

This from the old version. Not sure exactly where Lattic fits in the new version, but quite sure he does, he being far too good a character to lose. Complex. More kinks than a sand-viper. Among other things, of course, I may suspect the garbage think women don't write about anything not quite nice. I may also suspect that my writing about things not quite nice made them think I was on to them. Am I not?

Extract from *The Anile Heir* ©2006.I, Ysabel Jehan Howard, hereby assert and give notice of my right under s.77 of the Copyright, Design and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the author of this book.

Into the pulsating world of international intrigue step I Lattic. Because I just drowned, choking, screaming on the shit that is my life, the water pressing down on me, crushing me into oblivion. I wish..

In front of my exquisite hide settee on my impeccable pale grey carpet is an elegant smoked glass table. I sit on the exquisite hide settee silent ashen hysterical terrified. On the elegant smoked glass table are a bottle of takania, a packet of aspirin, my passport and a kitchen knife. These jar, do they not. I suppose the passport is quite sophisticated. Dabida does not do scruffy squares of cardboard.

I don't know what to do. I am too frightened to know what to do. It is three in the morning and I am scared of the dark. I have every light in the house on. I try to recite. I who am One, who am One with the One and You who are all, give peace to this house and all within. It never meant anything to me and it doesn't now but I recite it anyway because there is a ghost here with me. They made me kill her. I talk to her. Try to justify my shitty little life. Mel will have the pictures by morning.

Her voice echoes from the walls.

I can't be hanged for a murder I didn't commit. It's 4.30 am and dawn is beginning to break. I try to put together the fragments of my brain. If I leave now, they can do anything, force me off the road, into the river, into the arms of the Great Master himself. But I have not been ordered to remain in the house. Life must continue. At a respectable hour I can drive into the City. What am I supposed to do! It makes no sense! OK, I'll take a shower. Hey, man, it's the weekend! A guy has to get his groceries. I don't think I shall ever eat again but somewhere inside me something says I might feel marginally better with something in my stomach, less dizzy. I stagger into the kitchen and mumble a couple of slices of dry bread.

I can smell her. I can see her. Does this mean I'm going to die?

I take a shower and shave. How does one dress for throwing oneself on one's prince's mercy? I put on my running-gear, jump-suit and trainers. I do not think fashion sense will save me. OK, I'm going for an early morning run in the park. Car-keys.

I sit down again. Supposing I can't get in? Supposing there's no-one up? No-one of substance, at least. Hey, man, it's the weekend! Some idiot servant tells me to come back within normal working-hours. It is my right, I tell myself steadily. The criminally insane are what A-M are there for. So I think the Rep Centre is up and rocking at six? I assume my 'phone is tapped and my e-mail intercepted. Is that possible? I still don't know.

More coffee.

Hi, Mel, I've turned over a new leaf and I'd like to invite you for a run on this fine autumn morning. Tears are running down my cheeks. What have I done to my life?

I have a coherent thought, get out my laptop, get onto the Grid, find the Rep Centre, consulate section. Yes, yes, yes! Hours of opening. 7.30-3.00 daily. How wonderfully practical are my fellow-countrymen. Hey, man, it's the weekend, so we're open when you

have free time.

Into the car. Get onto the ring-road. The dips hang out in Carval on the north side. Drive with the caution of an 80-year-old. The road is temptingly clear but being done for speeding is not a good idea right now. Somewhere some practical saving fraction of my brain appears to be working.

The Rep Centre stands detached at the end of a row, on a corner, therefore, set back from the road, surrounded by cobbles inlaid in which is the drive which circles the building. The heavy ornate front door is shut. How amazing. I follow the drive round to the public reception area (I've been here before to get my passport renewed). Swing-doors. Lights within. I park. Walk very slowly to the swing-doors. Still I push the doors timidly, half-expecting them not to yield. Dabidan soil. Safe.

I walk up to the reception-desk and present my passport.

"May I see Mel, please. I'm in bad trouble."

The guy's eyes flicker as he notes my name.

"I'm sure it's nothing we can't sort. Take a seat now."

The reception desk is at right angles to the doors, so you have to walk its entire length to get to glass doors beyond. Something leafy. A conservatory of some kind?. The waiting-area is to the right. I take a seat.

"Berek. H-W."

Latic, shit, I think, but do not say.

"Latic. Thanks," I do say.

He's keying my passport number into the terminal.

Someone hands me a mug of coffee.

"Thank you."

"Oh dear," said Berek, "we have been a silly boy, haven't we."

He turned the monitor to show me a brief summary of my numerous imbecilities, but I only register the one word Cult.

"No," I said, "no. I am not Cult."

There's a lift.

"They hang out in the roof," said Berek.

I'm too far gone to comment on the paintwork but the door struck me. It had obviously begun life as the sort of heavy panelled affair normal in any old town-house. Someone has worked on it, someone who is very very good, and now each panel holds intricate scroll-work.

"Whew," I say.

"As doors go," said Berek, "this is nice one."

We enter a lobby running parallel to the corridor, with rooms off it.

"Kitchen," said Berek.

The judges of the court of final appeal are sprawled at a huge pine table naked from the waist up and have yet to shave. With them is Cantilip. Cantilip was not naked from the waist up. I

came over all pale and prissy. Of course I had followed the news but it had been totally unreal. On the table are jugs of juice, milk, coffee but no actual food. Behind them is a picture window giving a panoramic view of the City.

Mel had his back to the door. He turned.

“My lords, my lady.” I swallowed hard. “My prince, my lord, my master.”

I went down on one knee then prostrated myself. Bad theatre. I failed to contain the hysterical sob.

“Sit up,” suggested Hass.

“Sir,” I muttered. I sat back on my knees, shaking my head, forced myself to look at Mel.

“And?”

“I ask for your protection, sir.”

“What from?”

“The Constitution...”

It’s in the Constitution. Oh, it’s all clothed in legalese, both the State and the Crown have the right to mete out punishment commensurate with the offence. What it means is the Cult. What it means is if you commit bestial and obscene acts, you may be treated bestially and obscenely. What it means is if you rape someone’s mind, your own mind may be violated. May be, not must be. If you commit murder, you may be executed. May be, not must be.

“You want protecting from the Constitution?” I flush. “What have you done?” sighed Hass.

“Killed my slave, sir.” Among other things. “They made me!” It came out a kind of squeal.

And of course the tele-talk is being fired off left right and centre.

To Berek: Join me, please do.

To Sasha: This room is off-limits for the duration.

To Gurion: A fruitcake just confessed to me the murder of his slave. Can we have the full bit, please?

The full bit entailed silent and flawless service. Otherwise they looked after themselves “Isn’t there a movie?” asked Hass.

I jerked in what I was later to call my trapped animal routine. And Mel just sat there looking at me with intense curiosity.

What do I say, in the name of anything, what do I say, I’m just a harmless little sadist who never never in my admittedly shitty life – “I know what you guys think of people like me. Con-sen-su-al! I swear I never ever did anything to anyone that wasn’t – “ But that wasn’t true any more.

“That doesn’t apply to Jaizal,” objected Hass.

“Coffee,” said Berek and disappeared.

“Let’s go and sit down,” said Mel.

Where to start!

“I knew I had kinks,” I said, “right from when I was a kid in Zur. I nursed them, traded on them. Now I pay.”

“Take your time,” said Mel.

They cannot be this bloody civilized.

Hass asked me general questions – what do my parents do, where did I go to school but there were no harmless questions here, my whole life was on the line.

“I hated Zur! Got out as soon as I could.” Essentially what I told them was that I came to the City to be as depraved as possible – except that I had had a fairly innocent notion of depravity and I had never joined the Cult. “I was always on the fringe. Your father knows about my sex-shops.”

Berek laying out cups and saucers looked up.

“Edge-play. You just fell off.”

“I was pretty naïve,” I said. I expected them to howl with laughter, but they politely waited for the ape to explain what it was babbling about. “They took over the set.”

“I am so surprised,” said Mel, looking at me almost with affection but certainly as though I were something from another planet. I supposed he’d been taught about people like me but never previously had the misfortune to find one in his sitting-room.

“My original conception,” I began. Yeah, Lattic, right.

“Artistic integrity,” murmured Hass.

I flushed scarlet.

“Soft focus hard core.”

“What exactly,” asked Venga, “was in your mind?”

This is very hard for me, I felt like whinging.

“The Cult have a simplistic, a fantasy Jaizal. I’m not saying – he was too intelligent for – for it to have been how – if you read what he wrote – there was so much about him that – “ I cannot say this.

“That?”

“Rehabilitating Jaizal,” said Mel.

The abyss opened under me.

“No! I didn’t – I don’t think like that. I’m not political.”

“A traitor,” said Berek.

“No! Sir,” I appealed to Mel. “If I – I wouldn’t be here throwing myself at your feet. I’d be partying at Searc’s in a funny mask.”

“Peace,” said Mel.

“So much was pure Fidub! He was open to argument. He – “ They didn’t have towelling jogging-pants in those days, but if they had Jaizal would have worn them. “He didn’t do things the way courtiers thought they should be done. A big-bucks production it wasn’t. Steal footage from travelogues. I’m not recreating Azt here. I don’t suppose you know anything about the BDSM scene. You probably think I’m absolutely raving mad. The stuff you get on line. It’s terribly crude. Jaizal has caught a lot of guys’ imaginations. They want it glitzier.

They want long and lingering when I wanted soft focus. From the point of view of casting – the thing’s in two parts, OK. It begins – the capture of slaves and their transport to Azt. Abuse by soldiers. All that’s just models. It’s when you get inside the Summer Palace. I play Jaizal. The slaves and the Anile Court – they’re friends – acquaintances of mine and their slaves. That’s how it started.

“Guys started to back out. Hey, Lattic, busy, busy. No worries, I got a replacement. And the replacements start to tinker with the script and I can’t do anything about it because that’s how I work, anyone got any good ideas, I want to hear them. By this time I know, right and my guts are water, but I still don’t understand – why they’re doing this to me, basically. Don’t tell me the Cult’s poor! If this is what they want why haven’t they done it? I grasp they’re looking at the Kadun market.”

“The name?” said Hass.

I blushed furiously.

“I can’t lose my name! I know guess know I’m being set up and I know guess know that it can only get worse. Man, I’m 15 years in the City. I know what worse is. Not guess.”

“I’m going to wail,” said Mel. “You are duly warned. Why did you not come to us?”

“I told myself so loudly and so often I was hacking it that I believed myself. I didn’t want to be rejected. Derided.”

Hass suddenly grinned wickedly.

“Us? Reject you?”

“Try harder,” said Mel.

“You know what I am.”

“Tell us,” said Mel.

“I can’t.” That was something between a wail and a choke. “Highness, my life is forfeit!”

Unfortunately bad theatre not.

“Why?”

“I used my mind, sir. To enforce obedience.”

“When?” asked Mel.

“As a matter of course.”

“Consensual.”

“I understand there is no proof.”

“But not Cult.”

“No, sir. Never. I – I made my own rules.”

“Tell us about your slave. She had a name?”

“Calith, sir. She had kinks. I have kinks. We suited each other. She didn’t live in. A slave is a responsibility! That’s why she didn’t live in. I really did not want – 24/7. But she was on the set and I knew she was in terrible danger. So did she. She wasn’t an idiot. I tried to lose her. I faked that we’d had a blazing row. I’d made her do something too much even for her. She’d chickened out and gone back to mum. I have never in my life forced my kinks on someone who didn’t share them. I thought I was doing the one decent thing I’ve ever done in

my shitty life!

“I got home – I got home last night. Have a drink. Put on some music. She was on my bed. Hog-tied, gagged They’d done things. Her eyes. She was out of it. What the fuck! I said.

I vomited, mostly over myself.

Without a word Mel led me to the kitchen, handed me a wodge of paper towel. I splashed cold water on my face and caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. I even looked like someone in hell.

I began to stammer apologies, for puking, for being insane, for being alive.

Por appeared with a clean robe and Hass helped me out of my soiled one.

Seamless.

Wordless.

The air was different and I can feel music and no fear.

Oh.

The look I shot Mel was very scared indeed but it was a different kind of scared.

He smiled, then escorted me back to the sitting-room.

“Click! They came out of the shadows in those bloody masks. Suave. We return the runaway. You’re ours now, Latic, old boy. They made me – they made me – they filmed it. To ensure my submission. I think I recognized their voices but who’s going to believe – “

“Me?” said Mel gently.

I name three prominent Harni, one of whom is a member of the government.

“Little boy....” said Berek.

What they want from me – how I can be of real service – “ I suppose in its way this was the most terrible bit of all. “Exactly what I’m doing now. Get close to Mel. They seemed to think because I’m family you’d – tell me all the State secrets. Of course, they said, if they knew, they’d hang you. I know Tar knows about me. Even if he didn’t, I’m about to become famous as the star of - I tried to say about all I’d learn is the colour of the soft furnishings. They have a heavy class thing. Being who you are, old boy. They took her body away and I was just left there and I puked and had the head from hell and I just sat there, all night, and I thought maybe suicide and the screaming in my head wouldn’t doesn’t stop and everything around me was her and smelt of her – at one point I got out my passport but where could I run to and I couldn’t bear to be in the house, it was as though she was crushing me but I had nowhere else to go in my state. I’m just completely stricken. I’m pretty insane to start with but I get mad because it’s such crap. I know if I run I’ll be wanted for murder on two continents by dawn. I swear I was going to come here if I didn’t kill myself. It’s the only place I had left to go. I was too scared to leave the house at night. It’s like I’m in a funnel.”

“It doesn’t make much sense, does it,” said Mel.

“My mind is open, sir.”

I was trembling. Be gentle with me.

He walked in. Shrink away, cower, grovel, abject terror. *Peace, sweetheart.* Mentally I flattened my face to the ground in distraught, terrified and adoring submission.

“What,” asked Berek of no-one in particular, “are we supposed to do with you? Given that

you didn't kill her.”

“Geopolitics,” said Hass.

I stared.

“Sarat,” sighed Berek. “We’re supposed to hand you over to Sarat.”

I swayed and dizzied and nearly fainted.

I’m really not political. I’m a political embryo, never mind a political infant.

Let me be thrown in chains at Tar’s feet, only let me not have to discuss motion-pictures with HIH.

“Do we have a number for Searc?” asked Hass.

Por came in.

“Package just delivered. Photographs.”

And so I sat with Mel and went through 30 snapshots adding up to the kindest thing anyone could do to me was put a bullet in my brain. I appreciated elven calm.

“Searc,” said Hass.

A number had been found. The loud-speaker was turned on. The exchange went like this.

Searc: To what do I owe - ?

Hass (laughing): My lord, I disturb your peace.

Searc: You waste my time with games?

Hass: There was an incident last night concerning Latic.

Searc: The affairs of your relations are hardly –

Hass: Last Xulaman. Extraordinary costume. Bal has a copy..Several copies. If one is a forgery, so undoubtedly is the other.

Searc: I think we have little further to say to each other.

Hass: Where’s her body?

Searc: What are you talking about, boy?

Hass: We too do things the traditional way..

Searc: My time is short.

Hass: The number of the cat-house is 0 900100 888 888. panther@gov.fi. All lower case.

Searc: You are Ban-varna’s secretary?

Hass: No-one wants to be on the losing side.

My little brain absorbed what it could of this while squeaking with fright. Hey, I’ve played at being such a big guy.

“May I – may I show you!”

“Now that really would be a trap,” said Berek.

“No,” I said, “no.”

The H-W went ahead to case the joint.

“For fuck’s sake!” said Sasha. Nobody laughed.

Mel examining my dungeon.

OK,” said Berek. He really didn’t bother to hide his revulsion. “Item: one poor little girl, your collared branded 24/7 slave. Item: one instrument of torture sold as the fucking machine.”

Item: nipple and clitoris clamps for her further torture. Item: positioned on all fours. Item: dildo rammed into her vagina. Item: dildo rammed up her anus. Item: dildos attached to said fucking machine. Item: her ankles and wrists manacled and secured to the floor. Item: a muzzle put over her head. Item: her head held in a vice. Item: her mouth held open by a ball-gag. Item: I standing there flogging her. Item: she choked on her vomit and I was still flogging her when she was dead.

“At which point if any did this scenario differ from your usual domestic life?” asked Mel.

“I liked to hear her scream, sir.”

I appreciated elven calm. Moral degenerate, perv, freak, heard it all before. Only let them not know the whole truth.

Mel made a ‘phone call. Some grizzled old guy arrived and looked at me like I was infected dog-shit on the sole of his boot. Mel filled him in.

“OK...If I can just summarize for the record... You have a choice here, Lattic. As a citizen of Dabida and a subject of His Majesty, you can accept punishment at his hands, or you can stand trial in the City. If you’re lucky, you’ll be hanged. If you’re unlucky, our prisons are not well-policed.”

“Pretty boy, isn’t he,” said Berek.

“You may think you will get off, because that is how things are done here, but they are not usually done with the Crown and State of Dabida as witnesses for the prosecution.

I imagined Mel and Hass in the witness-box relating their evening. And of course there’s the video.

“I will be frank. We do not greatly at this stage want this shit all over the media and we are not able to contain the Crown and State of Dabida so we very much hope you will be the good subject of your king you surely are and take your shit way out of Harn.”

Choice, oh, sure, yes, choice.

“How things are done here,” I said, “I live maybe a further two days.”

“There is that aspect indeed.”

“Then they get off!” I didn’t really believe that.

“No,” said Mel.

“You turned yourself in, son. That has to count in your favour.”

Tar rang So-It. So-It is a spokesperson for what passes for the BDSM community in Zur, which I deride as a light spanking with a hairbrush.

So-It entered the Room to find Tar in front of the monitor examining a collage, suspension, nipple torture, harnesses, gags, you name it..

Tar turned.

“Crude, vulgar and declassé. Among other things.”

“About as erotic as a dead fish,” agreed So-It. “Most of us, as you know....There is a failure to discriminate. Sadism and masochism necessarily concern pain. Bondage and dominance do not.”

“There was another failure? Others will ask it.”

“You would have had us secure him with chains that he could not become a monster?”

“We accept,” said Tar, “we should have seen the vulnerability to blackmail.”

“You cannot be responsible for every half-wit who bears your name.”

“Did I say that?” asked Tar.

“His father.”

“Has bent your ear?”

“Shock,” said Tar. “Mel deals with Lattic.” He smiled. “Mel and Hass. They are a good team.”

Poor little bastard, thought So-It. “They are not too young?”

“I shall speak to him. That is a formality.”

Colts appeared with coffee and appeared not to notice what was on the screen. Now that, thought So-It, really is discipline.

“Malik Zesh! What site’s that?”

OK, wrong.

“People do that for fun?”

“Consensual is the word, I understand,” said Tar. “Such people are of course vulnerable to the Cult.”

Sheep in a fold, thought So-It, needing Alzani-Meta to protect us from the wolves outside.

“He wished to be a wolf?” he said, thinking aloud.

“That goes on in Dabida?” asked a colt.

So-It cleared his throat.

“There is no scene of that kind,” said So-It. “What people do in private.”

Tar laughed.

“We do not search homes on the off-chance there is a torture-chamber in the basement.”

The colts withdrew.

“The erotic nature of constraint,” said Tar. “There are polarities, active/passive. In each there is the balance. The question is not the constraint but what pleases, no? And reciprocity. Then union. Who can tell who is doer and who done-to? Shall I bind my lady to be more utterly her slave, desiring only her ecstasy?”

What, though So-It, is the appropriate expression for listening to one’s king describe his bedroom? But that is not the message. The message is we don’t get it, we never have got it, we are the walking wounded. They are too young? They are both paired. There are things in 600 years Zur has learned, organically, if you will. Alzani-Meta guard their privacy in a manner that would have seemed excessive in the imperial harem.

“A question,” continued Tar, “of whether, stripped of the trappings of bondage, stripped of its

language, the behaviour at issue constitutes a criminal act. A question, therefore, of the psyche of the partners.”

We provide a safety-valve for the maladjusted.

“Thank you, sir,” said So-It coldly.

“Pain, Master So-It, breaks the veil of fantasy. Pain is real. A woman who desires her clitoris tortured is a woman with a problem. Fantasy I understand and do not judge. The other I understand also and judge.”

“Lattic,” said So-It.

“There must be witnesses. You consent?”

“Of course.”

Fugitry mailed Por Lattic’s file and he fed back to Mel.

“He attended as an external student. You’ve proved you’re bright enough to be a proper student if you want to be but you don’t want to be. Suppose you’re a novelist and you want to set your next book during the Mosai Wars. You can attend anything about or around the Mosai Wars and because you’re so focused you probably end up knowing more about the Mosai Wars than most historians. No pressure, no commitment, no refund. How did he prove that? we ask. He skated the general papers. Tribute to Dabidan education. Not thick. People are a problem for Lattic. Mother Earth is not. Mel, I don’t quite know how to tell you this. He’s bats about the ozone layer. At any rate he was when he was 20.”

“I promise not to hold it against him,” murmured Mel.

“Walked out of school in Zur with no qualifications at 17. Ran away to the City. Parental brickbats. Large allowance settled. Glad to be rid query. Query do not want becoming rent-boy. This is not a man you think into self-improvement but he’s loose in the City and does not have concentration span of flea. Attention piqued. Did dissertation on it, no less. If it’s a dissertation class, you can do that, whoever you are. Get a cert to say you’ve satisfied the examiners. Which he did, by the way. Then he did the natural history of the Delta, then some greenie stuff about the eco-balance in the uplands of Vaudos. Not immediately following. Lot of basic science, cell biology, genetics, some quantum physics. When he feels like it, he goes back to school. Then he did the Age of Jaizal. Imagine what kooks you get on that one. So he’s mixing in the right circles now. What with one’s name. Followed by the collapse of empire and the role of Fidub in the formation of Dabida. So he’s interested in roots, you could say. But that’s about it for the human world, at any rate the real one. He likes literature. Remember this is spread over 15 years. It wouldn’t have consumed his every minute, the way it sounds.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“If I knew that.... It’s like a double life.”

“Why are you so interesting, Lattic?” asked Mel. “It’s not IT, though, is it, capital I, capital T. Predisposing factors.”

“If it’s not the wrong tree.”

“Take it from the top,” sighed Mel. “What does he not have? The slightest concern for his fellow human beings, whether at a personal or a global level. So he becomes Minister for the Environment?”

“The second question,” sighed Por.

“The second question,” said Mel, “is how come they know it and we don’t? So let’s put this life together. Consistently out of the house a lot, business, study, not a great one for socializing for its own sake. Relationships irrelevant query. Any relationship diverts attention from the only thing that matters, namely Lattic, hence a series of arrangements. Relationship with parents severed. Talks to his sister occasionally. Remembers her kids’ birthdays. Presumably kids are extension of animal kingdom. Adults, poor little bastard doesn’t do adults.”

“Query if not for needs and urges would live life of hermit. He had to make money and the quickest way was selling sex. Is that simple and practical or terribly deep? Said urges control him – they do that anyway, but contained by exploiting those of others. Kill or be killed. What, I ask myself, is he trying to prove! Independence from the rest of the human race. But he can’t because. Which still looks to me like a motive for murder.”

“I figure two things. One is this matter of Kadun is big enough and complex enough to engage Lattic’s intelligence. The other is – yes, no! The other is that he’s quite capable of getting passionate about Kadun, not because he gives a damn about the irturbi but because he’d want to serve Sarat. What is in the way of this? Why, I am! Suppose I don’t act as matchmaker. I can’t not, given the circumstances. It’s too convoluted.”

“That and he’s Dabidan.”

“He is, he is. Why should I - ? Evil grin. We do not waste talent, especially movie-making talent, but they can’t possibly know that. Do you suppose that, in the course of some drunken orgy, in the context thereof, he ever bumbled he’d like to serve Sarat?”

“Or Hass,” said Por.

“Or Hass indeed. One appreciates – what does one appreciate?”

“One appreciates that one has been presented with a packaged Lattic with a little pink bow round his neck. Faced with Lattic, what does one do?”

“Keep him on a short lead. Send him home? They’re going to assume family name and all that, old boy, no public scandal. I think that’s pretty firm. Talk to him. Beat the daylight out of him and turn him out into the naked city, he jumps in the river or it happens again.”

“No, no, no, no, no! Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes? Trust. To say his loyalty lies with us, to know that he is not working for Searc still doesn’t mean I’m going to tell him all our little secrets. The degree of – intimacy. Why on earth would any of us, however fond – unless he were engaged in work which he couldn’t be because he’s not going to be H-W or PANTHER and even if we crack that there are how would they know he’d learned anything and is it likely his little brain would not have been taught how to shield itself? Are we going round in circles?”

“Yes!”

“Thought I felt dizzy.”

“He has something to offer Sarat, something concrete and vital, which happens to be invisible. All this of course makes far more sense if he’s their spy.”

“He isn’t.”

“That deep.”

“That deep. Can you be working for the other side and not know it?” Por looked at him. “Just thought I’d ask.”

“Sent home. Why does that strike a chord? Enough! Bed for me.”

“Between them, Cho and Tar can call upon the best in the world. With due respect, therefore, to Lattic’s knowledge-base, he’s not going to become Sarat’s personal adviser due to his expert knowledge. He might, however, have an important idea, have put something together differently. Horribly diffuse, insights.”

Por had got as far as standing up and stretching.

“Apart from the rehabilitation of Jaizal, you mean. There you are, chatting away, general principles, nothing classified. Lattic the bloody bright looks at something a different way and because it’s brilliant and obvious something is changed. Only they don’t know what we’re going to do in the first place.”

“Aside from general principles! There’s something they want or don’t want to happen and Lattic has the argument?”

“Sure, sure!”

“In the City.”

“Banking.”

“I’d swear the limit of Lattic’s thoughts about banking are the bloody machine’s taken my card.”

“Everything confirms that a sadist with more kinks than a sand-viper absolutely refused to become an adept – so what does he want from life?”

“Por said: “Do you see a central theme? I’m not saying there wasn’t learning for its own sake. I’m sure he loves wild flowers.”

Mel stared.

“There isn’t a course in it. You have to design your own.”

A knock. Garg, who is it at this time

“Come in! Mel.”

“I want to ask you something. Tell me to go away again if you’re tired.”

“Ask away!”

“In consideration of your academic record... You are damn’ bright, Lattic, so what’s it all about?”

“Too intelligent to behave like a retarded baboon.”

“Something like that.”

“With apparently zero insight,”

“The thought crossed my mind.”

“So what is my rationale for assuredly I have convinced myself intellectually that I don’t need to change.”

“As you say.”

“I thought you understood people.”

“Some people. Sometimes.”

“You’ve looked, Mel. Can you really not know?”

“You are not a murderer and you are not a traitor. That leaves large areas of your life unexplored. It’s late.”

He went away again.

SHIT!

I screamed at my father. Maybe it’s genetic! He sent me flying.

I nearly asked if Mel could be asked to come back but what did I have to say? Street chic: I owe you, man! Melodrama: Highness, my life is at your command! Come to think of it, WTF was so melodramatic - ? Fake candid: can we cut to the chase here?

Mel and Hass shared with me their further deliberations.

“We consider – should we agonise that we did not keep a closer eye on you? Have we failed in our responsibility? Are we responsible for every raving lunatic who carries a Dabidan passport? The flipside is that you of all people should have known better.”

“I’m mad,” I said and meant it.

“There’s a kind of ribbon one wraps gifts in. Shiny, sticky and curly. Leave it alone in a drawer and it ties itself in knots. Kinks are one thing. I think the knots are going to have to go.”

I smiled wanly.

I understood this wasn’t just about me or even Calith. This was part of the game they were all playing and of which I had no idea of the rules.

Cho rang Searc. The Searcs of the world don’t really take seriously anyone under 50. It helps to be Anile emperor.

“Should we not learn more of each other’s ways?” purred Cho. “You will dine with us?”

Searc rang Bal.

“A little talk,” said Bal, “with the young gentleman. Ask His Highness to get his ass over here now.”

He studied Mel, still unshaven. You grow a beard? A padded vest topped the towelling-pants. This guy is in a war-zone.

“It is of course pointless to once again request your assurance that you will not bring mayhem to this City. I have been told you harbour a murderer.”

“Latic is essentially innocent, which is to say I am satisfied that he was forced to kill her. I looked into his mind.”

“I do not want to know that.”

“Tough. Have they produced the body?”

“That I grant you is an obstacle. The whole story.”

Mel told it.

“A difficult situation,” acknowledged Bal. “One so difficult it does not exist. I have spoken at length to Vanya. My government is dimly aware gossip has it that a member of your family has been a very silly boy. We do not interfere with family matters.”

“I thank you,” said Mel.

“Nonetheless, we must all be aware of the possibility that at some point inconvenient shall we

say to all concerned the body will appear. She had family?"

"None Latic knows of. We're tracing them."

"The waifs and strays, the rejects of the world," sighed Bal. "What makes a girl - ?" He shook his head. "Find Daddy abused her, a junky maybe."

"Latic has no such justification. What usually happens when the cops find that kind of corpse?"

"You have no faith in the integrity of our criminal justice system? It's buried, lit and fig. Why waste police-time? In this case of course there'll be a little arrow pointing to your cousin."

"I'm not sure," said Mel, "I'm really not sure."

"I understand you are not the only player. I would not appreciate Sohenoil turning those screws of which we spoke previously Any economic warfare must necessarily impact on the man in the street."

"The day I have control over what Cho does is the day Searc donates his fortune to the aged and infirm! Cho's not a fool."

"One does not get to chair Sohenoil by being a fool. Quite apart from one's other qualities. I would point out, however, that one is not yet in Azt. One is a private citizen in a foreign country."

Mel grinned.

"And so not worthy of these cosy private chats we have."

"You are learning."

"But of course it's balderdash."

"You are learning fast."

"Same rules?"

"Same rules, my boy, same rules."

Sarat sitting in the car fiddling with the radio-tuner, dissatisfied, abruptly muting, Mel's expression unreadable.

"I've been asked to contain Cho. You scratch my back."

"My grandfather," said Sarat demurely, "is always ready to listen to reason. So - ?"

"Nothing has happened."

"Until it's over every paper in the world."

"Exactly. Why isn't it? I want you to meet a friend of mine."

So, at last and finally, there's ME. What was your relationship with Mel Talal? people will ask. He loves me. He just doesn't love me that way. Ah, that way. He only loves me for my mind. Later someone else will love me for other bits and we shall think we shall live happily ever after but that is in the next continuum. That is After, in Azt, when the entire world has shifted on its axis.

If the City isn't the rudest place on earth, it's a good runner-up. If I say Mel's politeness struck me, I sound like granny. Young people today, dear. This great bear of a guy in fatigues with a bandana round a mass of black curls is lounging opposite me and arguing

vigorously against the possibility of clay soil preserving human remains intact. I'm sure I've seen him before somewhere but I can't remember where.

No preservatives have been found in the bodies, I point out patiently.

"Might the preservatives themselves not have been bio-degradable?" he suggests.

I forget how in the world we got on to 'womanspirit', no I don't, the marked differentiation, so far was ascertainable, between gender-roles in Humeria and in High Harn. From time to time people grinned at me because there are places where far worse than being the Anile heir is being Estanzia's daughter.

My mother has not only spent a lifetime talking rubbish but has published it and consequently it is not below the belt to cite her in a friendly seminar.

"Yes, but it's nonsense," I said.

"How nonsense?" asked Mel.

On this I'm good. 22 years of practice.

"Harn has recovered?" he asked, "Or the wound is beyond healing?"

"To those who think like my mother, heterosexual males are the enemy. The answer depends on how many think like Estanzia."

"They tear at the wound, then?"

"Is this a private conversation?" asked Sushal.

The afternoon draws to an end.

"Their gall-stones remained intact. Isn't that fascinating? May I ask if you would like to continue this over dinner?"

"Thank you!" I say, then "Brrrr," as the door opens and we out in a chill autumn evening. "Over here."

I take in a black bomb and dip number-plates.

"Your father's a dip? Where are you from?"

"Dabida."

"In-ter-es-ting. Alzani-Meta!"

"My second name's Talal."

"Ah-uh. Any relation?"

"Son and heir."

"Ah," I said weakly.

We entered Carval, the diplomatic quarter, turned into a drive and drew up outside the Dabidan Rep Centre

"So you live here."

He held open the gate to the area for me.

"No," he said.

Thus my introduction to the basement flat, its one huge purple settee and its tiny kitchen. As Mel fried up patsito did we make erudite conversation, did we even whisper sweet

nothings? No, no, we talked about my mother, about whom A-M had been briefed. Well, OK, we talked around the subject, we talked about people who might be in terrible danger because of their ignorance, about the resurrection of the Cult in Kadun, about the stranglehold in which a few old spidery things, members of Harn's oldest families, still held modern Harn, about feminism in Harn,

This was during his first year when he was in his own flat. Were we ever lovers? Yes, two, three times. We thought we were going separate ways, ways so separate that Mel's and Cantilip's dilemmas look trivial. I thought I was going to do what Mum had played at, namely lead a clean Harn. Unlike Mum, I wasn't going to sit vulnerable in a freaking field. I had the Denzines behind me. I did not in those early years appreciate that getting to know Mel meant getting to know Sarat and the ramifications of a plot which would end by turning the City inside out. I still ended up in Azt like everyone else. Not on Mel's arm. Regrets? No. I love him, but basically, you've guessed it, not like that.

Berek wandered in.

"There's a party going on – sorry! Ignore me. I am not!"

"Liar!" said Mel.

"Nonsense, my name is Berek!"

"This is Kai."

"Hi," I said.

"Welcome to Dabida! Beejay's got a gang of irturbi gawpers in tow. Solicitously they enquire after His Highness' studies."

"How kind."

"I thought you might like but clearly you are otherwise engaged."

"Kai might not want to wind up irturbi spies."

I spluttered.

"At least she's dressed for it," said Berek. "You're not!"

I was in my minimalist phase, black top, black loons, black boots, looking what Guri calls presentable.

Mel pretended to look puzzled.

"The prescribed attire?"

"I can always say you're entertaining."

"I am devastating."

"You have a guest," said Berek sweetly.

"It's not everyone's idea of fun," scolded Mel. "Harn is of course neutral."

"Harni are not," I said. "I think I'd find it quite interesting."

"Harni!"

"City-bred."

"If you will excuse me a moment..." Mel disappeared into the bedroom.

"You're at the Schools?" hazarded Berek.

“We met at a seminar this afternoon.”

“Cool! What on?”

“Burial customs. High Harn. That kind of stuff.”

“Ah,” he said.

It was only when Mel reappeared in heavy black silk and what even I could see was heavier white gold that the His Highness bit really hit me. Er, yeah, right.

Mingle, mingle. I found myself talking to a Vasculi in a red skin-suit.

“My prince!”

Beejay swept him a low bow, then looked at me.

“I think I have not had the pleasure.”

“Kai,” I said, having rapidly devised a policy which went: since I haven’t the faintest idea how ‘one is supposed’ to behave, I shall behave exactly as normal. “My full name’s Caithan.”

Beejay smiled.

“Your father a poet, then!”

He was much worse than that, I thought.

“Artist.”

“Karba ban-jaizat stoan,” said Mel, “universally known as Beejay, Kadun Representative at Harn.”

I looked around for anyone who might be an irturbi spy and felt a bit disappointed. I didn’t of course know Beejay then and so know that any female escorted by Mel would be vastly more of interest to him than a bunch of stooges sent him by Azt.

“You are creative?”

“I’m a student. Anthropology.”

“A popular subject today.

Although after a while the stooges began to gather round, it was only in later years that the exchanges in the drawing-room got more pointed, and I thought the stooges were rather sweet. Still, it was not a boring party. I discovered two Fidubi weavers trading in dyes. Around 11 Hass came in and ended up fixing an impromptu racquetball tournament out of which Xamia, a VILE agent, emerged supreme, around 12 a member of the City Council dropped in, around 1 Mel felt the need to swim. People had a tendency to recite snatches of poetry.

Around 2 it was officially over and I was told there were plenty of beds and they could probably rustle up a toothbrush that hadn’t been used more than a couple of times before. The next day was mercifully the weekend and I crawled rather shyly downstairs at about 10 and followed the smell of food.

How did I feel about a day out on the Delta? Hass had a boat and I could borrow some clothes from ‘the girls’, meaning H-W. Or rather the entire weekend on the Delta, nosing our way through the reeds.

They asked me what I thought of the government and got their heads blown off. I didn’t then appreciate it would get back to Bal, though I shouldn’t have cared if I had.

“Bal,” said Mel, “frankly seems to us a pretty decent guy.”

“Accommodating,” said Hass.

“Oh, he accommodates them, all right!”

“What,” challenged Mel, “do you expect him to do?”

“Over-rule them. He is the damn’ democratically elected government of this damn’ country. It is not freaking governed by freaking Searc!”

Of course there were people who told me I’d sold out to the corrupt patriarchal social order and then there was my gay friend, Carli.

“Eek, darling, one feels quite faint. You cannot spend your life opening hospitals, dear!”

“It’s not like that, Carli!”

“We shall see!”

Now here we are back in real time and Mel is catching me on my mobile.

“Can you talk? It’s Them.”

“I’m in the supermarket! Call you back in ten mins.”

“Por’ll pick you up.”

OK, OK, I didn’t drive, I admit it. I too suffered from ozone layer syndrome. Like the rest of us, I had heroically to overcome it.

“Corner of Sando Street. Where the card-shop is.”

Standing there with my groceries.

“This is the life. Chauffeur to collect me.”

“What’s for dinner?”

“Terrine. If I can follow the recipe. What’s up?”

“Oh no,” said Por, “Mel can tell you all about this one.”

Sarat and Mitch arriving at the Rep Centre.

“I understand we’re going to see a movie,” said Mitch.

Something in my brain screamed, pity, my lord, have mercy! Yeah, right, Lattic, the whip, the rack, anything rather than make you watch a film you made.

Openers. Sounds of war, the clash of swords, shouts, screams, cold voice-over: “Death is your master.”

Close-up of face in rictus of terror.

I know that feeling.

Town Anywhere in Kadun burned to ground. Women rounded up. Scenes of rape.

Trudging column of enslaved captives (male) pulling cages of enslaved captives (female).

Night falls. Column makes camp. Jeering drunken soldiers form circle. Heavily manacled slaves thrown inside circle and forced to copulate with each other, male/male, female/male, female/female, it makes no odds. More scenes of rape.

Shot of the Great Gates.

Within noisy bustling Azt stares and jeers at the new slaves.

Slaves herded into compound, manacled together in a single column.

Overseers examine livestock.

Close-ups of hands on pricks, fingers wriggling into pussies, tweaking of nipples..

Voice-over: This examination includes a test of sexual response and divides the new slaves into labour and pleasure. Only a fortunate few will grovel at the foot of the Anile Throne

After examination each slave branded on the back with a silver coronet above a silver chair. Close-ups of red-hot brand and faces contorted in agony.

After that frankly I just wondered hopefully if I could die.

Voice-over: Such is the magic and mystery of the Imperial Master that the burns swiftly heal. His Imperial Majesty is merciful to those who obey.

Shot of the Summer Palace. Camera tracks through corridors (footage frankly stolen from travelogue).

Shots of imperial harem.

Voice-over: Here in the limitless and sensuous luxury of the imperial harem His Imperial Majesty's toys are bathed, powdered, scented, oiled. His Imperial Majesty is a liberal and generous master and permits his slaves full enjoyment of themselves and each other. Slaves male and female naked but for the slimmest of gold chains decorating their exquisite bodies, around their necks, their wrists, their ankles. experiment with gold rings through their nipples, diamonds adorning their clitorises, cock-rings of beaten copper. Here they learn worship of the whip and here too they learn the ecstasies of fear and pain – and the fate that awaits those who fail to obey.

Shot of female slave naked etc nailed to the wall, dead-eyed, head lolling, blood dripping from her mouth.

Doors flung open. Slaves freeze.

Jaizal enters and walks slowly around. Beautiful and corrupt.

Me. I sort of started forward as though to run, then collapsed back into my seat.

Voice-over. No slaves moves unless commanded. No slave speaks unless addressed.

Shots of Jaizal wearing expression of polite curiosity examining slaves in variety of positions.

Jaizal reaches female slave nailed to wall, gestures to fawning companion.

Slave is taken down and thrown at his feet.

Jaizal: You may speak.

Slave:: My lord is gracious and his most abject slave thanks him for his mercy! Only command me, master, I obey!

Jaizal smiles, kneels beside her, traces his finger delicately around the outline of the silver coronet burnt into her back. As his finger moves, so her back catches alight. She convulses in evident agony but no sound escapes her.

Jaizal: You may thank me.

Slave: Only use me for your delight, Great Master.

Sarat raised his hand and someone pushed the Pause button.

“There is another half-hour of this. I suggest we fast forward to the denouement.”

You’ll miss the golden rod, sir. Zeshazesh, how many people have seen it?

Here is the Imperial Master reclining on cushions, beautiful and corrupt. The sun dances on a hasty mock-up of the Slavani Window. Sundry lords reclining around HIM. There is music and laughter. Cut to musicians, golden lutes, shimmering tiranias

A huge board is lowered from the ceiling by a pulley.

On it prostrate are twelve slaves almost naked but for who have experimented with; each wears a heavy collar from which a short leash attaches him to the board.

There is a buzz of delight and expectation.

Jaizal rises and does some more of the murmuring.

Jaizal: The captives from the south.

A slave speaks: Get fucked.

I’m really not sure if this little touch renders me a great patriot or a great traitor.

Jaizal regards him with faint amusement

Jaizal begins to play with their minds. They scream, kneel, begin to grope themselves and others. He turns them into men powerless to prevent themselves being rutting orgiastic apes, overturns their deepest kinks.

Jaizal. It’s a mental thing. It happens to be photogenic. He know which ones he wants to play with again.

Jaizal puts on skull-mask and indicates those he marks for death. These are unchained

Jaizal: Now let us honour Death the Great Master.

The floor opens beneath the board and it floats. The doomed begin to struggle and scream. The board is slowly lowered until all is still.

Close-up: The dead floating under water.

The insolent slave was not marked for death and says clearly: You evil cunt.

Jaizal smiles sleepily.

Jaizal: You, my lord, I shall address later.

Voice over. Hope you enjoyed the show, folks. That actually happened, that’s history in the school-books of the south. The guy was a Fidubi. Jaizal had him tortured – that’s our next production – but he didn’t get turned into a drooling imbecile the way most guys tortured did and in the end he became Jaizal’s right-hand man, oh and concubine. It’s from him we get most of our real personal insights into Jaizal’s character. He died defending Jaizal. He and The Star, Jaizal’s favourite female slave, they were maybe the only two people in the entire Empire who loved him.

Cut!

“Political propaganda,” pronounced Sarat.

“No,” I said again, shaking my head miserably. “Call me evil, call me psychotic. That was not my meaning.”

“You have meaning, Lattic?” Mitch.

“Cho’s seen it.”

“It was a joke,” I muttered. “It was theatre!”

“Loco,” said Mitch. “The guy is loco.”

“The guy,” said Sarat, “is in over his head.” He did not sound sympathetic.

Tar rang to speak to me. I don’t really want to go into – he explained what was going to happen to me unless I preferred being handed over to the civil authorities. No way, no way! I said yes, sir a lot. They call it an inquiry, an exploration. What would be explored was me. A cross-section of witnesses sit in. Anything goes. Nothing passes beyond the four walls. In my case the witness would be So-It, Zeph, my father, Sarat, Mitch, Searc and Sar-fenan

“You believe in slavery, I understand,” said Tar.

A strangulated gurgle escaped me. He waited.

“Yes, sir.”

“You are Mel’s prisoner, servant, and in sum slave. You are also his responsibility and under his protection.”

“Yes, sir.”

WTF?

I moved readily into another fantasy existence. I’m really not sure what I got out of that bit apart from a lesson in showing exquisite politeness to those in one’s power. Could I please. Would it be possible for me to. I understood that I was being monitored and also that being controlled was something of a relief to me. I didn’t expect the feeling to last and nor, I’m sure, did they. I did the washing-up and vacuumed the carpets and wondered what would happen if I rebelled.

I Lattic have a perfectly decent room, no, more: it is elegant. The carpet is cream, the furniture is antique and there is a balcony facing full south over the garden.

Mel’s prisoner. Of what exactly am I guilty? Bottomless, infinite stupidity.

It rapidly became clear to me there were busy guys. My little brain started to rationalize itself back to normality. I’d gone over the edge but there was a safety-net. They weren’t going to spend months or even weeks faffing around with me. Give me the shock of my little life, that was OK.. I was alive. I hadn’t been given a life-sentence. I was never ever going to be stupid again. It wasn’t an issue. Obviously I couldn’t continue in the City. Fresh fields. Batna-kri, Wintawa, hey maybe what I need is a fresh start. I didn’t doubt I’d be on a leash. If I ever ever. I wouldn’t, wouldn’t I. I’d be safe. I started to pretty much feel my abnormal self and I nearly – not totally – managed to erase from my mind that being my abnormal self wasn’t on the menu here. I didn’t mean to kill anyone. Obviously they understood that. I’d enjoy some intelligent conversation and never do anything like that again and that would be that.

My chores done, I sunbathed on my balcony taking refuge in The Horns of Ateria, a smart-alec spoof on the fantasy fiction then in vogue. There were undoubtedly worse things in life than being Mel’s prisoner, servant and in sum slave.. I was very nearly back to being my usual obnoxious self.

Mel told me that Zeph and So-It had arrived, together with my father. He was adding Searc and Sar-fenan to the quorum, and on the distaff side Kai and Cantilip. Who? Ref! That is not

how it is done. Boys do boys and girls do girls. Because of the sexual dynamic. This is how I'm doing it, said Mel. Nothing, I conceded, is worse than my father. I presumed that if he tried to kill me he'd be restrained. Mitch I reckoned about my age, Sarat, Mel and Hass clearly younger. In principle I appreciated the presence of older men – any other older men would be fine, just pick up a few winos from outside Gansa Stadium. Por I was sure would not be backward in telling the young master he was getting it wrong. If he got it wrong.

How it's done. Hetero guys do hetero guys and hetero girls do hetero girls and the cross-section here of gender and orientation suggested to me that they had thoughts on my orientation which were obviously garbage. I've fucked guys. Guys have fucked me. The life I've led has not been finickety, shall we say, but basically I'm a girls' boy. I appealed to Hass.

“You must know I'm not gay!”

“You're not gay,” he agreed calmly.

“Well then!”

“We think you have a few crossed wires concerning gender.”

“Such as?”

“You tell us.”

Here we go. Into the interrogation room, otherwise known as Mel's sitting-room.

Mel is sitting cross-legged in the middle of the floor. Hass lounges on the settee. The vultures are seated against the far wall, in a row of large and comfortable chairs. Mitch's long legs are stretched out in front of him. Cantilip is making him laugh. Sarat looks as though he owns the world. Searc is examining Mitch, Sar-fenan murmuring something to So-It, Zeph leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. My father looks at me with a sort of horror. Kai is sitting at the piano. The position rather than the person seems incongruous. There is to be musical accompaniment? How – sarcastic.

“Come and sit down,” said Mel. He patted the floor beside him..

OK, just what is this? I think I need to find the limits here. I play to the gallery.

“I prefer to stand. Sir.”

“What you want doesn't matter.”

“My lord prince, to hear is to obey,” I sneered. “What happens if I don't?”

“You stand there like an idiot,” suggested Hass.

I sit down on the floor.

“You are such a twat,” said Mel.

“Heard it all before, darling. No conscience. No moral sense. Pig-shit, my mummy calls me.”

“Twat,” objected Kai, “has nothing particularly to do with conscience or moral sense.”

“Twat,” agreed Hass, “means rather piss-artist.”

Mel held out his glass.

“.”

“I exist to serve. Sir.”

I don't move.

"I thought you believed in slavery," said Mel.

I treat him to what I hope is an entrancing smile.

"My lord and master, I exist for your delight and your pleasure. Only command me, I obey." I take his hand and raise it to my lips. "May I beg, sir, to be more than a common servant?"

"If you like," said Mel. "It won't get you anywhere."

"Or, sir?"

"That's the interesting part," said Mel.

"Negative on the macho testing," said Hass.

"Even if I beg for punishment."

"Why would you do that?" asked Hass. "You don't think you've done anything wrong."

Macho testing? I love it! Not quite enough to presume I cannot push them to it

"Your life," said Mel, "has been centred around casual brutality."

I demur.

"Ritualized brutality, sir. Is this really going to get us anywhere?"

"We shall see," said Mel.

"Highness."

"Ridiculous word," said Hass. "The appropriate word is height."

"He looks awfully frightened, Mel." Kai.

"Get you a glass of water." Mel.

He jumps up.

I am being out-manoeuvred here.

"Your glass, sir."

I stand at the sideboard, my back to everyone, considering there is more than one kind of edge-play.

I fall on one knee to hand Mel his glass. Whoops. A full glass of wine is tipped into his lap. I touch my forehead to the floor, apparently abject, then raise my head.

"My prince, my lord, my master. May your devoted slave lick it up, sir?"

"You intolerable little prick," says daddy dear.

"Please, Mel," says Zeph, "please may I –"

Mel is laughing and So-It too seems amused.

"No point in ordering him to clean the carpet," he grunts. "Don't s'pose he knows how to."

"Do the laundry," growls Zeph,

"Isn't that what women are for?" I say.

My father stands abruptly.

“Peace,” says Mel.

“Mel,” says my father.

“Little boy...” said So-It.

I can't read Cantilip's expression.

“I have to change,” pointed out Mel.

“Perhaps I can lick it up,” said Cantilip.

Ooooooh. Wince, wince.

I was left feeling like a complete twat. I got up and poured myself a glass of wine. At least they serve decent wine around here. I sat back, relaxed.

Round Two. This time in Hass's sitting-room. It was years before I found out what happened to the stain on the carpet. Somewhere in the back of mind I thought it would look good to pretend I was a decent chap somewhere underneath and apologize. I apologized. Mel got me onto the relatively safe subject of how much I loathed Zur. I can be amusing and he was insufferably relaxed and ready to be amused, the audience less so, both my father and So-It having played no inconsiderable role in my flight from Zur.

Long interval before Round Three. Busy guys.

Round Three Mel tells me something of his dissertation. I appreciate being addressed as though I have a brain but the subject-matter is a little dodgy; I don't want to discuss sex and gender in High Harn.

After a couple more days I say to Por

“I suppose I'm supposed to open my little heart to you.”

Por shrugs.

But I do. I find him easy to talk to. I say that despite having the self-awareness of an amoeba, and I quote, I am actually considering the question of how I have got into this mess.

“He thinks you're delusional,” said Por.

“My carefully contrived self-image does not care for your words. Solipsism?”

“Who on earth do you think you are?”

“Coming from where it does – I take it that is the point.”

“A little remorse wouldn't be out of place.”

I shut up for a while.

“It won't bring her back.”

Por shook his head in disbelief.

“So that's all right, then!”

Maybe it hurts too much. I mustn't be hurt. I matter. This I do not say.

One person in this shitty world cares enough to bother to listen to me scream. This I cannot say.

Tucked up at night in my little prison cot, my mind wandered in unusual directions. Don't tell me you're that naïve. I am not fucking gay, all right. Fantasy is something else. Three powerful young men, two of whom are generally held to be the most beautiful things on two

legs. Use me, master! I think I might like it. I was owned? Relieved of responsibility for my life? Fine, guys, fine. Everyone needs a vacation.

This is me, Zeph, here, and I'm lying on my bed channel-hopping. Just now I've landed in the middle of a soap. Tears are streaming down the face of the wronged one. Knock, knock.

"Come in!" I zap the sound. "Mel."

"Quick question?"

"Course! Sit you down."

"What does gay Zur think of my baby brother?"

I guffaw.

"You don't half ask 'em...Sort of god?"

"What sort of god?"

"Sort you wish you didn't have to worship from afar."

"And Sarat?"

"Umm. Er, would that be as an item or separately?" Mel laughed. "I think most people in the community assume, Mel."

"I'm saying nothing," said Mel. "But they don't think Sarat's gay?"

"Nothing about Sarat says he's gay."

"So what is it?"

"Different wiring."

"Suppose I suggested – a person can stand back from his own wiring and decide what to do about it. Be militant and reinforce it or be flexible."

"People put themselves in boxes? I'd go along with that."

"May I ask you a very personal question?"

"Don't say I'll answer it, mind."

"How d'you feel about having intercourse with a woman?"

"Stick to how do I feel! Bemused, Mel, distinctly bemused."

"It'll all come out in the wash. So there's Sarat lamenting the fate of the skagga and there's Hass saying the same thing. They're sweet, aren't they, well, life is toughening them up, but they were. Two sweet beautiful boys. But everyone's sure which is and which isn't. Why, Zeph?"

"I think I'd like to take my time over that one, Mel."

"The obvious answer is Sarat has Maya and Hass has Venga."

"Yeah, well, that is the – nothing much about the demon lover –" Mel choked. "Sorry. That is how – we was knocked for six."

"What by?"

"Someone said – someone said a bloke like Ban-vesit is everything. Does that make any sense?"

"Oh yes," said Mel.

Round Four.

“You have a very hierarchical mind,” said Mel.

“Even in this corrupt age lesser beings recognized their superiors.”

“Democracy then has spawned the Cult?”

“I am not an initiate!”

“A sympathizer.”

“I am in agreement,“ I admitted, “with some of the theory.”

“Clearly.”

“It was not your first contact with the Cult.”

“My lifestyle, my – businesses.”

“You ran slave-auctions.”

“But you kept them at arm’s length.”

“They were cautious. I think – “I was blushing terribly easily these days. “The name.”

It clicked into place that I was so utterly self-absorbed that I’d never thought they were suspicious of me as A-M’s plant.

I said something of the kind.

Then it clicked into place that only my utter unfettered bestial stupidity had got me in over my head.

“Hi, Mel, everyone knows I’m the piece of dog-turd on the family boot, but you and I are going to be bosom buddies and I just know you’ll tell me everything about the defence of Dabida. Or something. It’s crazy! How could anyone go to that amount of trouble when it’s obvious I couldn’t deliver.”

“That would depend,” said Sarat, “on what you were supposed to deliver.”

“An explosive kind of package,” said Mitch, “a little poisoned wine.”

“Who opens your pressies, Mel?” Sarat.

“I eat in the canteen,” pointed out Mel. “I mix with hundreds of students every day.”

“Who said this was anything to do with you?” asked Hass.

“I eat in the canteen,” pointed out Sarat. “I mix with hundreds of students every day. What reason should I have to come to the City?”

Rationality deserted me.

“Sssh, sweetheart,” said Sarat. “No-one thinks for a moment.”

I can just about cope with it by now. I didn’t think Kadun would ever get over it.

“Tar...” I said. “And you.

“And your responses to us,” said Mel. Which were distraught, terrified grovelling love and gratitude for sanctuary.

“I think you’re all barking up the wrong tree,” said Kai. “If this is a Grand Plot, you’re being far too short term and there’s no way they’d bump Sarat off until he’d outlived his usefulness.”

“Tell me more,” said Sarat.

“There’s a piece missing,” said Kai. “No, look, first of all they misread Lattic.”

“You can read anything both ways,” said Sarat. “If they suspected you why wasn’t your movie cheese in the trap.”

“You have to see it how they see it,” said Kai. “There’s Lattic. He doesn’t seem to be on anyone’s side. His own side.” I blushed furiously. “He’s good-looking, wealthy, corrupt. There’s nothing apparently stopping him going the whole way Only he’s got a name. What does that mean?”

“He’s on a lead.”

“He can be very entertaining about Zur. His proclivities aren’t in doubt, but they never push it. One fine day he announces – basically, hey guys, wasn’t Jaizal the coolest. Their little ears prick up. If it’s our trap, they walk right in. If it’s not, it has other possibilities. How did they know it wasn’t? They didn’t. They sent the cannon-fodder over the top and waited. They can’t quite believe Lattic’s stupid enough to go out and buy the rope and tie the noose.”

Thanks a bunch!

“We’re idiots!” said Kai. “Hang on, no, that doesn’t work either. Another brilliant but flawed idea bites the dust. Maybe. They think they’ve snared Lattic and he’ll go off and get best mates with Mel. 1. The surface of his mind, however, is screaming its head off, and the first thing anyone here is going to do is ask if we can help at all. At which point we end up having this conversation and Lattic is back in the bosom of his family. 2. They’d think fear would keep his feelings far down below a surface scan. 3. It wouldn’t matter either way because 4. The point is Lattic back with us. The more earnestly loyal the poor baby is the better. All he has to do is learn something and they’d take it out of his unprotected mind like a chocolate out of chocolate box. Except how would they know he’s learned it?”

“Been there, done that,” said Sarat.

“Bah!” said Kai.

“Bah to you! The Sheep Song...”

“Your chair,” said Kai. “The Anile throne is lost and both sides want to find it.”

“This is to get Lattic close to Sarat?” asked Mitch.

“Given the initial insanity, it’s a possibility.”

“Sarat locates Anile throne. Rushes off to tell Lattic.”

“I said there’s a piece missing,” said Kai virtuously.

Searc smiled.

“Even I have heard rumours concerning the Anile throne.”

“It sings, my lord,” said Sarat. “It dances. Perhaps it plays the piano. One should not accord too much veracity to ancient legend.”

“Surely that depends on the legend.”

“Indeed,” said Sarat.

“Shall we take a break there?” suggested Mel.

Cut! I thought

We dispersed.

“We’ve turned him inside out!” protested Por.

“There has to be something. Maybe it doesn’t look like anything on its own. Taken with the rest. You’re looking for bad stuff. I’m looking for any stuff.”

“Suppose he’s sent home. Exactly what would that mean?”

“I’ll ask.”

I am going to get to the bottom of this! thought Saski. She arrived in the City and hunted down Maya.

“Venga, darling.”

Maya put her book down and gazed wide-eyed at her aunt.

“What is it you want to know? Do tell.”

“Darling, the six of you. I understand you have an unusual relationship.”

“Tttt-ttt-ttt,” said Maya. “Strictly boys only. Ladies are ladies.”

Saski struggled to keep her face straight.

“This is the modern gallantry? Sarat engaged in what one must really – and you didn’t mind?”

“Tuition,” said Maya.

“It is over between them?”

Maya laughed.

“Of course.”

“Why of course?” retorted Saski.

“For a start Sarat and Mel aren’t gay.”

“Ladies get pregnant,” observed Saski. “In the best regulated households accidents may occur.”

“That too,” said Maya. “For which reason, should that be your concern – we shall not. You can see,” she added, warming to her subject, “it would be just a little difficult if Cantilip’s baby looked like Sarat and indeed was Sarat’s. There is the issue of sovereignty.”

“Maya!”

“Yes?”

“One can see,” said Saski, taking the final plunge, “when the young men concerned are fundamentally heterosexual. It never worried you Sarat and Hass - ?”

“It never worried me.

Incest! thought Saski. Does this worry me? I am sure – say rather Venga’s concubines. I like that thought better?

Saski to Mel, Hass, Sarat: *A moment of your time alone, gentlemen.”

Aw, mom, thought Mel

Project complex image, overture to a ballet, three lithe naked young men, not unfamiliar, and a fourth, also lithe, also naked, older, in charge, sort of choreographer.

Saski was rewarded by the cheeks (of their faces, that is) of hey man, three of the coolest dudes in town becoming suffused with a pretty pink glow.

“Your relationship with Venga, darlings. I have spoken to Maya – “

Sarat sort of moved. The physical space he occupied didn't change but he rippled.

“Let me finish, Sarat. My sons were unattached, perhaps I should say otherwise unattached. You were not. I wished to ascertain Maya's perspective. I wished also to know if she had felt threatened by you and Hass – “

“Oh mum,” said Hass. “You are sweet.”

“Thank you, darling. You and Mel have been lovers, darling?”

“I see,” said Mel. “Yes, but not how you think it.”

“How in the world - ?” began Hass.

Sarat said: “You've missed out a couple of chapters, Saski. Who are Maya's cousins?”

“Sarat – they would beat you to a pulp if they were in love with you?”

“Don't see why not,” said Mel. “Maya would! Mummy, do you think you could you shut up for five minutes and listen? Start with my lady Maya. All four of us, we talked about it, and I really do not think it occurred to her she was vulnerable, having known us all since she was born, and it's not Maya to conceal doubts, but I know she didn't as well as I can know because she discussed it with her bessiest friend who as you know is Fal and Fal discussed it with me, and if you have to ask me did Fal and Maya - the answer is yes. With whom else may one freely experiment if not with people as close as family, which brings me to Point Two. Hass and Venga then Sarat and Venga and Sarat and Hass, except it was fluid and all at once, then I surprised them and ended up joining in and exactly how much of this I wish to share with my mother – however...Hass and I were lovers in the sense we were in the same bed as part of a foursome, infinite and circular, and not surprisingly our bodies touched from time to time, we hugged each other, planted sloppy kisses on each other's noses because we were happy. We did not make love to each other at any orifice.”

“There was always someone else in between,” said Hass. “If Sarat was on top of Ban-vesit, and Mel was underneath, then I – “

“I understand you,” said Saski, perhaps rather hastily.

“We talked about that, too,” said Hass. “We're frightfully cerebral.”

“A rite of passage,” said Mel with a straight face.

“Isn't this just displacement?” demanded Sarat. “I mean isn't the real problem Venga, the Mysterious Older Man who seduced us. For a start he didn't.”

“Are we not adults of quite startling moral rectitude?”

“You are obviously gay, Hasiyata. It's not quite the same.”

“Worse, surely!” said Mel.

“When she calls me by my full name,” whispered Hass.

“What did you and Tar think was happening?” asked Mel.

“The H-W vouched for him.”

Our heroes enjoyed a brief wordless mental exchange finally articulated by Sarat: *This is getting hair-y!*

Don't tell me – “ Mel, briskly. “ – that either you or Tar thought we undressed behind screens and made love in the dark.”

“Were undressed,” said Hass.

“Dressed,” said Sarat.

“Darling, your father and I...” Brief mental movie.

Mel grinned.

“Well, then! Mum – you're really not making too much sense. Anyway, we weren't children.”

“Because if we'd been children,” said Mel with mock patience, “we'd have been removed PDQ and Venga done for child-molesting. I know we're your little boys for ever...”

“Lattice!” said Sarat. “It wasn't like that!”

“Darling,” said Saski, “what was it like?”

“He hates anyone hurting anyone ever. Since people do hurt each other, we had to learn about it. Mel and I. We learned obedience, we learned desire, we learned everything we should not otherwise know. We learned constraint, we learned submission, we learned absolute power, we learned to understand what mechanisms the Cult preys on. Most of the time in was in the head. He showed us the wiring. He showed us what it feels like.”

“He taught us union,” said Mel. “He taught us real sex, not the gross divisory - most of the time we were not repeat not indulging in BDSM, mental or physical, we were lying in each other arms, we were kissing each other's cheeks and we were talking and learning, chasing reality down the stranger creeks of the universe, and of course as a matter of fact most of the time Sarat and I weren't even there.”

“Even when we were,” said Sarat, “we subverted it, we hammed it up, we rolled about with laughter. Saski – all of us have a sense of humour.”

“Here, sense of humour,” said Mel with a wicked laugh. “There no sense of humour.”

“They take themselves so impossibly seriously,” sighed Hass.

“You have clarified a great deal,” said Saski. She ruffled his curls. “I appreciate such conversations with your dear grey-haired old mother...I shall talk to Venga.”

“Mummy – it does no harm to young men in our position to obey.”

“I understand that, darling, of course. Hug?”

Hugs.

“Mel and you, Sarat.”

He sighed.

“He said I'd be Anile Emperor. He didn't say he'd gazed into his crystal ball. It was just what would be.”

“He is irturbi.”

“Oh so that's what,” breathed Sarat. “And he put the idea into my innocent little head?”

“Much worse than that,” said Hass.

Oh no, thought Mel. Shall I be sensible and rational or will that make it worse?

“If Venga had wanted to manipulate me, don’t you think there were easier ways?”

“Entrée,” said Mel briskly. “Does one not think he had the entrée?”

“Sarat, my sweet,” said Hass, “could you possibly explain to my idiot of a mother - ?”

“Hasiyata!”

“Yes?”

“Sarat?” growled Saski.

“Nothing to do with my infant feet taking their first tottering steps in Narulis’ house, of course. Do you know it had never once occurred to me that I was the Anile heir?”

“Sarat...” said Saski through gritted teeth.

“Any time you have five hours, I’ll tell you the whole story. Suffice it to say... We say the Anile throne has a symbolic significance, regardless of whether there’s anyone sitting on it. I think, you know, if you haven’t – it’s awfully important you all understand – the Anile throne is very important to me, whether I’m sitting on it isn’t. That is basically where I’m coming from. That’s the model I grew up with, if you like. I know it might seem to some people Dad – anyway, the point is that it was mostly a question of, in the realm of, the other matter. Not entirely: from the time I was old enough to know anything I knew about Kadun PANTHER. Kadun made herself an issue, one that could not of its nature not be anything to do with me. But I was going to be a vet. So what’s my involvement going to be, animal welfare? Dad said something very important to me once. He said the world would try to define me and I had to resist that and stay Sarat. So there is Sarat, free-born citizen of Fidub, who’s going to be a vet... And refusing to also be the Anile heir. BV said I was the Anile heir, that it was the mainspring of my being. I argued to hell and back again. It’s just a label! It’s 600 years! He said I’d sit on the chair and Mel and I would be the two most powerful men on the continent. That has a very obvious meaning, but we lived in the world of multiple meanings and sitting on the chair did not to me mean sitting in the Throne Room of the Jumzit Palace. We teased him terribly about it. What was going to happen, if/when I sat my delicate behind on the all-singing, all-dancing throne, sound of thunder, lightning flashes across the sky... He made me whole. Or at any rate he opened the door. I had sigh to do all the work myself.

“Thank you,” said Saski.

“It’s counterpoint?” asked Mel.

“Yes,” said Sarat, sounding strangely shy. “If you ask me by what piece of mythic garbage little me gets to be counterpoint to a piece of equally mythic garbage in a black cloak with a scythe, I know not, but Cho, the Denzines, PANTHER archivists, anyone to whom one might reasonably talk about so bizarre a subject, are agreed: it’s counterpoint. Doom of Death. What do you do with it!”

And Saski wrote to Tar: They have bared their very souls to me and I am far too old and mean to apologize for the asking of it. Besides, it was so interesting!

“I may sit in?” asked Saski.

Round Whatever.

Oh no!

“My lady....”

Bless their little cotton socks, none of them would hurt a fly. Except. I am aware I am regarded as a life-form somewhere below ‘fly’.

“So pain’s where you’re at? Nothing is real, nothing has meaning, unless someone’s screaming?”

“What is interesting about the cage,” said Mel, “is that the slave is rendered abject, humiliated, grovelling, terrified, exposed without physical pain.”

“Strictly speaking, I guess,” said Hass, “Jaizal wasn’t a sadist. It wasn’t pain he got off on, it was fear. The thing is, if you frighten people by threatening some fell doom, that doom has to be realized or they stop being frightened.”

“Jaizal,” I said, “was the kid who takes his toys apart to see how they work. He was endlessly fascinated by what he could – fear could – make people do.”

“Didn’t it get rather samey? I your abject slave and blah.”

“To some extent I gave the punters what they want. Jaizal was more complicated than that. Did you know there was free speech in the harem? Not many do and if you try to tell them. What complicated Jaizal was the Fidubi legacy, of course. He had conversations with his slaves, long ones, and wrote monographs.”

Mel grinned like a hyena.

“That I don’t do.”

“It’s exactly the same legacy. When you told me you don’t need to put the boot in. That’s where Jaizal was coming from, it’s just he refracted it into another dimension. Everyone grossly underestimates the enduring strength of the Fidubi legacy.” Don’t talk like a book, Latic, it’s not appropriate. I turned to Sarat. I was going to find this a little bit delicate, but at least I should have back-up in the highest quarters. Jaizal was exactly like you, sir! Rephrase. “None of you – you don’t – you won’t be how some people might expect you to be. Jaizal – I’m not saying he sat on the floor in fatigues hugging his knees. I don’t know that! I do know he rejected any ideas of – appropriately imperial behaviour other than his own. He absolutely refused to be constrained by his courtiers, to indulge in ceremonial.”

Hass said: “Should I be right in supposing that one reason you have eschewed the Cult is because they spew simplistic nonsense?”

“A fantasy Jaizal,” said Sarat. “What an interesting thought.”

“Jaizal’s frame of reference,” said Mel. “You are my slave. You have no power. There is absolutely nothing you can do, mentally or physically. Except – possibly – persuade me by argument. Consequently I see no reason why you may not behave as you please, the proviso being that if you are an unpleasant little shit, if you irritate me sufficiently, and of course if you betray me – no detachment, poor chap.”

“Anyone talented,” said Sarat, “was more use alive and in one piece.”

“So we get to the scene is brutal because it’s fantasy. Because no real power exists, because the ‘slave’ can walk away, in order that there be a scene there have to be demonstrations of total power and the surrender of power demonstrated by bondage.”

“A spectrum running from total trust to total terror,” observed Sarat.

“The thrill coming from the mix,” said Mel. “How did a sensitive little boy like you get into that scene?”

“The short answer – there wasn’t anywhere else for me to be.”

“Didn’t that perhaps tell you you should be someone else.”

Hass said: “You didn’t mean to kill her and she only got dead because they muscled in on the act, you had it all together, but they scared diddums, and there is absolutely nothing wrong with the basic product.”

“No,” I said. “I didn’t have it all together. I skated. The ice broke.”

“Come here,” said Mel. “Sit beside me.”

I obeyed.

Hass sat the other side of me. Magic.

In my mind

There is a collar around my neck. Mel fingered it in a manner the meaning of which would in other circumstances be regarded as unmistakable.

Hass kissed the tip of my ear.

It was a nano-second, a blink. I exerted every shred of self-control I never knew I possessed. I knew they knew.

I have no desire to fuck you, said Mel.

I pouted.

I kissed him on the mouth.

“That,” said Cantilip, “is my property.”

Hass hissed with laughter but there was still a lot of tension in the room, to put it mildly, and I sat as though frozen waiting for Mel’s response. It seemed like for ever but was probably only seconds.

“I disentangle a knot,” said Mel. “The slave projects his own desires onto the master and proceeds to have a whale of a time having his desires satisfied, the while moaning that he exists only for his lord’s pleasure.”

“Designer slavery,” said Hass.

“Or there is the real thing,” said Mel. “What you want doesn’t matter.”

You’re making me nervous, Mel.

He put a comfortable, even friendly arm around me.

“Twat.”

Sarat said: “I wonder if Latic might tell us how he would like to be punished.”

Searc gave a short bark of laughter.

“Latic?” asked Mel.

I looked down at my feet.

“I need control, sir. I wish – chained, trussed, thrown at my master’s feet.”

Sarat said: “If it is his wish to grovel, let him grovel.”

“You may do as you wish,” said Mel.

“Must you obey your master?” asked Hass.

Mel got up and walked over to Cantilip, calmly knelt before her and touched his forehead to the floor, then looked up and laughed.

“My lady!”

He took her hand and pulled her down beside him, sat with his arm around her

“Prostration,” says Mel, “a set of bodily movements endowed with a purely symbolic significance. What would you say that significance is, Latic?”

“I defenceless, I vulnerable, I without will await my - master’s command.”

“Submission. Why should one human being submit to another? Voluntarily”

“To be controlled.”

“When captured in an ancient war?”

“Fear. Appeasement, Signifying one accepts one’s capture.”

“Showing one poses no threat. And when the prostration is involuntary? Chained, trussed – “

“Submission may be absent.”

“And if I command my servants chain you, truss you, throw you at my feet?”

“Then, sir, I have been relieved of choice.”

“And if you have begged this of me, once I comply?”

“I have given you all the power, sir.”

“Or passed the buck. You trust me with your life. I thank you. You trust me not to torture you.”

“At least,” said Sarat, “in any fashion to which you would object.”

“I’m frightened of pain.”

“The threat of pain then would control you more than physical constraint?”

“You’re so bloody civilized!”

“Been called worse,” murmured Hass.

“I’m your slave, Mel! Because – because I am your prisoner, because you all think I’m a piece of puke. I really don’t – somewhere I do – made to eat from the dog-bowl, that kind of thing. I need you to crack the whip, metaphorically, at least. I need to know who’s boss or else I behave unspeakably.”

“Bollocks,” said Mel, “on two accounts. One, you deliberately push it. Two, if it were not clear who’s boss, there are others who would have beaten you to a pulp. Shall I permit Master So-It do as he wish?”

“Perhaps you should.”

“Three accounts,” demured Hass. “Being – ah, groped is not unspeakable. Trashing the room, physical violence, urinating on the floor.”

“Interesting point,” said Sarat.

“Then I pass the buck,” continued Mel.

“Two things,” said Hass. “The assumed frame of reference in real life or in fantasy is that the slave will be brutalized, partly because of the preconception that that is how people behave to each other if they are not prohibited from doing so, but also because in real life slaves have been brutalized, but that in turn is not because of the preconception but because if you go around enslaving people and don’t brutalize and terrorize them they are liable to break your

spine in three places. The other is that you haven't hit Mel. The winding-up is itself fantasy. You don't do anything you think, rightly or wrongly, would provoke a painfully unpleasant response."

"Nonsense," said Mel briskly and changed the subject. "I think we should inject a little levity into these proceedings. Jaizal, I should be Jaizal. I never get to be Jaizal. Imperial Highness! You consent to be my slave?"

"Darling," purred Sarat, "that would be simply divine."

A moment's evident tension – How Far Would They Go Especially In Front Of – was swiftly shattered as they hammed it up, knocked it down, subverted everything in sight. I of course sit there thinking how dashed jolly decent they are to set themselves up to be laughed at, not realizing this has almost nothing to do with me and everything to do with mummy.

Mel reclined on a pile of cushions. Sarat knelt beside him apparently plucking at some instrument. Mel's hand begins to wander, scuttered forward, paused, looked nervously around, scuttered forward a bit more, froze as Sarat's gaze lit upon it. Mel assumes expression of utter innocence. What has this hand to do with me? Never seen it before in my life..

Mel rests his hand on Sarat's shoulder, runs it down his back. Sarat makes wide eyes. The hand caresses his chest and neck. Mel puts a finger under Sarat's chin, turns his face to his and kisses him gently on the lips. The hand comes to rest firmly on Sarat's cock. Sarat's eyes widen like saucers.

Mel: I am wracked with desire for your taut hard body. Especially the fiddly bits.

Sarat: The squishy bits.

Mel: It doesn't feel very squishy to me.

Sarat: Does that not mean I too am wracked with desire. Umm. (Looks embarrassed and rather puzzled.) That's not in the script. What I want doesn't matter. Look, you said it!

Mel (patiently): I said you were my slave and had to submit to all my desires. It's just a hand. Where's the harm in a hand?"

Sarat (suspiciously): Does it have an arm on the end?

Mel: OK, I admit that. There's an arm. You want to make some big deal out of that?

Sarat: I just like to know where I stand.

Mel: Kneel. You're kneeling.

Sarat (patiently): Slaves are supposed to kneel. It's part of the job description.

My time is now. Into the midst of this I am returned.

Cut!

Kai here. The narratrice's life is relatively straightforward. Then not only a second but a third person wants to tell his story in the first person. I think of pleading but I know them all too well. It's finally sorted. Venga's back for good. His eyes sparkle. My lady, I resume!

There can be no hurry. I drive slowly through the appalling City. This is my place and my time. Is there understanding? Perhaps not. The shops become fewer, the houses larger and detached. This Carval. I turn into the drive of the Rep Centre. Park. Get out. So this is where I live. I walk up to the front door and ring the bell. Very mundane,

Barriers.

A pretty little colt opens the door.

“I am a friend of Hass’s. I want it to be a surprise! Por is here? He will vouch for me.”

Games, idiot games enforce separation or enjoy it.

“Kew! If you’d just like to come in here...”

I sit myself at the bay window.

Por stands in the doorway grinning like a fiend.

“My lord wishes to be announced?”

“I want it to be a surprise.”

“I’ll take you up.”

I walk the path chosen me or climb three flights. As you prefer.

The huge pine table covered in papers, Mel sitting back holding forth to Kai, Sarat making a sketch and arguing with Mitch. Hass and Cantilip doing the washing-up.

We hug.

There is a rather confused lady in that room..

“My partner,” says Hass. “

I am the lover and this is my beloved.

“Kai,” says Mel, “is City-bred. She possibly knows more about the Cult Harn-side that even PANTHER.”

“My lady! Now I too embrace the madness.”

“I have heard so much about you,” she said.

Now this is interesting!

Hass and I perch on the table. There is moonlight and the sand hard beneath us.

“You don’t happen to know anything about drainage, do you?” asked Mel.

“We have a lot to catch up on,” said Hass.

At the door of his bedroom he murmurs forgive the mess, not expecting company, but Hass has always had a very feeble notion of mess.

The current passes between us.

We kiss, sink to the floor still entwined.

I love you more than my life.

After, as he lay in my arms, he explained the developments in the Grand Plot. Much later, he got around to Latic.

“My mother wants to talk to you. She’s here.” He described trial by Saski and grinned wickedly. “Something disturbed the ether?”

“What does it mean?” I asked.

“You,” said Hass firmly, “are family sage.”

We got dressed and went to her door. Hass tapped.

“Come in!”

I hugged her as though she were my own mother.

She stood back from me, holding my hands in hers.

“My dear, I digest – new things. My boys became men. To me it seems – all they have done has one source. Sarat must be Anile emperor. Darling, do you know why?”

“No,” I said.

Hass collapsed.

Round Whatever.

The tribe is presented to the tall, dark stranger..

“Well!” says Zeph.

Our eyes meet. Later I shall learn what gay Zur made of Tar’s beautiful boy shackled up with a wandering story-teller.

So-it’s gaze is searching. Cho of course I know. Sar-fenan’s interest is in my name.

“You probably don’t remember me,” said Jaizi. “The Morag-Fahdi – “

The sky is overcast, a warm drizzle falls, inhale the smell of wet fur and the creek a slurry of brown foam. A cub plays in the reeds.

“I remember.”

Reality dissolves. The sky is overcast etc.

“Venga!” said Saski.

“Mama?”

“You became PANTHER.”

Cho smiled.

There is a centre of attention other than Lattic. It frightens him. No: I frighten him. Look at me, Lattic.

All colour drained from his face.

“I interrupt the proceedings,” I murmured.

“That is your fate,” said Hass.

I kissed the tip of his nose.

“My lords, my ladies, may I tell a story?”

Cho’s glance was intent.

“Of course,” said Mel.

“Once there was a young man, a very young man, who sought oblivion, but he sought it not in death, not even in drink or drugs. He sought it in sexual domination. Only by the exercise of absolute control could he surrender wholly to his emotions, by enslaving others become the slave of his desires. Otherwise he was vulnerable. Others would find out about him. But also he understood that he desired being controlled, that his desires be directed, their satiation the will of another and the final object of his passion was ever himself, and so he begged for abuse, for the whip, the brand .

“I hate pain!” shouted Lattic. “That is total shit!”

“Come here,” I said.

Lattic looked at Mel.

“Obey, please,” said Mel.

I stood.

“What is it you want, Lattic?”

“No!”

I turned to Mel

“It is a simple matter to enslave him. Only give him what he craves.”

“I see that,” said Mel.

“Buggered if I do,” muttered Zeph.

No-one laughed.

Mel put a friendly hand on Lattic’s shoulder.

Lattic tried to hit me. I gently stayed his arm.

“He’d take it from you,” I said to Mel.

Mel led him away.

I Lattic back on the page.

“Who is that bastard!” I yelled. Mel was laughing. “Please...”

Mel put a brotherly and asexual arm around me.

“Come on, sit down, calm down. Just some dude Hass met.”

“Don’t be kind to me.” Through gritted teeth.

“Be kind to you if I want to be.”

“Mel - all my life I have been made aware – people don’t think much of me. I have brushed it off. I find I am no longer able. You refuse to – hurt me.” I can’t think these things, let alone say them.

“You understand there might be something wrong with you.”

I am terrified. Of myself.

“If you had made it clear obedience wasn’t optional.”

He laughed.

“Cracked the whip? Suppose I say you’ve been frightened since you were six. You think being petrified is a natural state of being.” I am much too snuffly for this. I say nothing.

“Eliminate the feminine. Why do you think love is female, Lattic?” I become rigid.

“There was nothing left! Even I...”

“You have a few crossed wires,” said Mel. “Better untangle them, hadn’t we. Nothing that can’t be sorted.” He looked at me a moment. “Say it,” he said softly.

“I love him!” I said.

“So?” said Mel.

“Mel, I want nothing more ever than to be his fucking slave! Tolerate me, Mel,” I said. “I may be insufferable. I need the control, the powerlessness.”

“Your freedom was embedded in not caring what happened to others.”

I looked away.

“All my life – all of it I remember, anyhow. I wanted physical control and no nice people would give it me. If my dad had handcuffed me and dumped me on Tar’s doorstep when I was 17 – I mean really, really, would he! I wanted someone to take me in hand because I couldn’t control myself, wouldn’t control myself because controlling myself was being sissy, scaredy-cat, frightened of the edge. I have tried to push you to hit me more times. All it gets me is your bloody detachment. It’s like you’re not there, Mel, but at the same time you are. I know I want to make you lose control. I have learned, thank you, my lord and master, command of oneself is not sissy. It just so happens that I can’t do it. Unless you – “

“You want me to scare you shitless? I can do that.”

“Flogged, caged, whatever, with no more thought than you’d give to putting a lunatic in a strait-jacket. I want to be his door-mat, his concubine, his bloody boot-scraper. I don’t suppose I’m the first guy or I’ll be the last.”

“He disciplines you,” said Mel.

Provoke taunt mock I would not could not.

“Sarat scares you shitless for another reason,” said Mel.

I don’t think my skin changes colour but I feel I’m blushing somewhere at the base of my spine, in my intestines.

“His Imperial Highness,” mused Mel, “is a ruthless in a manner you understand, if dimly. I am ruthless in a manner you do not understand. Sarat emits the aura that causing him the slightest discontent will result in instant demise. No games. No torture. Extinction. 1. It is of course nonsense. 2. A somewhat raw mental state is required to perceive it. How do you explain that?”

“You scare me most of all. You’re the one with the power.”

“What the hell is the point of having it if you won’t use it. Sarat has presence, I – absence?”

“You don’t care!” A bit squealy, that.

“About what? He does?”

“Bloody detachment.”

“If I don’t care whether you live or die, suffer.”

“Little informal chats,” I sneered.

“You of course want to be dragged in chains to the foot of the Anile Throne.”

“Not really,” I admitted.

“So?”

“Real life is scary. Real life is nasty scary. Fantasy is nice scary.”

“What do you want right now?”

To have my master’s arms around me, to rest against his chest, to call him ‘sir’ because I fucking worship him. To have him fuck me, to worship him with my mouth. I Latic stripped

of power, defenceless, become the perfect submissive – a loving little girl. Or something.

I knew he knew and definitely kept my eyes downcast.

“The little girl,” said Mel, “is the last defence, no? Behind her – “

“Mel!”

No more, no. Beat me, taunt me, torture me. Just keep it physical.

“He drives you, doesn’t he.”

Yeah, yeah, man. I know that.

“You know he’s got it wrong and you try to protect him.”

“Strip me, Mel. Rape me. Oh, you’re so bloody civilized. What do you think is the difference?” He looked at me. “Sorry,” I muttered.

“Sarat calls him the male monster, but he’s not a monster, is he, just a bit confused. He doesn’t understand male.”

“You grew up alpha!”

“I grew up.”

“It was the only way I knew to be male.”

“Let me – unpaid labour, doing the washing-up. Using you. It has to be something supposedly unacceptable if you have choice. That you have chosen it ties it up in a neat little bow. Proof of submission.”

“I’m safe. I need not to be.”

“Why?”

Safe is boring, safe is domestic, safe is warm, safe is loving, safe is sissy.

“Jaizal would have loved you.” .

“You practised initially consensual slavery. But it wasn’t enough, a joke. To be ruled by your slaves. You wanted the real thing.”

“It’s a fantasy world! It was still a joke.”

“But death was the ultimate reality.”

“I didn’t kill her.”

“The slave trusts the master will not order anything the slave does not desire. And if subconsciously he desires extinction? You keep saying that.”

“Then respond to it! It matters. It doesn’t matter. It mitigates. Mel, please, I’m a shit, I’m a head-case, I’m a piss-artist, I’m a psycho. I am not a cold-blooded murderer.”

“Hot-blooded? They can’t work on nothing, Latic.”

He held me tight. That’s supposed to help?

“Then stop hugging me when you ought to be – “

I jerked away, half-turned to the window, turned back. Trapped animal, gala performance.

“If I demand my own execution?”

“Say it.”

I liked it. It was the real thing.

“I beg you. Take my life.”

“No.”

“I need punishment.”

“Oh really.”

I lost it.

“Every solid citizen in Dabida would string me up and you say oh really! What the fuck game is this! Maybe I’m just about tired of being used to show bloody Searc how wonderful you are. Do something real, for fuck’s sake.”

“Your revulsion at the sight of yourself is not my problem.”

“Then what the fucking hell is the point of any of this!”

“Sit down. Shut up. Listen.”

Uh, that was a very real, very genuine note of command, Mel. Like an irresistible force note of command.

“You don’t need it any more, Latic. You’ve got us.” I opened my mouth. He raised his hand. I shut my mouth. “We show you what you are. We do not wave magic wands. Die in Searc’s cage. There’s the door.” He paused. “You face yourself. You have not killed and would not without coercion. Now you scream for death lest you kill again. That too is evil. We do not exhibit you to Searc, sweetheart. We drag Searc in chains to the party. You think he’s impressed by our little informal chats? He’s bored out of his formidable if evil mind. Sarat, however, exerts a hypnotic fascination. He stays for Cho. The Cult has only one obsession right now and that’s the prospect of Cho on the Anile throne.”

“You’re all that’s left,” I said dully. “I can’t bear it. What future have I got, Mel?”

“Don’t you think you’re good for more than doing the dishes?”

“I’ve wasted the whole of my life.”

“No. We’re rather hoping you’d like to work with us.”

“What could I do?”

“Make movies. We’re very into making movies.”

“Don’t joke, Mel.”

“I’m not joking,” said Mel.

He explained just a little about Mitch and marketing.

“You trust me?” I said.

“No,” said Mel, “yes. Depends. We think we’re only going to find out what this is about by keeping you close. We think you need us to keep you on the straight and narrow. We don’t think you’re safe on your own. We’ve been through your entire output. It’s pretty hard to escape the content, but we exerted ourselves. Technically, they’re very good.”

The following evening, he, Cantilip, Hass and Venga took me to dinner in The Grotto. Obviously anyone who knew anything would know we’d been on opposite sides. I don’t think I imagined raised eyebrows and whispering. When Zur unearths my reputation in the City – I considered. My reputation in Zur was pretty sordid, but it wasn’t as though it was a

public reputation, as though I had been part of a band that trashed hotel rooms, a movie star who went on benders.

It was the service. People who go to the The Grotto expect perfection. This wasn't perfection, it was magic. Gay actors! My existence is embedded in your having the perfect dining experience. They called him Hass. That's probably a sackable offence in somewhere like The Grotto but it's the way of the world that if you're Hasiyata Talal you make the rules.

If you have half a brain, you do a formal catering course and silver service, put on the performance of a lifetime each night, earn a fortune in tips and when the big break comes along there are no loose ends.

Did I get off lightly? I don't yet know. My personal view is that Tar breaking open my back would have been easier than Mel breaking open my mind. There is still a body out there. She won't be recognizable by now. I have nightmares. I still don't really know what is going to happen to me.

....

When we do formal, we expect perfection, thought Tannan. All very well to think it! Was it not just a little tempting fate to declare it to the world!

The world looked on and had so far found no fault, only was this truly the Dabidan Army we all know and love? When the world thought about it, it had seen smart, but never actually formal. So this is formal. Boob-tubes, high-necked jackets, loons, berets. Colour: sand. Knee-high boots: tan.

Synchronicity: impeccable.

Don't we over-do it? asked Karci. Gold buttons. Isn't that terribly infra dig?

Round Two to us, thought Pietri, but of course the focus was on Mel, who rode, almost in silence, apart from a few cheers and toots, through the city to the House of Silence.

Wearing...the world gaped, well, practically nothing, really. Loons and sandals. What is this, a sort of renouncing of worldly things! Cantilip wore only a shift and sandals.

Mitch, to whom she'd confided, had said, you can do it, honey! It would help, she'd raged, if there were a damn' script! Just say what you feel! What is this, an encounter session!

Mel stood on the dais facing the flame. Time lurched. Oh no, you don't!

"Of course I was raised to this and of course that is no preparation for the reality, the actuality. It is trust and a responsibility. I do not know that I am fit to bear it but nor do I see pressing reason I should fail. I have this to say. Much has been raised in recent times over the relevance if any of a hereditary title in the modern age. My answer is always the same.

Alzani-Meta serves not rules. If I cease to serve, if I do not make myself useful, I have no purpose, if I do not uphold and defend the liberty of the people of Dabida. As ever, you will correct me, as ever, you will berate me, as ever, you will criticize me. It's really not a job anyone would covet. It is my job and I wish only to say how grateful we are for, how moved we have been by the thousands of messages of support and affection we have received. We hope we may be – we shall not cease striving to be worthy of that trust and love. I thank you. My lady."

He took Cantilip's hand and kissed it.

Cantilip looked around at the gathering.

“I was not raised to this. I am terrified. Yet, my reason comforts me and finds, like Mel, no pressing cause I should fail. An occasion such as this is hard and perhaps in the modern age it is harder than it has been for my predecessors for anything one might wish to say has been harried to death already in a thousand newspaper columns and Grid-pages. I am not Dabidan. I know I am ignorant of the minutiae of Dabidan life, of things a native has absorbed by the time he or she is two, the minutiae and other things, for I did not know I was letting myself in for this! I may therefore make mistakes. I hope you will forgive me. But I am not an alien, nor Dabidans alien to me. Paramountly we are all just people, people everywhere doing their best to get on with their lives free of interference, and I wish to say I too pledge to uphold and defend this my nation and its liberties and you must correct me, you must berate me, you must criticize me. Like Mel I have been overwhelmed by what in truth is an outpouring of love. Perhaps we may never deserve it, but we shall try. I thank you.

Then, read Vrin, a member of His Majesty’s Armed Forces shall present to the new King Zani’s dagger. Uh-huh-huh!

The member in question was a little reefer scarcely past acne. She didn’t salute, Vrin noted it.

Not exactly dressed to return the salute, is he.

Mel smiled and thanked her and stuck the dagger in his belt.

And a private citizen of Dabida shall present Zani’s cap.

Mel put in on.

Bal stuffed his handkerchief in his mouth. I see. Now you are prepared to go raiding.

The sedate version of the anthem was played.

“Now we party,” said Mel.

They rode back to the hill to a different beat, to which they snapped their fingers, joking with the crowd, hoiking half the tots of Zur up into the saddle for a free ride.

Mel lay on the bed watching Cantilip strip.

“You do have to change,” she said, without much conviction.

“Definitely,” said Mel, “of course.”

They laughed.

“The priceless artefacts I have laid aside. They are real, you know.”

“I never doubted it.”

Mel emerged, the loons now silk and topped by a cummerbund, the boots gleaming leather, but still naked from the waist up apart from a golden torc and a black silk sweatband around the curls.

“Mel...” said Por.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

But Tar and Cho watching from Azt (where else?) were puzzled.

“I thought he would find it hard,” said Tar.

Cho shrugged.

“He has reserves.”

“Certainly,” said Tar. “That is not to say he is Zani!”

“He is not?” asked Cho. “Exquisite.”

And indeed Cantilip was, now in shimmering green velvet.

Bal murmured to one of his aides:

“I have attended many ceremonial occasions in many parts of the globe, regal and otherwise. I do not think I have previously come across one where the outcome is clearly to designate the lead actor a pirate.”

“Of course the question on everyone’s lips,” he said to Sarat.

“There must be some way I can get out of it,” said Sarat.

This made Bal solemn.

“You just stay human, kid.”

“For once,” said Sarat, “I am not the centre of attention. It’s orgasmic.”

Bal consulted with his security guys. Who is hell is going to target me when there’s so much else to knock off?

“Runner-up prize, sir,” said the chubby angelic-looking one.

Nonetheless Bal was determined to wander down the hill and mix with the crowd.

The soundbite from the streets of Zur that captured the heart of the world or er- something was two fifteen-year-old girls with pink hair looking at the scenes from the hill on the screens. In this particular scene Mel was standing in the courtyard demonstrating a dance-step to Cantilip.

We think Mel should dress like that all the time.

“Funny,” said Por. “We never think of that with regard to Mel.”

“Raw sex,” said Sem.

“Raw power. I wonder why.”

Nothing untoward occurred. Nonetheless a check-list of who was not there is perhaps useful, to keep things orderly. Me, for a start. Of course I was invited! Only – I don’t know. I am not in love with Mel, is that clear. Well, no more than most young females in the world. A bit more. I had never had the ‘it could have been mes’. I had them then. I’m being ambiguous. I mean the multi-faceted ‘it could have been mes’, well including I should have been mad, I could never do that particular job. Fal.wasn’t there, either. For the same reason? Shavli and Petrush, who just happened to be in Azt. Tar and Saski, Cho and Amida as mentioned.

I Latic. What! you think. That prat is going to get in the way of the action. I’m a bit less of a prat now. I don’t suppose that helps. I’m going to fill you in on what happened after. You’ll see why it matters later.

Mel was staying in the City. They didn’t think staying in the City was good for me. In any case the creative axis was in Zur. I got the screaming heebie-jeebies about returning to Zur.

Anyway I needed Mel. Rationally, very few people in Zur knew about me. Mel would return to Zur. Needed Mel, needed Hass, needed to know they were there for me. Of course it's a cliché. It was also true. In other circumstances we might then have become friends but they were newly paired and if they weren't spending their free time in the arms of their partners they were spending it plotting, from both of which I was clearly excluded. The only other person I could trust of course was – my legs turned to jelly at the thought of talking to Tar but they found me a niche in the honeycomb that is the hill and from there I plucked up all my courage and went to work for Mitch.

“You have meaning, Lattic?”

Neither my boss nor his office junior had given any indication they formed the Lattic Fan Club, wished me well or even wished to understand me and I really expected no more than that they'd be professional. I'd taken on board that from hereon in I was occasionally going to be lonely. You'll have gathered from my bio that my own company is not a problem to me. The thing about the hill, which I only realized later, but which of course Mel knew, is that you can always find someone to chat to if you want to hear another human voice.

You'll also have gathered that the natural world is an interest of mine. Someone took me under his wing and had time for me and that person was Essa. I found long impersonal conversations about trilobytes on the Leolisle amazingly therapeutic and then naturally would I come and have a bite to eat. The girls had of course left home by then. I'm not kidding myself I should have been welcome in the white house on the dunes otherwise.

Clearly there were what Cantilip calls tripwires here. but Who He Is was not the unexploded bomb.

They kept from me the scenes between Tar and my father, half-furious, half-exasperated, maybe one tenth contrite, concerning his parenting skills or lack of them.

If I ran into my father in the streets of Zur he crossed to the other side of the road. Well, fuck you, too, I thought, but after a while I allowed it to hurt.

Baya said: “How can he forgive you when he cannot forgive himself?”

I knew that saying, Dad, you need to forgive yourself was a non-starter. I also knew I needed to learn about growing up normal. I wanted to say to Sarat something like, you're lucky to have a father like Essa but I knew that was a non-starter too.

I wrote to Mel. If – if either of you had shown the slightest signs of going off the rails, how would Tar have handled it.

You know that, he replied. We are quite good at talking people into their right minds, with every appropriate allowance for age and degree of insanity. But that's not what you mean, I think. You want to know about being loved, no matter what, about trusting your parents.

I wanted to ask him things that outside the hothouse atmosphere of the interrogation centre seemed impossible. How old were you when you first became aware of sex? What did you think about it?

Maybe, I thought, I should work through those questions first, but I really needed to debrief with someone and not a father-figure. Fortunately Mel returned to Zur. He was never actually away for long. He sat up all night listening to me regurgitate my adolescence and only at 7.30 did he tell me he had a meeting with Vanya at 9.00 and even then he didn't tell me the nature of that meeting. Such meetings, I learned later, were formal, official, if you like the Prime Ministerial equivalent of a royal command. How close have you brought us to war this week, Mel? I just want to know, right.

I felt much better. I don't know why. Probably because part of my syndrome with daddy dear was passing the buck and I had made myself face what a repulsive little teenager I'd been. I'd have lost patience with me by the time I was 13.

I was aware of the thing called transference. I reckoned Sarat immune to being transferred to, at any rate by me. Sarat in the office was friendly professional, warmer than I'd dared hope, Sarat of course was far from immune to the charms of trilobites on the Leolisle – and Sarat of course was like busy, busy, busy, man.

Sometimes we had a drink after work. I'd never met Karula but had no expectations Mitch would invite me home. See paragraph above about daughters.

Sarat did, or rather Maya did. I found myself at a frantically normal dinner-party with the now famously non-plotting Vj and Sarshi, and a handful of Maya's friends from college. Not enough emphasis has been laid on the fact (do I detect a note of reproach? The editrice) that throughout all of it Maya continued as a student in Zur and if you think the guys are cool you just wait until Her Imperial Majesty hits Azt. There is nothing on this planet cooler than Maya ban-essa.

I enjoyed myself enormously. Hey, I might yet be a human being.

I became a regular guest.

There was a leak.

It doesn't take much to work out that from a PR angle I was a dangerous associate for Sarat.

It wasn't much of a leak, unsalubrious past, but it wouldn't take much turning over that past in the City for the shit to hit the fan and I started having sleepless nights.

Mitch was great. Rehabilitation of offenders. Part of the job. Someone has to care.

With this of course Zur gelled.

It pretty well all came out, pretty well, not entirely. At Cailith there was a brick wall. I never understood that, as I never understood why Searc and Sar-fenan had been asked to sit in and so make me even more vulnerable than I'd been to start with. I suspect one day I'm going to have to ask Cho about that.

Tar short and to the point. Lattic got in over his head. An object lesson for young fools. He turned himself in to Mel. He has supplied invaluable information concerning the activities of the Cult in the City.

It didn't come out in a hail of cameras and if you can't work out why I shall have to tell you. The media in Zur have something resembling brains and those brains said what goes on the seven o'clock news is seen by kids and while we can keep it decent and express it in terms only adults would understand we cannot stop kids demanding to know what that was about and as parents we do not wish to be subjected to the fury of other parents at being put in an impossible position.

I still felt I couldn't face the world.

Mitch issued a statement. No second chance? No right to start again?

I do not think it is for me to say how Alzani-Meta handle life's little failures but clearly as you full well know they do and if I understand correctly that is what they are here to do. Let us be clear that Lattic's original conception was not the finished product. The set was taken over by the Cult. You now understand a great deal more than you ever wanted to

know about the Cult and I trust you are now clear as to why Sarat has to take over Kadun.

Latic's field, shall I say, was common or garden pornography. Hard-core, I do not deny. There is a video shop in the Hoba. There is a BDSM scene in Zur. Like any other city, Zur does not represent a meeting of the mothers' purity league. However there is not here the moral ambivalence of the City and for what I trust are historically obvious reasons there is a strong moral lead from the hill. We none of us tolerate filth but we recognize that behind filth are human beings and some at least are more than the sum of their creations. There are other videos in this story. Some have been shot by PANTHER recording the leisure-time activities of leading figures in Harn. Ask PANTHER for copies. I do not think it is the Zuri way to pick on what is in context the little guy and leave the big fish untouched.

Bal to Mel: You have said nothing.

Mel to Bal: I spend most of my time in the Library these days. Exams draw near.

Bal to Mel: Maybe you'll fail and be kicked out.

Mel to Bal: Let us say that my lord of Var-segan is the emperor's man. He does not take his cue from me.

Bal to Mel: Be damned to that.

Mel to Bal: You do not read the riot act to the Dabidan media.

Bal to Mel: Couldn't you have sat on it until the kid's in Azt?

Mel to Bal: You have a free press, I have a free press. A ten-day wonder.

Bal to Mel: Until there's a bigger story? What bigger story, Mel? The end of the world?

They rode the storm, of course. I on the other hand, who had at least learned to accept I was vulnerable was a quivering wreck.

"Is there anywhere in the world I can hide?"

Sarat looked mischievous.

"Stick with us. By the time I have Krarlik in the dock no-one's going to notice."

I could see that was true. I wondered about forging a life of my own, not that I felt like forging anything, and dimly perceived that any minute now no-one on the entire continent was going to have a life of his own, certainly no-one in Kadun, you were going to be for or against and that would influence how you behaved at work, just about everything. Somewhere in the middle of this it struck me my future was in Kadun. If of course it all worked, if that didn't mean being rounded up as an enemy alien, shot as a spy. I wondered if I was off in fantasy-land again but I do like the countryside. Perhaps I could live in Var-segan! With Mitch I'd be safe. I was beginning to perturb myself. I realized I actually believed I had a future which was not necessarily disastrous.

Who now does not know that Sarat-ban-essa gathered around himself a formidable alliance of strong-minded young men and women, of all classes and none -

What the hell does that mean? thought Seani

- all older than he. Yet, despite all the odds, one may say, no visitor to Azt is left in any doubt that one man rules Kadun (for the moment, of course). One man is aware of the isolation and the responsibility. One man is referred to by road-sweeper and general alike as 'the boss'.

Yet Dabida appears now to be run by a quorum -

Does it really? thought Seani.

- It would appear that Mel thinks to run the hill as a commune -

Indeed? thought Seani

- decisions apparently taken by committee! In place of Tar's sure hand on the wheel is a Gang of Four, two of whom are irtubi. With the best will in the world, how can irtubi possess Tar's and Saski's intimate knowledge of Dabidan life?

The boil is leached, thought Seani. They're irtubi! Inevitable someone – who is this goon?

- Those of us who know Mel –

The growl from the H-W was instant. Never heard of him! Or a coward uses a pseudonym.

Comment, Hass?

Hass stretched out his legs and smiled.

I think he knows little enough of Dabidan life. A year ago, you climbed the hill. Perhaps you found Tar or Saski, perhaps me or Mel. Did you frown and purse your lips? Assuredly you knew Tar could over-ride us. I mention casually he did on only two occasions I recall.

The heart of it is a dig at Mel.

Venga said: Has Cantilip not said? Now I too must say it. We know we know little. I do not deceive myself that knowledge of the price of a bag of qallies in the Megamart – jolly good they are too – we know people. Are people so different, their hurt, their anger, their confusion?

But then Mel appeared and the whole of Sorito's got to its feet and began to sing the national anthem.

And that, thought Sorito, will go very nicely round the world, thank you.

“I thank you,” said Mel.

Comment, Mel?

Later, later.

“Give us something!”

Mel grinned like a shark.

“I do things my way. This is generally known as being the boss.”

Cantilip said: “So it's a learning-curve! I realized how bus tickets work today.”

Mel mischievous: “She thinks she's beginning to understand the ferries. Sarat says that takes a lifetime.”

“No-one understand the ferry!” said Sorito.

“That is a slur,” said a ferryman.

“His Majesty the King - ” began the po-faced announcer. Her face broke into a grin. “ – will

“speak pointedly from the hill.”

Mel smiled at the camera.

“Matters have been raised that to some require clarification. The prudent editor seeks to ascertain the facts before publication

I do not run Dabida. Nor does any quorum run Dabida. Kadun is (for the moment of course) an absolute monarchy. We are a constitutional monarchy. The role of Alzani-Meta is clearly defined in the Constitution.

This is not a patriarchy. Any decision taken by my lady may be regarded as a decision taken by me. This is how we have always done things. Those who doubt are free to consult my mother.

Nonetheless, if there must be one person at whom the buck stops, it is I and no-one else. I was brought up to bear that grave responsibility and I carry it out as I see fit.

I count Hass both wiser than I and more good and I suspect there are few in Zur who demur. I should count myself a fool were I not to consult him when appropriate. We have been a team since we were seven, and a rather successful one. It is a little late to stop now.

I was born in Zur. I went to school in Zur. I have friends in Zur, close and abiding friends with whom I never lost touch. We have wracked our brains concerning the ‘commune’ element of the article. When Hass and I were 16, our friends were constantly in and out. Why should it be different today? Beyond that, I should personally be very unhappy if any Dabidan did not feel at home on the hill, felt a barrier to visiting, perhaps not one’s own home, but the home of close relations, where one feels at ease. I expect to find a mass of people in my kitchens, some of whom I do not know.

I, together with Sarat, Hass, half the H-W, most of PANTHER and many, many people from all walks of life from all over the continent entered Kadun. Some of course questioned our right to be there at all, any of us, but few questioned the capacity of any of us to take executive decisions because of our lack of an intimate knowledge of Kadun life. Certainly we had done our homework. You think Venga and Cantilip do not? Certainly also homework has its limitations. We learned on the hoof. You think Venga and Cantilip do not? Certainly many many irtubi generously instructed and corrected us. You think Dabidans do not?

As ever, the door is open. As ever, it is recommended that those who have criticisms of Alzani-Meta address themselves to Alzani-Meta.

To some extent, thought Seani, the atom of truth behind the bile is that Mel and Hass now reign. Was it ever likely to be any other way? Tar must have known.

Others reached the same conclusion less graciously: king and queen.

A rat has squeaked, observed Smudge. Not much of a rat by past standards, but nonetheless a rat.

Anti-gay propaganda? asked Zeph

“That may be getting carried away, Zeph...”

“The word wasn’t mentioned.”

“Did it have to be?” asked Zeph. “What do you reckon that’s what Mel thinks?”

“You’ve lost me, Zeph.”

“Pro-patriarchy. The only heterosexual male of the four diminishes himself by treating the other three as equals.”

“It is different, though.”

“What is?”

“The hill. Everyone says so. It’s the same and it’s different. There’s nothing you can finger really. It’s not like they’re young so they’re having rockers in all the time or telling everyone to smoke dope!”

Zeph guffawed.

“Do not forget, my son, that the good Tar is far from deceased. Really imagine him turning the hill over to potheads.”

“Less masculine? Mum and Dad and one gay son and one straight one.”

“Two gays, one lady, one straight guy. In purely numerical terms.”

My impression of the young gentlemen, thought Zeph, but I shall not share with you the circumstances of that. Instead he said.

“You all know Hass.” Then he changed tack. “A certain young man now widely known as His Imperial Majesty has some very clearly defined views on how to do things. It would not be bizarre if these were shared by Cantilip and Venga. What I would say to hazard a guess is things are being done the Fidubi way. We in Dabida have of course thought that we always did things the Fidubi way, but I would hazard that we did things our way, though the difference is very hard to see.”

He spent a few days chatting casually to Zuri then trotted off to talk to the Gang of Four.

“Different?” said Mel in mock-horror.

“But we’ve always been here,” said Hass.

Zeph told them his theory.

“You are different,” he ended. “You went on your travels and you come back different.”

“Oh dear,” said Venga.

“As everyone knows,” added Zeph, “things were not always hunky-dory. Stress, loss, these mark people. People like you, you react different. One of the boys suggested less masculine. Ethereal I think is the word. Your mama and papa are very down to earth.”

The four exchanged startled glances.

“Zeph,” said Hass, then stopped.

“Like some real heavy stuff went down,” said Venga.

“I do not,” said Zeph, “know much about these things. Make that nothing. Like anyone who isn’t a total idiot I know about the Cult and there’s a lot of strange stuff about a certain chair which, it would seem to me, if only half true.”

I am where the buck stops, thought Mel. So soon?

“Tar abdicated to keep me safe mentally and physically. To keep my feet on the ground.”

To get you away from Sarat and whatever’s going down round that bloody chair, translated Zeph silently, putting something together not totally removed from the truth, about grown-ups needed to look after Sarat, kids could look after Dabida.

“Swapped jobs,” said Zeph.

Mel nodded silent assent.

Cantilip spoke at last.

“Bus fares are my life,” she said enthusiastically. “The price of cheese is an entrancing mystery. We’re sorry we’re not – if we’re still a bit – we are very glad to be in the mundane world.”

“I would not wish to pry,” said Zeph slowly. “Would got your fingers burnt be a relevant comment?”

“Owww,” said Cantilip.

“I’d like to help,” said Zeph, “in a practical sort of way. Any objection to just reminding folk life in Azt wasn’t a bowl of cherries, you’re a bit shaken still?”

“I thank you,” said Mel. “None at all.”

“Could I add something, personal-like,” said Zeph. “Hass has always been that way and there are no surprises his partner’s the same. The lady is pretty much an unknown quantity. It’s you, Mel.”

“Thanks,” said Mel wryly.

“Don’t misunderstand. It’s not what you say or do. It’s – “ He hesitated. “Folk like you have been around Zur a long time. You might say we are attuned.”

Venga sighed.

“His aura.”

“Is that the word? The vibe.”

“Vibe will do,” said Venga.

“You’ve had a shock, haven’t you,” said Zeph. “I can’t begin to think what that shock might be.”

“I have had so many shocks,” said Mel. “For 600 years Dabida has wondered why Fidub didn’t put Zani on the throne. I know why Zani didn’t want the throne.”

“All intermingled,” said Zeph. “You were very fond of Sorg, weren’t you.”

“Very,” said Mel.

“Walking wounded,” said Cantilip. “Is it so terribly obvious?”

“I would not say that,” said Zeph. “Quieter. I would think for most people who see any change that is the confusion. Perhaps one would think that on becoming king you would be more dynamic.”

“More mature,” said Mel firmly.

Zeph grinned.

“What you said,” he said to Venga. “People are people and people will go on climbing the hill and you’ll get it right cos you know people. Three months’ time, who’s noticing anything. I won’t take up any more of your time.”

“Thank you,” said Cantilip, “thank you for caring.”

The door closed behind him.

Malik Zesh!

“The wonderful thing,” said Mel, “about the way we do things is that people talk absolutely freely.”

Hass just laughed.

But they had each reached Zeph’s conclusion.

Mel said: “If there is a question I should really like to ask Tar, it’s not the correction interpretation of Article 35, it’s how great is the metaphysical danger Sarat is in.”

“You’re the boss,” said Hass. “Invite Cho to stay.”

“After we’ve seen to the drains.”

And so one simple meme took hold of Zur because others too have brains. Course they’re different. What they’ve been through!

And Pietri did not come to visit his nephews but, as was inevitable, Hass bumped into him in the town and the look on his face told him Tar must have told him everything.

“Come to lunch, to tea, to dinner,” suggested Hass.

“We shall.”

“When?”

“Tar protects his family.”

“That is ambiguous,” said Hass gently.

“All his family,” said Pietri.

“Of course,” said Hass.

He related the meeting to Mel.

Mel grinned.

“To be head of the family also, that is usurpation!”

“It is so unbearable we are here and she is not?”

“Predicated,” said Mel. “Is that the word? Both have long been predicated. If that’s the word.”

And Mel looked again at his monitor. Eight little rabbits split into two fours. Separated by a Great Divide. He turned abruptly from the screen.

“You have said nothing,” he said to Cantilip.

“It is resolved,” she said.

He pondered.

“In you?”

“When one is under strain, things may seem all-important.”

“Develop a veneer?”

“Kai and Cioulis will hack it.”

“Then had we better not speak sensibly to Kai and Cioulis?”

And I Latic hesitantly proffered:

“Mel was always leader of the pack. Could it be he no longer feels he has to act leader of the pack. He simply is leader of the pack.”

And Reakoed looked at me as if I'd said something clever. A couple of days later, a leader appeared in The Times saying much the same thing. Funny, that.

There was never any chance of me and Fal. I assumed that from the start. We grew very close and she told me about Sorg. Then I knew no-one had any chance.

“D’you think I’m mad?”

“People create their realities. A strong mind like yours.”

“Why should I do it? I ask myself that. Is my need so terrible, so devouring?”

“How – suppose he’s real and he vanished. Maybe he didn’t want to. Maybe he had no choice. If he’s real who can possibly say what governs -

“I want cubs,” said Maya.

“How big is an average litter?”

I was running, so fast I was tripping over my feet, running in that way you feel you’re falling forward and then I awoke crying, desperate for love, for someone’s arms around me, but how could I ever find a girl. I’d have to tell her and I couldn’t bear the scorn the rejection. And so I went to find Mel, but Cantilip opened the door – how probable is that? – and smiled (how probable is that!) and I didn’t realize I was still dreaming.

So then I did wake up, properly, in my own cosy little bed, but tears streaming down my face and I had no idea what to do. The thought surfaced: I have to find a girlfriend. Fresh wave of tears. I stemmed the flow and tried to be considered. Not my mother, not my father, not any freaking ordinary human being on the planet, on no-one except my future King, a busy guy, let’s face it, could I rely and I want – to actually love someone back. I want to put my arms around someone and make her happy. Do I really? I wondered if there was some kind of organization of moral retards where we try to make it together. Of course wanting to love someone was more awful, was most awful of all. I’m personable enough. I could busk it. Get someone to hug me but to give and then for the truth to come out. There is a very basic question here, Lattic, and one from which you run, my son. I laughed suddenly, because I really didn’t know the answer. Finally, do I want a girl or a boy? There was all sorts of stuff around that and it had nothing to do with orientation and everything to do with what I thought ‘girl’ and ‘boy’ are. Would a guy feel safer with me and so less likely to reject me?

Eventually I sat up feeling fake-resolute. I’m going to find someone to love. And?

Then I had a simpler thought. Let baby not run before he can walk. How about a friend? Someone to talk to. Someone who wants to talk to me.

So there I am not merely in a field in Carlin but in the freaking field. Leave the best till last. Dramatic effect and all that. Of course I didn't know it was the field. Yep, I Latic had found my sweet little cottage on the edge of the field.

There are many unhappy people in the world but perhaps in my neighbourhood only one more desolate than I at my worst. I hadn't even thought of her (remember, he added defensively, I was thinking of future partners, not devastated goddesses) but now it came to me that if I wanted to give, if I really wanted to give comfort to someone, to really not think about my frigging self all the time, to be a friend to someone, someone everyone knew was bleeding internally, there was my neighbour, Fal.

Half the village was looking after her. There was no sense in which Fal needed me, not even as a logsman, though I suspected she was perfectly capable of chopping her own wood.

I could drop in. I could be nice. Even thinking about someone else for a change was an advance for me. I took my shawl and my sturdy staff and went for a walk which just happened to lead past the cottage by the stream. From the distance I could see her in the yard.

"Hi!" I said, "just happened to be passing..."

She looked up. For how many hours, days had she been crying? I was appalled. Normal humanity in me took over and suddenly I had my arms around her and I was whispering, "Please, please don't cry like that," while she sobbed against my chest.

Umm. Yes. This was all very strange and new to me. Which is not to say I didn't like it.

"You need me to make you a cup of tea," I said.

"Thank you," said Fal.

We went inside.

"They shouldn't – I shouldn't –" I began.

She had recovered herself now and smiled wanly.

"Left me on my own? What can anyone do?"

"Make tea? I'd sleep on the floor if it helped."

And so Fal and I became – what did we become? Brother and sister, fellow-cubs huddling together for warmth in our lair. I don't know. There was never anything sexual. I don't know! There just wasn't and it had nothing to do with my being a moral retard and her being a devastated goddess. It was just a simple human need for another human. We had these long intense conversations about life and of course death.

They shouldn't have left me on my own. Of course there were resonances.

So I was saying that I really did like nature and I had thought of trying to rejoin the human race and meet like-minded people, nice, calm, normal people but it would be phoney because I shouldn't dare to get close to anyone and she said: What about the party?

What party?

Oh Latic, said she, they should've.

It unravelled.

You will have grasped the party, the metaphor. 'They came, the skull-faces, but we laughed'. We partied. Somewhere in the last thousand years or so PLT had decided there should be a permanent physical party, or at any rate that's what they call it. It bears, I gathered, no resemblance whatever to what I as moral retard recognized as a party or damn it most people, noise and noxious substances being wholly absent. The party, I gathered, is where nice, calm and not at all normal people drop in when they feel like socializing. Being not at all normal, they wouldn't judge me and in fact would be just about indifferent to where I was coming from. The party is also – well, they're not surprised to find people like me, put it that way.

"It was all so far in the future," Fal was saying.

Then we both giggled.

As clearly as if he were in the room, I heard Mel say you've got us. Yes, my lord and master, but you have the continent. In some sense Fal and I were both victims of continental drift but in some sense not because we'd both chosen to be country yokels instead of at the pulsating hub. But where is this party? I hear you cry. You remember the warren she led Cantilip through in Old Zur. Somewhere in all that is a house with a walled garden.

Another thing that arose from my association with Fal is that I ended up doing something useful to society and just doing something with my brain did wonders for my self-esteem. I had been, had I not, a highly successful businessman. I could organize things. I organized her election campaign. I ran her office. I'm still amazed that I actually did something useful to society and liked it.

Lastly I wanted to talk to the father I'd never had and took myself off to talk to Essa and Ven took me to Maona-Pri's party. Squeal of brakes. Yes, I do come to play a pivotal role in what was to come, or why else is our Chief Narratrix giving me so much air-time, but no, that pivotal role is not that by a sad history of assassination I got to be Anile Emperor! Then devastation came to the white house in the dunes and I actually spent quite a lot of time there making cups of tea while the fact that I hadn't wanted to jump into bed with either Fal or Ven even for warmth and cuddles was rather tending to convince me that what I wanted for warmth, cuddles and more was a boyfriend. I wasn't sure about that. There are, I mused, certain things that probably don't change however many centuries pass, and one of them is the reaction of the Anile Emperor to some goon who, no matter how inadvertently, upsets his baby sister, especially if said goon has already been brought to HIM's attention. It's something of a bucket of ice-water on the gonads. You can see that. There was something else. As my readers know, I'm pretty fixated on Hass. When I was at rock-bottom, when I really thought there was nothing left, he was kind to me and it wasn't pity for the poor retard. It was just absolutely without judgement or opinion and I wanted to be like that, though I don't think I ever can be, and I wanted someone like that though I didn't know or understand what part if any gender played. To be beyond everything – in the good sense, I mean – is to be beyond gender. Come to think of it, it is in the bad sense too.

So I was aware that, if anyone like Hass ever (I should be that lucky) showed the faintest interest in me as a human being, I'd fall like a ton of bricks but would it be real or would it be what d'you call it, transference, projection, and also aware that I wanted to be well, not to mince words, good, or just well.

His name is Narak. Isn't that a nice name?

He was talking about wild flowers. I do wild flowers. I discoursed knowledgeably on sheepwort and cowbell. I live in Carlin, I said. You're irtubi? I'm Dabidan, I said and then, I took a few wrong turnings. Carlin's my recovery ward. We chatted. Two weeks later, he asked me out to dinner, said he'd pick me up. Ah. I gave my address. Slight flexing of the eyebrows. I grinned. I really was human garbage, I said. Mel took me by the scruff of the neck. So I was forced to mix with a different class of people. I was just about the most screwed-up person you could ever hope not to meet. But you're different now, he said. I think I still have baggage, I said. I haven't ever had a proper relationship. He grinned mischievously the way PLT do and then – and then – he kissed my cheek. I kissed him back, a bit shyly, not on the cheek. He held me very close and somewhere my startled brain threw up I LIKE THIS.

We went to a little bistro and then we walked with our arms around each other and then it was time for bed and I was obviously tense as hell.

Relax, he said, just let me love you. So, umm, I did. Like being on a roller-coaster with starburst. Infinite and circular. I want what you want what I want and I realized that anything I'd experienced previously that could be delineated as sexual relations might have been cattle fornicating in a field for all it had any relation to the real thing. I love you, I love you, I love you, I said. I love you, he said.

Then I lay in his arms in the dark and told him everything and he said it all comes right in the end because I've got you but I said as I had to say, she's still dead and the more I turn into a normal human being the worse that is. I am never ever going to be able to forgive myself. I sort of felt him thinking. After a minute, he said, Because you think it's wrong to. Yes, I said. He gave a definitely sexy little wriggle. Then he said, you'll hold onto it or it'll fall away. I understand that, I said. I wriggled back. Can you teach me how to - ?

Eventually we slept but I woke tense. I can't stay at Essa's for ever!

But he was cool about coming to Carlin.

Does perfection have to be a dream?

I was hardly offering indispensable aid to Essa and Baya. The girls of course were in Azt. Except of course the girls were in Azt. I think I did help a bit but in the oddest way. Somehow my utterly fuckwit experience of living on the edge gave me a rapport what was essentially the unending nightmare of Essa's and Baya's lives since Sarat had decided to be emperor. Although I understood they found a peace, a serenity that I couldn't reach, I also understood they were human and at the level of normal folks they never had one second's respite. So I made a lot of tea and inadvertently brought myself once again to the attention of HIM.. There I was showing Narak around my humble abode when the doorbell rang. A dissolute youth stood there, identified himself as a cub and handed me a rather heavy-duty looking envelope in which was a handwritten note thanking me for looking after his mum and dad. Really, it was nothing, I murmured, totally taken aback. I passed the letter to Narak. Nice boy, he said, well brought up.

Narak's a gardener, basically, but large-scale. He ran one of Maona-Pri's parks. It was not one of the skills immediately required by the poor of Kadun but he reckoned he could find something to landscape in Carlin. The first miracle he worked was on my poor little garden. You mean well, he murmured. I really want things to grow, I said. Theory, that's me. I knew almost as much about loam as he did. I just couldn't put it into practice. Metaphor for my life! Even in my hermit's lodge it became apparent there was a new mood afoot, a new resolution. .

