”

“The word was ‘skulk’,” Vax helpfully reminded me.

Amida smiled gently.

“And you wonder her death has sent you flying?”

“Exactly how stupid am I! Until Maya’s death I wasn’t trapped, was I. People would have been disappointed, even disappointed in me, but – Dabidan politics, say, that would have been a legitimate choice. I sat in my little rural haven. I can do what I like. I can make a free choice. Because I could make a free choice.”

“Continue,” said Vax.

“If Kyse’d proposed before Maya died, it’s at least possible I’d have accepted. But he couldn’t’ve. It’s like – invisible lines crossing lives. You’ve got it all pat how things are, then they change. The terrible thing is you weren’t wrong in the first place”

Vax and Amida smiled at each other.

“Who has created – the new continuum?”

“You have. Only you didn’t notice!” Vax laughed. “I made a commitment without coercion. The coercion crept up behind.”

He laughed again.

“Let me ask you a truly vicious question. Do you like history?”

“Don’t torture the child,” murmured Amida.

But I said: “Don’t you mean historians! I mean, if someone’s idea of a family day-out was ancient monuments, that could pall. It’s his work!”

“Good answer,” acknowledged Vax. “What do you think – and let us project with abandon – you are happily paired, you have at least one child – what is Kyse’s idea of a family day-out?”

“Assurance we’d have one? I think he’s pretty laid-back, but it would upset him if we didn’t have – yuck! ‘quality time, honey’. And quantity! The Senate of a country that whatever our fond desires is not safe

cannot work office-hours. I have thought – we’d have to have somewhere in Azt. What’s more to the point, I have thought that, Azt being a historian’s dream, Kyse would have no probs there.”

“And your child? In the imperial archives with daddy or the Senate with mummy?”

“No child for the duration of hostilities.”

“Have you discussed that with Kyse?” Amida

“Did Tet want children?” Vax.

“Later, now, later.”

“And Sorg?”

“Very much. But later.”

“No child for the duration of hostilities. You would say that is standard form?”

“Basic issue. Among – a certain set of people. I have not talked about it to Kyse.”

“What is the exact rationale?”

“The entire load falls on the remaining parent, to the detriment of his/her – not necessarily efficiency.

Flexibility. Alternatively/concurrently there are doting grandparents, aunts and uncles, brothers/sisters and sisters/brothers-in-law. The other half is of course the vulnerability of the kid, the caging, the – the murder of childhood. When I think of our childhood – the absolute hideousness of keeping a kid indoors, I mean it would be like a cage. Or else – what is the point - ? I’m so sorry,” I said.

“What is the point in having them if you never see them, if they grow up in another country. We offered of course.”

“Mitch and Karula live with it. That’s not something people are queuing to copy.”

“I’m sure Kyse would understand that,” said Amida.

“We – we also think wherever the kid was he/she’d be a potential target and so – resources would have to be diverted. There – there are no circumstances in which Maya’s child could have wandered freely in public space.”

“True,” said Vax.

“But you of course,” said Amida. “Was there a grown-up with you?”

I started.

“No! It’s completely unimaginable. Not at that minute. We were out with Caluna. She was talking to some friends. Please, Mummy, may we get an ice-cream! Of course, darling. We came right back, babbling about the beads. I wonder if Caluna remembers!”

“Such good children,” muttered Vax.

“No auger of anything, darling,” said Amida. “Mel’s extreme difficulties with civilization.”

“Awww,” I said.

“And you?” said Amida. “One would be tempted to assume that since your looks were a difficulty you dressed down but the Leotard Look suggests otherwise!” After a second she added, “My dear, you look as though you’ve been knifed!”

“My image of myself is in swimsuit with a smudges of mud all over me holding out especially muddy mitts because I’d just built a truly fantastic mud-castle. That of course is nonsense. Or rather an accurate picture of when I was 8.”

“What is the relationship between the Leotard Look and the slaving?”

“You have to ask!”

“I am asking.”

“I am my own person, etc, etc.”

“But in the end you all fell in.”

“Maya liked looking like a sex-kitten. Sarat liked Maya looking like a sex-kitten. Unfortunately, the eyes of the world were upon them. Actually it wasn’t so much the sexy bit as the frivolity bit. The insistence on the yellow flip-flops is the real key to The Look! Puh-lease, we are serious people! Not too serious, of course.”

“Did Mel say that?”

“Yes.”

“There is some difficulty?”

“Only the obvious.”

“Pretend we’re thick.”

“Don’t wanna be serious people! Not that way, anyhow.”

“Which way? Pretend I’ve forgotten being 16.”

“First of all you want grown-ups to take what you say seriously. Sometimes. Not all the time, that would make it too easy for them. If they listen carefully enough, they’ll understand there’s really one thing you want them to take really, really seriously, and that of course is that the adult world is full of compromises, hypocrisies, irrationalities and even lies. You are different. Sometimes. Your horror of the slightest untruth doesn’t quite extend to not smudging exactly how thoroughly you have tidied your room.”

“The business at dinner, you are sure it was before the Matter of Kadun?”

“I’m sure it was. I think!”

“I have an image, Mel beginning to stretch, slowly extend one paw, whoops, something in the way, perhaps if I go in this direction... What was his relationship with the Press?”

“Sarat,” said Amida, “said, OK, you want to photograph me. Better give you something to photograph, then, hadn’t I. Hence, I suspect, the fashion icon. And of course.”

Vax laughed.

“As though his face alone. I should suspect Mel also thought that. Another way of manifesting it.”

“I like a good gossip,” I said.

Vax laughed again.

“But what about me!”

“Darling,” said Amida, “how much older than you was Sorg?”

“Most of us grow up in the end,” said Vax, “honestly.”

“We think of you all as much of an age,” said Amida, “but of course you are not. You must talk to Sarat.”

“Sarat? He doesn’t want to hear my life-history!”

“Probably knows most of it,” said Vax.

“I imagine,” said Amida, “Sarat heard it from both sides.”

“Tell him,” said Vax, “his grandmother says you are in a new continuum.”

Amida picked up her bag. I thought she might be getting out a tissue or something, but no, she slung it over her shoulder.

“That’s it?”

“Do come back if you need to.”

“You’re nearly there,” said Vax, “so close it seems a shame to spoil it.”

Er.

I didn’t run off to mail Sarat. It was a bit gross, wasn’t it. I could guess that I could have a soothing, perhaps even cathartic, time with Sarat, shared memories of Maya, but what Amida had proposed was hey, Sarat, what I really want to talk about is me. Amida hears all, Amida knows all. There must be something she knew that made it make sense. My mind ran on. Nor, puh-lease, did I fear we might end up comforting each other. We’re a monogamous lot – well, in my case serially – and I was sure Sarat would be equally repelled by that one. A monogamous lot, especially when in both cases the other half is dead. Er-ooh, is that the lesson of the day? We have both lost our partners, traumatically, hideously. What does that mean besides we have both lost our partners, traumatically and hideously. Oh no! That I have to ask, and fast. I rang Vax back and got Amida’s email addy, then gazed at the screen wondering how on earth to put it. Briskly, I decided.

“Sarat, we both loved Maya. Of course what I really want to talk about is me.” That strikes me as totally gross - ????

Is Sarat having a – a Sorg experience?

My dear, the answer to your second question is no. It is the right territory but the wrong part of it.

Oh Sorg, my sweet, my love, they want me to think about you objectively? Can’t be done, not yet. And? So Kai had the sense to tell me to stop trying to manipulate, foreclose. Maybe Sarat wouldn’t want to talk about a new continuum. I mailed him, again briskly.

I’ve been thinking about some stuff, ended up debriefing on your grandmamma! She said I should talk to you about being in a new continuum - ?

!?! replied the Master of Kadun, a tactful and well-brought-up young man. I winced as I translated it into what the fuck have you got to talk to Amida about.

Sex with Mel, I typed, then felt that was too brisk, made it sound as though I had a problem with – you mean I don’t! The whole – some of the stuff – our relationships when we were kids. There is a very limited number of people it is possible to debrief on!

I heard a rumour, you and Kyse?

Not at the moment, I typed back. That at least was the simple truth.

Maya, typed Sarat.

Yes, I typed back. What did I mean? I don’t know. I was in a train of thought that ran Maya is what the fuck you have to talk to Amida about. Why the fuck didn’t you talk to me? Because, moron, you are running Kadun! Oh and because it didn’t occur to me. I added: I didn’t think you’d want to hear me droning on about me, then got into whether that should be ‘don’t’ and ‘you want’. I changed the tense then changed it back, then typed Mel! then deleted it, then typed Hass! and sat back to see what that provoked.

Ah, typed Sarat.

I laid it bare: Amida said she reckoned you heard it from both sides.

I did! typed Sarat. A new continuum?

It’s a long story.

I know, typed Sarat. Shall I come to Carlin?

And that, as I sat noting that I had not instantly been invited to Azt, was the last thing I expected.

Do, please!

Go to the House. I’ll fix it with As. There are some kinds of crap neither of us needs.

SARAT I parked outside my door all night! I thought but didn’t type.

I could come to Azt.

Hass and Venga are here.

Ah.

Scene: A Room in Carlin. I don't think I could find my way to it again, up stairs, down stairs, nearly as bad as the hill. Like every other room in Carlin it is astonishing, but I am not sure what sort of a room it is. Anywhere else it'd be a junk-room, but one that has been hollowed out, in which the junk has been carefully piled against two of the walls. There's a bed along another wall, with an old CLIK poster above it. Yoof was here! Mardis? Incongruously it hung, curling slightly at the edges, next to a painting of the house somewhere past exquisite. That counts as junk in Carlin? A bookcase was piled with books, mags, a CD player, a pile of CDs, a piece of sculpture, abstract, modern I thought, not that I know much about art, and also somewhere past exquisite. In the middle is an old but not antique table and one of those swivel office-chairs. On the table is a pile of books and a tray of welcoming coffee. There is a window-seat. On this Sarat is sitting and gazing out of the window. He jumps up.

"I am so glad to see you!"

We hug.

"Good!" I say. "I mean I really wasn't sure I'm top of your to-do list." Then I wished I hadn't because I knew from Maya that Sarat had strong views on finding time for the people close to him and we all knew that it could never be quite like that.

"You cut yourself off, Fal. We worried about you."

"I had to. I needed to."

"Coffee?"

"Please." He poured.

"Can't remember."

"Black! If you're going to be kind and attentive to me, I may lose the thread. Not that I'm sure I have the thread in the first place. Shouldn't it be me being kind and attentive?"

"I am very well looked after. Hass and Venga have decided I need them. I am truly and infinitely grateful, except when Fal wants to talk about Hass at 15."

"I think I'm going to dive from the top board. You and Hass. You are not gay. Me and Hass. I am not male! What is the difference to the bloody Whole?"

I knew by his face that whatever he'd heard - from both sides - it hadn't been that which must mean - I shut my eyes - Maya hadn't told him - the truth but then out of a jumble of emotions came maybe she'd told him what was real - maybe I was talking out of my backside

"Perhaps you should talk to Cantilip," Sarat was saying in a voice that, OK I was a bit sensitive, I just might call over-gentle.

"Oh come on!" I said. "The fact that you're the second person to say that doesn't help!"

"Who was the first?"

"Kai. This story's been aired - to people it was airable to."

"Mel?"

"Mel is the problem not the solution. Could I possibly need to expand on that!" I filled him in. "Maitlan, Kai, Vax, Amida all say Mel was not - constructive."

"So why did you end up with Amida?"

"Time-slip. Maya and I were 8."

"Of course," said Sarat, "you're a really outer and exo."

"Sorg wasn't," I said. "And nor of course was Maya."

"When you lose the other half of you," said Sarat. "The other half of you?"

"I'm trapped in Carlin," I said. "The fact that I want to be in Carlin doesn't mean I'm not trapped here. Does that make sense?"

"Oh yes," said Sarat. "I'm trapped in Azt."

"Eeek," I said.

"Once upon a time," said Sarat, "I thought I'd like to be Anile emperor when I grow up. And if it worked, and it was a big if, etc, etc. I don't know, Fal. I don't know how I saw the rest of my life."

"The Dabidan model," I said cautiously.

"The Dabidan model does not entail - or maybe that's did not - fighting, I guess is the word. Being in a permanent state of war. It's as much a hands-on job as it was on Day One, d'you see. There's a level at

which the existence, I trust, of a democratically elected Kadun Senate is simply irrelevant.. The way I do the job must change but the job itself.”

“I wanted to do it for Sorg. I have to do it for Maya.”

He smiled.

“Something like that. I seem to be missing a few chapters here. What on earth has that to do with?”

I grimaced.

“I don’t know! All of this ear-bending I’ve been doing is basically because I can’t find the root. Umm, you didn’t answer the question.”

“But you talked to Kai.”

It took me a moment to suss that one.

“Not about earthpower,”

Sarat’s turn for the top board.

“Why are they all so furious with Mel? Where, by the way, I cast my vote. Fal-girl, has it not for one second occurred to you that you were right?”

After what seemed like forever, I replied, “No,” then, “Guy-stuff,” then, “The whole weight of the facts seemed – “

“Facts?” interrupted Sarat.

“Events? What people have said to me. Including Maya.”

“We were so mature? We knew – “ He grinned. “ – our arses from our elbows, especially in the dark?”

“What,” I asked cautiously, “do you now think about that?”

“It was fun, it was educational, it was genuine. What it was not was a profound statement about the cosmos.”

“How do you see it?”

“We have – we are encased in – bodies. Bodies have biological gender. Mentally we’re both male and female. I wish you would talk to Cantilip. Or Mitch! I heard it from Mitch. She said the hurt was that somewhere there is a female person who would knock Venga for six but it wasn’t her. Mitch didn’t quite get the hang of that. We’re conditioned, she said, to think we can only love male people or female people, or blondes or brunettes for that matter. The hurt was – I’m extrapolating – everyone saying, pityingly, but Cantilip, he’s gay! He’s not bloody gay! That’s Cantilip. Is Hass gay?”

“You’re not just losing me, Sarat, you’re freaking me. Alternative answers. Of course he’s bloody gay! You should know!”

“Just trying to make you think. Look at it from my point of view.”

“I hate it when people say that.”

“Which bit?”

“Come to think of it, both! Tell me your point of view!”

“You interrupted me.” I gave him A Look. “OK...I love Hass very deeply. I gave that physical expression, first singly, then severally. Hass is and was sure he was gay, from the first adolescent wriggles aroused by another human being. I am and was sure I was straight. Making love to Hass, and being made love to, was the first and about the only eso experience in my early life and struggles, because – you want to join the dots?” I shook my head.

“Still floundering.”

“I dissolved my barriers. Love dissolved the barriers. Hass was simply making love to a guy he loves.”

I squealed.

“You’re saying!”

“Tell me what I’m saying.”

“Hass would have – “ I realized my voice was still a little high and lowered the register. “Hass would have had to dissolve the barriers – “

“Loved you, I’m sure, cared deeply, not enough to – go all the way.”

“Which is not to say there isn’t a person in the entire world in a female body – it’s not the same.”

“That’s because of Venga, not you, Hass or Cantilip.”

“What does that mean?”

“Venga doesn’t really have any barriers. Nor really does Hass. He wasn’t 15 any more. You didn’t read the runes, Fal.”

“Oh thanks! Which runes would those be?”

“As I see it, you were just part of the gang. Suddenly it obtruded onto them that you are a female of the species, with whom certain things are possible or impossible, as the case may be. It gets worse. Not only were you female, you were right.”

I jumped without bothering to hold my nose.

“And they were both such sexist pigs they conspired to put down the silly girl. No, Sarat.”

“No,” said Sarat, then looked away suddenly, continued, “I was about to say no and yes.” It meant nothing to me and he didn’t expand. “Equal honours. You understood something they didn’t. They, however, understood things you didn’t.” He laughed suddenly. “I do remember The Leotard Look, you know. Intimately.”

“Enough about me,” I said but he shook his head. “Therapeutic?” I suggested.

“This is,” he said. “I’m really not quite sure why.”

“Your memories,” I said softly, “are all good. So basically are mine. Which kind of makes nonsense of all this – agonising.”

“Suppose I say, the basic questions are... Then you can look at me pityingly and tell me what the basic questions actually are.”

“OK!”

“Do you want to spend the rest of your life with Kyse? Complicated by possibility of not having a rest of your life. Do you want any of it? Would you rather spend the rest of your life in Zur? With or without Kyse. I could be spending the rest of my life in Zur with Maya. I chose not to. We live or die with the consequences of our choices.”

That came out rather abruptly, I thought, but then it would.

“But it worked,” Sarat was continuing. “The only thing worse could be the context of failure. So I am Anile emperor and you are Falita San-yaega-baht and the changes are rather violent, no? Dislocation. We have changed, we have grown. We have thought – what have we thought? The change is – organic, it follows. It is. It did. But the real new continuum – continua? – started the day I entered Azt, the day – “ He began to grin.

“Don’t remind me of that day!”

“Why not? Your past interests you.”

“Grrrr,” I said, then, “where the road forked.”

“Irretrievably.”

“So the people we are haven’t quite made their peace with the people we were? Or is that the other way round? A crack I had at 15 can’t possibly be intimately connected with Sorg’s death. Can it?”

“You seem to think it is!”

“Nobody else has the problem.”

“Mel and Hass don’t have the problem. Cantilip has the problem. Kai has the problem. I don’t think they notice.”

“The obvious,” I said.

“I really don’t think it has much to do with it. You know Kai wanted to be President of Harn?”

“I vaguely heard that!”

“Meaning she wanted to hit the bastards and hit them until finally they died. Instead she’s part of my gang dedicated to just that.”

“Organic?” I hazarded.

“The fact that she’s living with an officer of the Imperial Army who is really rather unusual, even by our standards, is in comparison superficial.”

“Tell, tell!”

“Cioulis is senoki. Think Cantilip and square it.”

“Secret belief he’s a tree?”

“Not far off.”

“She said a couple of things. She doesn’t really have the problem. Which I guess is why the Fal must talk to Cantilip camp. Fal isn’t going to talk to Cantilip.”

“The roots are outside,” said Sarat. “That’s the point. What we have become.”

“Instead of growing from roots – the whole history of Carlin is on my back! You were the Anile heir.”

“What did it mean? I made it mean!”

“Made it real? What did she mean, they want you to be real? There wasn’t anything realer.”

“Oh Fal.”

There was a moment’s silence.

“Suppose I say you’re thinking of how much of private conversations with Maya you want to share with me and whether it matters any more.”

“Way off target.”

“Sorry.”

“Start thinking you were right. Really get into it.”

“What was I right about?”

“Ex-actly. I think you did exactly the right thing, you know, goat-farming.”

I began to giggle.

“I’m just thinking, is that what everyone – Fal, oh, she’s goat-farming.”

“Where you did it – not totally off-target. I was thinking – not if I wanted to share, if you wanted to know, and not Maya. The bloody field of flowers!”

“Sorg?”

“Do you have time for the weight of being Anile emperor?”

“Try me.”

I mostly said, Mee-ah, like a freaking sheep. After a while, my brain started working again.

“A glitter of sparks.”

“The sexual relationship you wanted with Hass didn’t actually have any sex in it. Of course,” he said with mock-ponderousness, like some old guy propping up the bar, “if you want to know what I think.”

“That could be interesting.”

“It is of course all confused and confounded by the ages of the persons in question. None of you, none of us –

“Yeah,” I said.

“I think something like you understood the end-point. They understood the methodology. Half-understood in both cases. Oh and Hass understood the end-point too. His body rejected getting there with a girl. Your body rejected getting there with anyone. What you wanted to do was be there. When it came to it. What you wanted to do was leave your body behind, out of it, it wasn’t relevant.. You were furious because essentially Hass’s rejection, while he loved you like a sister, the unique precious individual you are, etc, defined you by your body. Of course it doesn’t matter to the bloody Whole! Mel couldn’t explain. What the poor sap was trying to get at is it can’t be done. We’re all of a piece. Unless we get to sit on the Anile throne, of course.”

“Do I detect a certain dryness?”

“If anyone had told me when I was 17... Mel was right too. Half-right. Not love and sex, Love with a capital L and sex. D’you want to tell me about sex with Sorg?”

“We got there.”

“So?”

“Where are you going?”

“What if anything does that have to do with your little heap on the kitchen floor?”

“I think,” I said slowly, “I really want some thinking-time on that one. It’s like yes, but as soon as I try and put words to it it vanishes.”

“We could talk about something else? I really don’t want to talk about Maya,” he said softly, almost meekly, beseechingly.

“Oh Sarat. I could say perhaps it would be good for you.”

“And other readings from the Book of Pious Crap! What is there to talk about?”

“My time-slip.”

“Isn’t that a bit obvious?” he asked, but gently.

“Pre-dislocation?”

“My last memory is of Maya dying in my arms,” he said, still gently. “What the bloody camera did not show is that we were joined at the time. That the culmination of our very eso relationship, in a sick sort of way. I

don't want to go there, Fal, not yet, not with you, not with anyone except possibly Hass. Sorry.”

“Sarat! Sorry. Oh Sarat.”

“The undoubtedly pretty mind of my grandmother runs (of course!) on several levels at once. They think I need to talk about Maya. If I won't talk to them, perhaps I'll talk to you,, who have also suffered violent loss. Who also loved her. I know you did. Do.”

I touched his hand.

“How about I come over all practical and recommend more coffee? Where's the kitchen in this joint?”

“Next door,” he said. “It might look like a bathroom to you, but to As it's a kitchen. This was his study when revising. It still is his hideaway.”

“Dislocation,” I said, feeling on firm ground with that one.

“Part of the family,” said Sarat. Again there was a certain dryness. Sarat, I decided, had changed. Yup, I really clapped myself on the back over that one.

I certainly wasn't going to report back to Grandmamma, so that left me with exactly no-one to talk to – except possibly Hass, which had the net effect of making me laugh because it was all so ridiculous. It was better than wincing. I am Falita San-yaega-baht. Of course I want to die for Kadun. Well, not want to, exactly. Oh, you know what I mean. He is Anile emperor. Of course he wants to, etc. But suppose I make myself Falita Landia. You didn't know Kyse's surname, did you. Fsyb is still a part of me and potentially a very unreconciled one. I had never tuned into the feminist thing about women adopting the names of their partners but now I saw there was definitely a point, if not their point. Ditch it: I am Falita, known pretty well universally as Fal. What does a Fal do? Stick to the point. Think about the heap on the kitchen-floor.

Put it in context. I was right. And wrong. So which adolescent ever born is wholly right? But the crack wasn't healed by Sorg alive, only by Sorg dead. What the hell did – could – that mean? My relationship with the eso was clearly rather rocky. From one extreme to another.... About the one thing everyone including me had agreed on was that Sorg hadn't been a time-slip because Sorg was aware of being dead, but now I wondered if time itself could be confused. If all times are now, couldn't Sorg have been both alive and dead? I'm going to start at the end-point and work backwards, I thought, then wondered how I could have come to such a thought and how I thought I was going to do it, I was able to do it.

How about sitting in a field of flowers, so conveniently on my door-step. I didn't really know what I had made of all that but clearly no-one else had any answers either, it was a fine day and I could do with a walk. I sat among the flowers and forced my busy buzzing mind to stillness. For a while nothing happened or seemed to happen, just a natural mild drowsiness and peace. I was just about to get up and go home, refreshed but nothing more exciting than that, when I sort of realized home wasn't there; certainly the flowers weren't. The field was pasture, rich thick grass, and a cow was looking at me speculatively. Not again! I thought. I turned and a guy was running towards me waving wildly and my heart practically stopped, but no, it wasn't Sorg and he stopped short frowning slightly. Your pardon, my lady. I mistook you. Me too, I said. I – I'm a stranger here. May I ask who is emperor?

He laughed. I, my lady, I! I'm sorry, I said. What – what year is this? He seemed completely unfazed and smiled. As we measure time from Narulis, it is the year 632. Then you're Kaminua, I said. He laughed again and bowed. I have that honour! Your time is when?

Cut, leaving a very shaken little Fal-girl, whose thoughts, I must admit, were about as numinous as cow-dung, being oh shit! This isn't me indulging myself. This is the bloody Matter of Kadun.

Whatever else I do, I need to live somewhere else. This landscape is not good for a girl.

Auto-suggestion? Whatever else is or isn't going on in me, I am clearly very vulnerable. Oh yeah, and who had put the idea of Maya slurping ice-cream into my little mind? Just possibly me.

It happens when I relax. When I let go.

Because right now my eso side is screaming to be let out, forcing its way out of the cage I have trapped it in.

That must be garbage. Last gasp, more like.

There's an urgent addy monitored 24/7. I typed it, thinking I really don't want to do this, as I consigned my immediate future to the Matter of Kadun.

The reply was almost instant: Describe him. I did, then rambled on about obviously I didn't recognize him, suppose there's a picture at the House, never consciously registered it.

The next reply was signed Sarat: Why did you think it was Sorg?

That seemed to me silly: I would, wouldn't I.

The Matter of Kadun, however, showed no interest in my immediate future. I half-decided to actually move, on the grounds that my here and now was quite complicated enough without half of history muscling in on the act, but where should I/could I move to, when moving seemed a defining act, a setting of in a direction in which I didn't necessarily want to go, meaning of course Kadun or Dabida. After all, I was trapped in Carlin. Aaargh.

I did not at that point know about Casin-ruhn. I don't know what it would have done to me to know that. I did not therefore know that Sarat, not wholly convinced the special effects department wasn't on permanent over-time, didn't rush off to the lake to ask Kaminua if he'd been to Carlin lately.

I had an idea, not about moving. The number of topics on which I implicitly and unquestioningly trusted my own judgement was dwindling rather alarmingly, and this one seemed particularly fragile. I looked at it nervously.

OK, you know how the gig works. Any member of A-M is available. The gig had been re-imported. Then any member of Sarat's family is available? Despite living a blameless fairly private life in Fidub? There were rather obviously two things there. One, just how many people do I intend to entertain with my crap? Two, why on earth did I think Shavli would illuminate me.

Oh and three, Amida had intimated I was going to have to do the work myself but not doing it wasn't where I was going with this. The more I examined this brilliant idea of mine, the more interesting it seemed but alas also the more deranged it seemed.

Shavli and Hass both float around on little pink clouds. Both are, however, the heirs and strange though it may seem, I do not quite know how it is done, no-one doubts that in either tragic eventuality etc, etc both would be entirely capable of doing the job – no-one apart from the obvious of course, but the obvious aren't pululating about the pink cloud but about the gender/orientation. Everyone knows what Hass is, and I don't mean they know he's gay.

Some things Mel runs by Hass to this day.

So Shavli, it's not me I actually want to talk about, it's you, it's what it all looks like on the little pink cloud.

Maybe I just talk to Hass. Wouldn't that be the grown-up thing to do?

Real.

Damn it, what am I missing?

Start with the obvious and brutal. No-one else, whatever their, no, all right, his, and that's not being finicky about grammar, heartaches and sorrow, has run away to goat-farm, but then no-one else has shattered.

Self-indulgence. I know that. Or what?

Everyone else is real. Did I just go round in a circle there? Everyone else is properly centred.

Understanding began dimly to dawn and I approached it not so much nervously as with tweezers in bio-protection gear.

I built – I don't think I like this.

The crack was healed by Sorg dead.

It's then I'm centred?

A completely ludicrous image came to me and I worked on it. It's like – it's like a mushroom, one of those big, broad, flat ones. Like a plate. Hmm. So – so everyone else spreads out from the centre, but I grew a thick stalk and built – a plate, bound to shatter.

I think I'll go back to thinking about moving.

Dislocation!

Just what is my problem! Why is everything an issue?

Let me approach this with ruthless pragmatism! That does sound impressive. OK. If I wasn't off-centre before, I am now. Meaning it's like everything's thrown up in the air and I don't where it'll land, only it's not like that, because I decide where it lands. Do I or don't I want to stand for election? Because if I do then I need to get back into the pulsating hub and actually know something about Kadun politics.

I can still learn about Kadun politics. That's not a commitment.

We live or die with the consequences of our choices.

Oh dear.

What life seems to have taught me is all decisions are irrevocable.

At least that explains why I don't want to make any. Excuse me, didn't Kai have the sense to tell me not to try to foreclose.

Where do I want to go back to?

When I was 5 and Maya became my bessest friend.

OK, not exactly go back to. That shaped the rest of my life. Irrevocably? Well, it certainly shaped my life to date.

I wrote slowly: I have no idea what I would have been. Dislocation!

That's ridiculous! You can't be dislocated at 5! Then every kid who starts school, finds not everyone's like his family –

Organic. Growth, change are organic.

Or?

You can be dislocated at 17 and I'm not talking about Hass. The bloody Matter of bloody Kadun.

Yes, but why is it dislocation? If everything follows from what was before, how can that be dislocation?

Which it does? Oh those lines crossing lives.

There's no way I'd be sitting in a field in Carlin chatting to Kaminua without it. Isn't there. Is the border not open! Sound of trumpets. Do we not uphold the free movement of peoples! There is no reason why a really laid-back Zur-chick called Fal should not have taken it into her head to find somewhere cooler and greener and emigrate.

With Tet? Double aargh. Try and join a few dots here.

So there I am covered in mud on the foreshore with my friends, having got to know fellow-Zuri. Gosh, that's exciting, isn't it. I grew up and joined the H-W. That's – organic.

I ended up in Azt. Isn't that bloody organic?

Me and half the continent.

The frame of reference has shifted for the entire world, not just little me.

Try another word. Inconceivable. Not necessarily not following from but inconceivable. Sorg. Inconceivable. Nothing in Cioulis' past could have pointed to living in paired bliss with a City-chick who is Mel Talal's ex!

He however, etc. Duh!

Or for that matter my lady Van-senok Queen of Dabida.

Suppose something happened to Cioulis. There's Kai, bereft only doing what she wanted to do and doubly wants to do.

So what did I want to do? Commitment to a certain set of values. No dislocation.

Except of course I'm really demonstrating that commitment by goat-farming. Gulp.

So I plunge back into the melee. Except I don't think I do.

What is all this stuff about writing my own script? Honestly, how on earth did Tet stop me? I'm so fragile to – eh-uh.

My hard drive being overwritten, like maybe the cap of a large mushroom?

Moron! Idiot! Imbecile! Bloody Amida! Just look at the crack differently, darling. It's horizontal, isn't it, between the cap of the mushroom and what it grows from.

But I wrote my own freaking script! I pelted off to Azt, commitment etc. But the crack was there before the bloody Matter of bloody Kadun.

OK, OK, the sexual relationship didn't actually have any sex in it.

"He only loves me for my body!" He doesn't love me for my body at all, that's about as far away from it as you can get. If for instance he's gay, how much more assured can a girl get that he doesn't only love her for her body.

Ah yes, the slaving.

I knew perfectly well Mel didn't only.

What did happen to you, darleen? Adolescence happened to you, you grew into a female of the species.

You know what they said about Sarat and Maya.

Maya was pretty but she wasn't beautiful

Beauty is not SA. Ice-maiden and nympho, guys?

It was not apparently necessary to convince those old and/or conservative folks that the Anile Empress was not a sex kitten.

There are angles there that have nothing to do with sex. Sarat and Maya knew it was real and – permanent, but had no problem with other people thinking it was a convenience, a scam, or at any rate at their age it can't possibly last. Tar's niece on the Anile throne was a rather large angle.

Maya, oh my darling Maya. The one thing everyone noticed was that Maya got on with being Maya, and they made of it whatever they wanted to make of it. Obviously she was in it as deeply as the rest but Sarat's determination to put her on the Anile throne shouldn't be allowed to get in the way of anything!

OK, it sounds weird. It was the opposite: organic. When she got to Azt she'd be Maya in Azt. Meanwhile, she'd be Maya in Zur.

An object-lesson to anyone who happened to be noticing.

Such as me!

Maya and Hass

That was what I wanted. Which could just be a bit obvious.

Back to the BPC a minute. Let go, Fal, let go! What of? I have been stripped of the two people who mattered most to me. I haven't got anything to hang on to. What does that mean? Anything?

My body was in the way, wasn't it. Not 'the body', about which so much crap has been written, my body. If I'd been a plump and spotty teen, instead of leggy and flawless (aargh), my life would have been different, even if I'd matured into leggy and flawless. I underlined that bit several times. Because I assumed Hass would

want me. But that's the opposite - ?

Exactly what am I saying here?

That I wanted to leave my body behind. The only way I could be sure it was left was with a guy who had no interest in it?

Cantilip is – good-looking, not pretty, not beautiful. Mel is besotted with what's inside.

I just wanted to leave what I looked like right out of it. But what I look/ed like is also me.

Meanwhile I was mentally composing a list of my friends, who are my friends, in that I'd rightly trust them with my life, death and shopping for shampoo, and wondering if it was interesting that I had a total no-no about talking to any of them, meaning Mel, Hass and Tet.

I'd have rather liked to talk to Sarat, but he'd made it clear Maya was off-limits. At which point it clicked that Sarat and Hass – uh, took their bodies with them.

The crack is between love and sex, said the oracle. And they're all pissed off as hell with him. But he was right. Between the physical and the mental.

Well, why didn't he freaking say that? That, I guess, is why they're all so pissed off with him. Because he was seven-freaking-teen and he didn't freaking know, of course! I surprised myself with this sudden urgent defence of Mel. Ah well, he is my friend.

Where does this mesh with my mushroom? What seeded it? Do mushrooms seed? What fertilized it?

I grew – I don't think I'm going to like this. I grew a sort of me that was nearly me but not quite and enabled the dynamic out-going Fal the continent loves so well. Or something. So I'm really much more like Kyse than I think. That thought took me by surprise. Why should it, when here I am retired from the world, for the most part making Kyse look a mover and shaker?

What's more to the point (I think) is the connection between nearly-me and the Leotard Look. Pretending to enjoy my body when really I wanted to get rid, again emphasis MY body not the body?

Some girls deliberately get fat.

Nearly-me. I think I've got things in the wrong order here. A quick glance at the right order doesn't fill me with ecstasy.

I was me with Sorg. The plate had cracked but not shattered. It wasn't Sorg's death that cracked it, it was Sorg's death that shattered it. That doesn't make sense, does it. Trouble is, I think it will. I mean, if I was me, why was nearly-me involved? Organic. A part of me. If the crack is in the horizontal plane, do you see. It's all me but there's this part that hadn't quite got the hang of it, which felt like me, which I acknowledged as me, as in I shattered, but also as not-me, in that there was me looking on, and indeed me on the kitchen floor getting to sweep up the pieces, which one of the pieces clearly could not do, which all sounds increasingly daft but so what!

Or in other words I'm so used to the idea of my self being divided that I don't even notice how it matters. Maybe.

So exactly what freaked me? It felt like my grasp at last on being me – at least this is taking me places I know no-one has the answer to. Sorg as projection. Except I don't think he was.

I am me now. It's just there's so much other stuff I don't know how to be me. Think about that one.

I needed Sorg around until I could get the hang of death not being wholly significant. Yes, well, a lot of bereaved people might say that. If we can just keep the Matter of Kadun out of this! I can't, can I. If he wasn't a projection, it's only the MofK that enabled him to be around.

Oh, I see. Whatever I do next, I want to be sure it comes from me, and I'm not, and I don't exactly see how I can be.

Guess it's time to make a cup of tea.

Who does or does not want to be with Kyse? I love Sorg. I do, of course, but Sorg is dead. Do I think I'll stop being me if I draw a line under that relationship?

When I'm calmly at my centre I'll know what I want to do next. I think that sums up the Matter of Fal.

.So what do I do, nothing, absolutely nothing, literally nothing?

I mailed Amida, briskly.

I think I've hacked it. I'm off-centre. I need to get back to base but I don't know the way! Who?

Back to Fidub, this time Cho's little two-up, two-down, it being safely Tar and Saski free.

He said, said Cho, I don't know how to be without her.

He won't, I said. He made that quite clear.

Cho laughed.

He does.

Amida said, My dear, you must forgive doting grand-parents.

Cho laughed again.

He doesn't.

We were evaporated, admitted Amida. Now, who is the answer to your question?

You? I hazarded, having thought about it a bit and recognized that the same stuff applied about there being a rather limited circle to discuss things with.

Good try, said Vax.

Oh no, I said. Girls do girls.

He is not gay?

Look, I said, I may not know very much but I know girls do girls to avoid the possibility of a sexual dynamic evolving where it really isn't wanted. The whole point is I managed to have a sexual dynamic anyway!

You yourself, said Amida, observe, sex was in fact not present.

This may be totally out of court, I said, but I'm going to say it anyway! Exactly what Sarat said to me was he didn't want to go there with anyone except maybe Hass.

This is not, said Cho, an attempt – another attempt – to persuade Sarat to talk about Maya.

There may be, allowed Amida, the possibility Sarat will talk about Sarat.

He seemed – I started. Quite willing to do that, but I didn't say it. My mind was racing over my conversation with Sarat. It started to gurgle and yelp. If, I said, if I agree to this, if I go ahead with this, what makes you think - ? Is there anything I ought to know?

We do not know the exact sleeping-arrangements at the Jumesit, said Cho.

Karula, you will see, was not the only person to put two and two together and make three.

Ah-oooh, I said. There are rumours?

No, said Vax, on the whole no. Sarat's public face is about as hetero as one can get.

I don't get it, I said. I move into the Jumesit and the whole world –

I think Hass would come to Carlin.

For me?

For Sarat.

For Maya.

You must mend that fence, said Cho.

Grrr, I said.

You cannot spend the rest of your life skirting round Mel and Hass. You are too close.

Remember, repeated Vax, we all grow up.

I was not of course aware of the following at the time...

Sarat is sitting no, not at his desk, which is large, highly polished and minimalist, but on it, reading a piece of paper. He has headphones on. They are (of course) of excellent quality. It cannot therefore be discerned whether he is listening to heavy metal or the music of the spheres.

He looks up and grins, zaps the music, puts the paper down

“Coffee,” says Baz and vanishes pdq.

“Grandpapa,” says Sarat meekly.

Cho laughs.

“You've come to apologize,” suggests Sarat.

Cho bellows with laughter.

“Far worse,” says Cho.

“Sit down, then,” says Sarat.

Cho arranges himself on the settee to die for and Sarat sits beside him.

Cho launches into the purpose of his mission.

Cho said after Sarat just looked at him and he felt his eyebrows were raised even though they physically weren't.

Your views, said Cho.

On Fal? I love her dearly.

That is not a view, said Cho.

It will have to do, said Sarat. He paused. It was, you know, pretty well the only private conversation I have had with Fal. Apart from about Sorg. I suppose you could count That Fateful Day. Three, if you were trying hard. We were plotters! If Maya went off somewhere Fal and I talked, we talked at parties, we talked. Not about Fal or Sarat.

Tell me about the guy-stuff, said Cho.

Sarat grinned.

I read you like a book, you know.

Then I raised you well, said Cho.

Not recently, no, said Sarat.

From Hass Cho got the same impression of politely raised eyebrows.

The fence must be mended, said Cho again.

It isn't broken, said Hass.

She thinks it is. It annoys her unspeakably, said Cho. That no-one else feels the split. Hasiyata – Hass made a moue. Cho pretended not to notice. You are Dabida's heir. You have an irtubi partner. You have apparently moved in with the Anile emperor.

So? asked Hass, then, That is why?

Thus Maya.

Certainly she moved in with the Anile emperor.

Sarat, said Cho.

Hass' lips twitched.

Truly your concern is Fal?

I like everyone to be happy, said Cho.

He is happy, said Hass. Bruised, of course, but happy.

You will do it?

Anything for Fal-girl.

Then perhaps I have misunderstood, said Cho.

Hass grinned.

I really do not think, said Hass to Sarat, your revered grandpapa gets it. Why does he not see - ?

Sarat sighed.

Of course he sees.

Hass mailed me. Should we go to a grand hotel somewhere? Otherwise there is an imperfectly renovated cottage off the Senshal Road. I should be delighted to offer you a sleeping-bag and an oil-heater. Perhaps you will cry I cannot leave my kids? I am confident and resourceful. I confess I have so far failed to find anyone who knows a damn' thing about goats, but I do not doubt I can rise to the occasion. Are you feeling too fragile to see the funny side?

No, I mailed back, not too fragile, then, it's lovely to hear from you, because it was. I'm sure I can find a baby-sitter. How long for?

Days, weeks, months, up to you.

I know what you mean. I also know what I mean. I also see, I thought, that you are getting me back into Dabida. Nor is this all!

See how you feel after a day of my undiluted company. There are walls unplastered, excellent for climbing.

No H-W?

Reakoed and Maitlan?

I thought about that a minute.

You have just communicated you're totally on my side.

Might I not have communicated that you will need defenders! Of course I'm on your side!
Whose side are you on?

Grr. Where are you right now?

Azt. I live here.

Doesn't it blow your mind, Hass?

Organic, sweetheart, organic.

Ummmm.....

Not recently, no. It appears to be the question springing to the lips of a select few.

Cho?

Asked Sarat. They do not grok. They may not be the only ones.

You don't think anyone will notice? Tet and Mel to name but two.

That could be interesting.

Hasssssssssss.....

Yessssssssssss?

Someone just told me the mind of his grandmother works on several levels at once.

I'm much worse. Mine works in 3D. You quail at the thought of seeing Tet and Mel again - ?

Of course I don't! Not exactly.

First, the basics. Then we'll get onto the interesting stuff.

I know the basics (growl). It's all churning around inside me and it should be out.

(Grin)

The venue, Hass, the venue.

My territory?

Or guy territory!

How about we start in Carlin?

Which just happens to be roughly equi-distant.

Just happens to be.

There's probably some kind of metaphor there about fulcrums and balance and hedging bets.

Bah!

Clinging like a limpet to Carlin because it has to be Azt or Zur. It doesn't.

For about 20 seconds I thought of getting some travelling in, see the world.

The goats?

Good an excuse as any.

Ssssh, I'm thinking. A large sign at the border, perhaps. DABIDA WELCOMES GOATS.

What am I walking into!

The country you were born in?

Double grrr. The cottage - it doesn't have land attached, does it?

I am of course desperate to off-load it.

(Helpless giggles) That's the cover? We're dealing in real-estate?

I didn't think of that one. I think you may be able to tell me if it has possibilities. Should it reach Mel's ears that we are plotting, he will sigh theatrically and murmur sorrowfully about addiction. I doubt he will give a moment's thought to what we are plotting, knowing that all will duly be revealed.

I see a problem there. Yes, my lightning brain grasps it in one.

We can iron out the detail later.

How about we compromise? You could pick me up on your way south, stay a couple of nights here.

I'll talk to Smudge.

I didn't quite catch that.

Our deliberations are not to be interrupted by goats.

Should I disconnect the 'phone!

Good idea.

OK. Don't bother Smudge. I'll sort it.

Fine.

What is Maitlan doing in Azt? Apart from its being the centre of the known world, I mean!

A fact-finding mission. Finding out what the hell everyone else is talking about. He describes the Fleet as a sort of time-capsule, if not isolated from the events of the day, certainly isolated from intimate knowledge of the Jumesit, the Imperial, and most of the key-players. It seemed to him, he says, Mel was speaking a foreign language, of which only odd words were comprehensible.

! And how does skiving off to the Senshal Road fit in?

Think of it as a jig-saw. The most disparate pieces....

Form part of the bloody Whole!

Aw, don't be like that. Be with you about 4?

TODAY?

Couple of years' time?

This is of course when all the people you know would be happy to help are out, away or with their 'phones disconnected. I really didn't want to bother Latic, because I knew he'd just Found Love, but I was running out of options. I got the Fidubi partner, who fortunately merely found it entertaining. He did, however, point out that he had no idea how to milk goats. It's really easy, I said, I showed Latic. He's not ace at it, but he's OK.

I got as far as packing a couple of pairs of knickers and my swimming-costume before picking up my phone and calling Reakoed.

The cottage. What am I letting myself in for here! Physically. Nights under the stars?

He choked.

It's actually perfectly habitable. There's even a pool.

Hass said sleeping-bags!

Certainly sleeping-bags. It's – what the word – structurally – sound. Running water. Main drainage. All mod cons in the kitchen. Carpet under foot. Lots of cushions. Not much in the way of actual furniture. People use it from time to time to chill out.

We're going to fast?

I was just about to sort that. Everything's under control!

Darling, what do I wear! I mean, I know Hass. Is he going to take me off into the sands?

Would you like that?

I set the agenda?

Sound of tinny music. This is your time, honey.

Clap hands together in girlish glee.

Scarcely had I rung off, when Latic rang back. Anything for you, darling! By that time I knew him well enough to tease: anything for Hass?

I went to say good-bye to Benji

So here I sit with my rucksack, poised for – whatever. Sound of engine. Hass at the door. We hugged. I didn't think we'd stop, he said, unless goats demand! Sorted, I said. Latic would do anything for you. He grinned. I must thank him, he said.

You are now crossing the border, intoned Reakoed. Whether you want to or not! Oh shut up! I said. Otherwise conversation was general. Maitlan, who was driving, nearly went the wrong way. That is the way to Zur, he pointed out. But we're not going to Zur, we said.

The Great North Road led to the Kilawi Junction and here we are on the Senshal Road. Next on the left, said Hass.

In the end I didn't know what I was expecting but it wasn't this. There was a drive, like a farm-track, furrows with grass and weed down the middle. On each side of the track, tumbleweed grew waist-high. At the end of the drive indeed was a cottage. It's tiny! I said. Maybe it just seems dwarfed.

It goes back quite a bit, said Hass. Essentially it's two-up, two-down. We tacked a kitchen and bathroom on the back. I pretended to count on my fingers. We've agreed to share, said Reakoed. The sacrifices we make! sighed Maitlan. I'll sleep in the sitting-room, admitted Hass. After he's exhausted us all, said Reakoed.

Finally we settled – on cushions – in the primrose-washed 'sitting-room'. There was a long low and curvaceous table which seemed to have been honed out of a single block of wood. You said there was no furniture! No, I didn't. That's not furniture, said Hass, that's art!. Venga made it. Truly you know we did not spend all our time...Should be a plaque, said Reakoed. Here the plot was born!

Hass stretched out his legs.

"First, I should apologize for having been 16. Being 16 is a design-flaw, which should undoubtedly be corrected in subsequent models."

"Oh Hass," I said.

"Second – guy-stuff."

"The direct approach," I said.

"Isn't this my fault? Darling girl, why the hell have you never said anything to me?"

I could see Reakoed and Maitlan were as taken aback as I was.

"The very direct approach?" suggested Reakoed.

"The bloody Matter of bloody Kadun!" I said.

"Ah yes," said Hass, "the bloody Matter of bloody Kadun."

"Busy, busy, busy! What the hell are you doing in Azt?"

"Er," said Reakoed. I didn't know where that came from, either.

"Looking after Sarat because he's my friend," said Hass.

"Owww!" said Reakoed.

“You are also my friend. You, however, took yourself out of the loop.”

“Maya was my friend!” I said. “Don’t you see! It was the two things at once.”

“Maya and Kyse?”

“I have not spent the past 10 years worrying about what happened when we were sixteen!”

“Good.”

“It’s not that – that I thought we weren’t friends any more. See above about bloody Matter of Kadun. She was your cousin! Amida – “

“Sssh. Amida pushed you onto Sarat. She’s very sorry and she promises not to do it again. At least the second bit. Maybe.”

I couldn’t help laughing.

“I turned to you fast enough after Sorg. I do not believe, it is not in you, it is not possible you are piqued! I’m not piqued, either! I’m not running Kadun. Nor was I – that must have been unbearable.”

Hass shook back his hair and laughed outright.

“When did you last see Sarshi?”

“Hang on there!” I said. “What on earth has Sarsh - ?”

You can’t say I didn’t jump right in, feet first.

“Some people,” said Reakoed, “going years back, when he was – “ He stopped suddenly. “ – when he was spending so much time in Zur, some people thought Sorg was gay.”

“About that I can be definite!”

“Why, Fal, why?”

“Now that is a personal question.”

“I didn’t think so,” said Hass. “Clearly, the only woman he was interested in was his twin, his other half, paired of course with Vij.”

“More coffee, Falita?” suggested Maitlan solicitously.

“Falita!” .

“It may help your brain,” said Hass. “Who is Vij, Fal?”

“Maya’s brother!”

“Who am I?”

“Am I completely mad! Don’t answer that. It’s practically too embarrassing to say.”

“Try,” said Hass.

“You are my family. Literally.”

“Blood out of a stone,” said Hass. “And why, darling one, am I your family?”

“Because I ran off with an officer of the Imperial Army. It’s all mad, Hass!”

“Then we progress. Very good. You will remember, of course, that Maya wanted you to be real. Entirely absent from your performance – your delicious performance that day – “

I batted a cushion at him. He fielded it.

“Hi, guys, I seem to have joined the family.”

“Evidently it is something of a shock to you to discern that marriage relates you to both Alzani-Meta and the House of Fire. The context in which you see Vij, Pietri, Caluna – you have been in and out of their house since you were five – it is not in itself so strange. I have thought how I, how Mel and I see Baya and Essa. The context in which you see me, Sarat and Mel does not appear to be in-laws.”

“We’re still trying to work out what it’s called,” said Reakoed.

Hass grinned and continued.

“As I understand things so far, impressionistically but overwhelmingly, you see your link with us as being your friendship with Maya. From which – impressionistically but overwhelmingly – it follows that your enthusiasm for talking to anyone but us derives from Maya now being dead and thus the tie less binding.”

“Invisible lines crossing lives! At least I got that bit.”

“Further and heretofore, as I understand things so far. Exoterically, this is about Falita-san-yaega-baht’s duty to Kadun, should she have one. Yes? No? Maybe?”

“Sort of? I mean, labelled as Falita Syb, of course I’ve got one. But is she – she isn’t all I am. Oh gulp.”

“Gulp, indeed,” said Maitlan.

“And the name for my relationship to Sarat is what?”

“Don’t you think we can bend your ear for a month or so on this?”

“Sarat’s abandoned being Fidubi,” objected Reakoed.

“Nonsense,” said Hass.

“Don’t be ridiculous, how can he be!”

“Did you ever read the history of the Anile empire? Kadun is Fidub.”

“OK, there’s a sense in which that. Kadun is Dabida? That’s more than crazy, that’s gross.”

“Are we or are we not an irtubi colony that grew up?”

“Fidubi colony,” murmured Maitlan. “Could you possibly be digressing?”

“No,” said Hass. “Fal’s ideas about her countries are one of the roots of this.”

“Plural,” said Maitlan.

“Most people have just one,” I said. “Hass, how can you talk like this?”

“Venga knows he’s irtubi and is effectively also Dabida’s heir.”

“Sarat was born two things, free-born citizen of Fidub and Anile heir.”

“The buzz-word,” I sighed, “is organic.”

“Ex-actly,” mimicked Hass. “You didn’t want to be Queen of Dabida and my guess is you don’t want to bear the weight of Carlin.”

Somewhere in the middle of that I made a squealy noise which turned into, “It’s not as though it were As.”

“Ex-actly,” said Hass again. “As is thoroughly capable of bringing Carlin into the modern world. You do not have to do it for him. If you choose to stand for election, you will do it on behalf of the values you uphold which are common to Kadun and Dabida. So where’s the border?”

“I’m not sure I have an answer to that. Yes, I do. Then it’s the same as standing for election in Dabida.

That’s got to be garbage.”

“Think about the guy-stuff.”

“OK, you all, you who plotted. You started from somewhere where – all three countries are one.”

“Meaning we were nuts and worse we want you to share our lunacy?”

I giggled

“Could it be! You argued it as shared values. Where does earthpower fit in?”

“Metaphysically, pragmatically or historically?”

“You tell me!”

“Two sides of a piece of paper,” said Hass. “Earthpower is the fertile soil enabling Narulis’ values to root. Alternatively Narulis’ values enabled earthpower to flourish.”

“Male and female! You’re saying – you’re pointing me towards – the border is a barrier in my head I need to get past. Apart from the obvious - for one thing, I’m PANTHER! Been there, done that. I am a subject of the Anile emperor, you know!”

“It appears to be doing your head in,” said Hass.

“No!” I said. “I’ve been over all that with Kyse, for a start. It’s one of the things that bonds us. Of course the loyalty is to the values.” I sighed. “So where’s the border!”

“Thought experiment,” said Maitlan. “Dabida is taken over by the nationalists. Alzani-Meta take refuge in Kadun. Sarat invades Dabida.”

“It has,” I said, “to be A-M goes rotten, like the Anile court, then Sarat invades Dabida to restore Narulis’ values.”

“Fidub could invade!” said Reakoed enthusiastically.

“That might be less sensitive,” agreed Hass. “The Anile empress of course was Zur-bred.”

I glared at him.

“Could you possibly be suggesting that I never threw in my lot with Kadun at all, I threw in my lot with Maya. That does happen to leave out Sorg.”

“Does it? I am not suggesting you regard monogamy as trivial. I understand you found it deeply traumatic to leave Tet – also known as abandoning the Six and throwing in your lot with Kadun. I also understand these things happen, have happened, to many people. Maya was there to bridge the gap. Now you behave as though the gap cannot be bridged. That, Fal, is garbage.”

“Also known as what? I have rather cut myself off, haven’t I.” I looked at Reakoed. “Maybe I didn’t find it traumatic enough. Maya made it all right?”

Hass looked at Reakoed and grinned.

"I hear things, Fal-girl, I hear things. Such as certain persons being the Three."

"I am – dividing myself on the Matter of Kadun? At the point – the exact point where my – my safety-net went, a very Zuri Zuri –"

"I don't know," said Reakoed, "I haven't asked him, perhaps you have, but I'd make a pretty good guess Kyse never for one second thought of himself as anything other than a Dabidan working in Harn."

"No," I said, "no, I didn't. Maybe it was too obvious! I mean that's why he hared back to – to me. WTF am I doing here! He did ask himself about working for Sarat. If we were together and I was in Azt."

"I bet he did!" said Reakoed

"There can be no question," said Maitlan, "of a repeat performance. You in Azt leaving dear old Kyse doing his thing in Zur."

"Is that what's terrifying me?"

"You tell me."

Hass said: "You asked me what the hell I was doing in Azt."

"Providing a safety-net for stray Dabidans? Minus one."

He laughed.

"Until Kadun has a democratically elected government, there can be no question, no suggestion, that the – union is any less binding, that Sarat is in any way isolated."

"Could that be a bit over-sensitive? Sarat is embedded in Kadun."

"Isn't that rather the point?"

"Still?" I said. "They can't be still – well, of course the Cult stirs things."

"Are his intentions honourable?" asked Hass.

"Nobody sane can believe Sarat's long-term aim is to – invade Ciletij!"

"Perhaps not physically."

I grinned.

"I thought the other had happened already."

"Exactly," said Hass.

"I'm not sure I see the diff. Kadun would be just as large, influential and dynamic."

"Worst possible scenarios," said Reakoed. "One, Sarat has the entire Army behind him. Is he really going to transfer power? Two, Sarat has the entire Army behind him. What happens if the democratically elected government proves to be thoroughly undemocratic?"

"After everyone else withdraws. Kyse has got safely back to base."

"Lad's been on 'is travels," said Hass. "Now 'e's come 'ome again."

"Aaaaargh!"

"BPC time," said Reakoed. "Home is where your heart is."

"Home," said Hass, "is where you want it to be."

"Your heart," I said. "Before – you might have thought Sarat's heart was in Fidub. Home is where your heart was broken."

"Is it, Fal?"

"Could that be what you're here to find out. I suppose – no, I did not ask him, it was obviously a no-no, Sarat has let go of Maya. In some sense. I think somewhere I feel – I realize I need – in some sense – to let go of Sorg, then I can make a free choice. I can't. I decided that when I turned Kyse down. I think I can't. I'm not ready. Would it be a really bad idea if I told myself I can?"

"If you hadn't realized it, it'd be a lousy idea."

"Are you keeping Kyse safe?" asked Reakoed.

"From my death? I can't ask you how Sarat has let go."

"You know he hasn't. If he had, it wouldn't be a no-no."

"He's functional. He's not pale and thin."

"He's in his right place, isn't he."

"I think I shall scream," I said. "Just for the sheer pleasure of it." But I was giggling.

"Let's take that one on," said Maitlan. "You sit surrounded by goat-shit. To some, a rural idyll, to others an acquired taste."

“Obsessed by the notion I ought to be somewhere else! Except of course equally obsessed by the notion I ought to be there.”

“Metaphor,” said Hass.

“It was only when you decided to relax and go with the flow,” said Maitlan, “that you realized you didn’t know where the flow was.”

“It was only when I decided to relax I started to have these interesting time-slips! That ought to tell you something about where I’m at!”

“Apart from Sorg.”

“Sorg wasn’t a time-slip.”

“Why not? For the rest of time he’s dead.”

“Wait a minute,” I said. “If it’s metaphor, why – no, OK, you can be in the right place physically or the right place mentally. Lose both and you’re up shit creek!”

“Let me be annoying,” said Reakoed.

“Do please,” said Maitlan, “he’s frightfully good at it.”

“You have no human domestic ties. You have friends of both nationalities on both sides of the border. You have plenty of money. What do you want to do?”

I looked at him cynically.

“Me, you mean, not the heroic young widow of the dashing young officer. Or possibly the dashing young widow of the heroic young officer.”

“Something else happened when you were 15,” said Hass. “Apart from me! It interests me that you focus on me. Flattering, of course.”

I had no idea what he was talking about. That’s rather shocking, isn’t it.

“Give me a clue!”

“Maya.”

“Maya?”

“Left you for Sarat.”

“What! I was not in love with Maya and I am not gay!”

“You are not gay. I don’t think that stopped you being in love with Maya. For exactly the same reason.”

“Same reason as what! Oh.”

“It was masked,” accepted Hass, “by Sarat’s being in Fidub.”

“I find that OTT. At 15? People go out with people. Oh. I was going to say for maybe three weeks.”

“Sarat at 17 deciding upon his career! Terrified of losing her. Nobody understood because of the separate lives.”

“You’re saying – you’re suggesting – I kidded myself it wasn’t real, I hadn’t really lost her. It’s OTT, Hass. The – the argument is I lost Maya at 15 and then I really lost her. So why aren’t I furious with Sarat?”

“That’s interesting too,” said Hass. “Was I not happy to make love to Sarat but not to you? What do you feel about Sarat?”

“Sarat personally - he’s a real sweet guy! We’ve always got along fine. I suppose he does embody the bloody Matter of bloody Kadun.”

“Which has repeatedly ripped your life open,” said Reakoed, with a rather unnecessary enthusiasm.

“Best friends,” said Hass. “The word ‘inseparable’ usually slips in somewhere. Since the age of 5, indeed. Through Maya you met us. You then ran off with us to make mud-pies. What was Maya doing while the three, four, six, 75.9 of us were messing around on the foreshore?”

“She was there sometimes.”

“A lot of the kids were there sometimes. They weren’t the Sublime Six.”

“What was it with us?” asked Reakoed of no-one in particular.

“That may be our quest of the hour!”

“This may sound incredibly simplistic,” I said, “but it’s what we wanted to do! Why does any seven-year-old want to clamber among the rock-pools? What we most wanted to do. The other kids had more varied interests.”

“There was a definite gang thing,” said Reakoed.

Maitlan snorted.

“History shall tell the banks we robbed.”

“I thought,” said Hass, “you are so alike, and then I thought, idiot, no, of course it’s the opposite.”

“I really do not have the faintest idea what you are talking about.”

He smiled

“I think actually perhaps you do, you just don’t know that you do. You, Fal, you are the eso one.”

“Sorry?”

“I have a theory about your mushroom.”

“Are you sure you haven’t been nibbling it?”

“Nearly-you,” said Hass. “May one not say this is not a false self, this is your exo side uppermost, when it should be in balance.”

“Sarat,” I said.

“Born politician, of course. Perhaps he should have stood for the Senate. Of Fidub, of course.”

“You’re teasing me again.”

“Sarat is or was primarily exo. He found his eso with me and Maya.”

“And you thought - ?”

“You were looking for the eso, but it’s inside you all the time, hiding. Busy, busy, busy, woman of action, doing. Something propelled you to think you had to be running about all the time. It might have been the Six. I’m easy on that one.”

“I’m digesting that. Sorg, beneath the carefully constructed witty debonair exterior, was very, very eso.”

“Kyse,” said Hass. “The only person who knows him very well is Mel, and I have not discussed this with Mel.”

“Solid,” I said. “Which may kind of be the same? Private.”

“All we have to go on is he didn’t want either aspect of the MofK. Tet.”

“Tet is deep, which may kind of not be the same. Hass, during our – my and Tet’s time in Zur, I think I was concentrating quite hard on having in some sense a normal relationship. Life with Tet – shall we go for a midnight swim? I’m understanding there’s a party. Why don’t we drive along the coast? I guess I felt pretty bruised by the other matter. Not looking at the inside. Put it all down to adolescence. Now we’re grown up. If we haven’t exactly gone our separate ways.”

“But it wasn’t and couldn’t have been exactly like that. The H-W linked you to the hill. Maya linked you to Sarat.”

“Haven’t you ever heard of not wanting to know! Tet now – if something – someone – someone distresses him – does the whole of Azt not know. He makes his feelings known and that’s that. He’s not an agonizer, a brooder. Sometimes I think – being forced to think about himself, his feelings after he was shot almost pissed him off more than being shot!”

“Do you still love him? I know what Reakoed thinks. What do you think?”

“He was very sweet after Sorg died. That’s a long way from. Life with Tet is also intermittent shouting-matches. We didn’t have anything bad to throw at each other, Hass. They were rather fun.”

“I see,” said Hass.

“I don’t see it as a closed door. Maybe he does. I know he could hurt me.”

“Exactly,” said Reakoed.

“I think we were walking around with our eyes shut, as though we couldn’t handle what was about to happen to our fixed world!”

Hass said: “For 98% of my young life, it was inconceivable I visit Azt, let alone live there. Everything has shattered, do you see, good, bad, indifferent. Everything. For 98% of my life, Zur was my life. Here and there, alive and dead, Azt and Zur, Zur and Van-senok, why is nothing whole? Mel. Why do you think everyone else has skated it?”

“I don’t think that. I saw Mel after Tar got them out.”

“Don’t you?”

“Who else has cracked up, dropped out and taken up freaking goat-farming!”

“What’s wrong with goat-farming? What have I been saying?”

I closed my eyes.

“What you have been saying,” I said slowly, “is, and I’m joining the dots as I go along here, so yell if I get it

wrong – Maitlan cut the cord.”

Maitlan looked innocently at the ceiling..

“Oh yes. You were saying?”

“Maya was the cord that couldn’t be cut? I was saying... You were saying! Was I not a happy little Zuri? Who should have left school and studied agriculture (optional!) and lived happily ever after with Tet on a small-holding, or at least until such a time as we both, emphasis on both, felt we wanted to be in on the happening. Or maybe I should have studied chemistry or become a photographer or or or.”

“The label,” he said calmly, “‘Mel’s friend’ was not binding. The label ‘Maya’s friend’ possibly was.”

“I felt I should have been there. It’s my job. I should have been protecting her.”

“Meaning?”

“Everyone thinks – including me – this is just a break from my ‘real life’. Self-indulgence.”

“You – half-think everyone else is skating it. You half-think you have a limited number of friends! Or indeed relations. Who told you you were walking wounded? Why do you think everyone is so pissed off with Mel?”

“That’s very sweet of you. The fact remains I had duties, commitments, responsibilities. Everyone else is getting on with the job, even if bleeding from internal wounds.”

“And if something inside you is screaming this is not my job, this is not what I wanted to do? Your term ‘everyone’ encompasses an extremely limited number of people – in fact maybe only two!”

“Sarat didn’t step down so I’m a failure. I’m wincing. There’s more truth in that than. After all, I am Falita san-yaega-baht!”

“They start us on a path. They don’t – laminate us! Make us untouchable. We have to do that. All of us, I should say, including you, skate normal life. Normal life has evaded us for some time now.”

“That’s exactly it! We’re at war. What kind of a drongo goes goat-farming in the middle of a war!” “Now it is Dabida’s war.”

“It’s my war! It’s taken two of the people I care about most and what am I bloody doing, harvesting pettifer? What kind of dumbfuck am I! That does not need Mel’s input.”

“It’s not that kind of war.”

“That’s part of the problem, isn’t it. If it were, I’d join up. End of story.”

“I gather you do good by stealth. Education and so on.”

“Why isn’t it enough?”

“Why does it seem to you without value?”

“That’s a bit obvious, isn’t it. It doesn’t risk my neck.”

“It is hardly cowering.”

“Isn’t the next step running home to Dabida?”

“Does the BPC not say that the bonds forged between individuals are beyond price? Fal, you do not need me to tell you what is going on all over Imperial Kadun. It is not speeches by princes or indeed senators that ensure Kadun’s future. If it become a shooting-war, you join up. Very good. This is now. You asked me a question. We got side-tracked.”

“That seems probable!”

“You have answered it.”

“Fine?”

“If you wish to represent Carlin, represent her. Perhaps you may do more good in the Senate of Dabida.”

“All right, all right!”

“Needing to risk assassination is not a solid foundation for action. We had to, have to do it.. And so we have gained everything and lost everything. There was never any other way to win. And so Sarat came to Zur and told us he killed Maya. Venga said that was balls. No Anile throne, no funeral. And Mel said, we were told to run for cover and we ran. Have we not too our demons?”

“You’re saying no-one else has to do it? No-one who didn’t start it?”

“Actually no. I may be saying everyone has to do it!” He considered. “I am saying – Mitch, Karula, Zulagan, Qine, Karci, Vrin, Baz, Saryulin – the list is long, no? Anyone who engineered the revolution, anyone who openly upholds it, is a target, but of course there is a pecking-order. We all knew to what we were committing ourselves.”

“Are you sure you’re not saying it’s their country! There is a select group of people with irtubi partners whom I have joined. Mel and you! Can you – can either of you truly say your commitment isn’t determined?”

“Kadun preceded Cantilip. If I say our primary commitment was to Sarat?”

“Not to Maya? Oh!”

“Who notably did not have an irtubi partner,” chipped in Reakoed.

“If you – if we start with something basic, simplistic. No-one wanted an increasingly vile Kadun on the doorstep. Most people couldn’t see what to do about it! Sarat won’t find himself with his back to the wall. If he did, at what level is Dabida committed? What about our government?”

“Our?”

“Don’t grin like that. OK, suppose we elected nationalists. Suppose – you can’t say this is impossible – suppose the whole of the old Quadrant – “

“It won’t, not in the foreseeable future. That is what we have slaved to achieve and that is what we have achieved. Too many with irtubi ties, irtubi friends.”

“The happening. Everyone involved. OK. I was there! All the same – is moving to Azt really politically – wise!”

Hass and Reakoed looked at each other.

“How shall I break this to you gently?” asked Reakoed.

I got it.

“All right, all right, some people are more mobile than others.” I sighed. “It’s all fluid, isn’t it. Day in Batna-kri, evening in Wintawa, night in Azt. If anyone has a dual commitment, you do.”

“I knew you’d understand.”

“Grr.” I turned to Reakoed. “Are you – irrevocably committed?”

“To A-M? Of course.”

“That,” I confessed, “is not an angle.”

Hass pretended to look shocked.

“To join a defence organization,” said Reakoed, “is to accept a risk. To leave one is not, I’d say, in this situation, to lose it.”

“A thought-experiment,” said Hass. “I go to Sarat. I say I need you. PANTHER return you then to the H-W. You work with me in Azt. You burst into tears at strange moments? You lose your temper over nothing? And so on.”

“Fiend. Of course I hack it. But I might feel like bursting into tears at strange moments and I might come to you and say, OK, I’ll do this job, but long-term this is not what I any longer want to do.”

He grinned.

“That question has been asked.”

“Maybe I should,” I said. “Clear some of the crap away.”

“Such as they only let you go because you were Her Imperial Majesty’s best mate?”

“Hass!”

“You called? Have you run that one past Faun?”

“Of course I bloody haven’t!”

“Why of course?”

“The measure of risk,” continued Reakoed, “may in some circumstances be extreme, for instance if you had attempted to throw Maya out of the range of the blast, which would undoubtedly have been your duty, had you been there.”

“It’s not the same, is it.”

“It’s not the same.”

“On the other hand you have made damned sure I grasp the opposite! What’s the game, Hass?”

“That’s what we’re going to find out. The meaning you give to the word ‘functional’ seems to me unusual, perhaps unique. I understand auto-pilot. One day, which is not yet, get Mel on the subject of auto-pilot. I understand also, of course, you were in a state of acute distress. You seem to think you had a breakdown. Did you?”

“Oh come on! When people feel their plates have shattered and spend ten hours sobbing? What else d’you call it?”

“I don’t know. Exhaustion may be one word. All of us, all, understand that sustained sleep deprivation heightened our responses. The goats did not starve. You did not starve. Someone found you your cottage, purchased the goats, tilled the field?”

“No!”

“Breakdown is just that. The car doesn’t start. You feel you can’t do what? What you don’t want to do, only you feel you must? Result, stasis. Being you, I suspect you did the one thing that could force you not to break down, self-sufficiency, cutting yourself off from those who’d hold you up.”

I blinked.

“That is an incredibly positive perspective on the Matter of Fal. I like it!”

“But it had its downside. You weren’t there to die in Maya’s place.”

“I just stopped liking it.”

“But then of course if you’d broken down instead – there’s a gap in the narrative, Fal, a huge gaping hole.”

I glared at him.

“Maya again?”

“Correct.”

“Tell me the worst.”

“What did Maya think of you?”

I sighed and relaxed again.

“She didn’t think anything of me. She loved me.”

“Oh my dear girl. Why oh why could we guys not do the same! That, I think. Not sure now, Fal-girl, not sure. She was a she. Her love had nothing to do with sex.” He laughed suddenly. “Ye Most Sorrowfulle Tragedie of Mel and Fal! You were both entirely right. But fi! Mel, her beloved cousin, is yammering about this damned crack of yours. My lady Maya – the profoundly eso Maya - contributes nothing to the argument?”

“She didn’t think it mattered.”

“And who else didn’t think it mattered?”

“Bandi.” I sighed. “Another woman. This is getting to look awfully like the stereotype – “

“Oh no,” said Hass. “Not at all. The opposite if anything. Sex doesn’t matter anything like as much as teenage males think it matters!”

“I suppose you’ve talked to Bandi.”

“No. I don’t call for the H-W reports on my family. Why d’you think I got here so fast! Exactly, Fal, what did she say to you?”

“But it did matter!” I said. “But only – “ I shook my head. “Extreme stress, I mean, really, what extreme stress was I going to be under? It would never have been an issue, would it, for the whole of the rest of my life. She really didn’t say much, ‘cept what I’ve said, a network of fine cracks. She didn’t think it mattered. When I think about it – that’s the opposite of what Mel said, what I’ve been saying? Except the plate shattered! Shattered into hundreds of bits.”

Hass reached across and squeezed my hand.

“I think there are two separate things going on here. I just don’t yet know what they are! Not sure, sweetheart, really not sure.”

“Sex doesn’t matter? I trust we can all see the where it doesn’t matter! Maya did not share, but nothing, nothing, leads me to think “

“Sarat is good in bed, yes, very good, possibly perfect.”

I chortled.

“One might ask, weren’t you jealous of a part of Maya becoming closed to you, but of course love has nothing to do with sex!”

I started.

“Saski!”

After a while he stopped laughing.

“That was not part of the Grand Plan.”

“Saski really couldn’t get the hang of why Maya was cool about it – but of course love has nothing to do with sex! But it had everything.”

“That, my sweet, is because we were but poor young males, while you and Maya floated far above us, only

Maya knew it and you didn't."

"I think I begin dimly to grasp Vax's responses."

"Slow strangulation," suggested Hass. "Both of us."

"You did apologize. One might ask – but isn't that the opposite of your I lost Maya theory?"

"Depends on the level?"

Another thought struck me.

"That says so much about what you said earlier about how no-one could understand the relationship. Sarat and Maya, I mean! You told Tar. Maya had a field-day with that, and that was before Saski."

"It was a little breath-taking," acknowledged Hass. "Mel, you know."

"Yessss. I did rather gather. Hi, Daddy. We've come back from the City especially to tell you all about our sex lives. Aren't you pleased? Aren't you grateful we care enough to share?"

"Not far off. Of course it was because of Cantilip."

"Hass – acknowledging this may be crossing the line, but we are talking about Sarat and Maya at 17, not – Maya's death - what does all this say about Sarat?"

"Then we talk of Maya's death. She was the part of him the world never saw. Perhaps one may say finally you left Maya. For an eso relationship with an adult male. The constant – perhaps – is the need for the eso. After Sorg was killed, with everything – in pieces." I knew he'd been about to say blown away. "You were stripped and so you could understand – you couldn't find it in another people, you had to stand alone. But you were so – flayed, reduced to everything, a spark of light that you could see Sorg. That is all of course very much perhaps!"

"But Maya was still there."

"Yes. Time forecloses. Don't get Mel on that one, either! Not unless you have several years to spare."

"That's not the Mel I know and love."

"No. One day you will have a long talk with Mel."

"Why not this day?"

Hass grinned.

"I was always the practical one, you know."

But I turned and considered him seriously.

"There's a certain amount of truth in that. Sensible! I like the image of my hard drive. 'Cept when it's insanely whirring. I think there's something there. It seems vulnerable to being over-written – the programs! Faulty connection to the source. Always telling me I have to do?"

"Try thinking of representing Carlin independently of Sorg. You have made a life there. You know and love the people. They know and love you. And?"

I closed my eyes a moment.

"Barrier in my head. Zur-chick. WTF. And of course."

"Falita san-yaega-baht cannot return to Zur. Maya's best friend."

"What a mess! May I ask you a stupid, ridiculous and personal question?"

"What else am I here for?"

"You and Mel have always been incredibly close. Negative on sibling rivalry."

"At no time did I offer to enable him to run off to Van-senok. It wasn't an option."

"Therefore Zur must love Cantilip."

"Therefore Zur must love Mel. You weren't on Sarat's Pad. You must have read it."

"Sovereignty."

"You have an even more personal question?"

"I'm not sure it's my business."

"What Maya said to Pietri and Caluna, perhaps Tar knows. What Maya said to Tar and Saski – they do not share. What Maya said to us – OK, chaps, over the top."

"She knew she wasn't coming back. In any sense. Hass – how can it be that I never asked her how she could?"

"Cut the cord? It didn't occur to you as relevant. Am I not sensible? Maya knew the moment she crossed the border she did something irrevocable. What of it? She made that choice when she was 17. There was never any return."

“She – she stopped being Tar’s niece.”

“Or we became the emperor’s cousins.”

“Relational. Relative. There’s something there. I don’t mean relations!”

“What you are depends on where you are. Or not, of course.”

“Let me play with that one. In Kadun I am, can only be, Sorg’s widow. The rest of my complex life is irrelevant. In Dabida I’m – whatever people know about the rest of my complex life! My – Kadun interlude is/would be irrelevant.”

Hass said: “Shall we talk about the crushing weight of expectation? Do you not perfectly represent both the old order and the new? With Tar’s consent, Mel and I crossed the border.”

“Pietri.”

“Pietri and it was of course discussed did not want to be Dabida’s heir in contingency plan (H)

“Then Vj.”

“Then Vj. Then?”

“M-m-m-aya.”

“Indeed M-m-m-aya. Thus Tar, Pietri, Vj stayed in Dabida! In parenthesis I may add that while Pietri is in his own way rather fond of Sarat and certainly a great deal fonder than is generally held to be the case, he is not so fond that he would wish Sarat to be both Anile emperor and King of Dabida! Nor of course while in its own way fond of Sarat, would Dabida. I have no idea what would have happened.”

“Meanwhile Falita No-one In Particular is screaming under the sheer weight of Carlin.”

“Why are you pretending to be in a state of breakdown?”

I didn’t erupt, or at any rate not instantly.

“Why – I – am – what?”

“I saw you after Sorg died. We all did. Collapse is something people sometimes need to do before they can get fully upright again and so not in itself particularly significant. It becomes significant only if they do not rise from the ashes.”

“OK,” I said, “I get it.”

There was a rather awful silence while they waited for me to say it.

“I’ll put the kettle on,” said Reakoed.

“No...” I said. “You’re saying – I suppose I have kind of said – invisible lines crossing lives.”

“The usual expression,” said Maitlan, “is fit for active service.”

“When Maya was murdered.”

Reakoed squeezed my hand.

“Another useful expression may be sick leave.”

“Try hunky-dory,” suggested Hass.

“Found a new direction. Everything was. I cannot forgive myself for not going back to work. That is what you’re saying. I cannot find myself acceptable to myself.”

“And the rest,” said Reakoed.

“Time forecloses,” I said through gritted teeth.

“Sarshi,” said Hass again.

“What about bloody Sarsh!”

“You really don’t have a clue, do you,” said Hass.

“Oh thank you!”

“What the San-yaega-bahts think of you.”

“And you have asked them!”

“I said they’d shout at each other,” said Maitlan.

“Families,” tutted Reakoed.

“Vij is my cousin, yes. I talk to him. Vij is Mel’s cousin. Vij and Mel are in Zur. Vij and Sarshi spend a lot of time on the hill. Mel is my brother. Mel talks to me. Need I go on?”

I scowled.

“Sarshi is Duvi’s niece. Sarshi is Asdinan’s cousin. I spend a lot of time at the House. I am honorary female parent to Smudge. What the hell are you laughing at?”

“So where is the border.”

“Carlin the bubble,” said Reakoed.

And so I echoed Mel, as they had always known I should: “Why is nothing whole!”

“Mostly because both internally and externally you have seceded.”

“The way you make it sound I’ve dropped out of the human race.”

“Ah-ah. The way you make it sound.”

“Somewhere I understand that I am Falita san-yaega-baht, sort of sister-in-law to Her Late Imperial Majesty, and I’m really not at all sure I can handle it?”

“I should have thought it – vexing,” said Maitlan. He smiled. “To have in considerable part dedicated one’s life to evading the Matter of Kadun and find one is in some sense the Matter of Kadun.”

“Mel,” said Hass.

“What about him?”

“One might think – this of course is conjecture – “

“You don’t say!” I muttered.

“A sort of terror – horror at the prospect of becoming Queen of Dabida might be enough to freeze the sexual response? In conjunction with – the other aspects of the occasion.”

“I’m trying to find an enormous problem with that. The trouble is. Mel was never frantically in love with me, the way – do I experience a sort of terror, horror! Was he?”

“It is my – estimation,” said Hass, “Mel was quite sufficiently in love with you for that to have been it, had you shown the slightest enthusiasm for the enterprise.”

“And they all lived happily ever after, she said with a sort of terror, horror. This eso side of me screaming in protest. What do I want to do, run off with the Morag-Fahdi!”

“Possibly,” said Hass.

“Isn’t that what you did?” asked Reakoed.

I turned to Hass. “You, Venga, Cantilip. Maya.”

He grinned.

“Eso as hell.”

“Shavli. You don’t have to know anything. You don’t even have to think about it to appreciate.”

“What,” said Hass, almost to himself, “actually is the Matter of Kadun.”

“What,” asked Reakoed, “don’t you even have to think about?”

“If anything happened to Sarat – she couldn’t be Anile empress in – in exactly that mode!”

“Appropriate to the time,” murmured Hass. “Undoubtedly, however, she could be Anile empress.” He gave a particularly wild grin. “Negative on the sibling rivalry. She, however, has offered. Or at least. Shav would not do anything so crude as to offer. Shav merely conveys if, then. The flow, you know.”

“Rather clearly I don’t! Maya wasn’t like that. As Anile empress.”

“Don’t you think so?”

“In – in a sense I was always, repeatedly, leaving Maya?”

“In a sense, Maya was your centre, from whence you felt it safe to branch out?”

“I loved the outdoors.”

Reakoed and Maitlan looked at each other.

“Now you may be flowing,” acknowledged Hass.

“Next you’ll be joining NoZone,” said Reakoed. “Are you a member?”

“No. No, I’m not.”

“Do we understand,” asked Hass, “that in Maya’s absence Kadun needs a female icon?”

I stared.

“Terror! Horror!”

“But of course you’re Zuri,” teased Reakoed.

“Perhaps we should approach the question differently. What is it you do not want to do?”

“Try,” said Maitlan, “being the person you’ve made yourself.”

Hass laughed.

“Time is running out. Maya’s death gave you time unlooked-for.”

“You’re in the loop. When are the elections?”

“When Sarat chooses.”

I couldn't help laughing.

"How democratic can you get?"

"When, when, when," said Reakoed.

"When Sarat has adequately indicated he is unswayed – I understand of course the converse."

"That goes back to what we first said," said Reakoed.

"Everyone needs time to recover," I said. "What did we first say!"

"Sarat and the army. Nobody, except the obvious of course, believes Sarat wants to or intends to govern Kadun as an absolute monarchy for the rest of his life, least of all CLIK, who are effectively running Kadun for him! Power in the hands of the people! It's quite complicated. In some sense, Sarat is – fulfilling the role he would have had there been the damned elections! Except. Except he remains where the buck stops. Except he has oversight. Except the officer-class has not implicit trust in CLIK."

"In short everyone is happy," said Maitlan. "They have democratic governance and civil liberty. They merely side-stepped the detail of voting for it, an – oversight which eventually they'll get around to correcting."

"The election," I said slowly, "won't actually change anything."

"I do hope not!"

"That's just it, isn't it. A particular way of doing things has been established. Were there subsequent marked deviation –"

"He'd have to step in. So – the people most in favour of the revolution are also the people least concerned about the elections it promised because the elections represent a possible threat to the revolution which is otherwise assured."

"You got it. I said it was complicated."

"Strange may be a better word."

"Everyone happy," said Hass. "Except perhaps Sarat."

Reakoed grinned unexpectedly.

"Of course he's bound to be a bit tense."

"Sarat would fight for Kadun in the same way Mitch or Varulin or or or would. Because it's his country. Conclusion: one may change countries."

"One may!"

"Shall we have another go at values?"

"And?"

"A long time ago, so it seems, Sarat pointed out values do not have nationalities. They do not carry passports. Then there's Mitch. It is held that the values brought from Fidub were alien but that is nonsense or why did so many follow Narulis? Then there's you, Fal-girl, in one breath declaiming that you are not Sarat's team, not Mel's team and in the next impaled on the border. What do these things mean?"

"On no account forget PANTHER serve no-one, and especially not Fidub!"

"May one ask," said Maitlan, "what is wrong with being Mel's team?"

"Sarat's team?" suggested Hass. "I really don't think there's much wrong with being Mel's team."

I eyed him cautiously.

"Was that the subtle wit for which you are renowned or something else?"

"Maya's team," said Reakoed. "I think we should talk about the it's what Maya would have wanted song."

"When was the last time you saw Maya?" asked Hass.

"About a month before she died. They came to Carlin."

"Nothing crass, I trust, no harsh words never withdrawn."

"Oh Hass, no, we had a whole day together, it was great."

Reakoed looked up suddenly.

"She didn't, by any chance, because they all do when they get thirty seconds to themselves, say she was skiving off?"

"I just laughed. I knew what she meant."

"What did you talk about?" asked Hass.

"It wasn't really a skive. We went into the village, into the Rabbits'."

"Yes, darling-girl, but what did you talk about?"

"Nothing. Everything. None of this junk."

Reakoed sighed.

“Work! They talked about work.”

“Goss,” I amended. “She told me about a visit from a factory-owner who wanted CLIK off his back over equal pay. Can’t afford it and that’s a fact. I told her – ironically, of course, though I didn’t see the irony at the time – about broadening the horizons of the kids in the village – “

Hass grinned.

“What our viewers want to know is how you were you feeling.”

“Fine.” I had a rather strong feeling Reakoed and Maitlan were biting back a ‘did you hear what she said? I don’t believe she said that!’ routine. “OK,” I continued, only slightly defensively, honestly, “that does support a number of the ideas batted around here, including I might add some of my own.”

“No PANTHER?”

Hass looked at me and smiled gently.

“Jaiz and Mellow. One in front, one behind. They only joined in in company. If you mean did we have the opportunity to talk privately, yes, we did – and no, we didn’t! When we came back home, PANTHER went to talk to the goats. I could have said anything to Maya, if it had occurred to me. In any case, it’s for absolute certain I could have said something like I need to run something past you sometime. If it had occurred to me. Apart from the fact that I could have emailed her or rung her any time. I had it hacked. I thought. What you said about pretending to be having a breakdown. If you mean now, I am not ‘pretending to have a breakdown’, I am candidly admitting I was in a state of total delusion!”

“Were you?”

“Oh for – that’s why you’ve devoted yourself to showing me all the things I was deluded about. Of course Maya is pivotal and of course you’re my – whatever you are, second cousin-in-law!”

“Didn’t someone tell Amida, the terrible thing is you weren’t wrong in the first place! Isn’t it – pivotal you did what was right for you? And essentially that Maya’s death had trapped you into doing what you wanted to, as it trapped Sarat.. Just clearing away some of the crap...Then was then, now is now. Distinguish, puh-lease between what is relative and what is absolute.”

“What is relative appears to be – “ I felt my eyes water. “ – shit, I thought at least I was getting over being watery.” Reakoed reached for the tissues. “I don’t know how to be without her. Thanks...OK, what Maya would have wanted. Not. Bloody appalled. Would not have cared if I’d chosen to – choose to take myself off into the middle of the sands. Isn’t that exactly it? I don’t know how to be – eso and active.”

“Do I not recall,” leered Reakoed, “she just wanted you to be you.”

“So you cut yourself off,” said Hass, “and so are surrounded by people who though they know and love you neither know you so well nor love you as much, and I do not think – I have not asked them – it occurs to them for a moment that standing for election is an issue to you. Nor of course for a moment is the life you lead an issue to them. They are proud of Sorg, they are proud of Carlin and they are proud of you. Therefore somewhere inside you squeal this person they know and love, of whom they are proud is not you, though she was you until Maya died. You feel they do not take account of – the part of you that is Zur, that ‘you’ is being over-written, but I do not think that the case.”

“That they don’t take account of or that me is being over-written?”

“Both. Especially the first one. Did it occur to you to go back to Zur after Sorg died?”

“No. Basically.”

“They noticed. As of course they noticed you did not in any normal sense break down. Distress they understand.. I can’t cope. I need people to help me. These they do not understand. They aren’t stupid. Nor like the rest of us do they have any time for bureaucracy. They understand perfectly well you could have remained at the Imperial held up by your friends not doing very much at all. I think probably they understand that you understand this and chose to make an issue of your independence, of which of course they approve.”

“But that’s what – my ‘independence’ turned out to be Maya-dependent.”

“Did and didn’t. So too Sarat. It’s not exactly unusual when someone dies to find a gap in one’s life.”

“We’re not talking about a gap, OK, in either case. One – one of the supports, foundations of one’s life.”

Reakoed said: “Right, you didn’t go back to PANTHER when you were completely fit to do so, having changed direction, not uncommon in fluid, dynamic Imperial Kadun. You appear therefore to have convinced yourself

that you would have been able to save Maya. Fal, my love, why do you think you would have even been there?"

I said: "They waited politely while she gazed fixedly at the ceiling.. No answer, guys. I just assume."

"You could have been," said Hass, "you might well have been. There is no reason whatever to think you would have been."

"There are several places to go from there," said Reakoed. "One of course is do you blame PANTHER?"

"One," said Hass softly, "is how is Sarat feeling."

"One," I said, "is wouldn't PANTHER be responsible for protecting the senators."

"That too," said Hass, "runs through the whole thing. Are you protector or protectee?"

"No-one or someone. Class. You wouldn't be trying to tell me I don't believe Carlin loves me because my family hasn't wielded power and influence for 1500 years."

"600 will do," cooed Hass.

Maitlan laughed.

"These are the sort of people who found out exactly what you are and are not the moment you fell into Sorg's arms. It is precisely why they love you."

"Why I – represent modern Kadun. I'd forgotten how good you are at arguing both sides."

"How are PANTHER feeling?"

"Furious, I guess. I note the assembled company are resolutely Dabidan."

"Cho, Airoch. Let us look at both sides. It would have been naïve – more than naïve, absurd – absurd to have ever believed we could change the world with no casualties. Worst possible scenarios of course included not only civil war but the continent at war. We did everything to annul those threats and succeeded.

Thousands of squaddies are alive and well. Sorg and Maya are dead. Better of course that Sorg and Maya were not dead. We personally have footed the bill, not – cannon-fodder – "

"Which is one of the reasons why anti-democratic government almost certainly will not be elected," said Reakoed.

"We all knew that getting out there was the only way. Thus our parents – our grand-parents – have sweated blood. I do not think anything prepared us, could have prepared us for the people we have become."

"Sarat seemed different to me. You don't."

"There may be reasons for that."

Reakoed laughed.

"Hang on," I said. "No, OK."

"PANTHER," continued Hass, "are one might say absurd. These deaths should not have happened. We cannot find the breach. Even in your rural fastness, you will have observed there have been no arrests. One might have thought that Maya's death would lead you not to dwell on how you should have saved her but to – ?"

"I thought of it. The Cult killed her. To find the particular baboons – " I stopped suddenly. "It is you know possible to hold two opposing ideas at once!"

"Anyone can hunt baboons but only you can represent Carlin?"

"Attack the source, at least. Contribute to – to making Kadun somewhere they have nowhere to hide. I assume the hunt goes on. It wouldn't be limpid genius to spread its details over the press, now would it."

"It does and it doesn't. Sarat wants Searc. He wants him finally and irrevocably. That's what Kai does – " My jaw dropped. Didn't think jaws really did that. .

"The Economic Liaison Officer told me to forget any crap I'd heard about her pivotal role – "

"Maybe not pivotal. Certainly crucial!"

Reakoed grinned.

"Maybe she can't see just how important winding them up is.

"Kai is no financial nitwit," said Hass. "She knows enough to carry off the job. But she's not a financial genius, either, by which I mean she sees that figures can be made to dance, somersault, mysteriously turn up on the side of the world, but she doesn't see how it's done. Look, no hands! She is not, therefore, in this respect the best Sarat can come up with. That alone infuriates them! The best he can come up with are of course those to whom she rabbits when she gets back to Kadun."

"Probably think it's positive discrimination," I muttered.

Reakoed laughed.

“That suits her just fine.”

“She waits for them to make a mistake?”

“Another mistake,” said Hass. “They made a mistake when they killed Maya. They of course know exactly who Kai is, everything they loathe and despise. They are forced to listen to her. She enjoys it enormously. Meanwhile Sohenoil amuses itself sabre-rattling. Sarat has a lot of time for Bal. He really doesn’t want to bring him down in flames, not to mention the human cost in unemployment, bankruptcy. They are not fools enough to think Sohenoil impotent but of course in their terms care for the human cost is a sign of weakness. Should they think Sohenoil too weak, Sohenoil has swallowed up – causing a certain amount of amusement in certain quarters – Livewire, Harn’s largest manufacturer of digital electrics, including of course the phone subsidiary, and Vivalia Publishing, whose titles include Glitz. People have taken to calling Sohenoil the Python, some flatteringly, others not. The Python Effect also stabilizes Bal to some extent. The message is succinct. We do not buy from Harn unless we happen to own the Harn company in question. By owning the Harn company in question, and thus enabling it to continue to sell to Kadun, we avoid down-sizing, lay-offs.

“I thought we were against monopolies!”

“Later, later. That is the war. In part, that is the war.”

“So – it’s a reversal – instead of the City owing half Kadun, Kadun owns half the City!”

“That’s the general idea, yes.”

“They tell her things? No, of course, light dawns, they expect her to tell them things!”

“I gather they can barely bear to talk to her at all. She’s all Sarat is prepared to give them, and I mean all – the commercial side of the Rep Centre has been shut down. Kai babbles – her word, like a little dancing brook. They hope she will let slip something she shouldn’t.”

“My brain has had better days but how does that – close the net?”

“Directly, not at all. Not all bankers in the City are pro-Cult. All bankers in the City find it prudent to pretend to be pro-Cult. She comes direct from Sarat. They know they can trust her. No-one is going to say anything of the slightest interest in a meeting where the Cult are present. She picks stuff up anyway.”

“Such as sorrowful murmurs that we are regrettably willing to deliver ourselves into the hands of Sohenoil!”

“The point, then,” said Maitlan, “is she is not a banker. She therefore does not have her own agenda.”

“Well spotted, that man!” said Reakoed.

Maitlan inclined his head.

“Speaking as a financial nitwit,” I said, “I think even I can see none of this stops financiers talking to each other all day every day.- there may be some in Kadun just as desperate to know exactly where Sarat’s going - ?”

“Sarat says nothing. Cho says nothing. Both occasionally yawn and swallow. Kadun has gone where Sarat wanted. People have money in their pockets and equally production has soared. The City is being ruthlessly excised from the equation and everyone with half an ear to the ground knows it.”

“I am the total financial nit-wit. When I inherited, I asked Faun to ask the accountants to look at the paperwork and check it was OK and left it to breed.”

“Complete breakdown,” murmured Maitlan.

“If anything, I was hyper, the whole time, hyper sobbing, hyper sowing – seeds, I mean, not needles!”

“One way of getting it out of you,” said Hass.

“May I suggest something,” said Maitlan. “Because you see your life in Carlin as escapism, you see representing Carlin as an extension of that flight from ‘the real world’, a theory alas more than adequately holed by the reality that it dumps you at the hub of ‘the real world’.”

“I don’t have a problem with that,” I said after a moment. “I’d quite like to have a problem with that. But I also know there’s a job to be done there. It may be slightly impossible. You can’t say it’s not challenging. Town and country, capital and labour, farmers and greenies. There are tensions in my rural idyll. It’s not so much they’ve been smothered. A balance has been found which is – is not exactly the balance. A balance that worked in the frame of reference in which they found themselves. Some kids from NoZone turned up and started to lecture Carlin on land management. That didn’t go down too well. Then there’s development. There are plans to build a new village down the coast from Car-sandis. Give people the chance to live in the country. It’s being sold as a large new village. You could call it a small new town. Some people are reacting as though it’s a steel mill. There are wider prejudices – townies leaving gates open, starting fires.

There are simple things. Townies and tourists think rabbits are cute. Frome thinks they're dinner! Then of course there's open war. Here guns are loaded, cocked and aimed! Dogs chasing sheep. You do not bring a freaking gaze-hound to farmland! All hell broke loose. Come to think of it, I probably prevented a war – the owner of the extremely valuable, extremely dead pedigree pooch was Ciletij! What's so funny?"

"We think," said Hass, "they will say you represent not Carlin but Alzani-Meta. I don't think it will get them very far but I think they will say it."

"Have to think about that one. There are other topics for debate besides land use and conservation. I don't think – if relations with Dabida were some kind of issue, I shouldn't abstain. Who would be better placed to tell them about Dabida!"

"Do you want Carlin to change?"

"It is changing, hourly. Everyone knows it is changing and must change but the extent of the – no, the physical extent of the change, that's the key issue. The mental change is total."

"Uzz'n still tarks Carlin."

"Cars uzz'n still tark Carlin! More so! It's a sign of identity, a nearly secret language."

"In people who feel just very slightly threatened?"

"Cars. Baint 'ostoil, now. You have to have some kind of a feel for the country, for nature. That goes beyond whether you're a farmer or a greeny. Basically what they had against the NoZone folks was they doubted they'd so much as planted a window-box. I rang NoZone in Car-sandis and asked them WTF. They tried to bluff it out. I detected the scent of sexism. I started to talk about nitrates and soil bacteria. I didn't know I knew quite so much about nitrates. I actually surprised myself. End of sexism. They said they'd investigate and get back to me. At which point I had to give my full name."

"I am enjoying this," said Reakoed. "At which point?"

"You could hear the gulping."

"I imagine they got back to you rather fast."

"Unfortunate oversight, kids still wet behind the ears, needs to start with simple stuff, not a mature and sophisticated eco-system like Carlin. I was feeling frivolous. I suggested Duvi's herb-garden. Really, I said, it's a perfect miniature eco-system. He could count the species of butterfly. I supposed I'd better fly the flag. I tried to be reasonably sensitive about it. As a general principle, our revolution runs on ask not tell. 1. Plenty of folks in Carlin have studied agriculture. 2. The basic point about the folks who haven't is that by trial and error, without benefit of science courses, their distant ancestors pretty well worked out how things grow best. The folks who have studied agriculture actually talk to the folks who haven't. See if they can offer bells and whistles. They actually dug up a lepidopterist, a serious academic lady. Duvi adored."

"But of course you want to go back to Zur," teased Reakoed.

"Whatever," said Hass, "are you going to do with all that money?"

"It frightens me? No, I don't think it does. I just happen to be on a back to nature trip which OK is slightly unreal."

"Your life in the prototype stage?"

I laughed suddenly.

"Where is my life! There's a lot in that. Hey guys, everything's fine, I've just lost track of my life a minute."

"The question then would seem to be," said Maitlan, "to be senator in Azt, that is your life or Maya's life?"

"Bearing in mind," added Hass, "that Maya loved you and thus would have wanted you to do what you want to do."

"I guess I don't think I can really believe that. Believe that certain – options wouldn't have disappointed her."

"Did goat-farming disappoint her? Nobut you were going to stand for election. Or convinced yourself you were, to justify goat-farming?"

"Maya is dead. You no longer have to convince her."

"It looks to me like you're heading – I don't want to do anything! That has to be garbage."

"I wonder."

"Oh do you!"

"What happens if you stop. Proto-breakdown didn't stop you! You opted – perhaps – for pretend-stopping, but of course you do not stop. Choosing to stop is not breakdown."

"No-one can completely stop! Oh, OK."

“OK what?”

“Can you really say,” I challenged Hass, “that you are not in a damn’ program!”

“Meaning?”

“Stop being driven. Let it all go on around me. Engage when I and as much as I choose. Do you? OK, you haven’t moved to Azt. Would you if you could?”

“I permit certain constraints,” said Hass.

“Meaning!”

“An uncrushing weight of expectation?”

“Suppose I say we’re all trapped! I’m not, not, not saying that is my deepest and most fervent conviction – I think! Those invisible lines have criss-crossed us so thoroughly – “

“I do not think Sarat can’t cope without me! I do understand that the time he has to – consider his inner life, shall we say, is limited and generally around 1 o’clock in the morning. If he wants to talk, I talk. Love is not a constraint. It would not, could not work were we not in the same building. Remove love and one could say I mould my life to fit in with Sarat. Now, suppose the situation were reversed, it was Sarat who died – “ I’d just started to open my mouth, when Reakoed said, “But it wouldn’t be, that’s the point, exo, eso. Fal would not have the same role.”

“Does that matter?” asked Hass.

“No,” I said, “it doesn’t matter. Oh! Oh, umm. If Maya had been left on her own, I’d do anything to help make her exo life as easy as possible and – none of this would matter a hoot.”

“We go to Zur a lot,” said Hass. “We rather like the place.”

“Leave myself behind,” I said.

“You take your self with you,” said Hass, “wherever you think to go.”

“Not least, of course,” pointed out Maitlan, “because its cause was alive and well.”

“I was just settling down to a really good, really deep conversation about Hass. I take it you’re not doing nothing until 1 in the morning?”

“Day in Batna-kri,” murmured Maitlan.

“If I skip the bit about programs – that is love of what? Who? Sarat?”

“Certainly Sarat. Certainly also Mel – A-M has not come so far and lost so much to back down now. Perhaps just love of it. I like people. So of course do you.”

“I wonder! It occurs to me – the thing about no diary! No being firmly committed to an event three months away so that a nice little trap can be laid. That can’t still hold. Sarat – you – you must know what you’re doing!”

“That is the uncrushing weight of expectation.”

“Azt,” said Reakoed, “has learned not to expect them to behave normally.”

Hass laughed.

“The invitations are constant and gracefully acknowledged if not accepted. It is really not a good reason for attending a function that one happens to be free on the day. Happening to be free on the day does not mean one has nothing better to do.”

“There is another side to that, I think?” said Maitlan. “You are not trophies, status symbols?”

“That is not a road,” said Hass, “we wish to travel.”

“Look who’ll be there!” gushed Reakoed. “If anyone wants to meet them, the door is open. Everyone knows which causes are supported. Sarat doesn’t think he supports the environment by attending a fund-raising gala ball, though of course he may attend if he feels like partying, which on the whole he doesn’t.”

“I have a horrible vision,” I said, “of your diary as a list of alternatives.”

“What is ‘diary’?”

“Oh Hass! List? Notebook? Palm-top? I’m going to get to the bottom of this! Who knows, it may shape my life in Azt. Colts open the post and read the email, yes?”

“Agreed.”

“And direct you to anything personal, which to most people would include invitations, but to you don’t – and they must keep a ‘diary’, a note of that to which you have been invited – “

“Alas, not. I mean I see the invitations. Otherwise a week later I run into the guy who says, I hope you got our invitation...”

“It’s much more complicated than that,” said Reakoed. “You’re forgetting the invitations from Dabida, or for that matter Ciletij and consequent commitments.”

“Representing Mel?”

“Or representing myself.”

“So – the only imperatives you recognize come from being Dabida’s heir. Similarly the only imperative Sarat recognizes comes from being Anile emperor! But that can’t be really true because in both cases. You choose what matters. What matters?”

“We don’t like being bored. Sarat has no interest in committees, even informally elected ones, a lot of interest in whether the people who dissent from the view of the committee have a point, and minus interest in giving committees a taste for power.”

“We have the ear of the emperor, you know,” murmured Maitlan.

“Gee, guys,” said Reakoed, “a lot of people have that.”

“So?”

“I get off lightly?” suggested Hass. “Sarat does not necessarily attend such meetings as one might consider vital.” He looked at me. “Have we strayed from the point here?”

“Well, now, guys, that depends!”

“So what’s the imperative?”

“I think you might have missed the point,” said Reakoed. “A point, anyway.”

“Do tell!”

“The point is being. The doing comes from the being. Being seen to be probably puts it better.”

I groaned.

“So you’re telling me it doesn’t matter what Sarat does!”

“I’m suggesting it doesn’t matter a hoot what Sarat does, so long as it comes from what Sarat is.”

I appealed to Hass.

“Couldn’t that be just the slightest bit completely deranged?”

“What, actually, does Mel do?”

“Not take decisions determining the future of the entire nation. We have a government for that.” They laughed.

“All right, all right! You know what I mean. What I think you want me to say is wander about being Mel. That’s what Tar and Saski seemed to do – not be Mel! Why am I finding this confusing?”

“Possibly because you think Sarat is constantly taking decisions determining the future of the entire nation. All the fundamental decisions were taken in Zur ten years ago.”

“Non-negotiable standards,” sighed Reakoed.

“I sort of see what you mean. I lived at the Imperial too! But it was a constant, hey, what shall we do about this!”

“Yes, yes, yes,” said Reakoed. “We figured it. Where were you born!”

“I think I can correctly answer that one.”

“What do we say in Zur?”

“Er.”

“About drains!”

“The government deals with the drains!”

“And does the government mind people saying that, does it infringe on our sacred Constitution, does it hint that democracy is about to be abandoned? So what does it mean, Fal?”

But I burst out laughing.

“I remember a pretty heated discussion about drains. Well, sewage, raw sewage, to be exact. Sarat has clear views on raw sewage in reservoirs. Some guy from Ciletij turned on a tap. Serious error!”

“And then what?”

“OK, it would be dealt with. By people who also had distinctive opinions! But Sarat wasn’t going to tell them how to deal with it.”

“So what’s the bottom line?”

“It can’t be done isn’t an option. The whole world knows that! I still don’t agree. Decisions, decisions!”

“Economic ones,” suggested Hass. “There were things that could not sensibly be decided until we had all the facts.”

“Not being an idiot,” said Reakoed, “I’m not disagreeing with that! But I’m talking about now. Try again. When people say CLIK are running the joint, what do they mean?”

“CLIK are running the joint? Knowing that if they transgress against those basic values we all hold dear a lot of people are going to say so, because there are a lot of people watching.”

“So too the Senate of Dabida!”

“I s’pose...I certainly see why – oh yes. Why no-one’s in a hurry for elections.”

“OK...”

“We do not,” said Hass, “go around making speeches about those basic values etc, we merely exhibit them. Does that help?”

I sighed.

“Being is doing?”

“I am reminded,” said Hass. “Duvi and her herb-garden.”

“She was brilliant when I was a hyper-non-broken-down wreck! I just don’t think herb-garden psychotherapy cracks this one.”

“Surely,” said Maitlan, “that is precisely what you practise.”

“My herbs bleat?”

“You told me she said something,” said Hass. “About your being so like Sorg.”

“Why must it always be a struggle! Oh shit. That’s letting go, isn’t it.”

“And?”

“It goes – it goes something like, let go, Fal, let go. What of? They’ve taken all I had. That’s why I have to let go?” It began as a statement and ended a question. “That’s what I have to let go of?”

“You have only yourself,” said Maitlan.

Hass said: “You said you knew the basics.”

“I s’pose – is that all letting go is. Think that’s ‘all’ in inverted commas!”

“Kicking out’ is brisker!”

“Just the determining factors of my life. What – and I am phrasing this very carefully! You’ve obviously talked to each other. Just talk among yourselves! What do you think would be good things for me to do?”

“How about Blatni?”

“Blatni!”

Blatni is a sort of play-pen for the startlingly rich.

“Always Stress-Breakers.”

“Walk away physically? Leave it all, everything? Kyse has money, doesn’t he! I trust Kyse has money!”

Hass laughed out loud.

“Kyse has a steady income from Stress-Breakers.”

“It’s generally called a vacation,” said Reakoed. “People have them, you know.”

“You, of course,” said Maitlan, “consider your current existence a vacation.”

“So when did you last have one? I may be a bit cross.”

“Poor Fal, etc, etc?”

“I told you it wouldn’t work,” said Reakoed.

Hass shrugged.

“You sit here tying the knots tighter. If you will not walk away mentally – “

“I do what!”

“You have just said. The determining factors of your life are two people who are dead. Not only are they dead, neither of them would wish you continuing – distress.”

“We’ve been there!”

“We have! I do not suggest you spend the rest of your life as a dilettante!”

“Stop.”

“Stop.”

“Aka skive off.”

“Aka skive off.”

“From your perspective,” said Reakoed, “you’re locked in a permanent half-skive. Why not do the thing properly?”

“Go hiking. Have absolutely nothing to do. Any other suggestions?”

“As I see it,” said Hass, “you stop or you start. Plunge back into the fray. You don’t just sit on the fence, you impale yourself on it.”

“Stopping is better? Maybe I should ring Sarat and ask him to call the elections! You seem to have spent an awful lot of time arguing convincingly that my life in Carlin is – valid, important.”

“Were you convinced!”

“The gap,” sighed Reakoed, “of course, is between how things are and how you see them.”

“I know that! Do I!”

“Where’s the barrier?”

“Isn’t that obvious? Sorg and Maya were murdered. Aren’t you telling me that doesn’t matter? Dismiss it.”

“No. No, that is not what I am telling you. I may be saying it is not the totality of what you are. It is not the essence of what you are. You exist apart from these things. You choose your response. At the moment you are driven.”

“I know all that!”

“Well, then!”

“You’re not angry,” said Reakoed. “I wondered.”

“What about?”

He looked at me in total disbelief.

“Sorg, Maya, nothing that matters. I thought maybe it’d come out.”

“Of course I’m angry! Isn’t everyone?”

“Yes,” said Hass with a grin.

“And everyone else isn’t red in the face with rage either. Don’t get it.”

“The solution is to do something about the problem, attack its root. Only you seem to have a bit of difficulty over doing. See multiple above! What you’re doing matters. It probably matters more in the long term than what we’re doing. But we touched on – Fal, if anyone’d asked me, I’d have said you’d have wanted to be in on the chase. That does not seem to be one of the alternatives tying you up.”

“That, of course,” said Maitlan, “was before she discovered her eso side.”

“It’s paralysing you,” said Hass.

“Just stop.”

“The usual excuse for not stopping is that you’ll find out what you actually think. I don’t think that applies. Which you actually think!”

“Are there direct flights to this Blatni place?”

“Only for private jets.”

“Aaargh. A horrible suspicion dawns. You wouldn’t be thinking of coming too, would you?”

“That will give them something to talk about.”

“I’m sure it’s tebbly discreet,” said Maitlan.

“I did think of my sister-in-law’s place in the north,” said Hass

“The thing about you is no-one’s ever quite sure when you’re teasing.”

“If you’re going to be in Azt, you’ll have to get used to the cold.”

“It can be pretty nippy in Carlin! Maybe I will settle for Blatni. What’s the reasonable alternative!”

“Anywhere,” said Hass with suspicious meekness.

“Except of course,” pointed out Maitlan, “there has to be service.”

“Ref! You mentioned Stress-Breakers!”

“Oiling the wheels? If the idea were to absorb yourself in how to catch and skin dinner, that would be another ball-park.”

“Is Stress-Breakers that bad?” asked Maitlan innocently.

“Exactly what is this supposed to achieve?”

“Whatever it does achieve.”

“I take it I’m allowed to walk in the foothills of the Calsides!”

“It’s not quite as bad as he’s making out,” said Reakoed. “The natives are friendly.”

“I take vacations,” admitted Hass. “Short ones. Sar-fenan goes there a lot.”

“S- “

“I don’t say he’ll be there when you are. Don’t you want to meet Maya’s murderers?”

“What the hell - ! Angry! Oh gee, Fal, you have to stop, Fal – and you – !”

“Calm down. No-one is forcing you to Blatni. I have a theory it would clear your head. I wondered if you might want to go to the City with Kai but you wouldn’t take the bait.”

“Of course you’re not angry,” said Reakoed.

“You think I have an anger problem!” I said, no, OK, I yelled.

“Not really, no. Only in this respect. You nearly cut his throat, Fal.”

Mental squeal of brakes. Oh.

“Oh. The rule of law.”

“How much did you want to?”

“A very great deal. What was the point?”

“It was recognized – does that sound objective enough? It was recognized that not only might there be casualties but that we might have to kill,”

“Of course it was bloody recognized. He was effectively my prisoner. That is not in the manual. No-one would have minded? I should have minded.”

“Self-doubt. The bad kind. Exactly how badly did you frighten yourself?”

“It wasn’t an issue. I didn’t.”

“Bollocks.”

“Maybe.”

“Is there not – “ began Maitlan. “Not a parallel, a mirror-image?”

“It’s all interwoven,” said Reakoed.

For a moment I just looked at them.

“Bloody right it is!”

“You did not save Sorg.”

“Thank you for that tactful enunciation.”

“Therefore both deaths are your fault?”

“I know that’s crap.”

“You think Sarat – had he turned a minute sooner, had they not moved to that part of the dais - ?”

“Amida is no fool, is she. There’s just one thing.”

“I know,” said Hass.

“Not with you, not with anyone. There’s no point.”

“I think Sar-fenan will be there. ”

“Your definition of ‘vacation’ is perhaps not.”

“But it’s fun,” said Hass.

“Do I or do I not ‘have to stop’?”

“Of course you have to stop. Unless you’d rather go on.” I don’t kid myself he wilted under my glare, but he did add, “As you are.”

“And how is meeting that piece of infected shit supposed to stop me?”

“Jolt the hell out of you?”

“May it not be the case,” mused Maitlan, “that the idea is enough?”

I don’t suppose he wilted either.

“Things will fall into place! Have we been taking part in the same conversation? How can they!”

“I am not sure how much of this matters. It is true. It is false. It is part-true. It is true on a fine day when the sun is shining and irrelevant when the snow begins to fall. What I should like to think will crystallize is what matters.”

“None of it matters with a capital M.”

“So?”

But Maitlan said, “When did you last have some fun?”

“Oh come on!” I said. “A long weekend is one thing.”

“Somewhere else, then,” said Hass in tones of sweet reasonableness. “I said: anywhere.”

“Do you think Vj and Sarsh would come? When the bastard is definitely there.”

Reakoed laughed quietly while I did more glaring.

“Sarat would complete the set,” said Hass.

“I like it,” I said. “Maybe not tomorrow. I want to be sorted before, not –by. You go there. You – talk to it.”

“Only when spoken to,” said Hass demurely.

“Waste of oxygen,” muttered Reakoed.

“I’m surprised they – don’t the ghouls have private haunts?”

“They really don’t want to – I hesitate to say can’t afford to. Yet. Desert the field.”

“Our charm,” said Hass, “our intelligence, our grace, our warm, vibrant personalities. Our appalling clothes.”

Reakoed guffawed.

“You never had appalling clothes in your life!”

“Depends on who’s looking. They really do not like my GASH Ts.” I chortled. “Zik has a wonderful – I don’t actually know what you call it, sort of fine silk tent, pull it over your head and it falls gracefully over your shoulders as you lounge by the pool, its being vital to keeping the weak northern sun from burning your brown Fidubi skin. It has ‘PANTHER protects’ on the back and a certain silver chair on the front..”

“Just another front in the war,” I said.

“Exactly!” said Reakoed enthusiastically. “Everything is a front in the war.”

I scowled.

“Remind me to tell my goats that.”

Eventually we wandered off to bed. I wriggled in my sleeping-bag and thought about guilt and fake-guilt and I should have been with Maya guilt. It didn’t take me long to get to really the only thing I’d ever done to feel guilty about was Tet and I didn’t seem to have much enthusiasm for that one. Do you know what you did to Tet? Shit. Possibly not. Far too busy being in – in a fantasy – in a what? That’s what my agonizingly brief time with Sorg suddenly seemed to have been, a dream, a game. But we were at the cutting-edge! Or something. So there I was in my dream and everyone was far too kind, or maybe just far too busy, to tell me Tet was bleeding to death. Or was that just another fantasy? But I had a truly awful, heart-wrenching moment of longing. We – Tet and I – were sitting on a breakwater and were happy. Tet was real. I knew then somewhere I’d filed Tet and me in a box called extension of childhood. That’s exactly what we were, kids together. Like my adult life didn’t begin until I got to Kadun. What was wrong with being kids together? Obsessed with Sorg and Maya who were conveniently dead. The living will conveniently still be there when I get around to bothering with him. If I’d learned anything, wasn’t it that they’re not. But that too was fantasy. Tet was safe in Zur. Nothing would happen to Tet. And here was I nearly in Zur and nearly getting up and walking to the door. I have to make things right with Tet! Even if he does turn me into jam. Probably got a girlfriend with him. This, Fal-girl, is not the most sensible – then I remembered he’d been in Azt. OK, so he’d been in Azt. Doesn’t mean he’s bloody living there! I nearly went downstairs to Hass but suddenly I began to laugh. Stop, he says! What do I do but conceive some other mad plan for doing? It can wait. Everything can wait. I forced myself to focus on that knowing that I was yammering it can’t, it can’t, time forecloses. So? So what? What does it matter? To whom? On which occasion! I hurt Tet. I really, really hurt Tet. I can’t undo that. I can, however, face it.

I woke up with tears streaming down my face consumed by a single thought: I hurt Mel. Not Tet, Mel. It was as though everything Hass had said about Mel, about the guy-stuff, was a huge red arrow, this way, Fal, this way, but I’d refused to see – no! Then Sarat was lying! No, Sarat hadn’t lied, Sarat had told me how it seemed to him. But he must know. Why must he? Then I suppose you could say I stopped because I didn’t know what to do, didn’t want to leave the room, see anyone, not just for a moment. Eventually I picked up my ‘phone and asked Hass to come up a minute.

The door opened. I looked up. Rueful smile time.

“I don’t know how to say it. I only know it’s true.”

“Oh dear, that sounds bad.”

“Hass....”

“Darling-girl, what has happened!”

“You didn’t reject me because of the bloody Whole. You rejected me because it would have devastated Mel.”

“Ah.”

I found a shred of defiance.

“If he was mad about me, why the bloody hell didn’t he say so!”

“Rather obviously.”

“Are you willing to talk about Mel?”

“Yes. Mel assumed certain things which turned out to be far from the truth. The hill your second home, Maya your bosom buddy. It never occurred to him -.”

“Everyone else assumed – I even understood that. The only girl in the gang was Mel’s girl. Why didn’t he – no, I can see that. Ask me out. The Press. Then I – holed both of you below the water-line. I can’t do it, Hass!” I realized what I was saying “Not, I mean, that there’s the faintest chance.” I stopped. “I want to say something. I don’t know how to say it right, so it’s going to sound wrong and awful. Please understand I don’t mean it wrong and awful!”

“Sssh, sweetheart, sssh.”

“OK! I thought – I thought Sorg and I, it was like a dream, a fantasy, but it was a real dream. It was real. And Mel and Cantilip, that’s like a dream too.”

“Oh my dear girl, of course.”

“Of course!”

“Relax! Let me get you something – anything, coffee, fruit.”

“Coffee would be fantastic. Are there any apples?”

“Your diet was always – it keeps you well!”

“Unless I’m suffering from chronic food poisoning!”

“One has to consider all the alternatives. Do just relax. If you won’t relax, think about what you just said.”

“My whole life has been based on a fantasy and I’m supposed to relax?”

“No better time. Eso, babe, eso!”

He vanished.

No wonder I – I feel I’m falling apart.

Ye Sorrowfulle Tragedie of Mel and Fal. Exactly how thick am I?

Why did I, do I, could I, can I not see!

Relationships that are totally eso seem – strike me as – unreal, dreams, even my own.

I had a strong feeling I was about to high-dive into very unfamiliar waters.

Mel – Mel what? Understood, something, nothing, everything, but he couldn’t explain it properly because he didn’t know what it was. Six-freaking-teen.

Let me sidle up to the bottom of the diving-board.

I am was shall be so freaking petrified by what I want that I’ll do anything to avoid it.

What the hell does that mean?

Oh no! It might just, not totally inconceivably, mean that I want (think I want) exactly what I wanted (thought I wanted) at six-freaking-teen, namely Hass to – transform me.

A yearning so desperate for the eso.

Not sure that I can say that. Does Hass understand all this? Nudging me towards working it out for myself.

He said he wasn’t sure. I think I believe that.

What is tying me down?

There was really only question I had to ask Hass when he came back, which he seemed to take a long time doing, with a flask and two cups.

“Chocolate! I understand it’s good for shock.”

“Why am I so freaking petrified of going there on my own?”

“Keep going.”

He continued to unscrew the lid of the flask.

“That’s my only line! OK, what – what you said about the perhapses. Did that scare the shit out of me, that I wasn’t – wasn’t in the – normal, everyday world any more? Is that what I know about myself, Hass? If I let go I’ll go somewhere so – so – “

“Different?”

“Different!”

“Then where is the balance?”

“That’s the next step?”

“Here and there. It’s very hot. Sip cautiously.”

“Then you don’t think Sorg was a time-slip.”

“Think about that.”

“I just did. Oh. Both?”

“In the Jumesit, we have an unparalleled opportunity to – apparently – discourse with a number of leading figures in Kadun’s history, but never in her future. We don’t know what to make of this. Your experience with Sorg would seem to indicate there is somewhere the dead have consciousness. I should imagine you never asked him how long he’d been dead.”

“Of course I didn’t! Our conversations seemed to – to follow on.”

“And then one day he wasn’t there any more. Sarat told him it would devastate you. He said it was right for both of you. Were you – any more devastated?”

“No. No, it was awful, but – but I understood it was something that had to happen. Whether it was all my imagination or not. It – wasn’t how a living person could go living.”

“Being normally alive.”

“I had to ask myself terrible questions. About being alive. I wanted to be alive and have – physicality, sensation, heat, light.”

“And so it couldn’t continue, whatever it was.”

“Was it my imagination? How could it be? Sarat talked to him.”

“It is perhaps possible you created a hologram. That bloody field is a more likely explanation. We don’t begin to understand. “

“Field?”

“The bloody Matter of bloody Kadun is in effect a number of phenomena which transgress the Fidubi model.”

“It’s a what!”

“You’re not the only one who’s had an interesting time. I suggest for the mo we stick to the point. We may not know what the point is, but our intentions are honourable.”

“It’s not – could it be – perhaps! Let me get to the beginning of this.”

“May I help?”

“I’m hanging on your every word!”

“What is my every word?”

I sighed.

“Stop? Let me try again. I have – had an experience not many other people have! People you love dying is universal, people you love being horribly murdered – it’s in the range of normality. I – I think I think Sorg was my imagination. That – therefore – obviously – he ‘went’ when I somewhere inside knew I could bear it.

The trouble with this is a) how could Sarat have talked to a product of my imagination and b) what does it say to me about me? As in a) holding on so desperately – b) it makes me – does it make me – frightened of – a part of me – to say I can’t control it is boring and mundane. It’s out of my reach. It’s controlling me. OH SHIT.”

“Certainly,” said Hass. “Piles of it.”

“Oh shut up!”

“Not a chance. I am not sure if Sorg was your imagination. I thought so at the time. I am of course the sensible one. Now I don’t know. The rest is spot on..”

“Stop saying that! OK....So that’s the famous crack and all – all this, doesn’t make a damn’ bit of difference because it doesn’t reach it, it doesn’t get near.”

“A minus. Keep – “

“Going! I know, I know. I thought you wanted me to stop! So I’m wasting your time and everyone else’s – “

“Bollocks. Your time, possibly.”

“Huh? So – I’m looking at the symptoms not the cause.”

“Is it out of your reach or do you refuse to go there?”

“As in stop. This could get repetitive! But I don’t know how to! On my own.”

“Of course you do. Try looking at things differently.”

“I thought we did that.”

“Suppose instead of whether you want to be a senator in Azt the question – the barrier – is that you don’t know how to be a senator in Azt.”

“Does anyone! Or just – just I don’t know how to be, so whatever I do it feels wrong? That is not comforting.”

“Talk me through a few days in your life.”

I grinned.

“I do relax sometimes. I went out to dinner last week! I spend lots of time at the kitchen table going round in circles.”

“I ask suspiciously what else are you doing? Preparing food, bottling fruit?”

“I’m not thinking about chopping veggies. I don’t see that it matters - ?”

“I do. I see that your idea of dropping-out means there are always calls on your time.”

“Wellofcourse, she gabbled. OK, OK, guilty. My goats need me! I talk to Benji. To my relief she doesn’t answer back. I talk to them while I milk them. I talk to them – swear at them when I’m putting them to bed. I shut the door with a contented sigh. Emails to be answered. I do wander the Grid. Isn’t that reactive? I hear you cry.”

“What you hear me cry is is there a second in your life when there isn’t something you ought to be doing?”

“Yes, so there! I read. I watch the television. I even paint my nails sometimes.”

“What are you reading?”

“You really want to know? It’s called The Barunin Heist. I picked it up in a second-hand shop. It’s a detective story about a bank-robbery.”

“That tells me everything.”

“I knew it! I have revealed all.”

“Possibly. Gee, I’m just trying to get the full picture here. Something between a maelstrom of unresolved conflicts and an avatar of serenity? Your mood fluctuates?”

“Hmm. I’m thinking about that one. I’m a serene maelstrom of unresolved conflicts? OK, this stuff is going round in my head when I’m painting my nails. Maybe. It isn’t – seriously upsetting me. I mean you can drop a few tears while painting your nails but you can’t sob your guts out. Voice of experience!”

“What happened to the sobbing? Did you try to stop it or did it stop on its own?”

“It stopped when – when in some sense it didn’t matter Sorg was dead. I think that’s what I was trying to teach myself. When the wound healed. Grief is me, me, me, poor me, I know that much. I love him. That’s what matters.”

“In your case, me, me, me and a few other things! Into this tripped poor Kyse. That of course profoundly unsettled you.”

I looked at him a moment.

“I had not thought of it like that but that of course profoundly unsettled me. Which just might lead to a certain irony! Here you are pointing out that Maya is pivotal – until she was killed when – do you think that’s true?”

“Serene in your love for Sorg you would have absorbed Maya’s death had Kyse not - ?”

“Had reality not! That’s back to what I said. Whatever Sorg was, it wasn’t part of – normal living.”

“As circles go,” said Hass, “that’s a good one. In fact it’s spectacular.”

I frowned.

“I think I see it as progression.”

“Back to where you started.”

“How negative you are!”

“I just want you to love your eso.”

“That’s what I said, progress! But I wasn’t – confident enough? No, it – yes! It wasn’t balance because it rejected a normal relationship with a live human being.”

“I take it you love Kyse.”

“Yes. Yes, I do. Think I do. I get a nice warm feeling thinking of him. I think I definitely do, it’s just not – dramatic. There has been rather a lot of drama in my previous attachments! I don’t think in my current state I should – inflict myself on anyone. Too much unfinished business.”

“And Tet?”

I was caught unawares having managed to rapidly dismiss my last night’s Tet moment.

“Last night – it really stabbed me how I’d hurt Tet. Then I woke up thinking how I’d hurt Mel and that – I was in a deep state of unreality, half rushing into Zur to make myself feel good by telling him I knew how awful I’d been.”

“Oh dear.”

“I’m not even going to look at you beseechingly.”

“Of course he still cares. How this – how that strikes me is somewhat that you’re seeing Tet as a closed chapter in your life because if he isn’t what is already complicated becomes apparently insoluble.”

“I don’t see a life with Tet,” I admitted. “I just don’t see what I’d do, which is of course totally Reakoed’s thesis. Writing my own script. It has occurred to me. That I’ve cut out the possibility of going to see him because if he didn’t tell me to piss off – dot, dot, dot.”

“You might end up in bed together?”

“We might both terribly regret ending up in bed together.”

“You might live happily ever after.”

I frowned.

“I don’t want to read too much – make that anything. I don’t want to read anything into that! You don’t see it as a closed door.”

“Read nothing into that. This is a system message, I repeat, this is a system message. Do not foreclose!”

“I think I don’t really understand. I might meet Tet in town. He might want my company. We might have a coffee. We might go out to dinner.”

“All that is so in any case.”

“That’s what’s stupid about it! It is, isn’t it. As though I need a blue-print.”

“You rather had one. Then you fell for Sorg.”

“Owww! M-M-Mel is a closed door. Read nothing into that! It’s just a remark on how things are.”

“Someone you have yet to meet. Someone you know already.”

“No-one. Do not foreclose! I repeat. Do not foreclose!”

“You might convince yourself.”

“I do know – I might even understand – my whole life is foreclosure! There are only three places in the entire world I can be. It’s ludicrous!”

“And similarly.”

“And similarly there are only two – no, make that three – things I can do.”

“Goat-farming was a rather vivid change of direction.”

I stared.

“I think that means something! Whenever I try to escape the snare! I - incorporate the escape – “

“Into the strait-jacket? Oh yes.”

“Do not be reassuring! That is forbidden!

“Then stop.”

“Could it be I don’t know how to? Because – I’m desperate to be – to be with someone – not for himself – that sounds so awful – no, yes! Because being with someone was torn from me – at least I understood that I had to be on my own, even though – even then – I’m saying such awful things about me! Do you think they’re true!”

“Had you stayed in Azt, there would have been a queue to wrap arms round you. It is nonsense to say you would have jumped into another physical relationship. An emotional support network – a most unserviceable substitute.”

“Hmm.”

“May I ask something?”

“You may!”

“Reakoed and Maitlan.”

“My brothers.”

“Never ever - ?”

“Never ever on either side. Now you’re going to ask why!”

“I think that’s fairly obvious. Never a moment when you were not emotionally entangled elsewhere.”

“Or they weren’t. As you have said, at 16 to ask someone out is not to make a lifetime’s commitment.”

“Leading me by the nose back to the universal minus one assumption I was Mel’s girl!”

“That is clearly not currently the case. They’ve separated, you know.”

“Wha – “

“Maitlan and Sula. The Fleet, alas, came between them.”

“Apart from in my distinctly raw state I’m so self-obsessed I don’t even know – he’s obviously not interested.”

“Are you?”

“Hass! I do not believe you have brought me here to play match-maker!”

“Lured, I have lured you here. What have we been saying?”

“Do not foreclose! Has he said anything?”

“We are talking about Maitlan? Try it this way, why wouldn’t he be interested?”

“Perhaps because he knows me too well.”

“Fair enough.”

“He’s on the hill – don’t grin like that!”

“This is Maitlan we’re talking about. They haven’t fallen into each other’s arms. That much I know.”

“Let me try something. If – my eso – like a balloon bobbing out of reach! Except this balloon is determining me. What, she demanded, are you doing exactly to get it back in place?”

He jumped up and made stretching, grasping, patting, gestures.

“Have you got a stick?”

“Idiot!”

He made a final grab.

“Got it!”

He walked towards me, his hands cupped round my balloon.

“There! Stroke it. Scratch behind its ears. Love it.”

I stroked.

“Coochie-coo, is oo a little darling?” I said in tones of raw cynicism.

“Do put some enthusiasm into it! Take it.”

I sighed and held out my cupped hands.

“Could this be crazy?”

“But it’s fun!”

I tenderly grasped – nothing.

“Talk to it,” coaxed Hass.

I looked at him, looked between my hands, looked back at him, bent my head over my hands.

“Why don’t you love me?”

Then I looked up at Hass in shock.

“I didn’t mean!”

He said “Inside, outside.”

“Running away from me, rejecting me. Do you feel rejected? Why can’t we live together! This is totally crazy!”

“Interesting, isn’t it.”

“Keep going?”

“How did you guess?”

“You’re part of me! I can’t be whole without you! How’s that?”

“Don’t forget I need you.”

“I need you!”

“Really feel it.”

I looked at him rather helplessly.

“Because it’s true, isn’t it.”

“Is it?”

“Yes. No. Maybe! I’m not making much sense, am I.”

“That’s what’s interesting.”

“Grr. OK, attack! I am absolutely sick of your controlling me. I’m in charge of me! Don’t tell me you are

me, I know you're me! Why can't I know you! Why can't I be you!"

"Lost to the stage," murmured Hass. "Keep – "

"Throw this cushion at you!"

"You'll drop it."

"Why can't I get through to you!"

"You are in charge of you."

"Why won't I let you get through to me? Why – why am I frightened of you? I've answered that!"

"Oh yes," said Hass. Something about how he was looking at me made me suspicious. "Now try it another way. You have caught your balloon. You are hugging it close because you need it. Now you put your hands on the control panels and it begins to rise, to float away, taking you with it."

"AAAARGH. Apart from taking my hands off the control panels, you mean?"

"Not necessarily. They might be the wrong place to hold it."

"Balance? If I hold it too close, I'm controlling, it can't float?"

"Shall we go for a walk?"

"How can I go for a walk! I'm - !"

I collapsed with laughter and of course let go of the balloon.

"So where is it now?"

"Hass, this is doing things to my little brain – tell you what, " I teased. "Let's go into town, buy a pack of balloons. This is practical Fal you're dealing with!"

But he repeated: "Where is it now?"

"There!" I said, still giggling, "Just behind you, floating towards the window, which is fortunately closed."

"Suppose I open it?"

"Disaster! Catastrophe!" I frowned suddenly. "I plunge through the open window and shatter."

"If you don't get hold of it before it goes out of reach."

"That – that's a bit eerie. Sorg? Damned if I do, damned if I don't... The balance, I take it – I plunge through the window, catch it, not, puh-lease, by the control panels! And it's like a parachute? Instead of shattering, I float gently down until my feet touch solid ground. But I have to have thrown myself through the window! Not to mention be very good at catching balloons. Oh no! Have you never heard of a mixed metaphor?" I scolded. He just grinned. "No, that does not make sense. If my – my ballast, is inside me all the time and I trust that such that I throw myself through the window, why should I throw myself through the window?"

Answer me that, sir!

"Because you do and don't know it?"

"Does that compute? I ask myself with the sinking feeling that it does. Couldn't have gone chasing without something inside propelling – compelling – me to chase it but. It does not make sense. I crash-landed."

"Who's in charge around here?"

I grinned suddenly.

"Ever heard of gravity? I don't have a problem with – theoretically I could have stopped myself crashing. I take it all back! It's not a mixed metaphor, it's a brilliant metaphor! When you fall from a height – " I held up my cup. "If I walk over to the bloody window, open it and drop this cup, it doesn't have time to think before it smashes!"

"But you threw yourself out of the window. Because it was the only possible thing to do?"

"Let me sit back from this a minute. Exactly when are we talking about?"

"When do you think?"

"Gravity is quick. This is slow. We're – we're talking about chasing a fake balloon?"

"Why?"

"Sorg –it did feel like that, throwing myself out of the window, my – my delicious performance. I don't know, Hass. I don't know if I really believed no-one would speak to me again! Does that sound completely mad? I think it was sort of - processing, projecting – what happened last night. I couldn't let myself directly feel it? You're saying I lunged after – and I had it by the control panels? So – I mean, are you suggesting, is it even possible – I went – went as far to where Sorg is as – one can – but that doesn't make sense, either! The order's wrong! Oh damn!"

Wipe away tears streaming down cheeks time.

“Sssh, sssh, ssh!”

Hass with his arms round me while I gulped and sniffled. I looked up and managed a smile.

“We’ve been here before. I like to think I’ve moved on!”

Then I felt as though that was going to cause me to weep too.

“Frightened the wits out of yourself.”

“The order’s still wrong!”

“Is it? Put together what you just said.”

I stepped back from him suddenly.

“No!”

“No?”

“Thrown away everything. Lost everything. For nothing.”

“And?”

“Don’t make this easy. There was no balloon, you see, inside me, nothing to keep me together, but – “ I was shaking my head, rather violently.

“Give yourself a headache.”

“I have you for that!”

“I aim to please.”

“I am totally cut off from – it’s not a crack, it’s the Great Divide! I can’t access it! But it – “

“Oh yes, it,” said Hass.

“What the fuck is wrong with me!”

“Hunger?”

“The sensible one! Not really. The guys must be wondering – I doubt it! This was always going to be you and me, wasn’t it, you and Sarat. I think I mean why.”

“I don’t know. Perhaps something to do with seeing yourself as the opposite of Maya?”

“Why do I hate it when you’re sensible! I don’t see how it could have – traumatized me, but there’s a lot of truth in that. Do you really think – the balloon game – “ I cupped my hands. “ – does anything?”

“It focuses you.”

“Half of me’s thinking how daft it is.”

“Focused.”

“I’m never quite sure when you’re teasing.. In other words I bloody well stop.”

“In other words you bloody well stop.”

“But I can’t walk around – “

“Muttering to yourself I love my eso? You could try.”

“Aw. I do have times when everything – feels all right. I don’t believe in it? I don’t trust it?”

“Love is shorter.”

“I’m feeling rather basic here. Because it’s not real. Reality is – unresolved conflicts.”

“You won’t trust it to show the way ahead.”

“That’s not exactly surprising. OK, we seem to have reached base. I’d love to say I don’t want a magic wand.”

“I think it’s time we went touring. Anywhere, everywhere!”

“You are breathtaking. Jansi,” I said. “I’ve never been.”

He grinned.

“Certainly we must visit Jansi.”

“The number of places I haven’t been to is rather large. I think it might depress me to dwell on it.”

“How negative! How defeatist! Cross a few off the list.”

“You’re serious, aren’t you.” Then: “It’s so ridiculous. Whatever everyone else thinks of me, I’m sure it’s not I’m in a rut!”

“Fal-girl, there are so many things you could be.”

“Ah, but are they organic!”

“Try listening to the organ.”

“Thought-experiment. I’m on a diving-board above the spinning world. It’s spinning quite fast so I have no idea where I’ll land – no, that doesn’t work, skip the ocean. Its spinning is usefully adjusted so that wherever I

land it'll be on land! That doesn't overwhelm me. Decide? You have to be kidding! It'd be all right if I was happy where I am."

"Maybe you are."

"Guilty as hell about it. Suppose I say I have a rather fixed idea of residing in Carlin in harmony with my eso."

"Would leaning on gates chewing grass come into it?"

"That would come into it lots. Stretching out in the grass watching the insects. Nurse the occasional sick goat, not of course that my goats are ever sick, far too well cared-for."

"Maybe you could be the family vet."

"Maybe, maybe, maybe! I think on the whole not. Farmyard smells are OK. Sick farmyard smells – I told Kai, about Mel and the cowshed."

"What cowshed?"

"Bin-liner socks!"

"But it was fun!"

"It all is, isn't it. That's your appalling secret."

"What else d'you read?"

"Have I an interest? Soil biology! I don't find it boring but necessary but it doesn't strike me as cosmic, either. Plants. I get enthusiastic over a flower I don't seem to have seen before, though maybe it was there all the time. Lose myself not."

"Ever?"

"Cast-iron boots. Mostly."

"Music?"

"Varies. I love Saluvian. Sometimes I'm not in the mood. It's as though – it speaks to a part of me which sometimes isn't there. Experience did a gig in Car-sandis. I thought great but I didn't go. Felt too old! The kids told me all about it."

"What now?"

"Oh thanks!"

He grinned suddenly.

"What does float your boat? Consider this as a perfectly normal question any one person might ask another. What shall we do next?"

"I know they won't expect explanations, won't even ask."

"You feel trapped up here?"

"A bit. Too stupid for words."

"Suppose I say – but maybe not here. You try floating. I'm here to catch you if you fall. Drag you back to earth if you don't."

"Where then?"

"Anywhere. I thought we were going touring."

"This could be interesting! Nerve-wracking, but interesting."

"I shouldn't have thought your nerves could be any more wracked."

"Think of the new flowers there are to meet."

"Do you remember learning to swim?"

"Actually no. Born with fins."

"Oh you were!"

"Are we getting to something like, some people naturally – you. But gee I had every opportunity. That's a bit like someone whose mother was Preceptor of Veterinary Studies lamenting he never had a chance to be a vet! I found Maya instead, didn't I."

The town is called Garsit. It is one of the many small towns in the middle of Dabida to which I had never previously been and it is interesting, or maybe strange is a better word. There is a main street which starts as long low stone buildings with almost flat roofs and moved on to three-storeys stone buildings with almost flat

roofs before progressing to coloured brick and then glass and mirror-glass., history of architecture in a brisk walk. Obviously as Garsit grew they'd lengthened the high street. There is no apparent reason for Garsit, no river or confluence of rivers, no protective mountains looming above. People long ago crossing ?not-yet Dabida had decided to settle, not go any further, to just stop. How weird was that? It can't have been like that. They left somewhere that had grown too big for their liking or maybe just didn't like them and found an empty space to live wild, live free. No, you don't do that, if there isn't even any water. But there were trees in Garsit. Careful irrigation? Perhaps it had been a trade-route? Not east-west, but north-south? I had a burst of inspiration. If you are going to the coast, it's too far for one day's march, so it's a stop-over, a camp-site that grew.

Somewhere in another dream I had seen us as setting out incognito to explore managing to divorce myself entirely from the detail that people would recognize Hass. The Mayor of Garsit was a willowy lady of about 40 who introduced us to the head of the school who showed us the kids' IT lab, which I found frankly startling for somewhere I'd never heard of, my knowledge of course being the measure of all things. It turned out that lab was indeed the word: Garsit earns its keep as the home of Communicate! inventors of innovative educational software, much in demand in Kadun, and with many enthusiastic young testers around me. I sat myself next to a teen engrossed in an interactive nitrogen cycle and shortly afterwards gained the strong feeling she knew more than I did. We explored the program together and like wow! You could model the effects of various different nutrients and even branded fertilizers on your various crops. I asked her if she grew anything and she blossomed so to speak and began to tell me about the abacanth and sarndria in her rockery. It appears Garsit is lubricated by an underground river fed from the GD which forms a sort of underground flood plain. Thus two sorts of vegetation flourish, that with deep roots and that which needs little water. You live and learn!

Where were we going to stay! We weren't, just passing through. We passed.

"We drive all night?" asked Maitlan, just smothering a yawn.

"Why not!" declared Reakoed.

"There isn't much scenery," I said. "Let's go along the coast."

"The interior of our fair land does not excite?"

"Spoiled!" I said.

"I'll drive," said Reakoed.

"Are you awake?" I asked Hass.

"No," he said.

The sea appeared.

"Wanna swim!" said Reakoed

Maitlan gazed intently at the waters.

"Can't make out if they're sharks or dolphins."

"I can dream!" said Reakoed. "Wanna wash!"

"Washing would be good," I said.

We snaked along the coast until we came to habitation, a hotel, set in its own wild garden, with the pool like coming across a lagoon in wilderness, and we swam and swam and swam and ate and ate and ate and went to bed just as our the majority of our fellow-guests were in the middle of breakfast and slept and slept and slept.

Where am I! I surfaced and wondered where are we? The accent almost indistinguishable, quite so, yes, we must be in the west somewhere. Where was everyone? I showered and dressed and mooched out into wherever, giggling to myself as I observed somewhere a long way down the dashing young widow of the heroic young officer was just the itsiest-bitsiest – no, it wasn't that I was disturbed more that I just took note of, took note of being in an absolutely strange place where what I did next wasn't predetermined. And by the way it was 1 o'clock in the afternoon. And a special round of applause for Hass for having smashed up my routine... I supposed I ought to link up with my gang before having my hair done. Phone again: where are you!

Lounging in the gardens. See you at dinner, I said, or are we moving on. This place is cool, said Reakoed. OK! Dinner at 9. OK! I wandered off to the cool hair-dresser who tutted over my split ends and washed and trimmed and conditioned and piled the mop on the top of my head for dinner, at which point I mostly looked ludicrous, being dressed for camping. I was going to have to venture into the boutique next door. I hadn't been able to miss it. There was a crimson garment in the window. The top half was OK (apart from the colour and the fabric), loose folds, but the skirt was magnificently awful. The fabric was shiny and the skirt many sharp pointed pleats. The general effect, I thought, was crimson corrugated iron. I went in and said firmly that I was looking for something in a neutral tone and ended up with black. The Leotard Look lives again! Hmm. Lipstick from the pharmacist and all I lacked was earrings but of course there was jeweller's. Again, flash seemed to be the mode. I do not do earrings that dangle as far as my waist. but I picked up a pair of discreet studs then stashed my booty in my room and went to find the guys, who were of course talking. It pierced me suddenly, who asks Hass how he's hacking it, but of course Venga did, and doubtless Tar and Saski too. I just let it all flow over me and should frankly assess my contribution intellectual or emotional as zero. Time passed and people began to move away, thinking of going out for the evening, no doubt and I grinned like a fiend at Reakoed and said if you will excuse me, I have to change for dinner. I have had the foresight to purchase something to change into! He cast a glance at Hass and said Non-stick. You, however, I said. I however, he said, packed for all eventualities.

And so I made my grand entrance and heads turned as they were meant to. The guys jumped up and Maitlan gravely saw me to my seat, though I knew all of them were pissing with laughter inside. I think we'd forgotten, said Reakoed. Maitlan shook his head. You do not make the effort, Falita! If you make a sort of puree of peach and cream, then stiffen it like meringue, then decorate it with chocolate chips, that's masali and I love it.

At last we were alone!

"Allow yourself to love him," said Hass.

"How can I? If you really love someone you don't – one or the other has to be delusion, and it would be unbearable. Don't you see how desperately – of course you see!"

"Your need to believe Sorg was the real thing transcends death. I see."

"You see."

"I don't like this conversation," said Reakoed. "To be – pragmatic, it excludes Tet's perspective."

"I know!" I said. "Let's all pile into the car and zip back to Zur and ask him! Or is he in Azt!"

"You are petrified," said Hass.

"Me, Fearless Fal, the dashing etc? I do not need being lacerated. I have no defence." He waited. "If I felt I had to – if there were some external need to."

"I meant petrified, not frightened. Frozen, paralysed by."

"I think that's – garbage, crazy. Excessive!"

"I am thinking," said Maitlan, "when two women – or indeed two men – when two people of the same gender! When they are best friends and each finds a partner, is it not usual that foursomes socialize? Sarat must know Tet well, I think?"

I don't blush readily, fortunate since I'd spend a lot of time a delicate shade of scarlet. At any rate externally. I ended up saying, "No wonder I cut myself off!" Rightly or wrongly I felt my further contribution was expected. "We did, yes, quite a lot. Tet is of course very entertaining and one of the things he was very entertaining about was the Matter of Kadun. Mostly we – he and I – just talked about Zur, Zuri, the extension to the Lido, the new bookshop, the idiot on the bus. This is getting complicated."

"It does," said Hass, "when you open the closed doors."

"OK," I said. "Mel is a closed door. Sorg is a door I refuse to close. Kyse is an open door. Tet is – " I giggled in spite of myself. "Tet is just a door!"

"A jar?" suggested Reakoed. "Can of worms!"

"Don't forget the hotel corridor," murmured Hass.

"The what? Oh, all the doors that might lead somewhere else. Are we going to go all BPC, gee Fal, you need

to find resolution here?”

“No,” said Hass, “because Tet is nuts about you, always has been and always will be.”

Ah well, if Tet talked to Sarat – or for that matter to Hass.

“I don’t think I wanted to hear that.”

“I spy another delusion,” said Reakoed. “You and Tet lived your happy child-like life far distant from the bloody Matter of bloody Kadun.”

“I don’t think I wanted to hear that, either. I am moving on,” I said. “Question 973, can I without clearing up the wreckage?”

“It will get in the way,” said Hass, “unless you do something about it. Whether that is internal or external is irrelevant.”

“Is it really!”

“Are you absolutely sure your horror of staging a repeat performance has Kyse as the victim?”

”Oh come on!”

“I deal in possibilities.”

“Some more unlikely than others. I was about to say, how about I leave the country! The continent! I wasn’t being entirely sarcastic. Suppose I – I really took myself off. To the Schools. Studied. Eventually met someone. Lived happily ever after in Harn. What you’re saying is whether I could, can do that depends entirely on how I feel about, what I do about, my unfinished business.”

“Now you’re getting it.”

“I can’t do it. See paragraph 40(b) above. Nothing binds me to Kadun except me? What about Dabida!” Pause. “I am feeling quite angry and why I am feeling quite angry is because I am not someone who passes the buck but I still don’t like the whole complete and entire buck being landed back in my lap!”

“Of course Kyse might well follow you back to Harn.”

I found I was shaking my head quite violently.

“No, no, it’s another fantasy. Neither of us would be, could be, happy, single, together – it’s a much worse betrayal!”

“Sorg’s death really messed things up,” said Hass.

Reakoed and Maitlan looked puzzled. I wished I did.

“If you mean that in due course while living happily ever with Sorg I should have made my peace with Tet.”

“That’s what I mean. Have you said sorry?”

“I wasn’t sorry at the time. In any meaningful sense. What does it mean now?”

“What does it sound like now?”

“Oh yes,” I said. I took a very deep breath. “IF I were sure Tet was what I wanted, THEN. How about

“Sorry I’ve made a complete cock-up of my life and dragged you into the mess that is me.” But that’s not.

And why say it? Not that I’m trying to get out of this conversation or anything. Are you sure this isn’t more only matters in months with an S in them.”

“No. No, I’m not sure. You are.”

“I – I take on board, this happened to lots of people. Well, part of it. I then take on board that some of them quite possibly returned shame-faced to their former partners in Ciletij/Vasucula/Dabida/strike out where not applicable, and it maybe even worked. I do not take on board that is necessarily my situation.”

“Your situation is different,” acknowledged Hass.

Reakoed put his arm round my shoulders.

“He just wants you to think about what cracked you.”

I looked up at him.

“That bad, huh?”

“Try your delicious performance on That Fateful Day.”

“It was all my guilt, wasn’t it.”

“Yup,” said Reakoed.

Somewhere I’m screaming. “Somewhere I’m screaming. You’re saying my guilt cracked me?”

“Yup,” said Reakoed.

“I was carrying it for nothing. I’d wrecked things for nothing. I love Sorg!”

“You have to,” said Reakoed.

“Fuck this!”

“You think Sarat has no guilt?”

“It’s different!”

“Of course.”

“Tet didn’t argue, did he. Don’t forget we were all there, grandstand performance.”

Maitlan shook his head sadly.

“I have always regretted...”

“Grr. I’m too confused to be aggressive! No, he didn’t. “ I stopped being confused and turned on Reakoed.

“So what the hell is all this Tet will write my script, just the what the, he never - ! No, he did not seize me by my hair, literally or metaphorically, and drag me back to Zur.”

“Perhaps he never quite believed it could last, Fal-girl.”

“Perhaps he was too bloody revolted by me to care!”

“Did you think he didn’t care?”

“Sorry, chaps, have to run...For the first time I acutely want to be somewhere else.”

“Missile detonated on target.”

“What I think is what I have said I think about my relationship with Tet, at which I’m cringing. We were kids together, etc. It’s all true. It’s all false. It’s – true when there’s an S in the month. Building mud-pies doesn’t last seven years. We were happy. We were not. Of course we were! I wanted, thought I wanted –

“I turned to Hass in appeal suddenly. “Leave me out of this a minute! There’s a parallel no-one sees. I know Sorg played the piss-artist! You knew him. I knew him. Sorg was 24-carat, agreed.?”

“Agreed.”

“And Tet.”

“Agreed.”

My anger had evaporated.

“What are you talking about?” I asked Reakoed. “What are you talking about?” I almost sounded desperate.

“I know what you mean, but why! There’s one thing I can explain. I think. “ But then I shook my head.

“No, I can’t.”

“What shape is it?”

“I asked you a question,” said Hass.

“Maybe I don’t want to answer it! Let me ask you one. What is the desired outcome of all this?”

“We just want you to be real?”

“Think of it as a fact-finding mission,” said Reakoed. “What do you want to do?”

“You asked me that, “ I muttered.

“I did? What do you want from your life? It’s not organic, Fal.”

“Been through that. How can it be? Just you and me,” I said to Hass. “And the balloon game. Because it’s the only thing that makes any sense right now.”

“I thought – who listens to you, Hass. Then I thought Venga of course and Tar and Saski. And Mel and Sarat.”

“It happened,” said Hass. “There are some things you close because they cannot be changed.”

“That sounds awfully brutal.”

“Yes.”

“And here am I bleating and bleating and bleating. You nearly said it. Two people who are dead, neither of whom would wish my distress. And even if they did! That’s silly, isn’t it. If these two people malignly wished me to suffer I’d be the last person to pay any attention to it. Have I achieved anything at all today except reminding myself it’s fun to put some make-up on occasionally?”

“Not really.”

“What really is the bottom line here?”

“Believe that it can – not that it will but that it can – work out without your pushing it?”

“Hmm. That’s a long way of saying stop.”

He just grinned.

“What’s crazy is I don’t know what I want. I mean it is, isn’t. It’d be one thing to be desperately trying to

make something I wanted happen. I know, I know!”

He said it anyway.

“When you stop you’ll know what you want.”

“I actually don’t have any aims. I did think that. My life went wrong when I left Tet. It didn’t seem real enough. It’s not – that’s what I couldn’t explain. It wasn’t that Sorg was more glam or more intelligent. He wasn’t even wittier. Less acid!”

“Did it?”

“Didn’t it! One of the few things I’m perfectly sure of is that when I was with Tet I didn’t give two seconds’ thought to our interesting adolescence.”

“There are four people in this – triangle! Two of them are dead. The living can talk to each other.”

“Four?”

“I think it.”

“You personally, without any wish to be prescriptive or anything ghastly like that, do you think I should talk to Tet?”

“I think he’ll talk to you. You think - shoot on sight.”

”Yes,” I admitted finally, “that’s what I think. Look - there are two reasons for my intruding on Tet. I may be delusional but I’m not dishonest! One is to make myself feel good, nothing for him, all for me. Really I’m not the complete shit he thinks I am. The other would be – because I’d decided, which I haven’t. Neither is on the agenda.”

“That is how it would look,” agreed Hass. “On the other hand.”

He picked up his phone.

“Oh no!” I said, but I didn’t actually wrest it from his grasp.

“Tet? Hass?”

My face made silent meah sounds.

“Are you on your own?”

Perhaps fortunately I couldn’t hear Tet’s responses.

“OK, I’m over in the west with Fal, Reakoed and Maitlan. May we join you for breakfast?”

I did hear an explosion of laughter. Laughter?

“Think of it as a reunion.”

“See you.” He cut the call, and turned to me. “You tried to avoid me. You avoid Mel. You avoid Zur like the plague. You can’t spend the rest of your life avoiding us all. You’re not going to tear each apart with us there.”

“But I’ll have a pretty good idea of the vibe.”

“You’ll have a pretty good idea of the vibe. Shall I now invite Mel?” Tears were pouring down my cheeks.

“Fal, Fal, Fal-girl, if it’s that bad.”

I shook my head. “I’ve only seen him once and he was so sweet and I didn’t deserve it. I thought he was in Azt.”

“So he is now, Fal-girl, when the mood takes him.”

“Where’s he living now?”

“Same place.”

“Are you crazy? You expect me to walk into my own home and - and - ?”

“And what?”

“Not freak!”

“Yes,” said Hass.

“I’m not going!”

“You prefer the hill?”

“Sorito’s!”

“Drop you off at the train-station? You think he’d leave that studio?”

“Oh, how much I matter!”

“You matter.”

“You know that.”

“I know that. Of course he might hide it rather well.”

“You are so comforting.”

“Hi,” I said, then “This is hard for me.” I pretty well collapsed onto the sofa I’d bloody well bought. “I feel such an idiot.”

“Then we’ll leave you to it,” said Hass.

“You bastard!”

Tet, you’ll have gathered, is not one of your expressionless types. He looked at Hass, at Reakoed, at Maitlan, at me. And said: “What the fuck is this now!”

“It’s a very long story,” said Hass.

“And you’re thinking we need to talk each other?”

“I’m thinking Fal needs to talk to you not about you.”

“And I am needing to talk to Fal? Have I no telephone?”

“I’d better go,” I said.

“It’s Hass I have an issue with here.”

“I rang you.”

“I do not care to be set up!”

“I think Hass got tired of going over the same stuff with me.”

“And what stuff would that be?”

“The total screaming cock-up I have made of my life. I shouldn’t have left you. I shouldn’t have left Zur. I am so sorry!” Well, no, that hadn’t been scripted. No place like home. “I’m sorry,” I said again. “I’d better go. I didn’t mean to – “

“Hass, you’ll go, please.”

The door closed behind them.

Was I just real? Oh shit!

We looked at each other.

“Umm,” I said.

“No good us both going ape.”

“We always did!”

“Fal-girl, what the fuck?”

“Hass says I just tie the knots tighter.”

“That is not good news. Do I not hear you farm?”

“Oh, I farm. And do good works. Up with the lark, toiling from dawn to dust. Just so long as I don’t think. In the end I couldn’t stop myself thinking.”

“So you turned to Hass.”

“Having bent the ear of everyone else in sight.”

“I don’t like to think of you unhappy.”

“It’s not exactly unhappy. What was it? A serene maelstrom of unresolved conflicts. Not that there was much serene. It was Maya’s murder. I kept your card.”

“I thought to come to you and then...I’ll make us breakfast and then you will talk.”

I didn’t miss the pronoun.

I told him everything, which I’d always known I should if I told him anything, though I don’t suppose it was absolutely everything – there is rather a lot of it, isn’t there – but everything about the pair of us and me and come to think of it it might have been everything because there’s so much repetition. He said practically nothing, - this is Tet we’re talking about, you have to factor in the intermittent ‘oh for fuck’s sake’ and ‘now that is screaming garbage’ but he didn’t pursue these telling points and I watched the dark eyes darken, the slight tilt of the head, the tightening of the mouth, the half-grin, the raised eyebrows – and the barely suppressed laughter.

“If I understand now,” he said at length, “and I want to understand. This business of the – mushroom – “ The laughter was not suppressed. “You lived my life. You lived Sorg’s life. Where is your life in this? That is the question. If I had understood how vulnerable you are, might I not have looked after you better? But then you found in Azt a life that was not mine and thought it your own?”

“Something like that.”

“Let me show you something.”

He disappeared into the bedroom and came back with a small silver stallion running like the wind. It’s actually a copy of the Pika, but neither of us knew that when I gave it him. My heart lurched. Tet placed it gently on the table.

“A witness, I think! Now Fal-girl, you are by no means sure you want me back and I – I am by no means sure I want you back, but I am not wholly averse to the idea and nor I think are you.” Oh. “I am also thinking it’s Hass you need right now to lay your ghosts. There would be a question, would there not, should I be trusting you if the Senate sat all night.” I felt duly knifed. Do not cut the crap, Tet, do not on any account beat about the bush. “I am thinking if I could not you would not be in pieces on our sofa. But there are bigger questions. My life, Fal, my life. Would I not be a target. That life you could not lead without – infringing mine and perhaps Kyse himself – a grand man, I may say – he does not wish to die for Kadun. I do not think either of us is of a kind to stay safe in Zur.” I promptly felt like walking death, which of course was what I was. “I do not think I know you as well as I thought I know you. I thought – I thought perhaps that was where you belonged after all, on the wider stage, and oh Fal, what do you do but take up goats. But there is still the wider stage and it is tearing you apart. You do not have to risk death for Kadun. Who would think less of you? Who are your friends? Is it not basic, Fal? Whatever the issue. You do not live the life others have chosen for you. This is my life. I’d like to share it. So says one to another. But sometimes it is not so simple.” I managed a wry grin.

“This is my life. I’d like to go on having it.”

“The exemplar is not Maya!”

“Kadun,” I said, “is not an abstract. It’s millions of people who need it to work.”

“Then they must make it work! If they decide it cannot work, the choice does not lie with a stray Zuri.”

“A stray Fidubi?”

He hooted.

“Did I not say things are not always simple! And I am a foreigner in Zur, and that too is different. I would fight for Mel. Not for Sarat. The border is in your head! The border is the border and long may cordial relations between our two great nations prevail! Kadun must stand on her own two feet or we have one great nation and I may say many is the argument I have fought for Mel against the claim that such is his aim! If you wish to become irtubi, become it. Impaled on the border now, that much is true. From my perspective, it is not your home. It is where you – crash-landed and if I continue that metaphor, when one crash-lands one makes, does one not – “I felt the laughter. “ – an impact crater, and it seems perhaps perhaps one’s roots are deep.”

Eeek.

“Tet – would you say – could you say – is that how Zur mostly sees it?”

“Ah, my role as oracle – yes.”

“You, Reakoed, Maitlan.”

“One can immerse oneself in the Matter of Kadun or one can get a life! A man after my own heart.”

“Perhaps a trifle harsh. That’s when it started, isn’t it. I feel as though I’m having a dizzying realization here, though you probably think it’s obvious. Maya divided me on the border. Sarat was never part of the sizzling 7.53 recurring. Sarat was Sarat and separate. She never felt it.” That came out a bit squealy.

“Your life is a wreck, a ruin because you are not Maya?”

“Owwwww. Can we just sit and look at that one a mo? Because I have the terrible feeling it’s true.”

“I’m thinking she must have felt it. It’s what she did with the feeling.”

“Over the top, chaps. Hass said she said to them. The list of people I may yet importune does not include Pietri and Caluna.”

“And so you want that pink cloud where it doesn’t matter. I ask you, Fal, is it that it doesn’t matter or how you feel about the mattering?”

At least I could be brave about this.

“How do you feel about the mattering?”

“You ripped my guts out.”

I just shook my head dejectedly.

“I am not dancing on a little pink cloud, Fal. Saying I love everything and nothing matters. I may be saying I love you so it doesn’t matter. I am not of a mind to be a victim, even if I was the innocent party. Have I not wondered, did I fail you? Nor am I blind for is it not a story as old as humanity, the men and now the women go off to war – though nor am I inclined to pour sugar for – perhaps – it would not have been so bad, had it been a war. The men and women went off to a party! But then there is the other side. I could have gone with you. “ Pause. “Nor will I pour sugar because of what followed. I trusted you so utterly I didn’t think of it as trust. It did not occur to me it was possible. Were we not a team? The decision was yours. Why?” “Not – not everyone was exactly impressed. Some people – I took it, Tet, that’s not an excuse, it’s just how it was, I took it though it wasn’t true. More glam, more money. What I said to Hass was more real.” I dried up. I could see that he didn’t think that a satisfactory response.

“I understand the happening, the cutting edge – Fal, I understand that to be at the centre of a revolution is perhaps not to be entirely sane though I do not let you off on the grounds of insanity! But these are descriptions of the situation, not the man. More real?”

“Tet – I’m not going to say you’re the least fake person I know because there’s strong competition. You are very very unfake! He – he met a need in me for – “ Oh Sorg. “He was different.”

“Different.”

“And the same. But different. He was as wild as you, as witty as you, as creative as you. Slightly less acid.”

“I shall keep the litmus paper to hand! Fal-girl.” He gave into laughter. “I am not laughing at you. Promise. You’re telling me I lost you to a clone because I had the misfortune not to be born a scion of Carlin? And so be – different?”

“I don’t think I can explain.” I had a burst of inspiration. “What you said about it isn’t that it doesn’t matter but how you feel about it mattering. He was – all the things you are, but he made them something – different.”

“Mel will not hear a word against, you know that. All the games he played with Challin. Perhaps now you can only lead a double life if you are very unfake at core. My problem is not with Sorg who snaffled the most beautiful woman on the continent.”

“Litmus paper!”

He grinned.

“And staying in Zur, that was tame.”

“Yes,” I said.

“Touche. But then this madness of a handful of upper-class kids who changed the world stopped being fun. I have been shot once.”

“I didn’t understand. Now I do.”

“What?”

“The greatest fantasy of all. That no-one would die. I did not understand that you had no wish to enter a battle-zone for what was not your country. I also understand – Amida says they sweat blood, did and do – the – courage to leave people you love to do what they have to do. And – that is the betrayal?”

“The betrayal is your making love to another man.”

“Sorry.”

“I’m hesitant to say this, Fal. There’s not been anyone else, even – casually. I am not saying it to guilt-trip you. That is how I feel. About you.” He managed a wry grin. “I’m not certain I’m wanting you but I am certain I’m not wanting anyone else. When I told Mel my thinking, he said, no, that is not Fal. What do you say?” Problem: I wasn’t at all sure what he meant.

“What did you say to Mel?” I asked cautiously.

“That you wanted a hero, someone you could admire – “

“Tet! No, no, no, no, no!”

“When I felt I hated you, it was because you knew where I’d bleed and that’s where you put the knife. I asked, what have I done to the stupid bitch to make her hate me like that? Everyone told me I was being a moron. I never really hated you but stupid bitch now – how thick are you, Fal?”

“I never thought of it like that! I love you!” It hung there a moment.

“It showed.”

“Oh shit!” Well, this was never going to be a make Fal feel good session. “When – you didn’t chase me – it wasn’t that I half-wanted you to save me from myself – I noticed that you didn’t, OK. I thought you were too bloody repelled to care.”

“I just gave in? The revulsion – the context was not good, Fal-girl.”

“I thought - you didn’t care – that much, you had your art, you were happy in Zur without me.”

“I was happy in Zur,” he said affectionately, “you stupid bitch, knowing I had you! Oh Fal, Fal, Fal! And then I have thought. You want to know how I felt? Suppose you and Mel had made a go of it, then in the whirlpool he’d run off with the very bewitching Cantilip za-fenan. How would you have felt?”

“Yes,” I said.

“I ran that past him “

“Don’t touch with barge-pole.”

“That was a very long time ago.”

“Does that matter?”

“When it turned out to be true?”

“I’m crying quite easily at the moment. So far by a super-human effort of will I’ve stopped myself. Because.”

“You came here, Fal. I will not tone it down because you have suffered so much. At the time of which we talk you hadn’t suffered at all. I’m asking you candidly, if Sorg had lived, would you be here now?”

“Maybe,” I said. “Don’t you see, that’s one of the – we didn’t have time for me to find out – it wasn’t what I wanted, after all. Tet – I turned it down already.”

“Oh, I see that! I’m thinking coping with what has been is hard enough without what might have been. Let us see now. You could have had Mel. You could have had anyone. You chose me. Now, I know you or think I do. I do believe how lucky I am. You, me, us, we click, we rock. You love me, what more could I want? Fast forward – skip that frame. Fast forward more. You’re telling me we’re cases of arrested development, kids who didn’t understand – what was it, what was going to happen to our little world. Fal, nothing has happened to my little world except being smashed up by you. Nothing – seismic! The change is in Kadun. Life in Zur, if you cared to live it, has not – materially – lousy word, materially it has altered, more trade, more irtubi. Lifestyle in Zur has not changed. And oh this story has a punch-line. What then happened finally to Falita who thinks – thinks – she grew up, grew out of me, is she a renowned international figure? She’s bloody goat-farming! Fal, what do you want? Can I give it you? Can anyone? You must find it.”

“Excuse me,” I muttered. At least I knew where the bathroom was.

When I came back there were two glasses and a bottle of brandy on the table. Tet poured.

“Just down it.”

I did and spluttered. I managed a grin. “Not only a goat-farmer but an abstemious one. It feels like you’re about the 17th person to ask me that. The same people ask me 17 times! They tear their hair out. Reakoed may be bald soon. What do I bloody want!”

“Something happened in Kadun? I am not meaning the obvious. Any of the obvious. I know it was not the glam, the international stage. Did you not spend half your childhood on the hill! And the other half – you think your bad behaviour has cut you off from Pietri?”

I glared at him. Another one immune to my glares.

“Yes. In a word. Now you come to mention it....It somehow being totally irrelevant that Sorg’s twin is his daughter-in-law. Not that I’m confused, or anything.” Just gazing in horror at what I just said. “Just gazing in horror at what I just said. Oh Tet. I loved him. But if you ask me – if I ask me the – reality level of – be sensible, Fal, be coherent. Do not bury your head in your hands. The reality level of a – peacetime life with Sorg.” I couldn’t continue for a minute. “That is me?”

“The hair-tearing. It was all that was real. It was not real at all. You let Maya down.”

“I what! Oh for – “

“You were not perfect. You were not real. You let everyone down.”

“Tet!”

“And no-one else has cracked up, dropped out and taken up goat-farming.”

“All right, all right! No-one else has deserted his/her partner!”

“If we are not all perfect, then at least we are all real.”

I picked up my glass and put it down again.

“You’re – you would seem to me to saying that – my sense of my own unreality was so acute – “

“I will not put words into your mouth, Fal.”

“I seem to me to be saying!”

“I’m asking again something happened in Kadun?”

“We take it all for granted,” I said. “I’d never seen people who were really poor.”

“I have and I take nothing for granted.”

“I hadn’t and – it became necessary to fight. I thought. I felt. Only I guess it’s not really what I want to do. I didn’t really mean – I meant – what I said, to my total amazement! Only not like it sounds.”

“Fal has discovered the world is a bad place!” He was laughing, but kindly. “Just don’t be telling me I’m not political!”

“I still remember the campaign to extend the Lido!”

“A triumph for people-power! But is that not exactly – if I understand that is the current level of your involvement in Carlin? And it’s not enough. Discuss! So what are you chasing, Fal?”

“Risk?”

“A better answer than death.”

“Oh come on!”

“I too didn’t mean that as it sounds. What are you frightened of?”

“Me. It’s like I make choices without my consent!”

“That man,” he said, and grinned suddenly. “I’m meaning Hasiyata Talal, not the gallant major!”

“Maya, Sorg,” I said.

“Let me put it to you, as we have said – Maya is a hard act to follow. You want to be something you are not. But then you are not frightened of not measuring up, though is that not how it seems. You are frightened of how easy it is to be someone else, perhaps how much you feel you want to be someone else. Someone not somewhere.”

“Hass knows.”

“Of course!”

“Ought to be, ought to be. Or of course ought not to be.”

“Now I will not say that in a moment of crisis it welled up out of your deepest being that what you really wanted was to live in the country and keep goats. There are survival tactics, do I not know it. But I would say.” He broke off. “I would say there is this question of mattering. I would say it broke on you like a new dawn that the Matter of Kadun mattered, that that was reality and – your life to date had been kids’ stuff. And – you ran off with – the hero, because he was real, meaning the bloody Matter of bloody Kadun was clearly the – that for which he’d risked everything. But it was his country. You overlooked that because it wasn’t Maya’s. “That is a very succinct way of putting it.”

“I am still saying to you, Fal, the bloody Matter of bloody Kadun doesn’t matter a flying fuck to me. If you tell me that makes me less real, less aware of human suffering, even less aware of what’s at stake. Less aware of pain. You are not the only person who has suffered. Have you thought of what Mel went through?”

“The consequences of our choices,” I said.

“Sarat assumed responsibility for Maya’s death and they told him bollocks and rightly so. There are unanswerable questions of wider responsibility, of - having brought about the situation in which. You may say – did Hass not say, squaddies are still alive who might be dead, kiddies would be dying of curable diseases. It is not an equation that can balance. Once I saw some animals taunting an old man and waded in. If I learned anything it was that one person wading in – but still I’m telling you I’d do it again! But endemic poverty, you do not wade in. You change the whole structure.” He laughed. “Even you understand that!”

“Oh shut up!”

“Was I not invited to speak? There are two sides to politics, yes? There is the structure in which – in which anyone can wade in. And the wading. Now I will wade in, you know this and count myself fortunate that no-one in Dabida thinks to shoot me for rejecting the extension to the bloody Lido, and if I am right it is your thinking that it is important only to work for the structure but that is not how it works, Fal, and indeed I strike at the root of the Matter of Kadun about which I do not give a flying fuck! Why Fal, have they risked, do they

risk their very lives? Why the talk, talk, talk – I should have made a grand plotter had I the inclination!":
I sighed.

"Because it matters as much if not more than people talk back!"

"Because all the resolutions in the Senate and the speeches and the constitutions do not matter a flying fuck if people like me do not wade in. It is that which maintains Dabida and – that is why I say one stray Zuri in the Senate is not going to make the difference. Are there not enough people fighting for the structure?"

I sighed again.

"Hass tried to make me see that. Why did I think what I do doesn't matter. But there are still a lot of angles."

"And they're still all what a little voice in your head tells you you ought to be doing! I'm thinking when you understand Maya you'll understand yourself better."

"That's my pretty pink balloon."

"You love your eso, Fal, it can do you nothing but good."

"It's getting late. If I'm to get back to Carlin."

"I can sleep on the sofa. So I like having you around. That doesn't."

"Would you like to meet my goats? Sleep on my sofa."

"Then maybe I'll understand what all the fuss is about!"

Oh.

"I haven't actually got a sofa! Armchairs do? It's a cottage. It's not large."

"This I have to see."

"But preferably not die of starvation."

"See what I've got in the freezer."

So Tet. Oh it's a fine night. Let us take a drive to Carlin. There was something mildly terrifying about the ease with which we worked together in the kitchen and I concentrated on being extremely practical.

"I've got rice," I said.

"How do you know the weevils haven't got at it?"

He slung into the rations bag a couple of those packets of perfect rice in 0.5 seconds.

So here I am in the back of Tet's roadster, same old roadster, Tet is not new wheels every year, and he has the stereo on, gentle but not smoochy – smooch would be too much – and it's not too loud to talk, but both of us seem to have dried up on the Matter of Fal, or should that be the Matter of Fal and Tet, though I don't think this is a moment of 'let's pretend' but more emotional exhaustion. Although we are rapidly leaving Zur behind, Gosh, it's quite busy, isn't it, and I feel him grinning at how I can be at the same time part of the pulsating hub and so totally – out of it. Er yes, I could put that better. Something stirs inside me about the impossible – impossible 24 hours ago that Tet and I could be on our way to Carlin – but all I say is, or was about to be before | realized how dense it sounded and kicked my brain into life. "Art is life," I said. Oh yikes. "I mean, as usual I had the wrong end of the stick. They said you went to Azt from time to time, but you still don't give a flying fuck "

"I had an exhibition."

Foot right in it, Fal-girl.

"Nobody told me, she said lamely."

I could see him grinning in the mirror.

"You'd've come?"

It gave me a rather left out feeling, thinking of Sarat and Hass and Venga and doubtless even Reakoed (drat him!) visiting doubtless the preview, but that I did not say.

"You drew what you saw. It's a good job you know me and know I've got a brain somewhere!"

"I do? But if I am reading that brain what you think to express is by my pictures I show the world something the camera loses and so fight the war."

"You make me feel silly. You can't not draw it because it helps Sarat!"

"Now you are being silly! You are saying I am averse to helping Sarat!"

"Of course you're not. Where are they?"

"That would be telling!"

“You’re teasing.”

“Some were not for sale.”

“Should I visit the Jumesit more often?”

“Perhaps! Three were bought by the City Gallery. There were six drawings of poor kiddies I gave to CLIK. Cho bought a cartoon of Sarat with six faces and twenty arms. “

“Wanna see!”

There was a lump in my throat which was not emotion but the choking urge to ask him to do something for me, draw Carlin, some of it will vanish, some of it has vanished, catch it before it goes. I suddenly remembered.

“Years ago.” I began to giggle. “Before we were all famous! You drew us all.”

“Oh yes,” he said. “Before there was a scar. Is there anywhere off the main drag?”

“Nearly at the Tap.”

“OK.”

We snaked around the car-park looking for a space.

“What is this, social centre of the known world!”

We parked. He made no move to get out, but turned to me.

“Those drawings. I took them and then I drew the scar. For Mel. For all of us. That is strictly private viewing. I heard you were on the hill with Kyse, and I have to say I thought exactly nothing of it, for you are both Mel’s friends. You’ll ask Mel to show you when you’re next in Zur. One day perhaps when we are all dead of a good ripe old age.”

Oh Tet. So what kind of a one-dimensional goon am I that I don’t think Tet understands pain.

“I will,” I said solemnly.

“What crap can we purchase here that is not a patch on my cooking!” He flung open the door and got out. I can still read Basic Tet, I thought. That wasn’t let’s move on, that was let’s enjoy some crap.

Clutching polystyrene cups of chocolate, we immersed ourselves in souvenirs of Dabida. Couple of giggling kids. Tet was spreading out for inspection a particularly awful tea-cloth when he suddenly said, “Hist!”

“Hist?”

“We are observed! It’ll be all over Zur in the morning!” The idea didn’t seem to worry him. He pointed to the fountain-shaped object in what was supposed to be the Saa’anda Senta. “You can’t draw this badly. There’s a law against it. That water is falling upwards.”

“I have always wanted,” I said, “a black biro and a yellow highlighter all in one.”

“Get you either way,” said Tet, “when you put it in your top pocket.”

We moved on. H-W scan IDs at the border. It’ll be all over Zur in the morning. The idea didn’t seem to worry me.

“Now we turn off.”

Now it wasn’t busy

He looked around. Well, it was cosy, it was neat.

“Material possessions are not uppermost in your mind.”

Not very warm. I put the fire on.

“You do not fell the trees and saw the logs.” He saw my face. “Just bewildered, Fal-girl, just bewildered. I know you are not penniless aside from your other troubles. You don’t want to touch the money? Oh, I see. As if enough were not besetting you. You sit down and rest and let me do the cooking.”

I was just as bewildered.

“Tet – what are you talking about?”

“The garbage in your head, Fal-girl! Remember me, I lived with you. You like nice things. You like beauty. If you do not fulfil what you think are Carlin’s expectations you have no right to enjoy the money. I never had a heart-to-heart with Sorg but I have no doubt he would tell you that is screaming garbage. Which Hass of course also told you. When are you going to stop beating yourself up? I tell you frankly I do not want you until you do.”

“I feel as though I got it by mistake!” Pause. “Until.”

“Until. Get some food into us.”

The stew was scrumptious. He always was a good cook. We watched TV and didn’t even argue about

current affairs. Think I could have put that better. I guess we were both completely drained. I dozed off, half-awoke as I heard him get up, just going to the loo now, woke up somewhere in the middle of night, looked at watch (two), remembered, looked out of window, saw car still there, took rain-cheque on walking into my bedroom where he was doubtless comatose on bed, laughed to myself with or at the general craziness and resumed my usual position at the kitchen table while the kettle boiled and I played with the string of a tea-bag. Before we go one step further, I thought, even if we're not going anywhere. It's like everything else, completely true and completely not. The kettle boiled, I prodded my (herbal) tea-bag a few times, dropped it in the bin and took my mug back to my sitting-room – oh, all right, my all-purpose daylight hours living-room – and settled down in my armchair, just in time to hear the front-door go and go into over-drive. Of course Lattic had a key, probably thought the light meant a burglar.

“Lattic?” I called out.

“Who the fuck is Lattic?”

“The neighbour minding the joint!”

“You left the keys on the table. I thought to see Carlin By Night!”

“I thought Lattic had seen the lights and thought I was being burgled. “ I giggled. “And by the way he’s gay. And Zuri.”

“It’s a colony you have here?”

“Lattic has had his own problems.”

“That name rings a bell. He’s not the Jaizal porn guy?”

“The very same.”

“Could I have thought life in Carlin bucolic and narrow?”

“Actually he’s probably sleeping the sleep of the reformed and rather sweet safe in the arms of Narak. Fidubi lover.”

“Hub of the known world. Tell me truly now, if you wanted to take in a late-night movie, you’re lost!” “Have to drive to Car-sandis. I think! I never have.”

“Doesn’t sound the worst fate in the world.” Hmm. “Water! What have you there?”

“Lemonflower and nettle. Glasses are above your head.”

“What is not...”

He turned the tap on, put his head under it to get a few mouthfuls, let it splosh on the back of his neck a minute, then shot me a look of pure mischief.

“Cold shower!” I grinned, and he grinned back. “I think I’ll not stay, Fal. It’s been good. We’ll do it again.” Pause. “You’ll note I have not so much as placed a chaste kiss on your brow. I would not wish – it is not I do not wish to – with or without barge-pole.”

“Understood,” I said.

I was still sitting dazed when I noticed it was starting to get light and so I’d have to do things. You’ll have noticed I hadn’t had a lot of sleep in the last 48 hours and I did not feel like a day’s work, but nor did I want to flop. I wanted to drive. I was just wondering what to do next in what I thought a vague sort of way, when I had a little moment of truth. This is what they mean! Hass wants to take me away from all this, that’s fine, I’ll fix it. I want to take me away from all this, that’s shirking my responsibilities. I would just check... I hoped Lattic hadn’t killed my sevania.

The sevania was flourishing. I stroked its leaves.

Lattic came up behind me.

“I saw a car come. Gone this morning, wasn’t sure you were back.”

“Just passing through.”

He grinned and looked at the sevania.

“I’m good with plants, you know that.”

“Can I leave you to it? Is that OK?”

“Course it is.”

Tet rang Hass.

“You did the right thing, you bastard, you!”

“Good.”

“Have you gone back to Azt? There’s something I want to share, when you have a mo”

“I’m on the hill. See you shortly?”

“Fine.”

You’ll recall my toothbrush and a spare pair of knickers are in a rucksack in Hass’s boot. Fortunately Miss Efficiency has a spare charger for her phone.

I went into the kitchen to make myself a flask of something at least, and Tet had brought a whole loaf, so I stuck some honey in a butterless sandwich. Back at the kitchen table. I was shaking my head as I had when I woke in the early hours. Everything everyone said was completely right and completely wrong at the same time. They had to understand that. You’ll be wanting me to explain that, no doubt. Of course he wasn’t wondering if he could live in Carlin, just curious. Take this business of writing my bloody script. Reakoed is exactly right and exactly wrong and I’d never argued or more exactly said it was gross slander of Tet because I knew exactly what he meant. Oh is it 2 in the morning, shall we walk into Car-sandis? I enjoyed it, I told myself rather urgently, and equally I hadn’t always gone along with it, if I preferred sleep, for instance, but I saw or rather I saw that Reakoed saw that there was somehow no room for me in it. But it was bollocks! I worked late. I socialized on my own, yes, without running off with – I am was am mad. I loved him. I loved Sorg and my dawning realization that he was indeed a virtual clone was not soothing me, nor Tet’s analysis thereof. I didn’t think it’d been scientifically proven that one can’t love two people equally and that I had to beat myself up with if one was real the other was phoney, toss a coin, because I can’t tell. There hadn’t been a framework to my life. Of course there had though I saw my friends were Tet’s friends but Tet’s friends were a separate crowd. I looked at myself sternly and demanded I consider whether it wasn’t just another delusion that there had been no flaws in Tet’s and my relationship. No cracks. Not in the relationship, no. I stopped in my tracks on That Fateful Day. Did they see it as some kind of assertion of independence? Was it? Hardly. Maybe if I’d run off with a Ciletij nationalist. So I had to assert my independence, did I – was else was all this break out, see the world stuff. A statement of fact. It was plain ludicrous that I could only conceive of myself in three places. At the same time. At the same time would really satisfy me. Metaphor, metaphor. That’s what I mean! That’s what Reakoed means. My life had been at the same time wholly circumscribed and wholly not. At (virtually) any time I could have done anything. So the question of the day is... Was it I who just didn’t want to? He had his art, Fal, you stupid bitch you. And it wasn’t true that I didn’t have my thing. I had the H-W. OK, it wasn’t my thesis on soil biology. You don’t explain when something works. I mean it just did. And Kyse has his history. I don’t think that will work the same. I just didn’t know I was doing what I liked. Tet and I were happy. No quesch dear old Tet being boring. I suddenly burst out laughing. Oh Fal can’t be normally unfaithful, not Fal, she has to make it complicated. Anyone else, virtually anyhow, open and shut, seduced by the wider stage and blah. Poor Kyse. Not that he’d seemed to mind. Kyse, I decided, represented Zur in my complicated little psycho-drama. Home and normality.

I knew it had not once occurred to me I should make Tet or Kyse a target but much worse than knowing that was knowing why. Amida must have thought I was a total nutter. Pushing me to see these were two separate stories.

I must have some kind of other shoulder-bag, holdall, back-pack. Under the stairs was a back-pack you could climb a mountain with, but all it had to do was have three sides. I shoved in it a change of clothes, flask, sandwiches, a couple of bottles of water, a pen and a notepad, hauled it onto the back seat and took off for the main road with the vague intention of driving west. Until I reached the ocean? It’s a possibility.

Tet opened the door, unshaven and unironed but distinctly happy.

“Been working since I got back from Carlin.”

“Where?” asked Maitlan.

“Tis a place over the border. I think I’ll not tell you what we said. This hovel she lives in – “

“It’s no good,” said Reakoed. “I’m going to howl with laughter.”

“We of course,” said Maitlan, “do not know her so well and so politely refrain.”

“Bollocks!” said Tet. “To resume my tale. We are decided, neither of us being entirely insane, that I shall sleep on a chair. We are watching television and having a drink and – and it is terrifyingly perfect. She dozed off. Not much sleep of late, I’m thinking, but I am touched anyway because it means she is relaxed. But there are not many people, male or female, who look perfect when they doze off in an old armchair and it happens that Fal is one of them. And I have a little – moment there. My little heart goes pitter-pat and I know that I am unreservedly nuts about the woman. Comes the dawn, maybe we can’t work it out but that does not mar the moment. I came home and I drew her. I’ll not give it to her instantly but I wanted you to see. Come into the studio.”

Sharp intakes of breath.

“Oh Tet.”

“And now I have bones to pick. I’m thinking someone should have told me she was in acute distress and apparently living a life of penitential self-sacrifice. Tying the knots tighter! She’s nailing herself to the wall. You’ll not tell me you thought I didn’t care?”

“Did you ask?” enquired Maitlan.

Tet considered him.

“I’ll not get into a row with you, Maitlan, I have too much care for you that and I grant you have a point. But are we the fucking Six or are we not?”

Maitlan laughed.

“You too have a point.”

“A farm, I heard. I did not think a palace. She’s taken over an old farm-house. I thought a pet goat a joke, not her – supposed livelihood. The way – the way people say Tet’s a painter as if it’s whitewashing the garden wall.”

“Do they?” asked Reakoed with interest. “I know what you mean!”

“And further – there is also the Matter of Kadun.”

“Should that not be the bloody Matter of bloody Kadun?” asked Maitlan.

“That is given! It is possible I have convinced her that she does not have to be Maya, though I doubt it. That is deep-seated, I think. If she would just be Fal, that would be enough for all of us. Third – Reakoed, you have uttered a consummate amount of screaming garbage concerning my relationship. Not only did I not – over-write her hard drive! I enjoyed her independence. I will say to you – she said – she said I gave no chase. I had my art, I had been happy in Zur without her. Did I care that much? I said I was happy in Zur with my art because I had you. We have had misunderstandings. But that problem of the hard drive is in Fal, not in me, is in who she is and who she wants to be. I said that too. And I said the opposite to your thinking, Reakoed, I said if I’d understood her better I’d have looked after her better.”

“Owww,” said Reakoed. “Sorry.”

“And this business that I am not good for her. Perhaps there is an element of truth in that but I do not think the person I am bad for is the person she is but perhaps the person I thought her. I do not think I know her anything like so well as I thought I knew her.” He turned to Hass. “As you yourself said, it is better Fal talks to Tet than about Tet. And now I thank you for calling but in truth what I want most now is my bed! Shall we catch up on other matters over dinner some time?”

I kept going until I hit the signs for Varl, A Medium-Sized And In Fact Quite Big Town In The Middle of Kadun. City-centre, I decided. I probably shouldn’t get the best out of my visit to Varl until I’d had some sleep. Old Town. That had possibilities. Oh wow! Some ruins loomed atop a small hill. Where there are ruins there are tourists and where there are tourists there are hotels, though in any case the bed and board trade in Kadun had gone through the stratosphere. Sure enough there was a turning and a forecourt lined with some rather spavined bushes, not at all like my savania. The Castle Inn. Oh, is that what it was? Had been. I booked a room, got only a twitched eyebrow at my name, and fell asleep. Exciting this, isn’t it. Fal’s Adventure. What, no bandits, no dragons? I don’t remember even having an interesting dream. I awoke around 7. Oh double wow. The ruined castle was flood-lit. Clearly the Castle of Varl was something I as a good citizen of Kadun should know about. I went downstairs and gulped. The place was buzzing. Dinner, I thought, will

be served elsewhere. I walked around the Old Town and it was really pretty picturesque, with slats and cobbles and interesting alleys. I found a bistro and ate like a horse, while designing a kind of mantra, not that it takes the length of a good meal to design I am not going to think. If I was not therefore to die of boredom I needed something external to think about. I am going to centre myself in the here and now. Truly there is a limit to the depth with which one can consider carefully shaded strip lighting or the carpet. That's only, I said to myself, because I know absolutely nothing about either. I mean, if I knew how carpet was manufactured I might find that particular carpet totally riveting. I remained unriveted. I walked slowly back to the Castle Inn writing myself a memo to buy a really gripping book in the morning but the shop was still open so I bought a weird variety of magazines instead:

I was bored shitless what on earth was I doing here? I am bored shitless the whole time, bar scratching behind Benji's ears. All my doing is just a disguise for that. All my vibrant inner life is just a disguise for that or maybe a consequence. This bit of me wants to do that and that bit wants something else

An aim. I need an aim, one that engages not just my brain but all of me Because I have no aims at all or none that take all of me with them.

In the morning I immersed myself in the history of Varl and did some more I am not going to think.

I found a good bookshop and picked up an analysis of the Kadun revolution. Ohohoh. Ciletij communard, Bonsadil Girat combines a first-hand account of the activities of CLIK following the Kadun revolution with an in-depth study of the role of capital in the modern world. I think I'm going to like this....I browsed. A couple of thrillers. Police-colonel Gensanit's latest mystery takes him from the vice-dens of the City to an ancient mansion on the Delta where the mysterious and sinister Cult... Oh indeed? Oh really? How wonderfully inevitable the novelists of Kadun. I supposed it was comforting that everyone was equally obsessed. I found myself facing a stand of the You Can Do It! series, elementary guides to everything and picked up the one on finance. Encouraged by having understood the first page, I shoved it in my basket. Oh look there's one on banking. And one on simplifying your life. I suspected I'd enjoy that. I was saddened to see there wasn't one on keeping goats and wondered if I should write it. Coping with bereavement. I thought I'd give that one a miss then picked it up anyway. Enough! I staggered to the check-out

The howls of laughter from Room 24? That's Fal reading an analysis of the Kadun revolution. I could do better! But that too was not what I wanted to do.

It was a perfectly decent hotel. The rooms were warm and comfortable. The public rooms were – pleasant. The food and water were palatable. But it wasn't somewhere to come to rest. Where, I wondered, was the nearest Stress-Breakers! Or should I be on the catch and skin dinner trip? Wasn't that a rather good idea, engage all of me? The thought came to me the only dinner I want to catch is Sar-fenan. Is it really? Isn't that an interesting thought? Then WTF am I doing here...reading an elementary guide to banking. Yes, I decided, I do want to at least see the bastard. I don't have a thing to wear! How true.

I put that in the folder matters matters, not just when S in the month. Unfinished business. I have unfinished business in Kadun. Draw a line under it and go home. How obvious is that. I couldn't see how. But that, Fal, you stupid bitch, you, is because you didn't stop. Stop and think

I see, I said to myself. I just can't do this at home. Too many commitments making the most demanding of partners seem a cipher. I had to laugh.

Stop and think about a need for the real that was so overwhelming, so compelling – did I really believe no-one would speak to me again! Finding it in other people.

But Varl still didn't do it for me. My heavily encrypted netbook was also in Hass's boot. This is what

happens if you don't plan! There was nothing to encrypt about what I wanted to do next – I know what I want to do? I bought a netbook in a rather scary shade of green, with a matching wireless dongle. I wondered if I should get some nail-varnish to go with them and in fact did. So I retired to Room 24, set myself up on line and started to paint my nails.

OK, Stress-Breakers. Our world-renowned facilities cater for the weary traveller along the road of life – er, Sarat, do you know this stuff is up there? Stress-Breakers can hardly be a hands-on operation right now....Hey, maybe they need a manageress! Still, it sounded good and the Lausanne is spectacular. Been there, been there! Though not to nestling in the foothills beside Lake Cava. Am I allowed to hike I think I'm allowed to hike. Would I be allowed to pay! Oh to be Falita Emery. Hmm. Even if trendy Kadun one had to show something to register and everything of course was Syb. I guessed I was feeling a bit fragile but I'd met it before and I didn't feel like dining out on it, guess I owe you some money Sarat. OK, not Stress-breakers, but I was definitely hooked on Lake Cava. I sighed, somewhere super-posh then, where one paid to have one's stress broken.

I spent another afternoon exploring historic Varl. Kadun is so old. Fidub is so old. And there I am the jam in the sandwich squeezed between the pair of them. This jam has pizzazz!

I moved on. I have all the time in the world. Here I am in a really not very picturesque village but it's alive. Political meetings and music groups and indeed a book-lovers' circle, gardeners and tree-huggers. The hidden Kadun no-one sees untouched by the revolution. I wondered. Even the Circle for the Advancement of Women could have pre-dated the happening, and even been open about its activities, for men and women had been nominally equal. They could both vote, obviously equal pay was a different matter, can't expect equal work, can yer, anyhow it's pin money, woman's place is with her kiddies....Did I want any? Oh definitely. When I grow up. Meanwhile I assumed I needed something to love and Benji filled that role. Plenty of time for that too. Some women just want to have them, without there being a father around, I mean. While I didn't doubt my practice run as goat-herd meant I was amply capable of doing that it wasn't what I wanted. I knew Tet wanted them – sometime – and I knew he'd be a fantastic father though I had no doubt our children would learn to swear early, and if our tottering tot caused havoc in the studio not just Zur but the whole continent would know it. The caring parent's version of a electric fence topped with poisoned barbed wire, I thought.. I suspected Tet's response to tots and a 2 in the morning walk on the beach would be to tuck them up in a buggy and take them along too. Being raised by Tet could be interesting.

I continued my tour of Kadun proceeding more or less in the direction of Lake Cava. The terrain began to change, so much so that it was worth stopping from time to time to gape in awe. In the midst of a particularly soulful moment I thought oh shit. Fal has vanished! I texted Hass. Alive, well and finding myself. Reading up on banking!!! Let you know more later.

I arrived at the Hotel Cava. Nothing flashy, just the gentle ooze of old money from the very wall-paper. That's so me, isn't it. Still, I cased the joint and decided I could deign to be happy there. I sipped excellent coffee from the finest porcelain in a delectable hide armchair and began to compose a brief report back to base. Dearest Hass, This is a recce, open-ended. What I do next depends on what I do first. Yes, I'm feeling cryptic and frivolous. Also contemplating Tet in the role of father. I don't think he'd have any objection, do you (giggle). Few bridges to cross first. Thank you for everything. All my love, Fal xxxxx

Fwd Maitlan and Reakoed. She said she was reading up on banking.
Maitlan to Hass and Reakoed. This is Fal. When the act is together, it's a hard one to follow.
Reakoed to Maitlan and Hass: She's going to bloody Blatni, isn't she!
Maitlan to Hass and Reakoed: Presumably she does not intend murder – unless Tet is to raise the infant single-handed.
Reakoed to Hass and Maitlan: Oh well, we can relax then.
Maitlan to Hass and Reakoed: Remind me to renew my subscription to Glitz.

Reakoed to Hass and Maitlan: What the hell did he say to her?

Maitlan to Hass and Reakoed: More, I should have thought, what he didn't say.

I continued with You Can Do Banking! The shred of an idea came to me. It was obviously crazy, impossible. Sarat and Cho would have done it, if it were possible. Or maybe it was possible, but just happened to destroy the financial base of the entire planet. But the other idea, that just might be not only possible but practicable. I began surfing. No, I had to sort home out first. Where was the nearest airport? I made a flying-visit (sorry) to Carlin and explained to the rabbiters that I was on PANTHER business, which I most certainly was, even if PANTHER didn't yet know it, and it really wasn't fair on Lattic... They loved it and set up a goats, savania and miscellaneous fruits, vegetables, flowers and shrubs rota.

I rejected brooding about how efficiently I'd chained myself to Carlin

Back at my post in the bay-window, I had a brain-wave: there are sites for schools, sites for kids who don't even know what a bank is yet. So I could skip Lesson One and maybe even Lessons Two and Three. Then I remembered Lattic and his courses in natural history. Yes, yes, yes! I found the Schools. The next actual course started in five weeks' time. No crash courses? PANTHER run crash courses, but that would mean confiding my PANTHER mission to PANTHER and that I was not yet ready to do. Later I should need information not publicly available. This was getting me into a condition in which I could understand that information. I wondered if Hass had told Mel anything. Everything? Leaving a trail the width of a house wasn't a problem. It didn't lead to the right place.

I mailed Mel. I need a crash course in finance. I think I might want to do something with Sorg's money – all right, my money! Can you rig something up with Fugitry. You know those courses dear old Lattic went on. There's one starting in five weeks but it's two hours a week. I want eight hours a day! Someone retired looking for light relief maybe? If at all humanly poss.

Mel to me: Of course, he replied smoothly, while blinking like an owl at noon.

And then, curled up in the delectable hide armchair in the bay-window looking out over the lake something began to click. I put my book down cautiously, discovered the coffee-pot was empty, waved at the waiter and ordered fresh, all cautiously. I mean, if you sustain an injury you move cautiously in case you upset it. I really felt that, felt that if I moved with normal abandon I'd disturb the delicate and vulnerable fusion in my brain. Oh Fal, what do you want? What do you really want? This or that. Here or there. Idiot, idiot, idiot! What is the aim of each of these avowed purposes? Because they're not bloody well opposites, they all point to one end., one unifying purpose. They do? They do! I think they do. A single root. Call it me. Work backwards from the idea I just had. Eeeuh. Yes. Maybe. Do it first, then see what my world looks like. If of course it can be done, but then if it can't something similar can be. That at least is not a question.

Mel got back to me giving me the addy of a lady with more letters after her name than there are in the alphabet. She does know this is finance for five-year-olds? I asked anxiously. Oh yes, he replied.

I arrived with a bump in the horrible City. Ah well, I was barely going to look up from my books. Denzine Mistress A-Z turned out to be in the Airoch mode, meaning she looked a slightly distracted elderly lady, draped in silk shawls in various pastels, and had a mind like a steel trap. I'm sure she guessed but she didn't ask – I asked some rather specific questions.

After six weeks of an eleven-hour day – three hours' homework – I mailed Kai.

Yes, she was in the City. You bet! Rather nervously I told her my idea. I had to share it with someone who knew about money. Do you think it's possible? I finished.

“It’s all possible. The second bit I love. Only it has to have an impact and the one you’ve chosen. It just happens to be exactly the sort of thing Sarat wants but not necessarily when he wants it. There’s a lot you don’t know.”

“I’ve been out of the loop...”

“It’s a bit more than that. There is a need to know and not many people have one. I’m making an executive decision here.. Sarat’s eyes only, OK!”

“OK....I’m agog!”

“You will be.”

“It’s not,” I said sounding wide-eyed and innocent, “it’s not a plot, is it.”

She grinned.

“It is potentially the plot of plots! Where to start? Go figure this business of the Cult using Blatni for R+R raises eyebrows in all the best circles. Some people think it’s just a prolonged taunt. Free movement of peoples about their lawful purposes, what can he do? I mean really, why don’t they go to Meela and get a proper tan?” Meela is another playground for the filthy rich, an island at high tide joined by an isthmus to the mainland of Ocogro. “Maybe they’ll get bored when Sarat doesn’t rise to the bait. Others look thoughtful and say they suspect if Sarat rose to the bait we’d have public executions back. The general gist is pushing him to abandon all our wonderful democratic principles. More others point out that it’s a hell of a lot easier to arrest people reclining by the pool at Blatni than to get them extradited. When PANTHER are ready, we’ll pounce. Game of chicken, and another kind of taunt. Obviously if (they thought) in brackets we were anywhere near nailing them they’d stay their side of the water. Public display of our failure.

“Yea, many are the views of the phenomenon. The key to all this is that Sarat doesn’t care where they are. He doesn’t want to arrest them, he doesn’t want to hang them, he certainly doesn’t want to keep them behind bars at public expense. He just wants to destroy them utterly and finally, preferably reducing them to begging in the streets. You’ll say no can do, greenbacks in every corner of the planet.”

“You’re actually taking my breath away but I might have said something like that!”

“You will further say – “ Mitch to the life. “ – that it is irrelevant that should criminality be proven a court can demand disclosure of assets because they will simply lie. They have made an art-form out of covering their tracks and that which cannot be traced back to one need not be revealed. On the other hand one may say that if no connection can be established there is no proof of ownership and so no reason why those nominally in possession of the funds in question should not retain them. Nor any reason why they should not sing like canaries. Bar of course raw terror. The role of raw terror in this should not be forgotten. To an extent which cannot readily be quantified, this is a psychological battle. We maintain, nonetheless, that any connection must have physical manifestations and physical manifestations can be identified. We are not looking for the end of a piece of string, we are looking for the piece of string itself. Cho believes it is possible to unravel their operations. We have of course trusted contacts in Ciletij and Vasucula, but we don’t think the governments are clean. Fidub, Kadun and Dabida make a formidable entity on the world-stage and Bal will do anything to help bar bankrupt Harn.

“Meanwhile Sarat is happy for the world to think he is engaged on a ‘mere’ murder-hunt and Mitch prowls like a caged panther, because of course Blatni is in Var-segan. Believe me, he does not like the pure soil of Var-segan soiled by Sar-fenan’s hooves!”

My eyes widened.

“Sarat is in a peculiar position as dynamic young leaders of revolutions go. It may be - unusual but no-one questions its legitimacy. Bal’s people regard his position as head of state with about as much consternation as they would a couple who’d broken up and decided to get together again. Of course if he were trampling over the masses.

“Now, suppose you commit a nice simple little crime in our glorious empire, bash someone over the head and run off with his wallet. The cops catch you and you are tried. Under what law? The answer effectively is imperial law, dating back to Guess-Who. It’s really interesting, actually. There are very few of what we should call the basic laws of a normal civilized nation that Kadun didn’t already have. It’s just no-one paid the faintest attention to them. Meaning the theory upheld equality before the law and the practice was determined by your gender, your class, your orientation, your bank balance and your politics. If you were very principled or very stupid, strike out where not applicable, you pushed it. Interestingly, sometimes you succeeded,

depends on the time, the place and the – disposition of the Senate, which acted as a sort of supreme court. Of course whether you pushed it probably depended on the disposition of the Senate at the time, whether you had a cat's chance in hell of a fair hearing.”

“Tut,” I said, ‘we do not have a Senate! But then – in context we do not need - ?’

She grinned.

“In context, we have equality before the law, a free Press, and a bunch of hell-raisers. Obviously a lot of crap law got passed in the many moons since himself. Sarat's solution to a legal nightmare was to ditch the crap and enforce the rest.

“There had previously been sort of local governing bodies called Moots with property qualifications for election. Not real estate. You had to have sort of – “: She grinned again. “At least two goats, a head of sheep, whatever that is. Narulis drew from these those who could be elected to the Senate. There was just one other thing. You had to be able to read and write. History of education in Kadun is several books in itself. To this end – there were schools in the big and bigger towns, there's the whole thing about a small farm being literally a family enterprise, even the kids had work to do, and there's Kadun being rich and fertile and its being a matter of pure self-interest to be literate and numerate in order to get richer if not more fertile, the supreme carrot of course being able to take part in running the joint. So there were classes set up just a couple of hours a week and the end-product was if not a literate population then a population a hell of lot more literate than it had been. Remember that though – screen goes whooshy – the Emperor was far-distant, my lord Var-segan, my lady Van-senok were not, so – centres of enterprise were evenly spread out. And all this, you will say, is completely fascinating but the what the hell has it got to do with?

“The true empire ineditably imprinted Kadun, whatever happened next. Narulis established national law, which was essentially Fidubi law. Subsequent laws were passed by the Senate and ratified by the emperor. National law was imperial law. People talk glibly – I can't imagine why - of the break-up of the empire, at least in part because there's a perfectly good sense in which it didn't. From the perspective of the rest of the continent, here was never any question that there wasn't an entity called Kadun, with a capital, a single currency, apart from of course the minor detail that the rest of the continent dealt rarely if at all with Azt – Dabida dealt with Carlin, Vasucula with Var-segan, and so on. Hell, Harn dealt with Var-segan. Again there's this weird gulf between the theory and the practice.

Certainly, certainly a central government, it's just that it didn't actually matter. When it insisted on mattering etc etc, which is as much as to say that the Houses were content to have some guys swanning around in Azt pretending to govern the joint so long as they didn't actually interfere with anything – and of course we may note... If there are any two basic facts emergent from this crazy gig, they're the Houses thought they could maintain imperial law better than the emperor, or at least they couldn't do worse, so long as it wasn't inconvenient, and the idea of basic rights – you could appeal all the way to the Supreme Court or the Senate in Azt, as the case may be. So long as you lived that long. The third essential is that the Houses retained a great deal of autonomy under imperial law and that after the empire this was if anything increased.

“Ballots can be rigged, guys can be suborned or even fall for specious arguments. The encroachment of central government on the autonomy of the Houses together with the nature of that government is probably the single most pressing reason for the We Want Sarat campaign. Bearing in mind that the Houses thought and presumably think they can uphold imperial law better than the emperor or the elected government of Kadun. For this reason it may yet go pear-shaped, except it won't because the ‘national army’ are senoki, etc.”

“They're taking a hell of a gamble?”

“Backs against the wall. We shall all live happily ever after under Fidubi law.”

“It's interesting. The myth of the national army! Which is of course why when they were sent to crush Zani they settled in Dabida instead.”

“You recall your glorious Constitution.”

“I do?”

“Bestial and barbaric practices.”

“There's some ancient law - ?”

“Verily, there are ancient laws. Going so far back your mind reels, the penalty for being an adept of the fifth circle, or in other words the sort of bag of shit that can blow minds at radius of 20 nani without even raising a sweat was death. The only people who could withstand didn't want to waste the rest of their lives guarding.

You could – hence the may not must – also be executed if you were a demonstrable lesser bag of shit. That was Fidubi law, that was imperial law, and that became Dabidan law. The Cult knows it. Even Sar-fenan isn't so insolent as to misbehave in Kadun, so far as anyone has been able to discern, and believe me, there are plenty of people watching. Even the free movement of peoples clause says you can be booted out if you put a toenail wrong. It all gets quite juicy at this point. If we proceed from the relatively known to the unknown, to shine is to be inviolate – ‘they came, the skull-faces, but we laughed’. – but reading between the lines Narulis and his gang were on a sharp learning curve because they knew how to laugh but not to fight back, mentally, I mean, doubtless they drew their broad-swords while laughing. Apparently fighting back was a particularly esoteric branch of a particularly esoteric branch and a very few in Fidub did know because Fidub has travelled the oceans for ever and had met the Cult in strange far-away places. Emphasis on far-away. Apparently there was a certain amount of you haven't had the bastards trying to fuck over your country, especially from Van-senok. Imperial law limited itself to evidence of – foul play – is there a better expression! Over in the west where they took the brunt of the assault they said something like whereas we take the point generally that an offence has to be committed – no matter how sinisterly and suspiciously you're prowling around that bag of gold, you're not a thief until you've stolen it – in this case we deal with what these bastards are. The Houses demanded and got the right to deal with members of Cult as they thought fit, without what you might call physical evidence, witnesses to the barbaric and/or bestial. Of course they didn't have videos then... There is physical evidence collected by PANTHER. Mitch argues shamelessly that the country is governed by imperial law and that autonomy therein and heretofore granted to the Houses is thereby retained. Thus he can do what he likes with them. Alas, they are foreign nationals. In short, he can kick them out of Var-segan and there isn't a damn thing Sarat can do about it – except piss with laughter, of course.

“By roundabout routes I get to the nub.

“From their point of view, I'm a piece of shit, the scrapings from the wall of a sewer. The usual epithet is camp-follower. Sarat and I both know that. That's the joy of it. But the insult is bottomless, immeasurable. They matter! Sarat is playing with them. The precise expression was ‘adolescent jape’. Naturally they wished to know the identity of the imperial envoy. Sar-fenan told Beejay to communicate to his master that the time for adolescent japes was past. Everything that Sarat, Cho, Mel, Sohenoil, AMI does is a slap in the face – something a bit more painful than that. It is an independent act. Sarat has in a very real, very literal sense declared war, invaded. It's as though there are two teams. This crap is going on all over the world and most places it's just bat and ball. Impregnable fortresses, that's the expression I'm looking for. One was Dabida and Fidub and the other was Harn. And then to continue the analogy, there were outposts, three in particular, Carlin, Van-senok and Var-segan. Broadly speaking. Not that individuals never fell from the path of righteousness. Call it the Lattic syndrome.”

“Poor Lattic! He's really rather sweet.”

“Sw – oh, of course you're neighbours.”

“He's really reformed. Got a Fidubi boyfriend who I'm sure can handle any urge that bubbles up to relapse.”

I took a deep breath. “Sorg's money. My money!”

“Virgin sturgeon.”

“I didn't really think it wasn't. Apart from the sweat of the masses.”

“The sweat of the masses is a whole different ball-park. Except when it isn't, if you see what I mean!”

“I did think of giving it to CLIK but I wasn't sure where it would end up.”

“Entumbi!” I looked blank. “There's a civil war been going on there for 20 years and probably set to go on for another 20. For people who are anti-capital, they're terribly good at making it really work for them. I think CLIK would use it for Kadun.”

“So do I. Think.”

“Anything that kicks Sar-fenan in the balls strikes a blow for the masses.”

“I definitely think that.”

“So these guys with whose names you may be familiar have been running their own economy, if you like. I find it useful to think of the Fidub bank having branches in all major towns throughout the world. And then those other guys, with whose names you may be familiar, have been running a parallel economy, also with branches in all major towns throughout the world. There isn't actually a global economy except in the sense it's the interaction of around forty parallel economies, each of which may be summed up as the guys at the top

deal with their own and the guys at the bottom on the whole haven't a clue with whom they're actually dealing, hence interaction." That's not what my economics teacher taught me a parallel economy is! "OK. Now this game has, as we know, been played over the prone body of Kadun for a long, long time. Bad enough that Sarat has taken Kadun, they did think he'd dashed well be a gentleman and play by the rules and NOT INTERFERE IN HARN. Caps. And of course they thought he'd be severely handicapped by Bal, but we've found ways round that."

"You murder someone's partner and you expect him to play by the rules?"

"They're weird like that. Sarat's – and others', Sarat's for short – financial activity in Harn is as brutal as an invading army, with about as much time for the conquered as your average brutal invading army.

"It gets worse. Yes, financial acumen, yes, financial probity. Nobody wants to work with a loser. A guy is top of the heap – he's on the side of the angels, that's a bonus, not compulsory. You remember when Sarat and Maya came networking. Of course who one is counted with those who care who one is, but these are cold, hard-headed and experienced players. Try what one is worth. Try Grandpappy. Why, that sure is a fine upstanding young man. The word was watch him. Nobody thought he could do it. He did it. That night – incredible scenes from Azt. You should have been in the City! Nothing obvious, just a kind of – glee. Oh the metaphor! It snowed, touching everything and making it sparkle. WATCH HIM. Caps. Many a slip, still a whole continent armed and dangerous, maybe Kadun implodes, politically, economically. Watch, watch, watch, they must have gone cross-eyed. But it started, even before Maya's murder. Deliberate cutting, deliberate snubbing, Gee, no, I can't stop, have to meet the flight from Maona-pri. And then. Most people don't figure murder as sound business practice. And then. The whole damn' Stock Exchange started singing the 'It's What Maya Would Have Wanted Song'. In my view, what he's done to them already is worse than having them queuing for welfare, even if that were possible. The whole non-aligned, ever so ever so neutral City reckons they're losers.

"And so by winding and circuitous paths we come back to little me. The world is moving on – what was previously their world is moving on without them – and they're thrown an old bone with no meat on it in a game with mirrors. Let's pretend you matter though how I am pretending you matter makes it entirely clear you do not. Let's pretend the economic future of Kadun or Harn or both hinges on these ridiculous little meetings. Let's pretend these ridiculous little meetings are about finance at all, not about the status of women or a murder-hunt. Where I make good is of course everywhere but. You've no idea how 'Economic Liaison Officer to the Anile Throne' opens doors. Everyone else wants to see me. I liaise like for crazy. I liaise with secretaries, I liaise with tellers, I liaise with chairmen – usually – of multi-nationals. And so I pursue my secret mission, which is open up a whole new world to professional women. I'm Honorary President of Women in Banking. And I drive the bastards up the wall. I babble stuff they could find and probably have found on the Grid, which naturally bores them shitless, only they daren't actually fall asleep because I drop apparent nuggets just as they're about to drop off. I share conversations with Sarat and Mel, only I tweak them a bit. Sometimes I make it up as I go along and we see what happens next to see if I've touched a nerve. I am such a waste of oxygen. Obviously there are dozen, a hundred, a thousand, a million, financial communications a day but I alone speak for Sarat and everyone knows it, though they can't think why!"

"I can," I said. "You hate them as much as I do."

"For everything they have done to Harn, for everything they have done to women. For the raw terror. For shackling good people. For the terror, for people who want to talk to me, for people who ask frankly, can I be protected? I have kids... And the only answer I can give is only if you move to Fidub. Or Dabida, or probably Kadun, because they have bigger fish to fry there."

You're fighting for Harn, I thought. It's your country. I didn't want to start that one up again.

"What all this means to your plots is that Sarat might decide now is the perfect time to start Phase Two. Or he might not. They are playing a waiting-game. What they hope is that they might be able to suborn the duly elected government of Kadun, drive a wedge, make out Sarat and Cho are acting against the interests of Kadun and the wishes of her people and lining their own pockets into the bargain. You may laugh but there are die-hard communalists in Harn and further afield who are not wholly impressed by CLIK's performance. The answer is always the same, of course, get off your arse and come and look. Pause while I write an ode to transparency, it's really very effective, thus the Great Disclosure – "

"The what?"

“Fal.....”

She didn't quite shake her head sadly.

“I suspect I've just confessed to living in a cave!”

“Wearing skins – not of course goat-skins. Sarat and Cho put the whole shebang on the Grid and further invited any associates who did not wish to disclose - about those sweat-shops in Esran - to quit.”

“They what!”

“It can't be everything. Settled on, isn't that the phrase. Settled on Essa, settled on Shav, settled on some great-great-great-aunt who invested wisely. Then there's the property in Kadun. The lawyers are having a ball over that. He's still living rent-free. Vasucula and Ciletij aren't in it for love, but they're not in it for money, either. First-rate service at cut-price rates. Nobody wanted a Cult-infested Kadun looming over them.. The economic returns are, shall we say, considerable.

“Even the gloom-mongers don't think the Great Enterprise will fail. It can enter rocky seas and as I say the City doesn't love losers. It can get nervous. If the boat begins to rock, it is thought, Sarat will send someone sensible to negotiate with them. In hostile circles I'm regarded as Sarat's little joke. Come to think of it, I'm regarded affectionately as Sarat's little joke, because if there's one thing that is abundantly clear to both sides. Now I think we should go and see Bal.” She grinned. “Your idea is delicious but possibly not legal.”

“I am as susceptible,” said Bal, “as the next man to two attractive young women intent on causing total havoc. There is no question that what you propose is legal and I will assure you that I shall not rapidly initiate such legislation as would be required to outlaw it. It is the damn craziest thing I have ever heard in my life – and as you are well aware I have heard some crazy propositions from your side of the water. I swear Mel himself could not have come up with this one.”

I preened quietly to myself.

“A fresh pair of eyes,” cooed Kai. “Even Sarat can think in tramlines.” Bal looked disbelieving.

“Ignorance,” I said cheerfully. “When you don't know anything about something you can play with it mentally – something like that!”

I told her other stuff too. She laughed softly. I was remembering, about Tet not just being a short fuse. The question was, whether he thought you were worth thinking about? Oh yes, I said.

Hass wondered if I'd like to eyeball the beasts, I said. I was thinking of putting on my posh frock and going to Blatni! He thought I might join you. Some piece of crap, maybe, sitting in on behalf of AMI. If they're willing to so sully themselves of course!”

“One is bad enough,” agreed Kai. “I'd go for Blatni.”

Neither of us really thought Sar-fenan would receive me.

Enter ancient panelled room, ancient walnut table the size of a double-bed, good afternoon gentlemen and blah. Sar-fenan looked up.

“Ah, the whore.”

Oh.

I smiled cheerfully.

“It's delightful to be here.”

He smiled back.

“Your partner was disabled, I understand.”

“He was.” I said. “He got better.”

“It must have been tiresome for a healthy young woman to be tied to an invalid. San-yaega-baht, one feels, must have been a more virile proposition.”

OK, buster, you started this.

“The voice of envy?”

“Talal is reduced to employing prostitutes? She does not deny the charge.”

“Oh no,” I said, “I shouldn’t give you the satisfaction of sneering at love.”

Lips duly curled.

“The Tensin Memo,” said Kai.

The what?

“We shall not discuss that.”

“Fine,” said Kai.

“Talal has sent you?” Note of total disbelief on the ‘you’.

“He wants to bargain, then.”

“Fact-finding mission,” I said.

They laughed.

“She is a goat-herd!”

Why do they know anything about me? The money.

I shook my head sorrowfully.

“You do not seem able to conduct a civil conversation.”

“Not with an animal, no.”

Kai picked up her briefcase.

“Congratulations, gentlemen, you have just severed your last link with the Anile empire.”

Absolute silence. Well, negative decibels. A silence heavy with loathing, fury, and yes, just a little consternation. We turned smartly on our heels and made to leave.

“That is nonsense,” said Sar-fenan.

“He has to deal with us.”

“We shall see,” said Kai, without bothering to turn her head.

We made our way out of the building the eyes in the backs of our heads wide open and fell into each other’s arms in the street.

“Put it there, partner!”

“We’re a team!”

“All recorded, said Kai. “

“What!”

“Always is.” She sighed. “I think I just.”

“I think you just too! What the – I mean, I’ve had snide comments, but – “

“Any excuse will do,” she said. “How interesting. They’re getting tired of waiting. They really believe Sarat needs the link. I think.”

“But the link is – was a joke! I may be getting quite confused here.”

“Nobody else knows that. It’s all mirrors. To the outside world Sarat maintains a fiction that he has anything to say to them. To the outside world he equally makes a statement about the nature of that ‘anything’ by sending little me to communicate it. Which is real? If Sarat actually had anything to say to Sar-fenan, he’d pick up the phone. He can do that! They think they merit the organ-grinder not the monkey. They think I’m a bluff and he will eventually – grow up may be the expression. Start to behave like a proper person.”

“They murdered – “ I started to say again. “She was only a woman?”

“Now you’re getting it,” said Kai.

We flew to Azt. Kai rang Sarat and told him that whatever he was doing he needed to stop doing it and see us instead because this is like big, man. He said he was just about to go to bed and it’d better be.

“Two things,” said Kai. “One, I have just severed relations with our little friends.” She made huge eyes.

“They were rude. This rude.” She played the tape.

“Oh, I don’t think so,” said Sarat, “not to formal representatives of the Empire.”

“Oh am I! I love it when you take things the right way,” I said.

“Worry about that in a minute,” said Kai.

“Worry is not the word I should choose,” said Sarat.

“The second things, things, actually. They’re Fal’s ideas. We went to see Bal. He said it was legal and he wouldn’t make it illegal. I think Fal should outline the plot.”

“I’ll fill you in later on how on earth I even came to be thinking about money. I did think and this is what I think.”

It was really very satisfying to make Sarat grin like that

Now Carlin. I went home and invited myself to dinner at the House.

“My idea of standing for the Senate, it was because I want, I need, I have to do something, for Sorg, for Maya, but I’m Zuri and I – I want to go home. But not with my tail between my legs, not without hitting them somewhere where it hurts, for Sorg, Maya, you, for everyone who.- who’s cared.. I took a vacation to calm myself down, to think. And I thought. I ended up in the City studying finance. The other strand is Sorg’s money. It would just seem so wrong to be in Zur with it. I don’t think Sorg would want me to have nothing. I thought if I could buy something, invest it somehow in a way that hurts them, for Carlin, for Kadun, then that would be – right.”

“We love you,” said As.

“Oh As. I love you all. I thought I can’t leave. It’s one of the things I had to think about. My feeling that – I had to be here. Or I had to be in Zur. There’s no transport?”

“Zur is your home,” said Saryulin.

“I think so,” I said. “So, I studied and – it still didn’t seem to me that it was totally crazy. I needed to run it past someone who knows about money and I talked to Kai – I don’t think you’ve ever met her. People call her the City-chick. She liaises between Sarat and the City.” I grinned. “Economic Liaison Officer to the Anile Throne.” I grinned more. “Or at least she was until relations were sadly severed. I’d talked to her before about my situation.” I don’t know why I felt this was relevant, but I did. “It’s the same and it’s different. Kai’s Harni. Her mother is a kind of earthpower – guru. Carlin isn’t the only place they’ve been fighting since pre-history. Kai hates them so much. She’s brilliant and before she met Mel she was going to go into politics, electoral politics, I mean, become President of Harn! But she saw that she could really do something here and now by joining Sarat’s gang. But it’s all different now. Kadun is Sarat’s gang.” I dried up on that one. I thought I’d got it pat before I arrived, but I was having other thoughts and I sure didn’t think I needed to say so she’s living with a senoki officer.

“Anyway, Kai and I talked. And she said it was possible. Not easy, but possible. She took me to see Bal and he said he wouldn’t make it illegal. But the other idea I had, that was doable. That’s what I want to talk to you about.”

I finally got to the point. Saryulin smiled. It was, I thought, the sort of smile a former Master of Carlin might have given when ordering the execution of members of the Cult.

The clans were summoned, Pilo, Sarshi and Vij, Mardis and his partner. You’d forgotten Mardis, hadn’t you. Mardis hasn’t forgotten you. His story’s a long one. Later. Pietri, Caluna and Sarat. Time for the tape.

“I left out a bit. Hass had suggested I might want to eyeball the shit. He wondered if I might do PA to the Economic Liaison Officer, given my – then – total ignorance of all things economic. Sneak into one of their meetings. She took me along. I honestly didn’t know at the time that she recorded all her interactions. This is the tape. After I’ve done my stuff, I want the transcription in the Press.”

“Ape!” breathed Mardis.

“This will be answered,” said Saryulin.

“Wish I’d been there,” said Sarsh.

We plotted. It was going to take time, but that was OK. Karula volunteered for the post of Economic Liaison Officer to the Anile Throne but Sarat informed her the position would remain unfilled for the moment.

OK Fal, start using the brain you have somewhere.

This is premature. Even goat-less, I am not at all certain I should move back in with Tet. I am sure I want to go back to Zur.

Tet (probably) would be happy anywhere he had perfect light.

I want Benji. Not everyone will understand that ??Tet, but anyone who's had a pet would/should. You don't ditch pooch just because you're moving back in with your ex or not as the case may be.

Among the very many things I know nothing about is the probably wide range of desirable properties to be found in the surrounds of Zur.

On the coast for instance where the light is doubtless fantastic.

Is driving into Zur for a late night movie any worse than driving into Car-sandis?!?!?!?

This is my life. I'd like to share it. What an admirably sensible remark.

Only sometimes it is not so simple.

Oh it is, it is it is! Don't know where that welled up from. I have – settled my account in Carlin.

What I want to do is live in Zur with my goats.

What will be, will be.

Is that kidding myself? Because the only acceptable properties are those with scope for a studio!

I started to think very hard about being together for ever with Tet only for the moment in separate properties. See everything is true and everything is false above. He is – complete without me. And me, so desperate for completion – what I had to understand, I informed myself sternly, was that my independence had been irrelevant. It simply didn't matter that when Tet had been painting I'd been out living my own life and I looked very carefully at how I put that and decided it didn't mean that being out living my own life had been determined by when Tet was painting. I'd gone out leaving him reading in the garden and come back to find him vanished into the studio.

Love me, love my goats.

Narak looked at me thoughtfully.

“We love you. We love your goats.”

“Especially Benji,” said Latic.

“Benji is a person,” said Narak

“Really?” I said.

“Does not the BPC tell us to trust our friends?”

“It's too far,” I said.

“And too fickle?”

“That too.”

“You go house-hunting.”

Yes, well, that's not so simple because my next spectacular achievement, I quickly realized, was to have impaled myself on whom is this bloody house for? I mean really, am I looking for somewhere for me or a family home? I was going to have to have some very specific specs here. What I actually had was a lot of fluff about perfect light. Maybe I'd actually learned that I should not start with closed doors. I started to look at real estate on the Grid.

Some days later, I saw it, I loved it, I looked at where it was and I choked. The Sohenisle. Yes, well, that particular 'border' had never counted for much. Well, now I know what I want, anyway. I found it eventually, just north of Zur in Halet's Cove, facing south. Almost the whole ground floor was one huge (and light) south-facing room with a curving central staircase to two half-huge (and light) bedrooms, one of which (I sighed) by removal of part of the roof would just happen to make the studio to end all studios, a bathroom and a smaller room. Our expansive personalities, I thought, would not suffer by making the bedroom into two rooms, should the need arise. The rest of the ground floor was a kitchen of sensible size (a kitchen-table at which I can sit and write strange notes to myself being mandatory) and a room breezily designated utility room. There was land enough for both garden and goats. I bought it and shortly afterwards reclined in my armchair looking out over the Straits and asked myself what the hell I'd done now. I sold the cottage to Narak and Latic, so they could put up friends or let to carefully chosen tourists as the mood took them, and my possessions were not many.

I sent out absolutely plain, absolutely formal notifications of change of address, no explanations, no exclamations, just one thing. No surname.

I duly scanned my mail-box for replies from Hass, Reakoed, Maitlan, Tet. Silence. Well, they knew of course, after my announcement in Carlin. The world waits upon what Fal does next! Grrr! I thought. They're thinking.

So I'm reclining in my spacious and beautiful room and I hear a car stop. The bell rings.

"Hallo, stranger," said Vij

"Out for the day," said Sarsh, "couldn't resist. Hope you're not buried in packing-cases." That was not my problem. "Oh, this is glorious! Clever Fal!"

"Eeek!" I said. "Darling!" Same old Sarsh. Just one thing. A bump in the middle. "When's he/she/it due!"

"Not long now!"

We chewed over Zur fat. It was quite distressingly normal.

I looked at what seemed to be about a hundred emails. So maybe the server had been down. Nothing from Hass, Tet, Reakoed or Maitlan. One from Mel. Welcome home! When's the house-warming? When I got back, I thought – this is my place! This is where I belong. Hope you do too.

Oh Mel, I typed back. That's really sweet of you. Yes, yes, I do. I think!

One from Kyse. Simply welcome home.

One from my brother. Dearest Fal. Well, you have had a time, haven't you. Glad you've made it back to base. We'll catch up sometime. I'll try and drop by asap. Lots of love.

Several on that theme, Phew, Fal, what a time!

Nothing from Hass, Tet, Reakoed or Maitlan.

Watched pots.

The root of all this, I thought, is if I were Tet, I'd start painting, but there really isn't anything in particular I want to do. I went to check the savania, which I'd replanted with the tenderness of placing a new-born infant in its cradle. The savania was just fine. Benji was just fine. I surmounted the fence and sat on the ground next to her anyway. She tried affectionately to eat my ear. Ah yes, my new life.

I had delivered the plot but others were much better at executing it than I was and – what? My star-turn would come.

Lonely?

But no, I didn't want to re-enter the pulsating hub. I didn't really want to do anything. That was a very unsatisfactory picture of me.

Tired?

Emotionally, probably!

I could go for a walk along the coast and discover new wild flowers. Oh wow.

I sat hugging Benji, who seemed to understand. Probably better than I did. It began to get dark, but yes, it was noticeably warmer than Carlin and I sat in the gloaming.

I could go into Zur. I didn't want to go into Zur, another attack of oh help, suppose I meet someone who actually knows me and wants a ball-by-ball account. I liked the feeling I could go into Zur. My place, I said to myself firmly, then my place, meaning the new house. My place. I felt myself beginning to expand a bit.

Now that I could smell the sea I knew I'd missed that. I took a deep breath, scrambled up suddenly, found my way to my front-gate and definitely scrambled through hillocks of rough grass to the edge of the beach, still inhaling deeply. I like this. Good grief! I sat and watched the sea, paddled a bit, and dawdled home. If this was another crash-landing, it was a good one. I put the TV on and curled up with cocoa, a bun and a book about the inner journey I'd discovered when moving, having forgotten I even had. I was just arguing volubly to myself with the author when the door went. I was quite cross but it was mum and dad, so I stopped being cross and ended up quite happy instead. Oh this is very nice, dear. I'd forgotten just about everyone in Zur runs on a different clock from Carlin, the evening is just beginning at around 9, and I also wondered if I'd inserted some code so secret even I didn't know it in my email saying don't bother to ring first.

Dad asked the fateful question.

"What are you going to do?"

"Decide what I'm going to do," I said glibly. "Maybe go to college."

"Bit of an age-gap," said Mum

"Oh, I don't know," I said, busking rapidly. "I guess quite a few people got caught up in things."

"Maybe you should write a book," said Dad.

I giggled.

"It couldn't be worse than the one I've just read. An analysis of the Kadun revolution. Some terribly well-meaning Ciletij who just happens to have the wrong end of every stick. Lend it to you." I dug it out.

Dad opened it casually and guffawed.

"I told you!"

Well, we'll be off now, dear. Lovely to have you home.

Back to the inner journey and so to bed.

In the morning I felt brave enough for Zur and just walked and walked and walked. My place. Even people I knew reasonably well actually didn't want to drag me off for coffee and hear every last detail. What, after all, would they want to hear every last detail of, the Kadun revolution? Probably had it to saturation point. My little love-triangle? Perhaps they didn't think they knew me that well. Boom! I walked into a friend of Tet's.

"Well, well, well, well, well."

"Hi," I said cautiously.

"As shattering as ever! What a fool he was."

"Sorry?"

"I doubt it! Who's next on the list?"

"I don't think we've got anything to say to each other here."

"No," he said.

Yes, well, it was roughly the response I'd thought I'd get from Tet but that didn't make me feel better. I made my way to Tivona Gardens and sat quietly reliving my I really hurt Tet experience in the – er light of more recent events. He really loves me. If he didn't he wouldn't want to be in the same room as me. That of course made it worse.

Oh my fragile peace. After a while I went on walking but felt I was carrying a little grey cloud over my head. The consequences of our actions. Pietri and Caluna. Not, I thought, without ringing first, and not at this moment because it was just possible I might be idiotic. The Central Library loomed. I walked in and said I'd been a member all my life but then I went to Kadun. Could I rejoin, please. What's your name, love? Does this permeate every bloody thing! It was, I said, Emery. I met someone... Sugar, is that the time, sorry to have bothered, sort out later.

I sat on one of the stone plinths at the front of the library, swore really quite aggressively, then burst out laughing, because if there's one thing I can't at this particular moment in this particular place do it's go back to being Falita Emery.

OK, my maiden name is Barvenat. Hallo, Falita Barvenat, do I know you? Hadn't we better get better acquainted. Because I do not think I can be Falita San-yaega-baht in Zur. How did I ever think I could be? Rather easily, really. Of course Falita Emery still has a Dabidan passport. Where to start? I scowled horribly. Like a huge dirty great metaphor for I don't know how to be me. All personal legal documents are kept in a most organized and orderly fashion – in a safe with Sorg's legal guys in Azt. I had of course told them I'd moved (and they were of course apprised of my plans for the dosh). Now I told them I wanted to be me. Fix it.

Ah, this is the life. Of course it wasn't quite that simple. I had to sign things and present my birth-certificate to folks, but finally I had a squeaky new passport, credit cards and even the electricity bill in my very own name. It felt surprisingly good.

In fact I was slightly shattered by how very good it felt. I have an identity! I can join a library! It felt just a little bit like being eighteen again, a grown-up, a person in my own right, who can go forth without fear or favour. If I knew where I wanted to go forth to, of course. That little flurry of activity brought to resolution, I was spending a lot of time doing nothing. Means gardening.

Tet has a strong vibrant personality. You noticed? I do not have a weak vacillating personality, except on those occasions where I wonder if I have a personality at all. Maya, you are probably sick of hearing, just got on with being Maya. There are other ways of being – rock-solid besides instigating late-night movies. It was my fate, I mused, sitting back on my knees and putting the trowel down, to surround myself with a group of people each of whom knew exactly what he or she wanted. So of course I got walked over. I can't – well, I can, but I don't want to, at least not long-term, live a life of total isolation.

Been there, done that?

Suppose I think of myself as a tree, or just a shrub would do. Or a road that diverged. One road led to Azt and one to Zur. You have to separate things out, very carefully and delicately. The whole Senate business had been a complex fantasy, a justification for my existence, no, more (or less) than that, a making of a new life out of the only – life left. Because I'd assumed with every cell in my body that the Tet door was not just closed but sealed. Lending a totally phoney simplicity – my future lies with Carlin! No it bloody well does not. Of course Maya's death had devastated me, but what had freaked me was Kyse, who had somehow to be incorporated into the fantasy.

I am in a new continuum. Am I really? Yes, I absolutely am, only I don't know what it looks like. Bloody Amida! I am in the continuum, which is new to me, of being Fal.

When in doubt, party. I considered inviting everyone important to me, but that seemed to incorporate half a continent – the Caniba gang, the Carlin gang – and in the end my house was warmed by the Six going on Twelve. I didn't think Sarat would come – busy, busy, busy – but he did. Wrapped in my own little bubble, I hadn't taken on board Dill living on the hill and she came. I didn't think it was my imagination that they seemed to gravitate towards each other. Mingle, mingle and oh look Sarat's talking to Dill again. Cantilip caught me looking and said dismissively, "Elder brother," then grinned.

"We all – move on," I said rather feebly.

"We do," she said rather gently then wafted away, leaving me feeling slightly disjointed. It had simply never occurred to me Sarat would find someone else. Any excuse to come to Zur? I wonder!

At last we are alone! People began to drift away but Tet had shown no signs of wishing to leave. They're a well brought up lot who left their paper cups and plates on tables not in flower-beds and would probably even have volunteered to help me clear up if it hadn't been quite so obvious Tet wasn't thinking of leaving.

"I'm thinking we should have our second talk. I was told the latest plot. And while I am thinking over its meaning I get an email from someone called Falita who tells me she's now living in Zur. And while I am thinking over that meaning I get invited to a very fine party."

"East, west, home's best," I said. "Is that trite enough? I thought – I thought I had to make a life in Carlin.

Now I just think I have to make a life. I have this problem – "I grinned. "Among many. What we said.

What you said. What Hass said. What everyone bloody said! If I'm not reshaping the continent, I don't

think I'm doing anything. Do you see? I'm sure you see. What Reakoed said. It's not you, or for that

matter Maya or Sarat or Mel. It's not you walk all over me, it's that I'm walked over! You, all of you, you're all so – complete."

"I chastised young Reakoed for that, I'm telling you! Perhaps I take it back. Perhaps not."

"Oh! Finding myself. Is that trite enough? I got lost somewhere in all this."

"Remember, Fal, I knew you before I loved you."

“What did you think of me?”

“Oh now Fal-girl, what does any 13-year-old opine of his friends!”

“Then what did you mean?”

“I loved you before I loved you?”

Tears began to trickle. He was so appalled he burst out laughing.

“The most cutting condemnation!” He looked around. “Here now, it’s only a bit of butter...” He tore off the offending corner of a paper napkin.

“Thanks...” Sniff, sniff.

“Now you’ll tell me what I said!”

“I’m such a complete moron, Tet! About people. Oh, I have a nice efficient little brain. Oh. Yes.”

Sniff. “Hass asked me what Maya thought about me and I said she didn’t think, she loved me.”

“Fal, Fal, Fal. If I drew you now, it’d be a raw wound. You’re wanting me to tell you how 13-year-old Fal got herself into this state? I don’t think I can do that.”

“I was thinking – much more superficial. Did you think I’d grow up to be a train-driver! Did I ever say I wanted to do something!”

“You have this fixation about doing!”

“Why only recently someone said to me what Sarat does stems from what Sarat is. I know, I know! And you still all do!”

“You can’t accept, can you.”

“Oh definitely. Accept what?”

“How many times has he told you to stop? You did not sit there, racking your brain, how can I screw Sar-fenan. And then – oh and then you will tell me that I took a set square and protractor to ‘The Madrigal’ because I could not see why the angle was not right, though when I stood back from the canvas, clearly the angle was not right! You will tell me I tore my hair out and – and that is the point! I did not rack my brains over the conception, I only knew the girl had to be looking through the balustrade and if that was not geometrically possible it had to be made possible! The thought is after and – what, Fal-girl? Your efficient little brain demands – “
I sighed.

“It whirrs. On its own. It really hates being ignored. If I’m not – I don’t know – reasoning, plotting, organizing, acting, I feel as if I’m doing nothing.”

“But that is not true. I’m meaning from your life with me, Fal. I recall we did a great deal of – nothing. And then of course I recall that that was not – real.” The laughter was frank. “I asked you this before and I begin to see Hass’s point, though I hasten to say I am not bored and nor in truth was he. Perhaps we should ask Maitlan, a nautical metaphor, your ship ran onto a rock and was ripped open. I am thinking of Sorg as a symptom not the malady but I am also thinking we should go back many years – perhaps not to 13! It was not real, the bloody Matter of bloody Kadun, then it was all that was real. Either or but why are not both real. Because both are real. And then I’m thinking you must have decided Zur is real, plain ordinary life is real. But not?”

“Yes, yes, yes! Getting quite excited here. Something came together, I saw something. I don’t mean a vision! That things weren’t opposites or – necessarily opposites. I mean I can’t be in Azt and Zur at the same time but wanting to be doesn’t mean I want to be! I mean Azt represents something and Zur represents something. It’s what they represent I want.” I began to giggle. “Any minute now you’ll tell me it’s all part of the bloody Whole. It’s like – one part of the fracture healed.”

“So you sit making sure the rest does not.”

“If I could just put that more positively... I sit weeding. I sit thinking I’m not – able to share my life until I have one. Because my brain won’t let me do nothing. Does that make any sense? I – I watched myself. I found something for my brain to do. I did this crazy crash course in economics. But it’s not what I want to do with my whole life. As Hass so astutely – damn him! Give me a problem, an intellectual problem, I solve it. Find the cottage, buy the goats. While having a breakdown at the time or not depending on – of course I loved my job. It was all projects. Fal will sort it. The very worst thing I could do is go back to work.”

“Has nothing anybody has said penetrated, Fal-girl! How can you be this insecure?”

“Did you hear what I said, Tet? I am a complete idiot about people. My judgement is totally undermined! I am a quivering wreck! Because of my own mistakes. Not even mistakes, just absolute - cluelessness.

Because I'm not connected to me! I walked into Sabila in Zur. He was not flattering."

"Ah, that now. He told me. I told him my relationship with my girl is not his damn business."

"Tet..."

"That was what you thought of me?"

"Shoot on sight," I said. "Secure? How can I be secure!" He began to laugh. "What the hell is so funny?"

"Promise you won't be cross?"

"No!"

"They only love her for her brain. Poor plain little Fal."

"Grrr. I sort of got there. I made a little mantra. I am not going to think! 1) I feel bored shitless and 2) I don't feel me and I suppose 3) like if you're drowning you grab the nearest stick of driftwood – "

"You found something to think about fast enough! I'm thinking and you'll excuse my seering honesty here – this too comes from you, not from us. You looked in the mirror and you couldn't stand thinking of yourself as – ornamental. Five guys, one girl. I think I speak for all of us when I say we – enjoyed that aspect of your presence as well as, what shall I say now, your more cerebral attributes and speaking of that, I too was 16 and it is my recollection your – difference of opinion with Hass was entirely intellectual and the disturbance it generated was as the estimable Maitlan has indicated, has he not, almost entirely intellectual, though naturally when you struck at the core of their beings."

"Ah-ooh," I said.

"No sex in it. I'm thinking you no more wanted to go to bed with Hass than – than you did with Mel – but that yearning – you did, however, want to go to bed with me and I with you, indeed. Now me, I didn't have any gender theory, being something of a hick from the sticks, I took things much as they came. Did I not tell you once, I viewed the whole thing like a good movie? That is not to say I had no questions. But me, my views were simple. I should find a girl. This – continuum of gender was not part of my perception and I told you frankly I did not understand this about the crack but to my simple mind it was to do with your sexual response or lack of and I do recall there was no lack of with me so I did not consider it of significance."

"You love me," I said.

"You'll not be telling me you thought I didn't!"

"No, no." The paper napkin was soggy.

"I'll get..."

He came back with a loo roll.

"Be prepared!"

"I swore to myself," I said, "whatever we said to each other, I should not do the waterworks."

He sat back and studied me.

"Is that not like your having no friends? I'm thinking – had we 'just' been partners, then there's a case. Emotional blackmail you're thinking. Poor little Fal, now, she causes pain and havoc, but oh she's so distressed." I duly winced. "But then how long have we known each other and you don't think you can cry? And then I'm thinking perhaps you knows you better than your conscious mind! And perhaps also me knows me better than my conscious mind for I am finding – for both of us, apart, it was a question of our pairing, was it not, but we have still known each other since we were 12 and that is not and cannot be – sullied. And so I talk the talk but perhaps in some ways I am as confused as you. I do not know if we can live together again, Fal. I do not say we can't. But we are still the bloody Six and if I say we are friends, we are not 'just' friends or 'only' friends. And – I am thinking something else. When we got together I was injured, I was angry. I needed you. And this is more complicated than it seems for have you not said did I care 'that much'? And then we talk of your insecurity and I do not say you need to be needed but to feel valued and if you did not understand that you were everything to me then our relationship was built on a lie. And if you did..."

He looked suddenly distraught, naked, completely vulnerable and if he was willing to show me that – crying even harder was not an answer.

"I hurt you so horribly, so badly. And just at this minute I just don't know how I could." I managed a sad little grin. "You said it, insanity is not an excuse. What does it sound like, Tet, me bleating it didn't seem real."

"A lot of things, Fal-girl, a lot of things, and I have said, I do not say the fault is all yours."

“Almost everything,” I said. It was best to get it over with.

“If some insane demon had said, you can draw or you can have Fal, I should have had you.”

“Tense noted.”

“And now? Fal – life is not a balance-sheet! I’m meaning – what am I meaning now? You cared for me, you helped heal me, mentally and physically and then – then it was as though it was all blotted out. And so I felt I hated you. But that stands. That is what is and the other, that is also what is. The one – it does not cancel, nor does it – redeem. That much I understand. I have come to understand. And so I listen to you and I do not totally understand but that I understand and you, I think – that is your difficulty. Either or. Our relationship, our selves, our lives, it is everything, not just a part. I cannot say – your running off with him is – real and your holding me in your arms while I cried – that is not. I do not think either was a lie. So it is complicated. More complicated than when we – when I was angry I cared to see.”

“Thank you,” I said. “Either or.”

“And now I think if it’s not walking over you, I’ll dump some of this junk in the bin for you. Glad to see it’s disposable, though I do not think NoZone would approve.”

I gurgled.

“Fortunately His Imperial Majesty is nowadays too concerned with affairs of state to agonise over the catering arrangements of his friends.”

“I remember a time now and so do you.”

“And Hass.”

“It’s a wonder any of us dared learn to drive!”

Since Tet’s idea of tidying up was to get a bin-bag and sweep everything into it, it took maybe five minutes of his valuable time to do so. I mean, this isn’t an act of selfless heroism I’m describing here.

That sounds a bit bitchy. I don’t mean it like that. I mean it wasn’t the poor woman is done in and there’s all this work to do.

“Where does the rubbish go?”

“Little box by the gate.”

“I’ll be off now, take it as I go. Until our next cosy conversation about the weather and the latest fashions.”

Flop. I don’t know which was worse. OK, Fal, this is crisis-point, this is between you and you, no hi guys, he-elp! Item: watching Tet move around carelessly sweeping paper-cups into bin-liner. One of the things removed from the narrative so far is how incredibly sexy I found him. Cold shower! I don’t think it exactly helps that both of us are on a knife-edge here. Item: I have in the course of a not really very long conversation erased and denied Sorg. Exactly what kind of a repulsive loon am I? This is of course what they all mean. My apparently practically bloody flawless capacity for my only reality being that which surrounds me. Repeat after me, Fal, both are real, both are bloody well real. It is not a dream you had. And yes, you are going to face that you thought you’d burned your boats, there could be no going back, and now you don’t know which end is up, not that you ever did.

I did that. It was real.

Not according to Maya, it wasn’t.

It was real as most people understand reality: it happened.

It all happened and it is all part of the bloody Whole. The movie called my life.

Why do I have this horrible feeling that? Is it another fantasy? This horrible feeling that all I ever wanted was what I had, namely a job that engaged my brain and a partner who was nuts about me.

Is there anything here that’s bedrock? Maybe I did not want to change the world. But then of course I did not understand how critical was the Matter of Kadun.

Screaming is good.

Where did I go wrong? Where did I take a wrong turning? Did I? I’ve just had a rather horrible thought.

Some people think they gain completion through money or success or sex. OK, it’s not exactly acutely bizarre and unheard-of to look outside oneself for the key to one’s existence. Other people. No, it’s the wrong order. Is it though? I’ll get to what I’m babbling about in a minute. I found Maya instead. Something I’m thinking happened in Kadun. Oh Fal, you screaming nutter. No, that can’t possibly be right. The only thing that happened in Kadun of the faintest significance to the Matter of Fal and Tet is that I was away from

Tet.

Let me approach this cautiously. Rather like finding a poisonous snake in the middle of my brain. Like that, huh? Then I'd better take my knife to it pdq. As though I were feeding off Maya, feeding off Sorg. If Maya had died first, my little rational brain tells me that running off with Sorg would have made much more sense. But she didn't and I am carefully erasing Tet from this analysis.

The thing about Maya staying Maya is that she was always around in what puh-lease so far as I know anything about normality which I begin to wonder but anyway... As Maitlan pointed out, two friends each find partners and provided the partners don't loathe each other and they stay in the same town they are on the edges of each other's lives, kind of like sets. And of course Tet was there. And little Fal felt safe. That may be just a bit OTT but go with it. Or else Tet was my ballast and I was too stupid to realize it.

I'm missing it again. But it's there.

At which point I remembered briefly I was supposed to stop thinking. Safe is OTT. Anchored is not, as in little pink balloon.

But I know that.

How about not going to, going from? What was I so desperate to get away from? How about me?

I think I'd rather have fancied a great pile of washing-up at that point. I'd sorted out my books. Perhaps I should check my bank statement.

What the hell is this? This me and reality garbage, what is it?

I need a new lawn-mower. I have a lot more lawn now.

Whatever it is, I am shying away from it like a frightened mare.

And I don't feel expansively enjoying my beautiful gracious space, more crouched in a corner surrounded by emptiness.

What is it they say, today is the first day of the rest of your life? This minute, I said to myself, is the first minute of the rest of my life.

Good for it.

I'm out of places to run to, mentally or physically.

I'm here with me. Maybe I shouldn't do things by halves, indulge in a night of breakdown.

The car always starts. There's a garden-centre over by South Side. I can't remember its name, but I can search for it. Compare specs, read reviews, order. I didn't move.

Nicely put, Hass. Love your eso. Stripped of the crap – hi Fal, meet Fal. I know you two can get along just fine if you try.

I mean really, have I gone completely potty? The answer to that might just be yes and I'm just about to get sane.

Because what I'm saying – I think what I'm saying – is that when I'm with – closes eyes a minute – when I was with – certain people or not exactly with – I kind of use them to be me – or not exactly, kind of absorb their Reality with a capital R, their eso

The phone rang just at the moment I was wholly convinced I wasn't fit for the company of other human beings. I let it ring until the machine picked it up, let the caller leave a message if he or she wanted to and then listened but no message.

I could be analytical or I could go to bed. Not thinking had gone by the board.

What exactly do I think I'm trying to say here?

Who is the key?

Oh. Maya's reality (of course) became the Matter of Kadun. Therefore it had to be my reality. That is basically such an awful thought I think I'll go to bed after all.

I have never thought of myself as a sponge.

There is of course chasing the eso.

There are plenty of shops in Zur open all hours. Ah, but do they sell balloons? Why not, parties happen all hours.

That was sufficiently ridiculous to shake off my gloom but I didn't really think grasping a balloon real or imaginary was going to help tonight. What is me? What is quintessentially and utterly me? Apart from me, of course. I looked around at my beautiful spacious and largely possessionless room and said out loud, "There's bloody nothing here that's me. Except me." I didn't think I felt quite so derelict that I'd hug

myself, though come to think of it that wasn't such a bad idea.

No, not analysis: fact. I started to review my life, not exactly for the first time, you'll have gathered, but trying to force myself to look at how it had actually been but I got side-tracked. Not very good at looking after myself, am I, no, not looking after exactly, valuing, but that was all right (kind of!) because other people valued me. Been here before.

What's the best thing I've ever done in my life? What should I feel proud of?

Oh.

I guess hugging that little silver stallion would be as good as anything but that little silver stallion is out of reach.

What I didn't understand, what I couldn't understand, is that Maya's reality was never not the Matter of Kadun because if she hadn't in some sense ate, drank, slept, lived, the Matter of Kadun from the moment she committed herself to Sarat, she would have gone nuts!

How thick is that?

Mel didn't stop being Dabida's heir because he is also Sarat's cousin-in-law.

Fracture.

Everyone else sees it as a whole, poor lickle Fal likes to think, but Mel – why is nothing whole?

Why do I think everyone else skates it?

Or in other words how the hell can I be this insecure? Or even just normally human?

What else did Maya do but absorb? Yes? No? Absorb the plot and the plotters as it/they unfolded around her and – file it! Slot it into its rightful place. About to say so far as it affected her but it all affected her.

Kadun sexism notwithstanding, she was 50% of where the buck stopped and – and the possibility could not have been wholly absent that she might end up 100%.

Loss. Do you know I never had an in-depth conversation with her about this in my life? But then it wasn't real. Something else. A sense of trespass. The kind of question dumbfuck journo's ask, gee ma'am, how do you really feel about being Anile empress? Gee, ma'am, how do you really feel about being Tar's niece?

Trespass may seem a strange word, bessest friend, but for all of us it was an expression of our friendship that we didn't ask dumbfuck journo questions.

Something that uses my brain and takes all of me with it. Fal, you are so stupid you don't deserve to be alive. Tet hadn't responded to the word 'project' and I hoped as much as I'd ever hoped anything he'd never felt the stupid bitch had just seen him as another project, but of course in a sense that was exactly.

Am I obsessive? Apart from the Matter of Fal, I mean. Well, obviously yes, in the obvious sense that whatever I'm doing becomes my reality, precluding everything else on the planet.

Ah, the balance. The balance I do not have, do not get.

And this is what happened to all the other people who ditched perfectly good relationships caught up in the happening. OK, some of them were maybe unhappy relationships. Kadun became life, or even Life.

Within that reality – I never had some kind of juggling work and home problem. But then maybe Tet's vibrant personality which did and did not walk all over me wouldn't let me. If I'd been single I'd probably have been pretty workaholic. Tet's personality in context is not precludable.

So now, and I had to force myself to think this, I've thought myself into a position where my relationship with Tet was perfect and I was complete within it – and what kind of bollocks must that be?

It might even be true bollocks, largely. If I'd known how vulnerable you are, I'd have looked after you better. Different. Sorg was different. The same but different. Skip the obvious differences. What the hell am I talking about?

As if I didn't know.

Loss. There are people around one and still the really penetrating questions aren't asked. One day...Oh, right, yes, so one goes around stopping people in their tracks asking the really penetrating questions in case they're not here tomorrow. Or maybe the questions don't penetrate until they're not here.

What, Sorg my dearest, did you understand about me? My fragile self.

He treated me like cut-glass. Outside work, of course.

Value.

He needed me. Not in the awful sense that he was nothing without me but needed me, all the same.

What is the difference between the flow and auto-pilot. That's an easy one. Maybe. The flow is you do

whatever because you want to. Auto-pilot is you do what you have to do when you don't want to. They don't – distinguish, think some things are more important than others. That's crazy. Do and don't. If you see Hass washing-up you'd think it was the most enjoyable task the world could devise. Think what other people think are more important. Don't. That's the point of them doing their own laundry, not or not just that they needed to learn how most people live. It's part of the bloody Whole. Generally called life. And so I who could have done anything or nothing, made myself a box, a cage, full of things I 'had to' do, when I didn't have to do them at all.

That's not completely true. Sorg's death crash-landed me in Carlin.

Oh but I did have to do them, to survive. The car could not be allowed not to start.

Tell me something, someone. How/when/why should I know that I'm in a fit state to live with Tet or anyone else human, for that matter, and not vulnerable to the lure of running off with the nearest Ciletij colonel who values me?

Phrase that one carefully because it's not really that I should or could because most of my mind and most of my heart would stop me, burned child fears fire and all that, but the feeling that the grass is greener is something else. Come on, guys, you've never even felt a pang? Sarat, now, but that too is a don't ask question, not because of trespass, ask it as a joke with Maya there, but with Maya dead – come on! When we're all mature and greying with our youthful vicissitudes behind us. If.

Ah, that little pink cloud where nothing matters. One day I'll wake up and none of this will matter. Really. What does it mean?

It means 'I shan't be there worrying all the time about me.

Not merely obsessed, but self-obsessed.

I'm thinking you would not be in pieces on our sofa if I could not. Quite so.

Hi Tet, I think I probably want to come home. Not yet. Find my bloody life. Hey life, where are you, where are you hiding? I need you to come out and play with me.

Let me tell you one thing I have achieved. I have an empty diary. I have bloody nothing to speak of to do. If I have not driven myself mad, I shall drive myself mad. Because of course what I'd really like right now is to be absorbed in someone else's reality.

Go over it all again. Have I got the energy? Is there any point? In piecemeal, no point. There has to be some common theme, some unifying force, some – some me, some what Fal is that pulls all this together.

Fuses the opposites. Is it just too big? That's my you think you've got it pat when someone pulls the rug away. But there's still me. There's still what I did at each cross-roads. My choices. My progressively stranger choices.

They must all of course think I'm totally raving mad, if for no other reason than I kept telling them Tet and I were happy.

I don't know when I'm happy?

Being happy isn't real?

Being happy isn't exciting?

What do I mean by 'happy', 'real'? Not some great big semantic philosophical debate about universal meanings, me, who made choices, surrounding 'happy' and 'real'.

In consequence of which I had for a time a relationship which defies description with what might or might not have been Sorg's ghost.

Where does that fit in with my yearning for the eso?

That is too big. That is just too big.

There is a case to be made out that I wasn't so much happy with Sorg as delirious. We didn't have anything like a normal life together, how could we in the heat of the happening? There is further a case – you can tell I'm not exactly enjoying this one – that that was much more – child-like than – than normality. How well really did I know Sorg? I knew – his essence. I knew he loved me and I responded. He reached me. I did not know Mel loved me. I did not know Tet loved me. So only Sorg was real.

Add another word to the glossary: love.

Too close. I knew everything about Tet and Mel. \

I think – I do a lot of that, not that it gets me anywhere. How men love women. What was 'child-like' was

that somehow I couldn't distinguish – sort of making mud-pies with sex and a house thrown in. Tet is being restrained. Perish the thought that we discuss our differences in some ghastly 'civilized' fashion divorced from – er, reality. There may be things he doesn't want to talk about to me. How surprising. He is – surprised by his responses to a real life Fal opposite him. Tell me about it! I am – surprised by how far he is going. Oh, life is full of surprises.

One of them was Sorg. What does it mean?

He made me feel real. Oh great. So real to me is what everyone else regards as total raving loon. Come to think of it that makes sense!

Ooh, a man can be attracted to me! Not my problem, alas. Ooh, a man sees through the – ornamental exterior. Also not my problem. Hang on a minute. Oh dear. How men love women indeed. How women love men. Lucky Fal who had – who has guys who love her for herself. Only you see they knew me when I was 13. Because I couldn't bloody distinguish, could I. Because I don't understand – long drop to the bottom of the well – that's the connection that misfires. Well, one of them. Is it? It was 'child-like' because it was mud-pies with sex. No, that doesn't – what the hell is my problem with sex? With Tet or Sorg, nil. I do not, thank you, Mel, have a problem with sex. But that of course is now and that was then and something called adulthood happened in the interval and this is something to do with sex and mud-pies. And passion and desire and other grown-up things which may actually be Tet's biggest problem right now because I am not an idiot (in some ways) and being passionate and being angry with someone can be a rather dodgy mix. How much older than you was Sorg, darling? Old enough not to be on a learning-curve! Nor of course was I, but. But what? It wasn't that we did anything more adventurous or different – it's that word again. How can you explain a scent on the breeze, an – an atmosphere?

Anything I said would sound so wrong, make Tet sound like a gangly youth who didn't know what he was doing. Neither of us knew what we were doing to start with, who does! We learned fast. Mel was not passionate. Perhaps I couldn't see the point of the exercise without passion, though I didn't know that at the time. Mel is not passionate? Perhaps. Oh that conversation with Cantilip I'm going to have when we're 70. Mel may be too eso to be passionate. I wonder! There's an element, isn't there, of liking getting hot and sweaty! Mel certainly likes exercise, likes using his body – anyway, he wasn't passionate with me at six-freaking-teen and consequently I was totally unturned-on. Ice-maiden is about the last. I am not frightened by desire which I suppose has something to do with being H-W. I mean, oh dear, yes, I mean. See line above about dodgy mix. Tet knows that in the appalling and inconceivable but conceive it anyway situation that in the middle of things his anger reared its ugly head it would not be oh shock oh horror he has hurt me, but more oh shock oh horror he found himself on the other side of the room. That, er, equally would not be constructive. For either of us.

Perhaps he is not so much being restrained as running on another track, the friendship one. On that track he is prepared to surrender to love. The other one has breaks in it. He will not (yet?) share with me what if anything he is going to do about that.

Latic said the shrine at Maona-pri had scared him, partly because anything that old defies any puny inadequate meaning you previously attributed to the word 'old', but mostly because he couldn't understand it, understand what it did to him. He said he felt absolutely safe there. Nothing inside or out could hurt him. It's in the stone, he said, rather helplessly. The power is in the stone. The mentors put the power in the stone, Narak had told him. I knew Latic's first impression of the mentors (it lasted about thirty seconds or until he started to explain his problems, whichever was sooner) was along the lines of sweet gentle folks who don't know they're alive. Fidub has not remained a Cult-free zone for 6000 years going on ever because they don't know they're alive.

Not transformed. Free. Free to be Latic.

I wonder....The ferries run nearly all night in the summer. I grinned to myself. Sarat would know. Sarat probably still knows, underneath the avalanche of further fact that must have crowded his brain. If they haven't changed the timetables of course, which they almost certainly have. I logged on and looked up the exotically named Fidubi Ferries while composing a letter in another part of my brain, which went something like, Dear Tet, I understand that I appeared with a good reference! I mean you value Hass's views and he

thought I ought to talk to you and I'm not saying it would have been different if I'd appeared off my own bat (bat-wings?) but – but what, Fal? There was a ferry in an hour which I could catch if I moved it, and one back at about 5 in the morning, which suited what I had in mind just fine. I ought to be able to create an absolutely soothing, silent and safe atmosphere in my own den of course, but I hadn't. I couldn't go to Zur's shrine, too many people would recognize me.

So of course the first person I saw was Vax. He gave a quick yelp of laughter.

"I have travelled many leagues," I said, "lit and fig. Whether I've got anywhere is something else."

"I look in from time to time," he said. "I hear things in our island fastness, you know."

"Maybe one corner of the puzzle is complete."

"I'm around."

There's a café for when you need to eat and the party is in the basement if you want to talk. I didn't want to eat or talk.

Carlin just thinks it's old. Did Narulis ever sit here? No, why would he, he was young, adventurous, a sea-farer – so maybe he went to sea to escape from a broken heart! If Sarat failed, if he were ever driven out of Kadun – where on earth did that thought come from? It had to work, it had to. With very little encouragement I could work myself back into a state wherein it was dependent upon me to make it but no, that had never been exactly. If everyone didn't do their utmost that would be a betrayal of Sorg. The thought sat more easily now that I had defined my utmost and set it in motion. The pillars the colour of damp sand, intricately carved, just a little bit crumbly, shimmered in the candle-light. I looked more closely and cocked my head. Were those letters? If so it was no language I knew. I closed my eyes and no, it wasn't a time-slip, just an awareness of time, of waves of time, past, present and future, which I suppose is another way of saying the bloody Whole. No, that hadn't been what I meant, Sarat hadn't been what I mean, when they did fail, when they returned to Fidub, they must have come here to recover. All times are now. I might just as well have been some Fidubi wench from aeons past. It was easy to be like that here. I am sitting in a pale-green tunic – well, at least it wasn't crimson corrugated iron, but I guess that's part of the bloody Whole too. I surrendered myself because here I am safe. The shadows came but could not touch me, not here, shadows trying to blot out the light. 'They came, the skull-faces, but we laughed.' I didn't laugh, I just went on sitting. Somewhere it seemed Vax was saying, "And what does Hass say?" and I almost looked round before I realized the conversation was in my head. "I have to stop," I replied. "I just stopped." I did laugh then. Because it was all so funny. It never works when you try to put words to what is – the messes people get into, that's OK, but people being killed, people in pain: It is all so funny. That makes more sense, the bloody gurgle of cosmic laughter. Inside. That's the point. It is inviolate. It is untouched. It is real? And all the human crap is not real, but we are human and have to be human. I knew enough to know better minds than mine had lurched at this one, but that is the balance. I had a sudden image of myself on – not exactly a tightrope, because it wasn't much more than knee-high and it wasn't that there was no safety net, the trouble was on the contrary that nets to catch me if I fell abounded, catch and trap me, but I was skimming along, easy-peasy. Suddenly I felt sure the rope was going to break but no, I told myself, and it didn't. Yet. Suddenly it snapped. This, I thought, is not totally unfamiliar but this time I know what to do! I threw myself clear of the nets. I didn't seem any the worse for wear but I was sure I was somewhere else, thought it didn't seem to be anywhere. Despite this mental circus-act, I was feeling very lazy, very relaxed. I suppose very safe. I wanted to stretch out and found myself another cushion. There were a few other people around but they too were lost in their own little mental worlds. I wondered about other people's pain, grief, fear (that makes a change, huh?) and where it went. I mean, I had no doubt that some of the people here were as distraught and devastated as I had been but it sort of melts away. Because it isn't real. I sighed. OK, so let me in this safe place ask myself what the hell is my problem with reality, but it really didn't seem to matter. Maybe that's the only way to look at it, casually, creep up on it unawares. The central fact of my life is – oh, do I have one of those? A determining fact of my life is that once I was in Azt – what? Unreal is such an unhelpful word. No, my relationship with Tet didn't seem unhappy or boring or even not what I wanted, it just didn't seem real. And Tet is not a wishy-washy person. It was just – somewhere else. Like everything else is right now, which might just tell me something important if I only knew what. There is a crossed wire, a plug in the wrong socket, like – like putting the headphones jack into the power socket. A little mental game came to me,

unplugging all the major connections – like I knew what they were or anything, but just pulling out any plug I could see! And Hass would say, I said to myself sleepily, just leave all the loose ends alone, don't try to figure which should go where. I can't honestly say that this little exercise made me feel the slightest bit different, but I did drift into that really nice waking dreams state – is it alpha rhythms, can't remember – and had a really nice though not remotely revealing, so far as I could see, trip. I came to eventually, blinking and reflected that – possibly – spending the night with myself on the floor of the shrine at Maona-pri counted as my most insane act yet. Thirsty. Where is the caff? I got up and looked around. Half-open door with light on, that must be it. It wasn't very much lighter, the sort of people who want a drink in the middle of the night don't want to walk into a blaze of neon, and much as described by Latic, benches with cushions on and broader benches in front of them to serve as tables, and really rather strange lamps on each table, like mini-inverted chandeliers which, Latic had said enthusiastically, give you enough light to read by without disturbing the ambience, which was pale pink; the walls were pale pink, and there were paintings which looked rather good, even in the half-light. [The loos, I discovered, were pale pink too, everything including the bowl, with good paintings, and well lit. There was a rather gorgeous one of a tree in bud. I wondered if I could get a reproduction. Somehow I had no doubt these were originals. I didn't think the shrine lacked funding and I wondered.] Behind the counter a middle-aged man with a bushy beard was engrossed in a book. There was a water dispenser. I drank thirstily. There was a solid wall of books, vids and disks cunningly illuminated by under the shelf lighting. Latic had raved about this. I made my way to the counter. The guy looked up and said hi.

Hi, I said.

Hunger? Thirst?

Hot drink?

Anything in particular? You will be amazed at our range!

I looked around. I shall?

Under the counter.

Lemongrass?

Come to think of it, I thought, right this moment, I could do with apple-stock! I wondered if I actually could or whether that was me tweeting Carlin at me.

And ginger?

And I've suddenly realized I'm ravenous!

Do you an omelette?

That would be brilliant! Thank you!

Give you a shout when it's ready.

The laughter gurgled up from somewhere

You shout here?

Didn't you notice the juke-box?

I grinned and wandered over to the books.

The Illusion of Time. That sounded a bit heavy, a bit theoretical. Why Am I Here? You pick that out wondering where is here. Here turned out to be the universe. Something a bit more local, I think. Why is a Zuri in the shrine at Maona-Pri in the middle of the night? This enchanting collection of meditation music from the Age of Calpedene. The what? Oh, it's the name of the performers. You don't call yourselves The Age of Calpedene unless there was an Age of Calpedene. Slap your wrist, Fal, you should have paid more attention to Fidubi history in school. I could certainly try that one, my place could just do with enchanting music and indeed there were headphones and a drive to try it with. Oh yes, oh this is gorgeous. All I need now is something to read while listening to the enchanting music – er, do you buy, do you borrow, do you donate? Oh, right, a sort of ledger with a pen tied to it. The box for donations is in the wall to your left. We ask you to write the title of anything you take so we can keep stocks complete. That's simple enough. I continued browsing. Put The Light On! Why are you so darned unhappy? So life has dealt you a lousy hand. You are in charge. I think I'm going to like this... Eternal Flame: A History of the Shrine at Maona-Pri. I picked up a vid, Treasures of Maona-Pri, while I was at it. Who are You and What Do You Want? That sounded – pertinent. Death: It's All One Continuum. That was definitely going to engross me, but not one for reading in a caff, even this caff. When the chef brought my omelette I asked him if he was one of the mentors and he confessed he was. I felt suddenly shy but came out with it anyway. My partner died and I

had a sort of experience with what might have been his – ghost. Some people said it was projection. I have talked about this, I mean. I wondered is – there anything you can recommend. Anyone saying anything sensible about – that sort of thing. Oh you poor girl, you, he said. I felt immediately swaddled in love. Oh I see, I said, that’s what you do. He cocked an eyebrow. People can say anything, everything because they’re safe and warm and cosy and smothered in love. That’s about the size of it, he said. Whom have you talked to, may I ask. I sighed. Hass. Hasiyata Talal. His lips twitched. And you want a – second opinion? I’ve had second opinions, third, tenth, I said. I think I’d like some kind of – overview. That’s a good one, he said firmly, pointing to Death: It’s All One Continuum. Let’s see now, hope we’ve got one... We do try and keep everything in stock... There we are! He triumphantly produced a small cream paperback entitled Matters of Life and Death. Your dinner’s getting cold. Unless you want to talk. Thank you very much. No, I said. But I’d better... I gestured at the ledger. You eat, he said. I’ll write! Thank you, I said again.

After a while I went back to my cushions then got up and walked slowly up to the Flame. It rather seemed to me that I saw things in it, sparks and flashes, but I rather prosaically put that down to tiredness, except I couldn’t stop looking. ‘Love and cannot leave,’ I said to myself softly. I looked up at the Window THAT AM I and an incredible collage of starburst and flame but – rather prosaically – I guess I’d disconnected again – what had me really gaping was the structure of the Window, its divisions, though the images were different. Yes, well, I’d seen that before; so that’s where the Dacunine Window comes from.

I was just thinking time I was mooching off when the first rays of sun hit the centre of the starburst, were refracted. Yikes! It was as though the whole shrine had been set alight.

A voice behind me full of laughter said simply, “Good, isn’t it.”

“Is there music in the glass?” I asked.

Just laughter.

I turned to face the stranger. He was a tall, thin, elderly guy, slightly stooped, now looking at me with frank curiosity.

“The lady knows Carlin.”

“Oh,” I said, “the lady knows Carlin!”

The lady, I thought to myself, has just found another – project. Ancient history!

I got home, said good morning to Benji, told her my night’s activities, swallowed some strong coffee and set to thinking about – oh what a cliché – making my house a home. Then I went to bed, though I didn’t sleep, but did another session of pulling out those mental plugs, an endeavour which seemed to me suddenly as important as regular physical exercise.

My choices were strange and intricate. Whatever tenderness Tet felt for me could not, I felt, reasonably be expected to stretch to re-creating some of the greatest work of all time for my sitting-room – though I did wonder how it worked – did the artist do the drawing and the glazier the transference onto glass? Nonetheless, I did not like my windows. I wanted a window to look at, not through. I can’t be the first person to feel like that – surely there must be specialist suppliers. I searched, there were, but the products were artistic gunge. What I wanted, I realized, was a nest in a corner of that space, a sort of special place where I could sit in a mysteriously imposed mental safety and listen to the Age of Calpedene. I deliberately gave the psychological ramifications of this a miss on the grounds that whatever it was it could not possibly be damaging. My room was quite big enough to lose an end of it and this I did, replacing the window, mentally at least, with something large, beautiful and pictorial and creating a step up to an arched entrance which instead of a door was a delicate double waist-high iron-work gate. I didn’t want any furniture, just rugs and cushions and I didn’t want to put anything on the walls because the beauty would come from the window I didn’t have and couldn’t find.

Artists must work in glass, the possibilities are too intoxicating to be ignored. I tried the galleries and did find some beautiful stuff, but it still wasn’t what picky me wanted. All it really needs, I thought, is a huge window sticker! What d’you call them, transfers? Historic site and all that, there were probably hundreds of them in the shop that I hadn’t found and wouldn’t have been open even if I had found it. Time for a day-trip to M-p. Yes, yes, yes! All glorious in reds and golds. All I need now is a builder and a glazier – and somewhere to live while the work is being done? No, I can camp upstairs. This is rather fun. I turned my attention to the other 90% of my accommodation. While I have work done, is there any other work I want done, any other interesting niches to create! The trouble with my beautiful light and spacious room is that everything is built-in, and so everything is hidden and so the general effect is as uninteresting as living in a large box. An

artist – I grinned – might rave about the spareness of line, but I didn't feel in spareness of line mode. I was not going to invite an artist to give his considered professional opinion. There were definite ramifications to having my home designed by Tet. I found some interactive interior design software – model your ideal home! That gave baby hours of endless pleasure. I got there in the end. Alcoves, alcoves were what I needed, and a bay window. My every instinct was against central divisions. I had quite enough of those. Oh, and I wanted to make my loo and bathroom fun and pretty. So then I'd had the builders in and got there and felt thoroughly content with not just my place but my space so I went off to spend another night in M-p, appreciating the first one had been good for me at a level I couldn't even describe or define. However delectable my space, there is something in the atmosphere after 6000 years, something in the stone. Something. Something that wards off all hurt, all pain, all fear, all anger – and all mattering. This time I rested my back against what I ridiculously thought of as 'my' pillar and hugged my knees and simply breathed. By no means a classic meditation posture but I was happy and this time I felt emboldened to actually take on my dragons and slay them, because I wasn't. I think I might find that impossible to explain. I was also emboldened by having done a little bit of very elementary detective work on break-ups due to the bloody Matter of bloody Kadun from stats from the Vasuculi Civil Affairs Department (couldn't they call it something else?) to self-help and problem-page sites. Nobody had been lying to me! I hadn't really thought they had but it was good to see they hadn't. This bit of my saga at least was entirely within the realm of normal human woe. Of course if I knew what the question was I might know what the answer was. Yes, this, yes, that, but why. It's the wrong way round! At the centre it will be obvious why. Again I had the sensation of some kind of fusion. I am Fal, I said to myself, lazily, sleepily. THAT AM I. All are One and do not know it. I just need to get past – whatever it is I need to get past. Is that a good circle or is that a good circle? A circular maze came into my mind and I came to sharply filled with the sudden realization that there was a block on the way through it, which I suppose is screamingly obvious really, but I'd never thought of it like that before. Hallo, obstacle, what are you? Now I'd visualized it, I could so to speak prod it and poke it. It wasn't very responsive. You have to bear in mind here we're talking about a short thick black line. I felt fairly frivolous. It's my mind, I could push it here, maybe make it change into something else, do what I like with it. Hey, maybe I can jump over it! Nothing changed inside but I had the definite sensation of the block rising to meet me. Aw, don't be like that...How about brute force, pneumatic drills! I knew the drill-heads broke. So you want to be difficult, do you? As though that wasn't obvious or something. Now look, I made you, I can unmake you...Suppose I parachute into the centre. Like maybe I fly away on my eso pink balloon and flutter gracefully down. I enjoyed that one, but it didn't seem to change anything. What is going to happen to me? I knew that was the question but there wasn't an answer. But no look if I get centred I think I must think mustn't I, that something so devastating will happen to me that it must be avoided at all cost. Can't we have a try before you buy here! What else am I having? This business of mattering. What will it do to me, what shall I lose? Are you Maya? And a chorus of dancing bears high-kicked across the floor of the Ciletij Senate? No, actually, but I knew I was dead on target. I had a flurry of the sort of thoughts you don't want to have and since I was alone having them I was extremely glad I was where I was, in a well-equipped operating-theatre, not in my home first-aid room. I didn't fully love Tet, I held back a bit, I loved you. I'd leave, betray, forget. Sorg was a male you. I couldn't not. I heard Hass telling me I'm not gay but that doesn't mean I wasn't in love with Maya and I felt confused because I felt I understood 'like that' and 'not like that' but not both at the same time. I just said over and over to myself, Maya, then reason kicked in and I thought as I had before, no, the order is wrong, it doesn't make sense, but perhaps after all it did if I thought, no felt, felt that with Sorg at last I had Maya. Me hadn't fully, properly – what was the bloody word – loved Tet, not the real me because me was on some kind of eso trip with Maya but I did, I do love Tet, with both of them dead I'm free to love Tet.

Umm, that's rather a high price to pay. No wonder I'm ravaged by the whole thing. Having thought I'd lost Tet too.

The word bi floated into my mind, as in bi-sexual. Can you be asexually bi-sexual?

So long as I can love my eso, not someone else's.

It sort of seemed to explain the whole Hass thing, but I couldn't have put into words how.

Bi. You point both ways, equally attracted, or in my case un. Hermaphrodite. You are both. We're all fthat.

Oh the continuum of gender indeed. My male part saw no reason why I shouldn't love Maya. That made

sense. I think. THAT AM I. It doesn't have a body and it doesn't have gender. Therefore I have neither body nor gender. Therefore we have to be human. Here and there and in my case all over the damn' place. I thought that in my case the chicken definitely came before the egg. I mean, it all seemed so much simpler to my gang because they hadn't fallen in love with someone of the same sex without being gay!
Eeek!

Or not exactly. To complete the square the matching-pair that should have dined with Sarat and Maya was not me and Tet but me and Hass. Had I oh what's the word, subliminally understood that? Amida, Amida, Amida, and what I'd waded into, at six-freaking-teen, I mean, was Sarat and Hass sorting out their relationship, but Sarat isn't talking, Amida, darling, he isn't talking about his relationship with Maya and he isn't talking about his relationship with Hass, and in both cases why the hell should he?

Oh did I hole them below the water-line and other such allusions, not expecting me to be so thick that I didn't see what water-line, what boat? Sarat is an outer and exo kind of guy....What difference had that made? Probably rather a lot. And Tet? Tet is outwardly outer and exo. The eso is all in the art.

And in Fal.

Right now, I think – I don't think – I need to be – I feel, yes, sort of floaty, but in a very prosaic way or maybe that's actually how it is, I just don't feel – the weight of me, which is strange because I don't feel like moving, either, don't feel I can move from this spot. The only need I have right now is to see the sun hit the Window again. Practical Fal kicked in, plenty of time for that. A drink would be good. But that would mean both moving and saying words to another human being. Don't think I can do that. To some extent and heretofore, I have just punched me in the stomach, followed by knocking myself unconscious. Rather literally in terms of having knocked out who I thought I am, but there might be an element of wishful thinking there. I need to grow. To let me spread through me. Just sit.

Eventually I wanted to go to the loo. We are human. Quite so, yes.

I definitely wanted the tree in bud. That is so me.

It was the same guy behind the counter. He smiled in recognition.

"Do you do strong coffee?" I asked.

"We do."

"Yes, please!"

"There's a painting in the Ladies', tree in bud. It's unsigned. Do you know whom it's by?"

"Guy called Manya. Lives over on the Leolisle. We sell a lot of his stuff."

"That's really what I meant. I did come once in daylight! Went to the shop. I didn't see..."

"I think it's in the catalogue."

"The – yes, of course." He cocked his head. "I mean, you've only been here 6000 years. Not just for locals."

"I look that old?"

"This place," I said, "you just could be!" I stifled a yawn.

"We do B and B too."

"Sorry! Oh. No. I'd miss the sunrise." He laughed. "Why have I been allowed to live my life and not see! Is there music in the glass?"

"Not a lot of people ask that," he mused. "Something of a specialist enquiry."

"Can we just say I know Carlin. Rather well." I paused. "I think I'm being silly. There's nothing secret – it's just - I'm not here because I need to talk to someone. I'm here because I need to talk to me. When I was five, kid in Zur, Maya Talal became my best friend."

"Oh dear, dear, dear, dear, dear."

Once more the cocoon of love.

"I told you the other bit. Not the bit in the middle. I had a partner in Zur. In Kadun I ran off with Sorg San-yaega-baht."

"You have been through it."

"I have rather somewhat been through it. I've talked to Hass, Sarat, Amida, Vax and my ex. I may be sick of bending other people's ears! I wasn't there when Sarat let the music out, but oh I heard about it."

He gave a grin which showed he knew all about dynamic young emperors releasing music in glass.

"Let out long ago. You're Fal?"

“I’m Fal.”

“I’m Taja.”

“Hi! Do you do this all the time? The night-shift, I mean?”

“Good grief, no. We all do a month. Since there are rather a lot of us, that works out about once every two years. For the caff, I mean. There’s also the party, of course.”

The cocoon hadn’t wavered.

“I think,” I said cautiously, “you’re thinking of what has happened to all of us.”

“The terrible pain. The ghost was Sorg?”

“If,” I said.

“Any more thoughts?”

“Not really.”

“Customer!” A thin pale young man had come in. “If you want to talk again, mail me. Taja@shrine.fb

“Will do! Thank you.”

He was chuckling.

“I used to be a school-master. Remember me to Sarat, I taught him when he was ten.”

“Local boy makes good!”

I finished my coffee and took the tray back to the counter. Taja gave me a half-wave of thanks while talking quietly to the thin pale young man who on closer inspection looked terribly ill. Perhaps he has some awful disease. I think I’ve got problems?

Such as they were, I went back to ‘my’ pillar contemplating them. I knew I was still a long, long way from where I needed to be. Two things now presented themselves, neither of which was exactly soothing.

I thought I’d lost all three. That was enough to cause havoc to anyone. Could I say my enthusiasm for my relationship with Tet was – well, real or well – some kind of over-reaction to not having lost everything after all, like – like you think you’ve lost fifty dollars and find you’ve only lost fifty cents. Phew! The other thing wasn’t any better. What would my life with Sorg have been? Happy, certainly, but an extended fantasy that might or might not have one day crashed on reality? It was not comforting a) to think that I could have spent the rest of my life in a state of delusion, b) to think of the hurt I should have done to him or c) worst and most unbearable c) that his murder had saved me from myself.

It happened. Part of the bloody Whole.

I didn’t think I needed to doubt that I love Tet. I did that before my life got complicated. I did think I needed to be extremely – distrustful of my advanced capacity to tell myself it was perfect before and will be perfect after and the bit in the middle doesn’t matter. I remembered a bewildered Kai. But it can’t have been, Fal, perfectly and absolutely happy. Because to remember it like that is to deny the problem entirely, deny I have a problem. And it’s my problem and no-one can take it away from me, so there!

I used the pillar to scratch between my shoulder-blades, if you see what I mean.

And what is the prime scapegoat? Sorry, Benji. Why, it is the bloody Matter of bloody Kadun. What would my life with Tet have been? That’s a different can of worms. Can I say I should have grown up, grown out of it, as Bandi had comfortingly said I should. Probably, I decided. We should have had children, both of us, Maya and I – the terrible pain came from nowhere then ricocheted off. I closed my eyes a minute. What would Sarat have been? Not, I think, a vet. Environmental activist? And they all lived happily ever after, except none of them ever dared use paper cups. I managed to laugh. The wider question of responsibility. Or denial of. While Kadun went to hell. Could Sarat have been happy worrying about paper cups? Of course he couldn’t.

Was that another of my either ors. If Krarlik had decided to invade Dabida, that could have been mildly interesting for about ten minutes, while the ‘invading army’ (once again!) settled in – oh of course, oh how freaking obvious! I expect. The meaning, purpose and origin of Garsit is probably that it’s far enough from the border for Jaizal’s soldiers to have decided they could safely settle. But that, the putative invasion I mean, had potential repercussions even hairier than what had actually happened. Visions of them returning to Kadun with Sarat at their head.

None of this is part of the bloody Whole. None of this has happened. Well, Garsit has happened.

There was a Matter of Kadun, outer and exo. By the existence of this – no, by Sarat’s choices, my life has been determined. Or not, as you prefer.

OK, Fal, which do you prefer?

Me. My choices. I could not keep me separate, being incomplete. I could not see myself as independent, not required to give a flying fuck about the bloody Matter of bloody Kadun. But that of course is exactly the opposite of what I've been saying – oh, of course, the independence had to be the delusion and the bMbK the reality.

Sorg. My choice. I did that. But faced with a male Maya-clone who was mad about me – a what? He was nothing like Maya. Leave it a min. I didn't give myself a choice. I was being controlled by me? Not by love, not by lust. Two halves, one on each side of the crack. This is what I need. Like when you're drowning you need air. Thought I needed? To heal the crack?

It was beginning to get light. I went to sit in front of the Flame. The sun rose on the Window of the shrine at Maona-pri, blotting out everything that could possibly matter.

When I'd finished being transfixed I went home thoughtful struggling with the realization that I had lost nothing or nothing that I ever had in the first place. I had a session with Benji and then I very thoroughly and systematically searched the site of the (of course) internationally known shrine at Maona-pri. I was having an idea. There were lots of things wrong with it, but I was having it anyway.

Deal with the practical side first.

I had never in any meaningful sense commuted and taking the ferry to Maona-pri and back struck me as commuting in a meaningful sense. So I wanted to be a volunteer, did I. Well, it would certainly be a wholesome and constructive use of my time, but the practicalities seemed to have escaped my better nature. Obviously I should have taken the house on the Sohenisle. No, I am not going to move again, especially for something that was bound not to last, a fad, a stage I'm going through.

Oh really Fal, and why do you want to be a volunteer? Other than you have transferred your enthusiasm for any eso outside you to a place instead of a person. I only want to help out in the shop or something... Oh yeah?

Is that a healthy suspicion or an unhealthy suspicion?

Boing! Oh I see. The devastation, the loss, is the loss of other people's eso.

I think I need to think – I think I actually need to think now.

It's all in the mind... The crack is in the mind, the glue holding me together is in the mind. The absence of the glue is in the mind. The car always starts! Is that the eso, sort of emergency starter? When – when the rest of what you think of as you. Because it's still there even if you think it isn't. So exactly what are you saying, Hass? I need to love it. To accept it as part of me. I can be here and now and not float away to – but that wasn't necessarily exactly all down to me, now was it, whether ghost or not, the bMbK made time itself hiccup. Except time had slipped in Zur so I couldn't in all honesty say that was nothing to do with me, whatever that was. If I love it as much as I love me, I unite with it. If I love it less than I continue travelling furiously in ever-decreasing circles. If I love it more than – I – I do things which I can't accept in some terrible sense damage me such as Sorg. Because it doesn't have gender or identity or boundary. Because – it's not 'my' eso, it is the bloody Whole, and that bit of the bloody Whole that is Fal is – infused by it. Is that the point? Might be. If I understood it. Infinite and separate. Here and there. But that which is me cannot not be a part of the bloody Whole, whether I think I am or not. Well now, that depends, doesn't it, on what you mean by real. As in whether permanence is part of it. 'They just want you to be real.'

Presumably not permanent. Everyone else gets it, damn it! Hence of course my insecurity, thank you, Tet. This has to have a source. So far as I could see, my entire childhood and early youth had been emotionally, intellectually, morally and metaphysically impeccable! All in the mind... I had

consciously/unconsciously/sub-consciously firmly plugged the headphones jack into the power-socket! I wanted to be like Maya. But I'm not Maya, I'm me. Oh dear, is that a divorce or is that a divorce? And I knew I wasn't like Maya in what I suppose I thought of as superficial ways. Hass even asked me, what was Maya doing while the rest of us were making mud-pies? Oh I see. I think. I gave it identity, gender, boundary. Eso was like Maya. Not like me. Like Hass. Not like me. Like Sorg. Not like me.

I think it's for moments like this I created my own little hide-away. The whole terminology – oh Fal, you can't be that dense. Can I? Outer and exo. Inner and eso. Some people, my young brain figured, are – contain – the eso and some don't? And I'm one of the ones who don't, but I didn't know I thought that. If I thought that. Eso doesn't do, it just is. I think it would be quite easy to have embedded that one. To have had it

apparently reinforced. Sarat did. Maya was. Maya got herself a rather good degree in the ancient languages of the Malpurian sub-continent while Sarat was plotting. Could anything be less relevant? Uncomfortable echoes there. Did I always secretly think if it wasn't the bMbK it wasn't Real? Anyway, it doesn't follow. Can't say Sorg was while I did. Oh,, oh, oh, oh, oh. No, I can't say that. I just possibly can say the attraction was Sorg was and did. Showed me how to be me? Enough! I shall read something soothing and perhaps instructive. I dug out Eternal Flame.

Yikes. 'Since before recorded time there has been a Flame at Maona-pri. Legend has it that the first mentors came from Var but there is no evidence that Var in fact existed, though the sandstone from which the shrine is constructed is not indigenous to Fidub and no explanation has been found for its remarkable durability.' Oh really. I knew enough about the other matter to know mind can maintain the strangest things. So that's what the mentors do. My mind wandered slightly to something I had found mildly interesting. The literature on offer was wholly what Latic had called vanilla. This wasn't exactly surprising – we do not want to encourage seekers for either thrills or power or indeed those on the wrong side or even for those with apparently the most upright and academic reasons for interest in the Cult, not without a nice cosy chat first. They must always have provided sanctuary and healing. Where the shrine at Maona-pri fitted into the history of the continent, I shall doubtless learn if I keep reading, though some of it will be between the lines. So what did they do in their beautiful shrine. They tended the Flame, they healed the sick, they observed the stars. Oh and they conducted 'what some have called' counter-rites at Xu-laman, 'a concentration of power then believed' to oppose the power of evil unleashed by occult practitioners on these 'Days Celebrant'. Oh did they really. I frowned slightly. So they knew about the Cult pre-Narulis. How? They ran schools. Narulis was educated by the mentors. The plot thickens. Exactly what was he taught? 'The precise events leading to the establishment of the Anile Empire are veiled in some confusion.' I bet! 'The subject is naturally one of great interest to historians but outside the scope of the present work. Nonetheless the role of the mentors is plain. It was they who instructed Narulis in the nature of the terrible enemy he had confronted and advised – 'In-ter-est-ing. In it up to their necks, these sweet folks who don't know they're alive. 'It was mentors who formed the phalanx of the first PANTHER!' Well beyond their necks. Wanna know how they knew how to confront the foe. The present – vanilla – work is obviously not going to tell me. When was it published? Latest impression last year. I ruthlessly skipped about 200 pages. 'At the time of writing it seems there has been an unfortunate resurgence in Kadun of those primitive practices now known universally as the Cult but perhaps more extraordinary still is the rumour that Narulis' descendant, Sarat-ban-essa, is preparing to repeat history. Sarat, as have all the scions of the House of Fire, has of course been extensively educated by the mentors.' So you taught Sarat when he was ten, did you. Nothing I knew about Sarat which is a very great deal confirmed an extensive inner education. 'As did his illustrious ancestor, there can be no doubt that he derives his strength for the great task before him from the shrine.' Oh good grief! He was going to be a vet! I think, you know, they are not indifferent to the Great Enterprise though I was rather glad not to have the present author describe the service to mark the funeral of Maya-ban-essa. It wasn't optional, I said to myself softly. Sarat, if you will insist on this particular career-choice, you are going to have to be dragged kicking and screaming from the NoZone stall into the shrine to understand the bloody Whole...Cho and Vax, I presume.

I rifled through the pages I'd skipped. The Building. The original structure is of course a circle within a pentagon. An open circle within a pentangle within an open circle. The points of the pentangle are joined by obviously curved rows of little rocks such as might mark and indeed do mark the edges of flower-beds. Four of the triangles contain the caff, the library, the shop and the Change. The what? 'The exact purpose of the area known as the Change is lost to history.' Oh really. Ask Vax. The fifth triangle, that pointing due east, of course contains the Flame and the Window. I don't suppose they had a caff and a shop in pre-history, either, though come to think of it they probably did have some kind of refectory for the weary traveller on the road of life and indeed here that is confirmed by the present author. 'Sustenance has long been provided by the mentors for all who seek it and also retreat for those who wish to fast or engage in other spiritual exercise.' Why on earth didn't I think of that? Probably because it didn't seem exactly relevant; food, drink, possessions, these are not my dependencies, just the esos of two people who are dead. Of which I am necessarily deprived anyway. I mean the point of fasting is it stops you taking something in to rely on and forces reliance on that

within.

Which just might be another ground zero point now I come to eyeball it. If am not forced kicking and screaming into my eso, on what am depending? My intellect is a rather big fat obvious answer. Could I possibly have been told that already! Nonetheless there is something I can resolve with my mind. After that I might actually understand it. Cantilip was wicked about the ancient languages of the Malpurian sub-continent. Good to have a linguist on the team. Perhaps the team might learn to speak irtubi. Mitch sighing and pointing out that most irtubi don't speak irtubi. What exactly was it I could not understand? Apart from how to say, 'what is your name?' 'would you like to go to bed with me?' in irtubi! Cantilip produced a not exactly serious list of 'useful phrases'. How Maya – why Maya – how Maya could have concentrated wholly on her studies or even concentrated at all. Why Maya was not divided on this bloody Matter of bloody Kadun.. I realized that intellectually I understood: when she was absorbing a textbook on grammar, all of her was there, and when she was with the plotters all of her was there. Compare and contrast my fixation that whatever I was doing I ought to be doing something else. So what's the proposition? Anything that's part of the bloody Whole is of equal value, as per washing-up and laundry, which is clearly ridiculous. Add two words. To me. Complete.

Not sponge.

Hmm.

Not leaking?

Let me try and gee really feel the reality of this, which I know took place, year in year out, Maya studying in one room and the plotters immersed in gross national product in another. I wondered what Cantilip and Karula had made of Maya, at least before they got to know her. Anile empress not obsessed by Matter of Kadun! Read all about it! See Maya as she was, not as I thought her to be.

I can do that, can I? I suppose you could say – eeyuh. Yes, certainly you could say that. My mind is running ahead of me. Say cautiously that she tended to the quiet and studious. But then they all do, don't they, if they hadn't/didn't have public faces, Maya, Mel, Sorg. To some extent. That's not the eeyuh factor. That's – Lido extending! When we got to Kadun (we, Fal?) everyone knew about Sarat but Maya was something of a closed book. And Maya just wandered around being Maya and if whenever she found a Lido in need of extension she said so, which was of course about every five minutes, which is what they all did and do. What did Hass say, all the major decisions had been taken in Zur. All the major decisions were taken in Fidub aeons ago! Implementing change to the infrastructure is something else.

Maybe it's just time I went to bed.

I slept until the early hours, got up and began to fumble around in the kitchen while muttering to myself, this is no good, Fal! Messing with my biological clock. I went back to bed and set the alarm. Even if I didn't really sleep again, that was one track I could get myself back on.

At any rate until I went to M-p again, which I felt would be rather soon, because even lying in my little bed I didn't seem to be quite able to get myself into the frame of mind where I actually got anywhere. I was trying to summon up the maze but it wouldn't come into focus. I can't really be frightened that I'm going to crack again. How badly did I frighten myself? What?

Into sharp focus came my most terrible of moments but it was gone before I had a chance to anything really except feel what I felt at that exact instant, which was exactly nothing, total anaesthesia, except of course the car started, the car always bloody well starts, so – yes, so the eso is pretty hopeless at slitting people's throats, either if the person has just murdered your partner, and in the fraction of a second after, yes, I did feel the urge but that is a long way from doing, no that's not what I mean. I mean – although I badly wanted to cut the bastard's throat I was no more likely – it was like there was an impenetrable barrier which I think I now recognize as the eso I keep insisting I don't have. Equally I didn't want to. Oh, I frightened myself all right, but not by my understandable murderous urge but by being – taken over. What am I talking about? Not by loss of control but loss of control over loss of control! Fal's eso rides to the rescue to save her from herself! That's obvious garbage. Is it? Is it really? The crack is in the mind. The glue is in the mind. The – the conviction that there was nothing holding me together could only be over-ridden – could not and cannot be rationally over-ridden, only in that supreme moment of crisis or, or, or in that place of absolute safety because I am a bit frightened of my eso, of letting it out of the cage I've put it in. The only thing stopping it spreading through

me is me. Frightened of letting go. Frightened of ceasing to be me. That's not as melodramatic as it sounds now, is it, Don't wanna be inner and eso. Wanna be outer and exo. Wanna be me.

What a nice little argument. So why have I spent my life latching on to other people's esos. Uh-oh! How about because my own was too dangerous? In my mind.

They're all so complete. Safe. There is nothing safe about the eso! That's an interesting little conviction. Not sure when or for how long I dozed but I do know the alarm went off.

I awoke with a thought. Just stop, Fal, just stop! It was, however, a rather limpid thought. 'You're the eso one, Fal' Yes, I answered, I know that. I just don't want to be. Think I don't want to be. Due to my slightly peculiar ideas about eso.

Meaning?

Skipping lightly over the minor details that 'I' can't decide what to do and 'I' thinks that Doing Something is Crucial, what 'I' paramountly does not want is to find herself doing something totally different from anything I think of as me and which has been 'chosen' by an eso I don't accept as me.

The pronouns are enough to freak me.

Or in short shut up and love my eso.

Coda: But of course why I can't decide is because my poor abused eso is screaming at me that none of the things I contemplate is me.

It is very un-me to spend daylight hours sitting very quietly doing absolutely nothing. After a while I grinned to myself and went into Zur to buy a packet of pink balloons.

I blew them up and watched them happily bobbing around not necessarily within reach and thought: my problem with free flight is what?

The number of things I'd never thought of doing is so large it's not possible to list them but they range, shall I say, from parachuting to the ancient languages of the Malpurian sub-continent.

There is no given, no indelible reason why any of these things 'aren't me'.

Anthropology to art. One is enough! I can draw in a rather basic sense, my people look like people and my houses look like houses, possibly even my fountains look like fountains and my water might fall downwards, but my people and houses don't look like particular people or houses. I certainly have no great talent for it.

Putting smudges of paint on a piece of paper to create a somewhat impressionistic picture of a beautiful vista is not the same. Among the services offered by the shrine, I should explain, was art therapy. I wasn't quite sure what Tet's reaction would be but I suspected it would make me giggle. Hass's simple (not so simple) point had been I can try anything, don't have to magically think I know I'd like it in advance. Do not close those bloody doors! No, that wasn't it. Do not look at a row of closed doors.

I went back to the Grid-site of the shrine. There were all the obvious soothing things for people who were feeling frazzled, art, music, dance, poetry, gardening. There was a series of talks on things like The Window and The Building and another on what I suppose you could broadly call current affairs insofar as they impinged on the shrine or the shrine on them – give or take 1500 years. The Shrine and the First Anile Empire. That I have to hear. Alas, as is usually the way when you come across a really interesting event on the Grid, you've missed it. How about 'When did the Modern Age begin? What defines it?' I put a mental half-tick against that one. Then there was a section called The Inner Journey. Self and Other. Love and Power. Form and Essence. There was a section called simply Help which said the mentors can be reached 24/7 and how so to do. Interestingly, I thought, the Study page mostly just said the same, but it also said there was a retreat house on the Leolisle. My immediate reaction was rather that I'd done a lot of retreating and advancing was more what I had in mind, but I read on. Somewhere between a first-class hotel and mental survival training. You leave behind your family, your friends, your mobile, your netbook, your books, your magazines, your music, your anything you can escape from yourself into and learn to live with yourself. You don't even talk to anyone, except the mentors, presumably when after 24 hours you're climbing the walls. The menu is fruit, raw veggies, yoghurt and water. However, our beautifully appointed rooms...Discomfort is not part of the trip, though you did do your own laundry (and make your own bed and tidy your own room if you wanted your bed made and your room tidied – the guest's space is sacrosanct. Be assured no-one else will enter your room from the time you enter it to the time you leave it). You can stay in bed all day if you like and swim and ride if you don't. Yes, but can you paint smudgy sunrises? Yes, there are many outlets for creative expression... I have to try this. Hallet's Cove was so far free of friendly goat-sitters. Trust your friends. I mailed Narak and Latic and

asked them if they'd like a holiday in Zur. Whenever they felt like it, really, no rush.

You didn't book, just mailed or phoned to let them know you were coming. I guessed they never turned anyone away even if temporary accommo had to be found in a sleeping-bag rather than a beautifully appointed room and that it was impossible to predict how long people would last out. I did know that although you are of course free to leave at any time you are asked to talk to one of the mentors first.

I turned up. The house was beautiful. The diet didn't bother me. I didn't have to stay if the other stuff did. I was a little ambivalent about what it was going to do for me but I supposed I'd find it a soothing and soulful experience. I think I conceived it as a just slightly more disciplined version of what my life was like already, erasing all the little things that break up a day. I settled in, nibbled some fruit and went exploring. I found the Art Room. There were paper, brushes, and boxes of paints, Oh I see, yes, this is good, what you also don't have to do is start babbling in semi-explanation, gosh, you know, I haven't painted since I was a kid, don't know if I'll be any good. I noticed there was also a shredder, presumably if you found your work embarrassingly bad. There was a slim dark girl about my age who looked up and smiled but of course we didn't speak. I started to mix colours until I had a pale pink I was happy with and started to smudge. Pale pink, pale blue-grey, more a sunset really. What this needs is a few clouds, pink ones of course. And how about some land. Yes, I can cope with that. Those are fields and hedges, at least if you're feeling generous. It's pretty, though. Flowers in that field, I think, little dabs of red, yellow, purple. It's something else too. Where's the stream? Oh. I suddenly felt a block. I put Carlin At Sunset aside a minute and stared out of the window. Well it was therapy, healing, not preparation for my first exhibition. Was there a person in this landscape? I thought there probably was but I didn't want to wreck my achievement so far. I took another piece of paper and dabbed out a human form, gender and identity indeterminate, hair mouse, dress dark green, quite tall, all of which told me nothing. Except not Sorg. Not Maya. Not for that matter Tet. I suddenly laughed and went to find a pencil and a big fat rubber. I was going to make a total pig's-ear of this but no-one would ever know.

When my attempts at drawing Tet, Sorg and Maya were I thought as good as they were ever going to be, which was lousy but desperately well meant, I sat back and considered that actually this was technique rather than talent. I just did not know how to get features right. I could draw something that was clearly meant to be a nose but when I tried to make it a particular nose it evaded my clutches. I suppose that like monkeys at a keyboard coming up with the BPC if I persevered for long enough by trial and error I'd eventually get it right but the key to my life didn't lie in teaching myself to draw Maya's nose and it was time to give up. I surveyed my works. My mysterious figure in green, I thought, needed some surroundings. Damn it, I'm enjoying myself! But the surroundings didn't come. Think I might be arted out for the day. I guess you just leave - ? I gathered my bits together, wiped down the table and went for a walk in the gardens. What's that? I giggled. Like in the botanical gardens or the zoo, there were neat discreet boards identifying the growth, just in case you wanted to use what's that as an excuse to start talking to someone.

I flopped down on the grass only mildly irritated by the perception that somewhere I'd mentally slotted this experience into the box on holiday and therefore given myself permission to do absolutely nothing. There was the gentle buzzing of insects, the scent of flowers and – and someone standing over me, probably Sorg. There was of course no-one standing over me, least of all Sorg. I sighed. And anyone wonders why I like my eso safely behind bars? Something sort of clicked. All so vanilla...Yes, well, training in containing the esoteric is not one for the Grid. Let baby not run before she can walk. Starting by accepting the poor abused little creature would be good. All are One. Some do not know it. Poor little eso! Love, love, love, love, love...My intellect protested, loudly. OK, the bloody Whole. OK, we do past, present and future. Where in the past, present or future has Sorg stood or will he stand over you in a garden on the Leolisle? I answered back rather feebly, I thought, I don't know it was Sorg and someone in the future could but as for stand over, stand guard over – whoops. And anyone wonders why I like my eso safely behind bars? Hang on a minute. I'd cracked – open? And the eso roared out in the form of Sorg? Don't see how that – shut up a minute, I said to my intellect. Just see what happens next. I sank happily into alpha rhythms and a rather delectable moving picture show, places I'd never been and doubted existed to go to, strange, strange scenes of coloured rock and impossible skies, and beings that never existed on this planet. So this is the connection, this is the trip. The next 48 hours or so were pretty impossible too. The most mesmerizing time-slip came as I helped myself

to our renowned buffet of garden fruits and Sarat was there, emanating most discordant waves of fury. Dragged kicking and screaming! Oh, I think so.

I am in a fully equipped operating-theatre. I am under no requirement whatever to function normally. Let's just see if this settles down a bit first.

It did a bit but I was under no illusion that I knew how to deal with it.

I picked a female mentor who superficially looked 18 but close-up there were fine lines and was probably I guessed actually about 40. She had long black hair and a sparkly bandana and she looked as though she might be fun. Can I talk to you? Sure, any time.

I'd given myself a bit of time to think how I was going to approach this. I hadn't got anywhere, but I'd tried. "I grew up in Zur with Mel and Hass. Maya was my best friend. Some of the – outer aspects of how I ended up here are personal to other people. I have talked before. To Hass and to Sarat, and to grown-ups! Amida and Vax. It's the inner. I have a very dodgy relationship with my eso. I started going to the shrine. Since then – it's changed. And since I've been here – time-slips, the lot. So I thought I just want to talk about the inside. Then I thought and my problem is what? I mean – it is engrained in all of us, but you're not exactly going to ring Glitz."

She held her hand up to stem the flow of babble.

"Which one was your lover?"

I sighed.

"Mel. When both of us were unattached. Maya. When she was with Sarat. In neither case remotely turned on. Later relationships fine. Hetero."

"Some people avoid talking about others so as not to appear to blame them. Some people choose talking about others to avoid talking about themselves, whether or not blaming them. Some people have a genuine sense of the private. There's a question of blame?"

He-elp.

"That's a chapter in itself. It's not – the – the key relationship doesn't actually have anything to do with me. It's not a relationship I had. It's not even a relationship someone I had a relationship with had."

"So it's private." She nodded understandingly. "But critical?"

"Sarat and Hass were lovers when they were 15. There was never any question of Sarat's being gay. If they could express their feelings for each other like that. I couldn't see why Hass and I couldn't. I am more recently assured this was an intellectual quest on my part. Others have put it that the sexual relationship I wanted with Hass didn't actually have any sex in it. It seems this rather upset the guys' thinking on love, sex and gender."

"We have all of us of course understood," she said smoothly, "that you are all very close."

I grinned.

"Not that close? Sarat says now – it was he who was surrendering his boundaries. Hass was just making love to a guy he loved."

"Interesting. When did Mel fit in?"

"After the Hass interlude. Before I paired with Tet. Then Mel went off to the Schools, Hass met Venga, Sarat and Maya set up house in Zur."

"And," very softly, "you all thought you'd live happily ever after?"

"I did," I said. "That's a rather large part of it. I left Tet and went off with Sorg San-yaega-baht. Maya, Hass, Sorg, all frantically eso. The general idea is I'll look anywhere but. There's one other thing. Because of my social circle I know about a lot of things that a lot of people don't. I know they exist, I mean. If I refer to them, it's not I'm claiming to understand them."

She looked at me thoughtfully.

"D'you mind if I have a go at translating all that?"

"Er – no! Don't mind..."

"My intellectual knowledge is way ahead of my actual knowledge and I may be asking things or even wanting to learn things that might just raise an eyebrow. These people aren't idiots. They're not going to teach me how to put a key in a lock without finding out the whole story – but I don't want to tell them that, so I hope my

excellent references will in some way oil the wheels.”

I giggled.

“I think not exactly. What I want to know is how to deal with me, how to be me, living in Zur, far from the foe. What I know about is – what happened to Mitch and Karula, for instance. I assume – “

“Correct.”

“No-one else has cracked up, dropped out and taken up goat-farming. Least of all Mitch and Karula. I’ve just realized – what they’ve been through is more than any of us but of course they’re older. I felt insecure compared to my friends, my contemporaries. That – that I’d somehow failed. Yesterday I had a time-slip at your renowned buffet of delectable garden fruits. Sarat was there. He can’t have been more than 18 and he was livid, that’s the overwhelming impression I got. Dragged kicking and screaming from his mobile! Then it came to me that everyone else was fast-tracked because of who they are. Then I felt I put two and two together – this is the don’t really know what I’m talking about clause – Tar, Saski, Cho, no-one would have let them within 20 nani of the border if they weren’t able to deal with the Cult. That’s where the two things overlap. I think. I mean, I realize, I think, they all have – an extra layer of protection.”

Unexpectedly she grinned.

“Wise beyond their years. Indeed. Goat-farming?”

“I think I’d better give you a potted bio. Mel, Hass, Reakoed, Maitlan, me and Tet were a gang when kids.” I sighed again. “AKA the Seismic Six. Maya wasn’t part of it but my best friend anyway. Tet and I paired. I was H-W. I went off to Carlin, then to Azt. I ran off with Sorg San-yaega-baht. After Sorg’s murder I crash-landed in Carlin on a back-to-nature kick, cottage, veggies, goat. I also cracked, though Hass says I didn’t – fill in that in a minute. I – experienced Sorg’s – ghost for a while. I was just thinking I might be back if not upright then standing on one leg. Maya was murdered. I’d tried immersing myself in the life of Carlin. I had more questions than answers. I turned to my friends. I got one thing straight and came home to Zur. Currently living alone except for Benji, my goat. I’ve been through what should I be doing, who am I, what is my name – I’m back to my maiden name – which is my country. Bandi screened me for the H-W. She said I had a crack which wouldn’t matter unless I was under extreme stress. I’d grow out of it. Really, what stress was I going to be under? I cracked along it instead. I’ve had a time-slip in Zur. That sent me running off to Amida. I had one in Carlin. Kaminua mistook me for a lady of his time. I’m told the particular field of flowers.” I could see she was quietly laughing at something else I knew about. “The extent if any to which Sorg’s ghost, projection was also consequent upon the Matter of Kadun is something I accept I may never fully understand – why should I when no-one else does! But my more recent thoughts on that are that – more like, when I cracked I let out my eso which I’d kept – caged. I had some rather odd convictions about the eso and I found it – chased it, needed it - in Hass, Maya, Sorg because that was safer.”

I could see her digesting that lot.

“Being here in Fidub with people who don’t know you is on balance less complicated than being in Zur with people who do?”

“I’m not actually sure about that one. I didn’t come to Fidub to talk to people.”

I filled her in a bit on that one.

“But you’re talking to me, not rushing back to Hasiyata?”

I made wide eyes.

“That would be a bit rude! When it comes to it, Hass has other things to do. I think I probably want to do this independently. It’s not I feel I don’t really belong in the – inner circle. It’s I feel I don’t know how to belong. Reakoed, Maitlan, Tet, they don’t have a problem. They’re just themselves. I’m not myself.” I grinned. “The general verdict is if I could just get over thinking I had to be Maya, I’d get somewhere.” Her eyebrows flexed. “Not – give my life. Maybe risk it. Definitely do something public. That’s without the eso side. I know this might sound an incredibly trivial side-line. What I know is that Maya studied ancient languages while the plotters plotted. She just got on with being Maya. At the same time she was just as much part of the plot as Sarat.”

“By being themselves you mean distinct?”

“Yes, exactly. No – overflow.”

She was laughing.

“It is your misfortune that your dearest most intimate friends, blood-brothers, I believe the Press has said, are

the stars of the greatest blockbuster of the age and possibly of any age. Reakoed, Maitlan, Tet, what do they do?”

“H-W, Fleet, artist.”

“It tells you nothing that you paired with the one who kept himself – distinct?”

“Ow! Maitlan cut the cord. Went off to sea.”

“Sensible man. Reakoed?”

“Reakoed doesn’t just seem one of those happy-go-lucky chaps who go through life unruffled, he actually is that. Tet’s more complicated.” I explained my complicated Tet.

She seemed more interested in Maitlan.

What is it they say about the Fleet? It goes round the continent clockwise until it gets bored, when it goes anti-clockwise instead. If called upon to serve his country concerning this Matter of Kadun, he would be as far as possible from the hub of events.” She smiled. “Or he just likes wide open spaces.”

“Neither,” I said briskly. “Or rather I suspect the first, but not as you’ve made it sound. He’s another Lido-extender. Explain in a minute. Maitlan is uber-cool and uber-bright. I think he might have understood doing his bit lay in making friends in far-away places. Not sure how that meshes with his most famous saying! One can immerse oneself in the Matter of Kadun or one can get a life.” Uber-cool, uber-bright mentors don’t piss with laughter, but her eyes danced. “Maybe if you make it more personal? Maitlan would have understood that whatever happened Mel was putting himself in the firing-line. Politically I mean, as well as. Why are we talking about Maitlan?”

She didn’t answer directly.

“Three young Dabidans. I may assume you would fight to the death for Dabida, indeed for Mel. It is part of your normality that your dearest friends are also Dabida’s heirs. The rug is taken out from under you. Your friends are the emperor’s cousins. Mel is clear on the matter of sovereignty. You would not fight to the death for Sarat – perhaps. But Maya? Is your personal perhaps rather than political loyalty to Alzani-Meta not also your loyalty to the Anile Throne? Does it not betray Mel and Hass to ‘reject’ Maya? You were the only one confused by Maya Talal Ban-essa?”

“There are so many things there,” I said. “And then Maya wasn’t there any more.”

“The invisible link to Alzani-Meta is what I should imagine is the unbreakable bond between Sarat and Hass.”

“I guess,” I said, “no-one knows what Mel would do if Sarat were really in trouble.”

“No-one except Mel.”

“And Tar,” I added rather glumly. “Mel and Hass adored her. Maya. She was very adorable.”

“So far they have admirably and brilliantly walked a tightrope.”

I giggled and told her about my tightrope.

“Interesting. So many things there?”

“This is a practical in the irrelevance of time?” I sighed. “I thought I’d got the loyalty one done and dusted. Then there are invisible lines crossing lives.” I filled her in. “There might also – this is something I’ve only just thought of. Dependency on the future of Kadun! I mean a feeling that whatever I choose to do may be abruptly interrupted. Sorg, Maya, if Kadun collapsed shouldn’t I feel I had to fight? Tet says no. One stray Zuri is not going to make the critical difference.” Fill-in. “Reason is one thing.”

“Why did you decide against the Kadun Senate?”

“I thought of something better to do!” I told her about You Can Do Banking, Kai and Sar-fenan. “Part of the other matter stuff is nattering about how Narulis learned to fight. Then I was reading a history of the shrine and how mentors were the first PANTHER.” I explained very briefly about Lattic and how the word ‘vanilla’ had entered my active vocabulary other than descriptive of a flavouring. “Please may we talk about my eso! My delusions are so basic here. Don’t wanna be inner and eso. Wanna be me!”

She smiled radiantly.

“Just getting a bit of background here. Your relationships with Mel and Maya?”

I sighed again.

“That means I have to tell you about the cottage. Mel said – by loving each other we get that bastard off the chair. He meant it rather literally. He, Sarat, Hass and Venga had – sexually experimental times together. Maya and I were giggling about it and sort of naturally progressed.”

“An extension of your relationship.”

“Might have been if I’d been remotely sexually interested. It was a good giggle and more but not sexually more.”

“Maya didn’t mind? About Sarat? She was with Sarat?”

“Oh yes. I was about to say indissolubly. Saski asked that.” I grinned. “The grown-ups were informed. Cantilip had thought she might have a future with Venga. He went off with Hass and she had to deal with his not being gay. Then she and Mel found each other and Mel thought Tar should know all about it.”

“I think I’m lost. You and Mel?”

I explained about me and Mel.

“Ten of you, then, the core of whom – Reakoed, Maitlan and Tet did not take part - ?”

“They didn’t. This was future leaders of the world stuff.”

“I think I shall not attempt to analyse relations between the six of you - a family of six siblings traumatized during adolescence by the simple fact you were not? The rest, one might say, is history. What is clear is you have caused no rift.” I must have looked completely devastated because she pushed my tut! polystyrene cup of water towards me and murmured, “Have a sip. Clear,” she repeated and began to laugh. “Falita, nothing is more common than that friends of both former or otherwise side with one or other of a pair when a relationship breaks up.”

“The only rift is between me and Tet!” I considered. “Bit pat isn’t it, sibs can’t be sundered.”

She looked pleased.

“Of course. You have a better metaphor?”

“Not really. There’s one thing missing. It’s the way you put it – the idea of Hass and Reakoed being on different sides – though they do have very different views. Hass said I half-think I have neither family nor friends. I’m related to him. Sarshi. Sarshi is Sorg’s twin. Her other half is Vij, Maya’s brother. From their point of view, I cut myself off. Which is sort of true. I mean I don’t think it ever occurred to me everyone wasn’t a phone call away. Busy, busy, busy. There’s an element of lasting out on my own as long as I could. When Amida said I should talk to Sarat I jibbed a bit, but that was sensitivity not distance! Gee Sarat, we both loved Maya. What I really want to talk about is me! Eight out of ten,” I decided. “The people I grew up with I’d say anything to and they to me. I shouldn’t confide in Cantilip or Venga.”

“Time to stop, I think,” she said. “Same time tomorrow?”

I supposed I’d wanted an independent view. I felt, not shattered or anything but a bit strange. I’d bared my soul (not just mine!) to a complete stranger. But it’s so much easier to talk to people who’ve known you since you were five! Or of you, or the frame of reference in which you dwell. I wondered. Plus side. Independent conclusions, if they struck me as deeply wrong, maybe I hadn’t explained properly. Minus side. The other people weren’t putting their side. Bit I said he said they said. Maybe cheating a bit, but I couldn’t get away from that, have to go to the other side of the world and even that probably wasn’t far enough to find someone who knew absolutely nothing about the people I was talking about. I made it into a mental game. How far back would I have to go? Obviously Narulis. Where would I have to go? Harn to explain the origins of the Cult. You should write a book. Someone should. But then all the sexy bits would be left out. To be published when we’re all dead, then? Let us assume of old age. How would our kids feel about it? Maybe for private reading only. But to be written now, while we remember. Who has time to write a book? Er, I do. I just didn’t think it was my thing, though I suppose I’m not making too bad a job of my bit. It does matter to the bloody Whole. Kai! She must be at a loose end. So it came to pass in a beautifully appointed room on the Leolisle!

Aw shucks, I couldn’t even pick up my mobile and tell anyone. I wondered if I’d been a bit naïve about the cause of Sarat’s uncharacteristic rage. I suppose they’d turned him inside out and he didn’t necessarily like what they said. Not as though I wanted to be Anile Emperor. I considered Senta. No cocoon of love had enveloped the little bird with a wounded wing. I’d have to ask her about that.

I was just thinking I might like to do something physical, maybe go for a swim, when I fell asleep. As you know, my usual diet is light and, as you also know, I really love masali. Perhaps it was another piece of self-deception that I should be unaffected by the menu. Who cares! I don’t have to do anything. Mostly.

Umm. I think I'd prefer to be clear-headed and well rested for further sessions with Senta. I am, I thought, already aware of mild sensations of evisceration or perhaps that's too strong a word. Of being uncurled, as a fox might uncurl a hedgehog. I didn't mean to sound curled up, I protested feebly to myself. It must have come across like that. I was just dozing off again when it jolted me to realize it was like that, I'd just said it was like that, sort of, anyway. It did feel strange talking about myself to a stranger. I dozed anyway.

I awoke feeling clear-headed, well-rested and pro-active. Damn it, I'm going to talk about my eso! Well, eventually. I formulated my baseline.

"My baseline here is I really don't want to find myself talking to Zani in the MegaMart."

"But why ever not!"

"Social embarrassment? People might stare?" I changed the subject. Pro-active, you know. "Taja in the shrine cocooned me in love. I felt completely safe, completely relaxed. With you I feel – just the tiniest bit on my mettle. I'm wondering why, whether it's you, me or both."

"And?"

"It felt odd to have told a stranger the private bits, just because you're a stranger. Obviously this isn't stuff I've clasped to my heart, my lips sealed. It feels as though it is. The – the sum of what Hass said to me, followed by what I said to myself. Completely mad. I took it all on board without feeling – what didn't I feel! Stripped? Tet for obvious reasons was more – personally critical. That sounds a bit feeble. He was frank about having felt he hated me. I'm not so delusional that that was something I hadn't been able to conceive of. There was a cushion of what you said, an unbreakable bond, a cushion of – love. Shielding me from reality?" That last bit came out in rather a rush.

"How can it?"

"That may be the question? Hurt is illusion."

"So?"

"So I feel that reality is illusion? I've thought that. But then it doesn't make sense."

"Reality is what?"

"Ah-uh. I've asked myself if I have special Fal definitions of certain words. I asked Hass about whom he talked to about Maya. I've told you, he adored her. Venga, Tar...But what he said was it happened. I know it struck me as brutal. It happened. Sarat was standing where he was standing. If he'd been standing where she was standing. You can say it shouldn't have happened but you can't change that it happened. That's the – common-sense view of reality and it's Hass's view, so far as it goes. And – everything that everyone else in the universe happened to be doing at the time happened. Me digging the garden. My Fal definition is rather that a sort of – film of unreality settles over that which is elsewhere. It's not exactly true that I never felt shocked or anything. After my second talk to Tet I was appalled at myself. I felt I'd managed to erase Sorg from the record. I sat saying to myself. You did that. It happened. Then – though I'm not sure about this one. Ninety per cent of the continent didn't think Sarat could do it, so I'm not sure saying it didn't seem real to me. But then in Azt it was like the only thing that was real. Though I think that was a common ailment too. I actually – I wanted to be sure people weren't just being kind and I looked up the figures for relationship break-up consequent upon the bloody Matter of bloody Kadun! But it was a very definite feeling. Not that Sorg didn't matter morally or emotionally or for that matter historically. Not essentially that I was trivializing my feelings for Sorg or my betrayal of Tet. More that it just didn't happen. Tet and I had somehow got separated and now we might get back together. I'm a sponge? I asked myself that. I seem to completely absorb – oh."

She laughed.

"Oh?"

"That can't be right, either. A wider reality?" I wondered hopefully. "I'd told him I'd drivelled to Hass about how it had seemed to me we – Tet and I – had not grown-up, lived the lives of a couple of big kids in a delusional state about what was about to happen to our little lives. He said nothing had happened to his little life except being smashed up by me. Cue for Fal absorbing life in Zur as all reality."

"Or back into your life with Tet?"

“They weren’t the same conversations. Oh, I see. Oh shit. Sorry! Tet was explaining – his reality was loving me as a friend, as a member of the Six, blood-brother, sister, etc. To which of course.”

“To which of course.”

I had a strong feeling she was just managing not to giggle.

“The word that occurred to me is ‘leaking’ which I find a bit weird. More holes than a sieve I can cope with but it seems to be letting stuff in not out.. The bottom line is that my edges are blurred.”

“Necessarily.”

No giggle there, only a certain dryness. Try harder, Fal?

“I can see – can I? If I find, need, have decided that my eso lies outside me I must be – porous. Leaking?”

“Uncontained, shall I say. All over the place.”

“I’m telling this piecemeal,” I grumbled. “It’s not I had it pat. It’s that one bit followed from the next.”

“Do tell,” she said.

I finally got to the rich history of my eso. The only time she showed the flicker of a reaction was when I voiced my healthy suspicion of attraction to the shrine, but she didn’t say anything.

“It has of course occurred to you,” she said at length, “that as you change Tet may no longer be among what you want.”

“It has,” I said steadily. “I don’t think so, but if I’m wrong I’ll know before not after.”

“And of course,” she said.

“No,” I said, rather firmly. “By lose I mean lose as in dead or might as well be. Never wants to see or speak to me again. Both of us are in a – process of discovery of what can’t be lost.”

“How can you lose Maya?”

“That freaked me a bit. ‘Cept I was in the shrine. I think. I think I think something like. All the external stuff people tell me about stopping thinking I have to be Maya. It comes from a – conception of Maya’s eso. Which I prefer to my own. Stick to like glue? Because I am just a little bit petrified. All in the present tense. Maybe. One of the reasons I’m here is because I think I see that I can control myself by brute force, slam down the lid? Be a sort of fake me.”

“When?”

“Ever?! I’ve left out.” I narrated That Fateful Day.

“Implying?”

“No, I don’t think that! Except in the terms that I do! Running on higher octane gas? I don’t think they all know. Knew. Exactly what was wrong with me, Is. I hate verbs! Maybe Hass. A – perception something wasn’t right? Time! We were all of us so hopelessly busy. The idea that what Maya was thinking about, chewing over when she finally got a minute to herself with Sarat was me.”

“You didn’t tell me you were PANTHER.”

“For ten minutes.”

“You stopped. Suddenly there was time.”

“Oh yes. No Sorg, plenty of time. I was stopped.”

“I disagree.” I flexed my eyebrows so much they hurt. “What is the source of your feeling of inadequacy?”

“Oh. Control?”

“Do continue.”

I giggled suddenly.

“I guess it centres on the cup of cocoa? What they know, what they can do is stop it falling. What I know – experientially is it was impossible not to crack. What I know intellectually is there’s a place before the cup falls where you can stop yourself dropping it. You always have choice. In theory.”

“What was it they said, vaccinating sheep? Have you asked Sarat if he’d like to goat-farm?”

“He’d be bored silly.”

“And you are not? Did you not say? What is the difference?”

“What – what I think you’re saying. Not least because Hass has already said it. Why am I pretending to have had a breakdown?”

“You are more bereft than Vij and Sarshi?”

“That is painful.”

“That too is reality.”

“What you’re actually saying is a person always has choice. No I’m not arguing, just trying to be clear. There’s a level where I rejected choosing not to fall. Or chose to fall. Because it was what I needed to do. To be me. To be real. But who’s me doing the deciding. The eso I reject but which is there anyway....Which is totally divorced from me. I think. Thus making choices I don’t know about. Ohhh. It kind of forced its way through the crack and – manifest as Sorg - ?”

She held up her hand to stop me.

“As you say, why should you know when no-one else does! I should certainly agree there was some kind of shudder in you. I should also agree that your experience of Sorg was in some way consequent upon that. The field effect we shall have to leave open.”

“That’s it,” I said, feeling quite excited, “a shudder, that’s exactly. But then that’s like there was a shell, a block with a crack in it. I thought I’d discovered something when I thought of the crack as lateral, horizontal, between the mushroom and me.”

“The block in the maze?”

“Wha - ? To mix my metaphors? There was no crack in the block in the maze.”

“As you said, when Maya died, the crack wasn’t there any more.”

“But the block sealed tight? Thinks: this is getting a bit esoteric.”

“D’you want to come up for air?”

“Thought that’s what I was doing....”

“D’you feel more relaxed now?”

“Now you come to mention it. I’ve just thought of something a bit weird. I think it’s pretty trivial.”

“Tell?”

“I jumped from wow, I’ve never talked to a stranger to of course I have: Kai. Depends what I mean by stranger.”

We called it a day.

I lay in the garden and tried to recreate the maze. It didn’t want to come. Means, I thought sourly, I don’t want it to come. Had I learned anything? Stop trying. Sorry? I thought my eso was rampaging through me. Oh triple shit: not if I find the place I don’t want it to. Which as we all know I do without choosing. So I just need triggering, do I, Senta? Hmmm.

Okey-dokey, try step by step.

Who’s in charge around here! I seemed to remember something about laboratory rats and a maze but since I had no access to any source of information I hoped Senta was hot on laboratory rats and mazes.

Ah-hah, o little maze! I may not be able to read about you but I can draw you.

I could just paint it out, I thought, as I wandered off to the art-room. The block, I mean. My previous efforts lay untouched at the side of the table. Look at them later.

Uh. I am not gifted at drawing perfect circles. I just found that out. Why shouldn’t it be square? My circles would do. And it’s got an entrance. And it’s wildly simplified, circle within circle, within circle. This won’t do, might just as well draw a straight line. What else is it? The block, I mean. The point about a maze is most of it doesn’t matter, most of it is just there to confuse you. Hang on, Fal. If you could just think occasionally. Most of a maze is dead-ends. The block, I mean, is just another dead-end. So it’s not the way through at all. I just think that’s the way to the centre? Ah-uh. I was absolutely sure. But then I would be, wouldn’t I. It’s a dead-end, you idiot, just a particularly flashy one. Which doesn’t mean getting through it isn’t – dramatic. There is an actual path through my five-year-old art-class maze.

This does not do. I need a picture of a really complicated maze. It’s going to have to be square. Set-square and protractor! Does the equipment provided include a ruler? It does! As an after-thought I looked for a pair of compasses, but there wasn’t one. I drew 20 boxes within boxes. Now whadda I do? Close my eyes and make arbitrary breaks? They are – no, the dead-ends are – all my creations. OK, put some breaks and dead-ends. They don’t have identities, values, attached so they can’t be subconsciously determined. That

sounds impressive! On the other hand I might end up with no way through my maze. I guess maze design is quite complicated? Narak might know. Could there be a maze in the grounds? Sort of thing landscape-gardeners have fun with.

Time-slip. Protracted, if not protractor. I am eight and sitting at the kitchen-table with a puzzle book. I have a fine-tipped green felt-pen and I am scowling horribly at the maze in the book. Bunny needs to find his way back to his warren. Warren? The entrance to the warren. I turn to the little crossword further down the page.

I guess you could say the eso is a warren.

I sat doing nothing for a while before I turned back to my work. Then I felt a ludicrous urge for a fine-tipped green felt-pen. There probably was one, but I didn't exert myself to look. I had a pencil and readily re-created my eight-year-old's scowl. I also had a rubber and I stealed myself to at least giving my maze an entrance.

Need a coloured pencil to make my line of progress or retreat clear. I got a green one.

OK, suppose I turn left, then right, then – I am travelling, very fast, like speeded-up film. Not like being in a car or a train. Why not like? Along – I have no idea what along, never seen in my life, it winds and it has rails on both sides, ornamental ones with spires and curlicews. Then it stopped, faded, no sensation of having run into something or indeed, I suppose, having fallen off the end. WTF?

Surprise, surprise, I have come to a dead-end.

Supposing I'm irritating about this. Just barge through, as a line on paper, you understand. I barged.

Quite disappointed that the point of my pencil didn't break off or something. I continued heedless on my merry way. I knew what was going to happen now and it happened. Until I met The Block. Of course I am super-imposing.... It's just a line of exactly the same thickness as all the other lines. But I refuse to see it like that.

Now where were we?

I'm talking about two different things here. Not sure either of them makes sense.

Hallo, block.

Oh wait a minute, it's got to have a hairline crack. A few moments' delicate rubber-work.

No, no, no, no, no! Excuse me, Bandi said I had a crack, not a block with a crack. A crack which should heal.

Unless of course after that I made the block round the crack?

This is doing my head in. Ah well, it's meant to.

I can't draw a crack within the frame of reference of the maze without a block around it.

Oh yes, I can.

I picked up my maze and went to look for the nearest mentor

I brandished my maze.

"Look this may sound silly, but I want to alter this but I don't want to lose the original. Is there a photocopier I can use?"

"Copy it for you." He broke into a grin. "How many copies would you like?"

"Ten, please!" I said while working out that I couldn't use a rubber on photocopies but I could use white paint.

When he came back, I said, "Graphics software. I think I worked out that what a program can do is not what a person can do and a person can't necessarily use a program properly. Either way it doesn't come direct from you. In instances like this..."

He smiled.

"Infinitely saveable, infinitely alterable."

"That's the one."

"There you go."

I wandered back, frowning slightly. Maybe he didn't have an answer. I doubted that; it must be a common enough question. I diverted myself readily enough to technology. A scanner, then, scan, save, print. Suppose you wanted to take home on disc – well, you'd just have to have a scanner of your own, wouldn't you. This place has a specific purpose and I was entirely sure the people who had worked out what did and did not mesh with that purpose were very unthick. This was in danger of preoccupying me. Work-avoidance!

It's all perfectly simple really, I thought to myself hopefully. The crack runs straight through the centre of the

maze. Thick squiggly line. Damn it, I want software. Scissors and paste it must be to have the two halves slightly separate. That means the eso is split. That can't be. That means I feel the eso is split. So that's what Mel was raving about. But the maze. The only opening – one half is full of openings. The other – ah-uh. The only – what is the only apparent opening in it into the – space is blocked by The Block. Peculiar but interesting... Oh no, of course, the rest have previous dead-ends. The only path from the entrance that leads to my Great Divide.

Now I may be where I need to be, where to start from. Emphasis on 'may be'.

Hallo, block. So you've got a hairline crack in you, have you. But you didn't when - ?

This is frantically interesting but does it play in real-time?

OK, there I am with my lickle hair-line crack through the middle and it's something and nothing, immaturity, I'll grow out of it. Then Mel puts his oar in and makes a thing of it. Umm, it's quite unusual for Maitlan to declare his best friend should be shot. Nor do I think Vax makes a habit of wondering if people should be strangled – well, people who aren't Sar-fenan, anyway. I can either protect Mel or analyse this and know I may be protecting Mel. Or I can jump Mel entirely, trusting my famously reliable judgement that what followed was not down to my having been in some way scarred by Mel.

Decisions, decisions.

If it's immaturity, then all the dead-ends are weak, they'll collapse. Except the Maya one which grew stronger?

Oh, oh, ohh. I sort of feel I see something. Not sure if I can find the words.

Let me not get ahead of myself here.

If I say, as I have said, that I was actually fully myself with Tet, taking all of me with me. Then I can also say, yes, dear, but you didn't feel that. What graphically, where graphically - ?

That needs two divergent versions, superimposed. How about an overhead? I think I may be gurgling beneath the waves thinking I can draw this. Memo to the management of the retreat: look, personally I think an OHP is critical.

Let me take this slow-ow-owleeeeeeeeeeeee.

If I can stop gurgling a minute. No, look, wait a min, if – but then I might as well tear my pictures up.

It's only images. Metaphors.

Force you to rely on yourself. If you can draw it, you can see it in your mind, not on a screen. Hmm.

Suppose this bloody crack is between my eso and what I thought of as my eso.

I rather wanted to take my sheets of paper, paint and pencils outside and arrange them round me but it was beginning to get dark. I demand a flood-lit terrace!

Certainly I could go and nibble something, so I gathered up my latest work into a neat heap and vamoosed.

I returned to the art-room now of course in total darkness except for moonlight. I put the lights on and returned to my task. The light was OK, but it wasn't dazzling. It wasn't as though I was working on intricate gradients of colour but there didn't seem any reason I couldn't continue this in my beautifully appointed room (at any rate if I didn't get permanent white paint over the carpet – I sneaked a look at the tube: washable). I slipped my kit into my pockets and retired for the night.

There was a fat armchair, cream, a bit frilly for my taste, but nothing objectionable, by the window, and a reading lamp (and in the bathroom a separate tap for drinking-water). I curled my legs up under me, sipped slowly and scrutinized my portfolio.

Where was I? Damned if I know... I was also – distantly aware, shall I say – I had or might have interrupted myself because I didn't want to continue. I was going to have to recreate continuation mode. It apparently came quite easily and soon I was oh, yes, I see, I meant that-ing, but I was suspicious. It was too like having been away from work for a couple of days and sorting out what was on my desk. It wasn't personal. Fal, you have to really feel this... Feel is not the right word. Be inside it, not an on-looker. Guess that means going in the entrance to the maze.

The crack itself, you idiot, you, is not real. Or rather, it's my crack, I put it there, and no-one can take it away from me, so there! No-one else.

OK, with Tet. Taking all of what I think of as me with me. Only – only what? Only I have – imagined?

Good a word as any. A split in my eso. Based on this idea that I 'can't be' eso because that's not me. Only I know that I need it. Oh. Again. Gosh, did I do that? There is something there about Mel and Hass both,

but not sure it's sharing with me. I grew up in heavy water. That still doesn't mean I even knew what my eso was at the time of my non-existent relationship with Hass. You mean I do now? Maybe I can rephrase that. Oh. In triplicate. Maybe I just sit and yowl? The idea embedded somewhere that unity requires union. Instead of with myself.

Union with someone else.

Half an eso looking for partner to make music with.

Gee, Fal, you really need to love yourself.

Yes, Hass, you told me that.

Now, I am not Sarat: I am not a walking coffee-bean, pride myself indeed on lemongrass and nettle. I allowed myself a giggle wondering how Sarat currently would react to caffeine deprivation (not earlier, don't think he was hooked at 17). In other words I could really do with a mug of really strong hot coffee. Was that distracting myself from the matter at hand? Probably! Where was I? Does it play in real time? It sounds as though it does. That may not be the same thing.

Sarat and Hass. Sarat and Maya. Where could I possibly have got the idea of the union of opposites? It's my crack, I made it, etc.

I internalized garbage in other words. Twice over: the inner and eso is not me, only the outer and exo is me.

Mel went ape. Bandi said I'd grow out of it. Mel was seven-freaking-teen and Bandi was in her 50s. Both were right. Discuss.

At what level did Mel go ape? Can't ask Maya. Either. Discuss. Cantilip, I feel it is only honourable that you be present at a conversation about the relationship Mel and I didn't really have. Or at any rate know about it. I imagined those delicately arched eyebrows rising somewhat. Look, this isn't just idle curiosity, it's driven me halfway round the bend (only half?) and sent me to retreat on the Leolisle... At some level – that may be a rather good let-out, but leave it for a min – at some level both Mel and Maya detected – sounds like scanning a freaking laptop – discerned that as far as Fal was concerned she didn't have an eso to unite with – so – so they were loving but as far as Fal was concerned the whole thing was a dead loss. Seven freaking teen. Let's say they didn't have a lot of idea what they were looking for, only that it wasn't there. Could even have been (she said hopefully?) much more superficial than that, a – perception Fal just isn't bringing all of herself along to this party. Is not ready. Is immature.

So I was a late-developer who hadn't been fast-tracked because I and my immediate circle wanted to restore the Anile throne. Bit of a gulf there. I had to giggle and did.

Hang on, the bMbK wasn't on the horizon then. Oh. No. OK, who hadn't been fast-tracked because I wasn't the future freaking king/A-M/who just wasn't the frantically eso Maya.

I put aside the increasingly imperative talk with Mel and I took another look at my maze, the version of it where the only path that led to the centre ended in a block and a drop.

OK, if that's a block, I can rotate it (damn it, I want software!), make it a bridge.

Oh dear. I don't know exactly how I feel resistance and I do not rule out that I am making myself resistant Maya is dead

I shall never see her again, laugh with her, hug her, talk to her, giggle with her. Leech off her.

I have memories. I do not need this – phantom relationship. I cannot lose her. I cannot forget her.

I need to cross that gulf.

I love my eso.

I have – hurt it? I have hurt me. I am frightened of it.

Lots of stuff about floating away on little pink balloons.

I am so terribly afraid of letting go.

It's not – it's not a fear I can find. It's a fear somewhere in the maze. A fear I have only pretended to confront, that I shall not want Tet?

But no, it was there when I thought I'd lost Tet.

Controlled by my strange notions of the eso? I shall be someone I do not know? I suppose I could say that is increasingly unlikely. Only I am convinced of it. What I need is someone, who sigh can only be me, to take the two halves and drag them together. That's you, you moron! Now get on with it...

No software.

Forced to do it myself whether externally or internally.

I need a clean sheet of paper. I turned over one of the mazes.
I drew – some things on half the sheet. Not sure they looked like what they were meant to be but I knew exactly what they were. A mobile, a goat, a fence, a plate, anything that came to mind to represent my exo world. Then on the other side lots of clouds and balloons and starburst.
They're not separate, idiot.
Of how to – infuse mobile, goat, fence, plate with starburst graphically or any other way I had not a clue, I felt, except they're infused already.
In my mind, in my mind, in my mind...
At least if I make a bridge between them, that's a start!
It was a rather good bridge, actually, one of my better efforts.
It ran across my mind that maybe it could be over a river and that I could swim across, but my mind told me instantly that the current was too strong. Thanks, mind. I am really going to have to have a little talk with you.
I accept. I reject.
This is my mind I'm talking about and it really does not want me to do this.
Gee, well, no-one ever said this was easy.
Moron! Idiot! You're still doing it. Whatever you say, you still do it! Deny the other half. Start there, idiot.
That half is not a maze. Well, it is. Not in my sense. That half is open. A curve with no boundary. But no entrance except at the Great Divide. Just pick up the rubber and make a way in.
Feel.
It will not surprise you to learn that I didn't want me to do this but I thought-experimented my way – in would be an exaggeration: to the threshold.
Feel.
What?
Lost? There are no directions. I had to giggle. What? I don't have to run for the Senate or plough a furrow? Whaddya mean, I can do banking?
Blind? I am going to walk into a little pink cloud that loves me.
Like wrapping myself in a warm fluffy blanket.
Look for things. Things infused with starburst.
Such as me? THAT AM I. This am I? What am I?
I am somewhere.
I am?
Who is me?
This doesn't feel real. No, well, it wouldn't. Discuss.
It felt real in the shrine. It doesn't feel real now.
Dive. That's a good image. I am paddling, not even paddling, more like you're heating some milk and you dip a finger in to test the temperature.
Let go, Fal, let go!
Even if you do hold your nose.
Mental climb to top board. Look at all that sparkling blue water I mean pink cloud. What's on the other side of it?
At which point I had the clear feeling I was asking myself to be the cup falling from the first floor window which can't stop itself. I found myself saying to Hass. I know perfectly well what you want me to do. It just happens that I can't. Course you can, he said. Let me show you. Nice dive. Very nice dive. Only he didn't come up.
Senta! He-elp! Alas, it was 3 in the morning. I was perfectly sure she was instantly available if I'd been about to cut my wrists or something. Since that was just about the opposite...
Guess I'd better go to bed, then.
OK, that's clear enough. I have this figured as suicide. Death of the self, sigh. The end of me as I know me. But it's not!
What the freaking hell do I not want to lose?

It's too late to have another go at infusing my mobile, plate, goat with starburst. I really do think I shall just – I flopped on the bed and fell instantly asleep, without even cleaning my teeth. Oh shock, oh horror.

Without drawing the curtains, either. The morning sun streamed in. Urgh, don't wanna wake up. Very, very un-me. Clearly I had found my previous night's antics absolutely exhausting (bearing in mind conducted without the support of coffee or indeed anything excessive in the way of food).

I can't be this tired. It is not reasonable. I wondered about the relationship between don't wanna talk, wanna sleep and forcing reliance on that within. One of two things would happen if I kept my date with Senta. I'd fall asleep or I'd find that inner reserve I don't have. Why doesn't being lackadaisical and unclear occur to me? It occurred. I was going to have to take a really big decision here: whether or not to get up. I got up, showered, examined briefly the notion that I was a hard case and the only way I was going to crack my shell was probably by fasting, the time for which was not yet. For the moment that within was going to be sustained by an awful lot of food.

I caught up with Senta and presented my apologies, up half the night, be better if I'd had some sleep first. She murmured understandingly.

At the point I left her, I actually thought I was going to flake out on my bed and at least doze.

I got as far as stretching out on my bed but didn't feel the slightest bit tired. An avoiding Senta mechanism? Hmm. I frowned horribly at myself, then wondered if I needed something to happen before I talked to Senta again. The state of not feeling the slightest bit sleepy would be readily attributable to coffee, if I'd had any. The other thing, I mused, was being tense as hell or at least tensed-up, geared for action. I assessed myself. No, I didn't feel sleepy. Nor did I feel the slightest bit willing to do anything. And the word for that is? Stasis? Paralysis? Freezing. I found myself staring at the ceiling and somehow that seemed too much so I rolled over onto my stomach and closed my eyes into the bargain. Look within, right. What does happen if I fast? Can't feel any more inert than I do now.

It came to me slowly, I think because I wasn't thinking of anything in particular. It came piecemeal and I didn't quite know what to do with it when it came. Anti-climax. Crack, fault, Great Divide. I really need to stop feeling negative about that crack. It's a fault, a weakness in the block. It's how to break it open.

That couldn't possibly be what either of them meant. Fal has a crack, not a block. Maybe they thought it was given that I had a block. Most people do? But if the crack is positive what was the problem? Either Bandi and Mel were mad or I had fundamentally misunderstood. Or of course I was wrong. The conversation with Mel loomed even larger.

Rather groggily it occurred to me – groggy as in knock-out punch – that this was only a different way of saying something I'd said already. That I'd broken open along the crack and my eso roared out in the form of Sorg, Sorg and life-support system.

I felt a block, all right, a distinct block against talking to Mel. It seemed so contrived. How ridiculous is that. What would be contrived? Distance.

I am not in love with Mel and he is not in love with me. He wants to hold me and I want him to hold me. Look, Cantilip, it's brother and sister, OK. Is it?

Now, Fal, I know you're considering all the theoretical possibilities, but now you're being ridiculous.

Am I?

Yes and no. I am not being...Precise. There is a relationship there on a plane – oh yikes – it is no threat to Cantilip or Tet but that does not mean they can be guaranteed to see it like that.

That sounds like crap. What am I searching for?

NO.

Well, yes, actually.

I go round and round and I miss the centre. The centre is of course Mel. What is this garbage that I need some kind of chaperone to talk to Mel.

It's not garbage, it's – it's a sort of projection of tact. Because there is absolutely no reason to think that Mel at this on-going moment in time wants to be reminded that he was nuts about me, never mind to really wallow in it. So it's not garbage it's a sort of – what I said before. It's a – oh all right, yes, that's what it is, a sort of protracted wail of self-justification, it's not just idle curiosity, I shouldn't bring it up if it weren't important.

Well, it is to me.

Why?

Why isn't it enough to know?

We live and die by the consequences of our choices.

Even though we don't even know what the pivotal ones are at the time.

Because I Fal who am currently not harvesting pettifer but might as well be for all the contribution I am making to the Great Enterprise did not and do not want to be Queen of Dabida but if I had wanted that would have altered the whole of recent history.

They tried so hard to make me see that my work in Carlin – no, that doesn't sound right, my life in Carlin, my being part of life in Carlin, my community work (why am I having trouble with this?) my being Fal in Carlin, how about that, my Lido-extending in Carlin – my being Fal in Carlin, which was organic. I mean I didn't take a job as a social worker or a teacher.

And then it hit me, as though someone had hit me physically, and I didn't swear or squeal or metaphorically try to hit back, I just sat there as though struck mute and paralysed. I wonder if I went pale!

It's too big, too crazy, too awful.

Sarat and Maya, Mel and – Fal. If I were Maya, a Lido-extender, I could – I could be Queen of Dabida and still be Fal

Of course that means. Of course I love Mel. Everyone does except the obvious.

What am I saying?

What might I be saying?

That what Mel was raving about was that in me which killed any possible relationship stone dead.

That something in me knew I was a pettifer-harvester not for the international stage. Which is fine, only Maya was too.

That I love Mel. Like that.

Then all this gunge around talking to him is a sort of – suppression mechanism. Because talking, really talking, no holds barred, to Mel is impossible: I might say I love you.

But I don't! Do I? I can't be this cut off from what I really feel. Can I? Hallo, block. Are you by any chance protecting me from knowing that I love Mel?

No, look, this is deranged. Even if he were single, I am not sitting here wanting to spend the rest of my life with Mel.

Aren't I?

If he were single and not King. That awful, is it, being Queen of Dabida?

It is – not-Fal. I had that fixed at 15. Why?

Another – the other – angle came and hit me on the back of head. Hass was a sort of – safe substitute?

There is an awful lot here about being kids. Being Queen of Dabida is very grown-up.

Why am I so insecure? Is that egg or chicken? I mean am I insecure and so I didn't want to be Queen of Dabida or insecure because I jibbed at being Queen of Dabida

Say it, Fal. I don't think I can. Because I rejected a man I loved because I was frightened.

That does even sound worse than it was. Sounds as if we were grown-up.

Clearly (as in like mud) at 15 I had some very fixed ideas of who I was.

And of what it meant to be Queen of Dabida. Saski.

I could never be Saski. I'm quite sure Mel never expected me to be like his mother! But then that hardly mattered, did it, if I thought Dabida did, would have.

What did Kyse say? Gosh what an interesting life. Not for me. At least he was grown-up! Something in me knew not for me. Only there was Maya.

There are (may be) other even more terrifying perceptions. Sorg. So despite my best efforts, but no, they weren't my best efforts, they were my out of key ridiculous efforts to get away – if I'd had any sense I'd've studied the ancient languages of the Malpurian sub-continent and spent the revolution doing a doctorate – I ended up in Azt working with Mel and I had to get away, had to, change nationality, anything – 'obviously' I couldn't go home to Tet. Why's that, Fal?

So what does that boil down to?

One half of me committed to enduring values etc etc

The other half wanting to escape from the inner circle

So I end up like I've broken my leg before trying to run, about half a nani from the nub.

All this is very soul-searing and so on but I do not love Mel. Like that.

No, you moron, but you did. Or I would've if there hadn't been Saski in the way.

It is conceivable, though by no means likely, Mel and Cantilip could break up.

It is conceivable, perish the thought, Cantilip could be murdered.

It is not conceivable Mel would abdicate.

It is not conceivable Mel would be able to help Sarat any better thereby than by remaining King.

It is, I suppose, if you really want worst case scenario, conceivable an anti-Kadun government could try to force Mel to abdicate but that is not quite the direction my mind is going right now.

Saski. I thought she was brilliant and wonderful.

Big deal, frankly. I mean I really don't think that's enough.

Except maybe it is if I was really insecure. One of my better circles. A rather special instance of combining child-rearing with a full-time job. When I first met Saski I was five, which I guess is what I mean. I never had – she never allowed any of us to have – the idea she had anything better to do than play with us. Bunny finding his way back to the warren! That was home, though. I began to dimly remember a huge fat book called something like the Bumper Holiday Annual. It had quizzes and puzzles and mazes and stories and jokes and homely advice and joining the dots and ordinary colouring and colouring by numbers and, because we were after all very small, as well as being outside a lot, it seemed to us we'd never get to the end of it. It jolted into focus suddenly Mel saying there's nothing left to do! And we all solemnly gathered round on the floor and went through it page by page looking for something we'd missed. So then we were bereft and nothing would do but we needed a new annual. But something happened then, what happened then, nothing relevant could have happened then. Except we were just a touch older and when Saski took us to the stationer's we were diverted. Reakoed wanted a crossword book and Hass wanted a guide to the seashore. I can't remember what I wanted. Did it start so soon, everyone being focused except me!

I suddenly wanted to escape from me rather badly, focus on something external and solid. I found a blank piece of paper and drew a crossword grid, filled in symmetrical squares and did a lot of sucking my pencil. Twelve-letter word beginning with A...Advantageous. then I giggled and rubbed it out. This was going to be a Falword, just for fun. Three-letter word beginning with M...Four-letter word beginning with G.

What exactly do I want? A row of closed doors! I want to walk out of my current life and walk back into a new one. Latic. Latic has cocked-up far more than I have, but his new life is just that. My 'new life' would seem to be a bit more demanding on those around me. It wants everyone else to be new too. And preferably alive if dead?

I just do not seem to have the hang of this thing called change aka life.

I wrote one sentence: As I sit here in retreat on the Leolisle it is so blindingly obviously why – I can't even run me!

But that's now not then. Now years after a pivotal choice.

Not everyone is suited to everything. Why should I even think, why should it be a problem - ? Maya. Maya made it a problem just by being Maya.

Maya showed it was possible.

Why can't I just do one thing? Because I just did and it didn't work.

Because the one thing I need to do is be Queen of Dabida. Don't freak. Metaphorically. Prove I can be Queen of Dabida. Meaning what? Prove I can be here and there and anywhere I choose instead of this sort of parody of it, this being all over the place, which is my life.

Prove I can be Maya. Here it all fits the porous absorbent flexible reality.

Prove I can be me, with a life that has – components. What an abysmal word. It'll do.

That's a very large circle indeed. Yes, I mouthed slowly, but now I know why.

Do I?

I was in love with Maya because it was the nearest I could get to being in love with Mel without hurting myself.

Or him.

I could not, could not, let go with either of them.

What I'm really talking about is being Alzani-Meta, isn't it. I mean, this was before the bMbK. Even if I had paired with Mel it might have been 30 years before I was Queen.

I think...I think I am now back in familiar territory. At least I've got some things right. Don't wanna be inner and eso. Wannabe me.

I think – no, that makes no sense. Or does it. Let me try very hard to see how my little teenage brain worked.

In the end it's not who Mel is, it's what he is

To my little teenage brain being synonymous?

So they talked – so we talked – about self-realization and being together and some of the stuff that is not in front of the children because if you grow up on the hill and are as bright as Mel and Hass you can't not pick up and you have been taught two things, one is to ask and the other is not to babble and they obey impeccably only we are the Sizzling Six, we're family, and so what they learned distinct from the general teen what is life, why am I here, why are you reading my bloody T-shirt, they shared and – and something scared little Fal-girl shitless and convinced me no?

That is one hell of a theory. It might even be true.

I don't want to go there. I know that.

Except now I do, of course.

Obviously if I'm so utterly petrified of sinking beneath the waves the only place I can force my head under water is here.

At the risk of repeating myself, what do I think will happen.

It suddenly hit me, it ought to be obvious because I'm talking about fif-freaking-teen and all the grown-up stuff whirring around inside me hadn't happened yet for me to want to cling onto it.

Maybe I should undergo hypnosis! I suspected I shouldn't be very amenable.

I was pretty tired by now. Definitely there are few things more wearying than sitting in a well-appointed hotel room contemplating the many ways one has screwed up one's life.

There's something weird here (never!) If I wanted to be like Maya, why didn't I go to college, why didn't I copy - ? But that too was later.

After I'd failed another kind of exam entirely.

I never did fail the school ones. School wanted me to go to college, Mum and Dad. Low moaning noises: I couldn't have followed Mel to the Schools, could I, though what might have happened if I had! There was absolutely nothing to stop me going to college in Zur, except of course me. Surprisingly enough, I had no particular interest. I suppose cults and rites and things could have proved useful but being in a state of denial over the bMbK that of course did not occur to me.

I wanted the opportunity to use my brain and to be out and about. The H-W I knew would give me both

So would've being a student. So?

So? I muttered uncomfortably to myself. So I might actually have immersed myself— watch that word — in a subject.

Keep it on the surface, Fal. That is not a comforting view of my seething depths. As for the completely ludicrous apparent view of the H-W as being Action Woman — close but not too close, not uncomfortably close. There is a rather nasty word I am avoiding. Two nasty words. Shall I incorporate them in my Falword? Vicarious and Parasitic.

Why didn't I join the Fleet or run a youth hostel or become a ranger? Tet. From that limited point of view, Sorg was because I felt trapped by Tet.

Daft? Crazy? True?

Fast-forward. I have no interest in pursuing a career in finance. I can think and I can learn but there has to be a purpose. Make that short-term goal. That at least gelled. Fal is brill at mastering her brief! Fal takes the ball and runs with it.

Fal at this rate is going to go to the top.

Where she would work closely with Mel. I had to laugh. I felt trapped by what?

No escape! Aargh! Except of course my absolute refusal to go and be a mountain-guide in the Lausanne or something.

Such things, I decided, were strands in a skein — I impressed myself with that one — rather than pivotal choices

I didn't feel the slightest need to talk to Senta or anyone else, not, I thought, because I felt self-reliant, but more because of a sense everything was - unravelling, I guess.. I'd found the knot at the centre and — and although

bits had other elements of me independent of that knot – did that sound right, it did – somehow the knot had affected everything I'd done.

Only – only I still don't really see how to – walk away from the mess! Escape what I've been and become what I was and am. Is that the wrong way of looking at it. Because it's all me.

All right, don't get carried away here. A knot at the centre

Or in other words I still don't have the faintest idea who I am or how to be me. Ah well, it was nice while it lasted.

I just want to be me! Well, no, clearly that's actually the last thing

I considered opposites in a general sort of way, gregarious/solitary, and I'd been both. That at least struck me as fairly normal. The Lattic transformation seemed to me terribly straightforward – no, I'm not an amoral sadist living for kicks I'm a nice normal loving person.

What am I that is fake? I got a rather nasty answer. True, not true? Vij had lost his sister, Sarsh had lost her brother. Yesbut they have each other.

I shouldn't have the good friends I clearly do have if before I decided to go round the bend I hadn't been a good friend.

What images of myself do I have? Can I trust anything I've done ever to be truly me?

See above about wanting everyone else to be new too.

I do not see a situation where I can be – what? Anonymous. Not determined by some aspect of my past. New. Different.

Why am I so sure I'm different? How different? Something is clearly wrong with how I am. That doesn't mean everything I am is wrong.

Everything I do. Doesn't it, everything I do have done is off-centre.

Hardly be here if it hadn't been, should I.

Everything? Maybe Tet wasn't right for me.

Aaah-oooh – what does wanting to be Maya really mean? Apart from a secret crush on Sarat. Well, that's one theory I can discard anyway

How about – how about – I don't even love Mel – of course I love Mel – not Like That

Maya. Of course. They ripped him open on Maya. Or just probably Hass. So now he is Anile emperor and in a position to say no to analysis – analyses of his relationships. Or possibly anything fundamental there is to say about those relationships was said here in this place.

And I am or was or at least part of me must be Falita San-yaega-baht.

And this started when I was five and Maya became my best friend. Oh what does that even mean, as Hass so astutely pointed out.

OK, Fal, what did it mean. For all practical purposes I was an only child which meant I couldn't have had the childhood I had in rock-pools apparently free from grown-ups if I hadn't got in with a group of like-minded kids, but Mel and Reakoed were hardly the only like-minded kids in Zur. I suppose it's possible I loved Mel from the moment I met him – most people did! Mel at 7 was extremely loveable. The sheepdog cartoon didn't come from nowhere you know! Mel was like a big puppy you want to hug. And yes, you felt safe with, an innocent remark that may have dimensions – why can't I get this right!

Project, I thought suddenly. I am making myself my own project. I am therefore (aaaaaaaarrrrrghhh!) reinforcing the split with every freaking breath I take. Could it be an idea to let go?

I have moved back to Zur. I could not move back to Zur. I had to make my life in Carlin. Call it the Sabila Syndrome. Bollocks! I could not go back to face me. Hey, well in that case I've made progress. Have I, have I really? I can only face me when – when I can kid myself I'm not as bad as I thought Tet thought I was. Because – owwwww – because – OK to be in, to live in Zur – being the fun dynamic outward-going person I was in Carlin – sobbing by the stream for hours? I know what I mean! – back mixing with my oldest friends – would necessarily – must – if Tet had clearly loathed me – a rift.

Senta must think I'm incredibly thick. Ah well, in this respect...

Between me and Mel? I want us to all be kids together again. But that of course is unreal. We have grown up. Well, some of us have.

Ah this thing called life aka change. What was that about freezing frames? Which frame would I like to freeze?

Yes, well, that's pretty obvious too.

That one moment when we were perfectly happy

Hallo, silver stallion.

The maze, you stupid bitch, you, is the bloody Whole. What? Where did that come from? Suck it and see. What I am lost in is the bloody Whole. Need a map! On the one hand that's totally mundane and obvious and on the other - ?

Oh. Oh? Oh, that's where it comes from. I am – am I not thinking myself to be – mysteriously separate from the bloody Whole, outside it. Battling with it. Trying to subdue it.

In that context – ah-er-ooooe. Of course Maya is a freaking 'dead-end'. She's dead. In that case, Sorg must also be a 'dead-end' but I hadn't found and don't wanna look, feel block against looking, Because of course if – if 'normally dead' – but that doesn't, if the bloody Whole – just what is the bloody Whole – and do I have a special Fal meaning thereof?

Oh, oh, oh. Indeed I do. Fake detachment. The Whole and I are at war! OK, Hass, anyone, how can you be both part of the Whole, the bloody Whole, and detached. Not that people find this difficult or anything

What is the bloody Whole? Reality. What happens, what has happened, what will happen, what is, what will be, what might be. What could be. Yes, well, clearly what could be is my – my what, my bad dream, my nightmare, my terror. What has been isn't so wonderful either. You can change reality or you can fake reality. The two are different, only I don't seem to know that.

Discuss with particular reference to....Sarat hasn't put a layer of paint over Kadun, he's changed it. Now, Fal, don't run away from the point. Which is?

Sorg.

Let me creep up on this cautiously because I think this will hurt. Try Latic and his new life. It's real. Then his life before was fake. Or horribly real, depends, depends what you mean by real. The realities of his scene were nasty and real. But he was fake. What is it they say, there is only the real, then everything else is fake. But you can't say that! Makes it sound like – oh, I said that. Did I say that? Not exactly. Bad theatre. That's exactly what my life has been. All of it??? Acting a part. Back to Latic. How can you say killing someone is acting a part? The curtain falls and everyone gets up. But they don't. Maya doesn't. Sorg doesn't. All one continuum. Do I sort of fail to understand that they do? After all....Somewhere. But I think I'm running from the point. Day-to-day reality. Day-to-day reality is people die and someone somewhere loved them. That's not – what did Hass say, it happened. Is that – how it's all one continuum? It happens, like everything else. What is is. Is what was is?! Latic stopped being fake. That's what gee, you make your own reality means. At least when it's not an idiot meaning be fake. And what do 'they' also say, love is the real, and it sort of makes sense at 16, even though it's obviously crap...Because pain and death and hate are over there somewhere else.

Such as Kadun? Ohhhh.

And when a gaggle of hyper teens, who at least have had an elderly relly die, if not a hamster, said, whaddya mean by that, what did 'they' say? They said you need to try to love everyone, and see everyone as he or she is. They said all crime comes from people being self-centred, lying to themselves, being fake. They said when you love a particular person you – all right, all right, did I love Sorg or did I just love me and what I got from him. I can't bear it.

Or do I mean did I love Tet?

I wasn't even 'grown-up' about it. But then that would have broken the dream. Flying visit to Zur, Hi Tet, I've fallen in love with someone else. How could I, how can anyone, but that's being grown-up and it's tough. Not as tough as the thought that if I'd had the sense to break the spell and got my feet over my doorstep. Hi Tet, I've fallen in love with someone else, all right, me. Isn't that what all this chasing other people's esos amounts to?

Why aren't I screaming?

And we probably gave the seminar on divorce counselling a miss at six-freaking teen. Was there one? They oh they, they taught us not to fuck with other people's feelings. Underlying it, one now sees with hindsight, they didn't expect our attachments to be perman- serious. Underlying it also – we were going to have to learn to be civilized because you can't drop math or change school because your relationship with a class-mate failed! Run away to another country. Yes, well, that class I failed.

It was (of course) a class that failed to take account of the unique bonding properties – in my case unbonding – of the bloody Matter of bloody Kadun. Was that a surrogate, as in 'clearly what was wrong' with my relationship with Tet was that it didn't have the magic glitter-dust all over it. My main problem with that is that there's a nasty little worm of truth in it. Yep, we weren't truly indissolubly bonded because – because what exactly, because we didn't have a common obsession – and as to how this maps against the whole business of Maya being hopelessly unobsessed - ?

Maya was my role-model, except, except – don't wanna be inner and eso, wanna be me. Except I did vaguely grasp somewhere that I was not Maya and our lives were very different. Not Saski: Maya. Always my

darling Maya.

So What would have happened if I'd let go when we – when she made love to me. Oh Fal.

Now I need to think. Or maybe talk to Venga. Or not Mel but Cantilip.

There is one female person with whom I'd be gay. Was.

Think: my progress or lack of does not hinge on being unable to talk to Maya. That is/would be a great cop-out.

Think: exactly what am I saying here?/do I think I'm saying here?

Male and female, we are. A continuum of gender, there is.

And as usual I have it all the wrong way round.

That might just have blown my little mind into the stratosphere. OK, I had no particular reason to define myself as gay, straight, both, neither – neither? - none of the above! Depends on with whom! Do I conceivably make my point? My previous sexual experience having been limited to – just limited (?) Put it this way: what can categorically be said about Mel and me is that it did not convince me heterosex was the cosmic all. Subsequently, however...But that was after. What else is fixed in this game of shifting sands? Sarat and Maya. And only now does it occur to me, do I let it occur to me, that Maya and me parallels Sarat and Hass and she was transcending her boundaries. Or that Mel put her up to it to see if I was gay, though I think Maya could have come up with it herself. But what no-one realized, least of all of course me, was – was that I was nuts about Maya, just waiting to fall into her arms, but it could never be, could only end in tears, my tears, and so I cut myself off from me. Indeed a repeat performance of Mel. Is this plausible? Unfortunately yes. An advanced sense of self-preservation. I thought hard then about my impeccable childhood. It was given that A-M went to ordinary schools in Zur. They'd been doing it for 600 years. It was given that ordinary Zuri found friends on the hill. That didn't mean – I rather desperately searched my memory for someone, aunt, dad, teacher who might somehow have implanted in me that I could get out of my depth, needed to stay in my comfort zone. It clicked. Everyone was quite sure Mel would look after me, quite, quite sure. Mel's little friend who treats the hill like a second home and happened to grow to have film-star looks. Me, it came to me suddenly, was lost a long, long time ago in others' assumptions, others' expectations. And me reacted. Did I? Or was I always in my own little world. Something penetrated – not, alas that little world. People made cracks about Mel and me and it just never occurred to me. That it was real. That it had a reality quotient. Which I think means. Which is somehow bound up with the dramatic story of my eso. Nobody scared me but I scared myself. Oh there is something there. Wish I knew what. A fixed idea who I was. .

...

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 hooley 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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