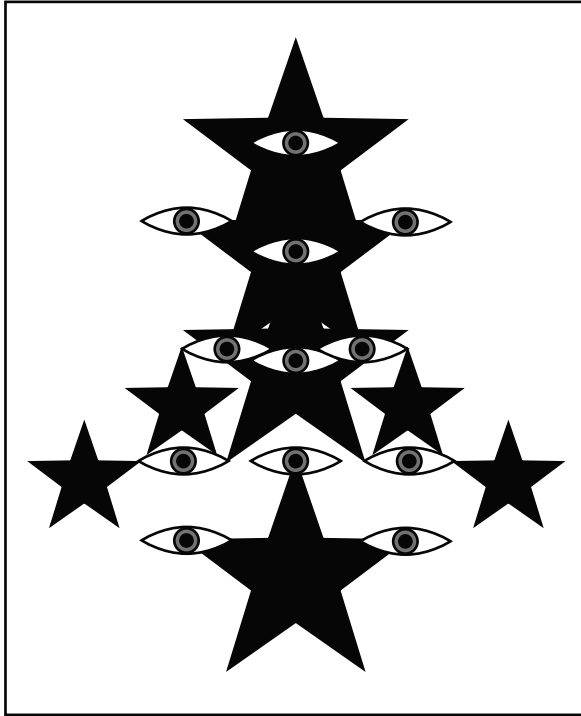


# Michael Ayres



## *Dustless*

*an excerpt from Chapter 3, 'The Riders'*

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## ***NOTE***

The reader of this text is reminded that the version presented here is an unrevised first draft only.

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[ *Akzasosan Suli, one of the novel's heroes, is relating the history of the invasion of the Pure Western Lands by the vast armies of E-Tzhi, the supreme leader (Zulor) of the Eastern Lands. After a long summer and autumn of easy advances, the forces of the Eastern "barbarians" have met fierce resistance at MoLitzSur, the Gates of Morning. The generals and the Zulor (the Shining One) meet to discuss strategy, and decide upon a strike south by the XaKryDozu (the horse army of the Warring State of Dozu). ]*

...The meeting in the map coach came to an end with some somber banter.

General G-Muzhi, whose nickname, even among the Generals, was 'Firehead', was delighted with the prospect of good horse war on the plains. He swept his hand over the map, and made a grabbing gesture on the dot representing LuinSom. "Perhaps", he said, "I will take a Dainty wife here to spend my winter with".

General U-Xhox, who was not in favour of the attack south, frowned.

"I have an old wife back in Dozu State, and I would like to go back there and lie with her again."

G-Zho, known for his good humour and wit, said quickly.

"I have two wives back in Dozu, and they tire me out"

"Brother G-Zho is a -dhra dog," G-Muzhi said, referring to the tribe of Dozu-dhra, whose men may marry several wives. "It is hard to please women in halves."

"Come to Dhra, Brother, and I will show you how it's done" G-Zho said, to laughter.

"No, I say it is too difficult – half your time in the north, and half your time in the south – and no time to yourself" G-Muzhi responded, to more laughter.

But the older General U-Xhox said: "I would rather have one old wife back in Dozu-xhi, and be in one piece when I lie with her, than have two wives in Dozu-dhra, and be lying out there in two pieces" – and he tapped his finger on the map, indicating the area into which the XaKryDozu was about to ride.

"But I cannot die there –" G-Zho said – "I don't know how to say it!"

There was more laughter, with G-Muzhi deliberately mangling the Dainty name written on the map: Plain of RezSomia.

And they turned to the Shining One, whose command of the Imperial tongue was now almost complete, and beseeched him to tell them the correct pronunciation of the battle they would fight.

And the Shining One said: "This place is called the Plain of RezSomia. It is barren, but I will make it fertile. The Ancients of the Western Lands made beautiful maps – but even a mad Zar General can conquer a map. Let us, the Dozu, conquer the real ground beneath our feet. Come: we will ride."

So the Generals parted, and the oil lamp over the map was dimmed.'

## xI

‘It was indeed a beautiful map. The Dozu had taken it from a captured garrison in what had been the City of Streams, but was now DrezKul. The map, itself venerable, was a paper copy of one of the great metal maps of the Ancients, kept in the library of maps in the High Citadel of LuinShar.

I have said, the Unparalleled One had an almost complete control of the Imperial tongues – from Low to High Imperial, his progress in the language had indeed been swift, almost as if E-Tzhi matched and mimed the momentum of his armies, capturing the grammar and sense of the Pure Land and taking control of its meaning just as the XaKryDozu captured cities and plains, rivers and towns.

Yet while E-Tzhi’s conquest of an alien tongue had been rapid – so rapid indeed to have caused Marinsomar astonishment, and even a certain unease – it was not total.

The imperishable inks of the Imperial cartographers gave an accurate picture of the cantons and provinces now under issue. Even though the map was eras and dynasties old, the Pure Land does not change: mountains remain as mountains, and hills as hills.

In a lovely pale green ink, the Imperial cartographer had written in a slight crescent the words ‘Plain of RezSomia’ over the area shaded an almost translucent blue. And beneath those pale green words, Plain of RezSomia, in the MidImperial script, was another word, in a clear red: *az-ri*.

Now, to the people of the Pure Land, *az-ri* means ‘barren’. But it means more: to our people, if a place is *az-ri*, it is not to be entered, it is a sterile and a killing place, unclean, unforgiving, where the invisible air is an enemy and the bright sun no friend. It is an imPure place. But to the Shining One, *az-ri*, barren, merely meant unpopulated or bare, desert, unwooded.

Thus it could be said that the fate of the XaKryDozu, of the Zulor AngaRa, of the Pure Empire, and of the Pure Way itself, hung upon the understanding of a single word.’

## xli

‘It is getting late, and we must ride on soon.

Yet I invoke the power of the *seria-ma* to end my history at the rightful place, not to skirt or shirk the fullness of the tale.

On the afternoon of the third day of the battle at the Gates of Morning, the moving wheat fields of the XaKryDozu began to ride eastwards, following the line of the Mountains of Razia, intending to then swing round where the MoLitzKra, the Gates of Eagles, opened into the Pass of Lusoria, which in turn wound round through the mountains to disgorge itself, at MoLitzCor, the Gates of Vultures, at the opening of the RezSomian Plain.

This was an error.

An ordinary man may make an error, and it causes ordinary confusion – ordinary pain, ordinary fire, ordinary hurt, ordinary shame. There is a faint ripple in the Way, and the universe rolls on. We try to be Vigilant, but our eyes grow tired. We try to repair a hurt, and cause another hurt. It is human. But an ordinary man makes an ordinary error – he floats a small bubble, as the people of the 3rd Province say. But the Zulor E-Tzhi was not an ordinary man. He lived in the realm of the gigantic and the great, and with his bubble floated the wreck of Empires and the deaths of millions.

It is unlikely that his father would have made the same error. M-Tzhi had the beast in him, but not the god, and the beast was cunning. He saw with limited eyes. But his son, E-Tzhi, was the Unparalleled One, and his eyes saw beyond ordinary limits.

M-Tzhi fought his battles in the known world, the Six Warring States. But E-Tzhi was fighting a battle 40,000 karsts from the Eastern Lands, in unfamiliar terrain. M-Tzhi would not even have contemplated an assault on the Western Lands: the beast in him could be satisfied, his hunger was not that of a god. In a similar situation, M-Tzhi would have retrenched; he would have guarded his conquests. He would not have split his forces – which his son and his Generals had done twice, splitting both the XaKryDozu and the Muli XhoOnKry. He would have left the Gates of Morning, and retreated, and wintered out his time, gaining intelligence on his remaining enemies, securing supplies, strengthening his lines of communication. But M-Tzhi had only ever been seeking to conquer terrain and people; he was a man of metal and trees, not a thinker. E-Tzhi, however, as we know, was of a philosophical frame of mind: he was not merely seeking to conquer the world, but the meaning of the world as well.

In this, as we know, he failed.’

## **xlii**

‘In the 53rd year of the Extended Hand era, and of the dynasty of so-zhure, which was also the 1st year of the Dark Season era, the Zulor AngaRa made a great error.

I have told how he sent a message to the Emperor Moin II: “I come. I bring a question, and my answer. What is your answer?” The question we know was this: “Tell me, which is stronger, Death or the Way?”

To this message and this question, Lansozar dai:juri, of Fine Rank, and head of the Oak Leaf Mark, opposed what we call the ‘No Answer’ strategy. The suffering people of the Pure Way were retreated out of the invaders’ grasp: land was burnt, and though space was given up freely, E-Tzhi’s armies were denied food and, most importantly, information.

On the Pure side, we sacrificed space for time. The Empire was dizzy with blows, and we needed to recuperate and to amass the three remaining armies still

available to us, those of North, South and West.

The RoMayZir was Hosted. The Northern Hand of RoMayZine warriors were sent through the Razian Pass to defend MoLitzSur, thus denying E-Tzhi the Pass and the South Route, and inviting him to seek to outflank the Northern Hand by the wide detour east and south across the RezSomian Plain.

The Eastern Hand of the RoMayZir went to the ancient and beautiful city of LuinSom, where they prepared to meet the empire-shattering force of the XaKryDozu.

This then was the No Answer strategy. E-Tzhi, receiving no answer to his question – indeed, finding no one to whom he might ask his question – allowed himself to be lured away from the Gates of Morning, and to undertake the ten days’ ride to LuinSom, the Pure City of Quietnesses.

E-Tzhi left a great force under two Dozu-xta Generals to pin down the Northern Hand of the RoMayZir, and ordered General M-Zhoo-i of the Muli XhoOnKry to bring half of this army to the Gates of Morning to ensure no Imperial force could break out and encircle the XaKryDozu. The other half of the Muli XhoOnKry army was to proceed north and to attack, take and hold LuinJaro, a great city, which would be the base for any forward operations.

This is what happened.’

### **xliii**

‘Two days’ ride brought the leading units of the XaKryDozu to the mouth of the Pass of Lusoria. The mountains in that province are said to be very beautiful, one in particular with an elegant cone of vast grace, but I have not been there, and cannot say.

Here, as with the ride to MoLitzSur, the Dozu Horse found deserted villages, their towers abandoned. But in this place, east of the Highway of Snows, the farmers seemed to have had less time to escape, or had been unwilling to believe that the advancing Zulor’s army would reach their farms, because the buildings were intact, and frozen crops stood in the fields, awaiting hands which never came to harvest them.

Snow fell on the pines, the architect spoke of deep jade greens, of staggering heights, narrow ravines, beautiful vistas. L-Qra, now often in the company of the Shining One himself, travelled in one of the coaches. He wrote that, while it was possible to grow accustomed to atrocity, it was preferable not to live with it too long, and he was glad he was riding with the main army of the XaKryDozu, and not left at the Gates of Morning, where the savages and madmen had roamed, carving paths of flesh and blood through the Dozu. He meant by savages and madmen, of course, the RoMayZine warriors of the Oak Leaf and Long Night: his is the comment of an educated barbarian, wholly incapable of understanding our Subtle ways; yet it shows the severity of the conflict, and the fear the relentless simplification of the

Enemy had created in the Long Invaders.

The scribes also tell of a peaceful ride through the foothills of the Razian Mountains. We have their official records, and also in some cases their private thoughts – although those fortunate enough to serve close to the Unquestioned One perhaps had thoughts within thoughts, for until the conclusions of their testimonies, where a certain license seems to have entered their words, even the notebooks meant to be read only by themselves are often works of shadows and gaps, through which one may seek the truth but not face it head on. The scribes, after all, were completely familiar with the glory of E-Tzhi, and knew that to look direct into the gaze which was like the sun invited blindness.

A man is a universe, even a Dozu-xhi scribe. If we did not have to ride on soon, it would be possible to speak in detail of those men who accompanied the XaKryDozu on its last ride, the scribes who have left the records not only of the events which befell the Dozu Horse, but of themselves, either directly or, more often, in incidental pieces. It was the method of the Dozu scribes to make their records in small immediate notebooks, writing swiftly to capture the sayings of the Zulor and of his great ones; then later to transcribe the notes into the official registers, where speech was often embellished with descriptions of gesture and of situation. While the registers are formal and elegant, the primary notebooks are often a flurry of signs, whirling with energy and often dotted and patterned with the idiosyncracies of the scribes themselves.

One scribe, for example, was a considerable draughtsman, and his pages are interrupted and decorated with sketches of landscapes, of animals, equipment and the like; another scribe, a close and loving observer of nature, gives detailed descriptions of plants or fish encountered during the prolonged journies across the Western Lands; a third scribe doodled small pools of flowing circles here and there throughout his notes. One can imagine the scribes, often in the presence of the Zulor but with nothing to describe, scribbling through these longeurs whatever was close to their minds, or habits.

We know therefore that during the ride through the Lusorian Pass, the horsemen of the Dozu army could have seen both the blue eagles which give their name to MoLitzKra, and the vultures which give their name to MoLitzCor, the northern and southern Gates of the gorge. We have excellent sketches of the steep rock formations, the precipitous heights, the volcanic cones, the mountain pines, and of the birds themselves – one of the scribes even using coloured inks to hint at the sapphire and indigo blues of the eagle feathers – and there are measurements of wing spans, descriptions of the indolent, circling flight patterns of the red-collared vultures, small but detailed pencil sketches of talons and beaks, and so on. These notebooks were highly prized by the warriors of various Marks: the Cherry Blossom Mark of my revered ancestors (of whom there are many), has in its possession several of these primary notebooks; I myself have seen them, and turned their pages at my ancestral home in LuinShar.

Once through the Vulture Gates, the XaKryDozu began its ride south, and presently, the moving wheatfields of their columns entered the RezSomian Plain.’

#### **xliv**

‘At first, nothing out of the ordinary was noted by the scribes. They describe a dry, flat country, easy riding with few trees, an undistinguished grassland with a few, somewhat stunted copses of birch. After the eye-stunning ranges of the mountains they were leaving behind, the nondescript nature of the terrain seemed rather disappointing to them, although one scribe remarked that no Dozu Horse soldier can look on an open plain for long without loving it – the XaKryDozu was born from the plains along with its splendid horses, and had fought several of its most important battles over such landscapes.

Once onto the Plain, they were seven days’ ride from LuinSom. The horizon waited for them, and they rode in good spirits towards it. Since leaving MoLitzSur, they had met no resistance at all, and no dead or living-dead Fire Troops had returned to haunt them. Even General U-Xhox, who doubted the wisdom of this venture, seems to have felt his heart rise to greet the sweeping open expanses of the grassland before them – it is said that in the Dozu cosmology, heaven is just such a plain, and Dozu warriors go riding there each day in eternity.

Although the map had been marked *az-ri*, there was water; numerous small brooks ran across the land, and they were plump with autumn rain and now laced with the ice of coming winter.

It was not until the beginning of the third day of the crossing of RezSomia that one of the scribes made an entry in his quick book noting something odd about the place. He knew the translation of the name meant Plain of Quietness, or Quiet Plain, yet it was not until the advanced units of the great army had paused at a minor river crossing while a wheel was replaced on one of the coaches, that the scribe noticed how extraordinary still the environment was. At first, he says, he thought it was merely an impression caused by the cessation of the ride, a pause in the clinking and hooves, yipping of riders, trundle of wheels. But gradually it was borne in on him that, apart from the voices of the waters and the souging of the breeze through grass and the isolated birch stands, there was indeed virtually no other sound.

Barren indeed, he thought.

And the scribes, who formed something of a squabbling clique – as is the way with scribes, I suppose – discussed things amongst themselves, and it is quite common to find an impression noted in one book quoted or rephrased in another, and then in another again, perhaps with certain modifications, so that a student of this event of the Dark Season is given a vivid sense of the scribes living and working together, sharing jokes and thoughts, and mulling over points of common interest.

By the evening of the second day, the barrenness of the Plain has become

a subject of speculation for the scribes. We can follow the course, through one notebook after another, a kind of intimate shadow life of each of the writers. We see how across the pages one series of notebooks, the lover of nature has spread drawings of birds and animals; virtually no day goes by without a rabbit's head recorded here, or a robin's nest there. The quick books recording the ride from MoLitzSur to MoLitzKra, and from MoLitzKra through to MoLitzCor, are dense with images of birds; but from MoLitzCor onwards, the drawings rapidly peter out, and on the pages devoted to the Plain dwindle off to nothing.

The scribes record a debate amongst themselves as to how RezSomia came to be named, and a discussion as to why it did indeed seem to be so very quiet.

The full extent of the lifelessness of the area seems to have become apparent by the morning of the third day of the ride. They noted they had seen no evidence at all of any settlements. There were no towers, no villages. There were no farms. Moreover, there was no sign that people had ever lived here. There were no constructions of any kind, wooden or otherwise. Nothing had been abandoned. There were no tracks, no paths, either. No sign that fires had ever been lit, or nomads wandered the plains.

Then they realised they had seen no rabbits or hares, either. There were no wild dogs, no ponies, no hedgehogs, even, no frogs in the pools, no fish in the streams. Then, when they heard no birdsong at dusk, and dawn broke without a single finch or chat calling, it occurred to them that the skies were, and had been for three days, birdless. Nothing moved in the sky but clouds. Nothing flew, not nearby, not among the birch trees off in the mid-distance, not even in the far distance, not once: over the whole Plain of Quietness, there was a tranquillity, a dullness, a something empty.

It is said that if at night you looked down from an eminence on the XaKryDozu encamped on a plain, the spreading numbers of their fires was greater than that of the stars in the sky. One of the scribes on that second evening, on a page which seems to be marked with tears, describes the Dozu Horse Army bivouaced on RezSomia: he says it looked like a universe fallen to the earth, another firmament. He says he could see no end to the twinkling lights; they stretched to the horizon. He thought every village in every tribal land in all of Dozu must be empty of their men. It was a nation lying there under the heavens of an alien land – at least, a nation of men.

At this point, experts in the study of the quick books of the scribes detect a faint change in the work of virtually all the writers. There appear to be slight deteriorations in the grammar. Spelling mistakes begin to occur with greater frequency. There are more, and more drastic, erasures, crossings out, blots, redraftings. There are even some experts who claim to be able to discern a certain shift not only in the technique but in the style and reach of the writing – a loosening up, a movement away from specific things towards something vaguer and, often, more intimate.

The scribe who described the appearance of the XaKryDozu army bivouac at

night, for example, also comments on how glad he is to be here with these Dozu men. The scribes' attitude to the soldiers was not usually so warm: there are many entries or asides throughout their writings which display a degree of contempt for the flowing numbers of those who did not ride in the coaches of the Zulor's retinue. The Dozu are generally regarded as a cheerful, singing people, strong and honed close to the earth. Before the crossing of RezSomia, the more urbane Dozu scribes, most of them from the small but highly cultured city of southern Dozu, DrezDzha, in the -pol province, looked down upon the unlettered masses drawn from the plains and valleys of the Fifth Warring State. That night, however, the scribe goes on to speak of how moving he finds a song which he hears on making his way back to his coach, a splintered, uncut lament sung by a boy of the Dozu-xta people, sitting on a boulder with his comrades lying around him, listening; the scribe even notes down the words of the song, though he makes several mistakes with the dialect. A reader is left in no doubt that the writer found comfort that night in the vast companionship of the XaKryDozu, a rustling and living order set against the peculiar noughtness of the Quiet Plain.

In the morning, the sense of a curious timelessness begins to be recorded. The flat land unfolded before them, but the horizon of course moved as they moved, and the day's riding seemed like a kind of stillness. The taste of the water is mentioned: it has a peculiar tang; it is metallic. The air too is described as strange: although the wind blows and the air moves, it seems sluggish and it feels oppressive. Snow falls slowly. The grass seems to sway in torpid waves, taking an age. The sounds which occur all seem far-off, somehow, and seem to take a long time to reach you.

The great General, U-Xhox, whose nickname among his soldiers is the Iron Bull, has also noticed the barrenness of the Plain: he has lost his earlier enthusiasm for the open spaces, and is again pessimistic about the strategy. He makes a grim joke to one of his close officers: "A fine place we have come to. Have you seen, nothing flies here? It's so dead, even the vultures have deserted it."

The Shining One, however, is oblivious to these things. He spends most of the ride closeted in his coach with the architect L-Qra. They are hard at work on designs for the Zulor's new capital. The designs grow more fabulous by the day, and the tower grows taller.'

#### xlv

'In LuinSom, the Emperor Moin-so-zhure II had for several days been waiting with the Eastern Hand of the RoMayZir. Snow was falling. Because of the very specific difficulties of the terrain they would be entering, they wanted to delay their ride from LuinSom until they were sure they were catching the right moment which would rise like a dark wave and carry them into history, or out of it.

Some attempt was made during a meeting of the AnZorXar, the Heads of the Marks present in that place, to dissuade the Emperor himself from going with the

RoMayZir into the wilderness of battle. This was an issue which the RoMayZine Marks such as the Grey Monkey and the Shepherd pressed with considerable insistence, arguing that Moin was too precious to the Empire to risk his person in a Complex encounter, that he was no longer of clear warrior age, but also that his grief for his son should be respected, and that he should mourn at this time, and not slay. But Moin was of Subtle Rank, and while he listened carefully to the Fine and Subtle ones of the AnZorXar, resisted their arguments, and said that he would join with the other Marks the Five Towers Mark of the Imperial House. However, he accepted that the prosecution of the combat itself should be in the hands of the most distinguished of the RoMayZine Marks, the Shepherd, whose Head, the revered Kozosoyar on:noru, thus took effective control of the Eastern Hand of the RoMayZir.

Even the calm and Subtle men of the Marks were unable to suppress the impatience of this waiting period entirely. Some were eager for the conflict, and wanted it to begin; others were less eager, and wanted it to be over: but there was a shared desire not to be waiting. Yet, they had to wait: until a message came from MoLitzSur, they could not move. The wave did not rise.

Accounts vary slightly in their descriptions of the RoMayZir's Hosting in LuinSom. The relations between the various Marks are complicated and difficult to state, but accounts agree that there was a divide between the RoMayZine Marks, who tended to keep amongst themselves, and the others. The RoMayZine warriors waited impatiently too, but theirs was a different impatience. Their aloofness was respected by their fellows, some of whom tended to view the RoMayZine Marks as representing a very different branch of the Way – perhaps even, in some cases, as a different Way. While the members of different Marks and houses mingled freely, often sitting in Stillness together under one Lawful roof, no one from the Cherry Blossom or the Five Towers joined the RoMayZine of the Falling Snow or Red Cloud as they sat in *zamen-fur*, Stillness and Darkness, fighting the Enemy who waited for them there, then as always.

So all waited, at the heart of a Dark Season, for the wave to rise.

And then the wave rose.'

## **xlvi**

'It is hard for a man of the Pure Way not to feel pity on reading the accounts of the last days of the XaKryDozu. Yet we must be Vigilant, and remember that these same Dozu horsemen had followed their Shining One first burning through our Pure Lands, killing pitilessly for karsts, and mashing up millions.

Still, knowing what we know, it is hard. When a single man dies, we say that a universe dies. But when an entire universe of universes goes on to its destruction, it is a hard matter to contemplate. It is hard, knowing what we know, not to feel pity on reading the account of one of the scribes of his great joy at finding life on

the Plains of Quietness: it is difficult to look upon those pages, to study the very detailed drawings and the exhaustive account of the man of his discovery, and not wish to look away. Yet we must be Vigilant.

It was on the afternoon of the third day that the scribe came across the ant nest which not only he but his fellow scribes report. The ants themselves seem unexceptional from the bare description: small, gingery, with perhaps an unusually glossy sheen to their bodies, and longer antennae than might be usual among other families of a similar size. And nothing about the nest, a conical mound sketched by two of the scribes, would normally have excited such interest – but there, where life, as we say, was rare as a man of Zar, this nest, spouting ants like a small volcano, seemed a very precious event to the Dozu writers, and they devote more space to these small, gingery ants than they had previously expended on the wonders of MoLitzSur, or on the waterfalls at SoSumi, or on JaZamosu, the Canyon of the Beginning, which they had seen months before and which most viewers consider an apex in nature.

The spelling mistakes have begun to proliferate at this point, and the grammar has odd kinks and disorders, and the handwriting itself is sloppier and the letters of the script larger, more childish, but the sense is still quite clear, and we can picture one of the men stooping and lifting some of the ants up, along with some grass, and putting them in a glass vessel. There is a definite sense that the scribes felt something like kinship for the small, metallic insects, which were the only other creatures to share life with the men on the desolate grasslands.

One of the High Surgeons of the Dark Season era expressed surprise that it was the soldiers themselves and not their horses which first displayed the symptoms of the sickness which lives in that place. But others believed it was natural that the horses, with their cruder make-up, should take longer to deteriorate. A man is a Subtle engine, a wonder of nerves and sinew, a thing of shadows and bone, hard, delicate and bound with vision. He is a mix, with heavy stuff rounding with the light. But no one can look closely at the opening of a human eye without realising that here is a focal point of wild beauty, a moment where the universe bends back upon itself and flowers with exhilaration at its own radiant sensitivity, and may recoil in an instant understanding what a hurt may be, and who may cause that hurting.

Almost from the moment the Dozu Horse had begun to ride out from MoLitzCor, and their mounts kick up the dust of the plains, some of the men had complained of a feeling of light-headedness. It passed and recurred, and wasn't a cause for worry, or even for much speculation.

By the evening of the third day they had spent in RezSomia, however, the riders of the XaKryDozu began to exhibit other signs that made them wish to hurry on, and reach the city of LuinSom on the other side of the plain.

In some, the light-headedness began to turn to an ache. Others, who had previously felt normal, began to experience the light-headedness of which their

comrades had spoken.

Accompanying the light-headedness and the headaches was a developing thirst. No matter how often the horsemen stooped to refresh themselves from the clear, metallic-tasting streams, or filled their canteens with the water and drank, their mouths and throats felt parched. The sun was very harsh out on the shadeless plains, but it was not warm, it couldn't have been the source of the men's thirst.

Not everyone was affected in the same way. Some weren't affected at all, but there was nothing they could do to halt the advance of the riders or to avert the disaster they saw happening around them.

With some the light-headedness seemed to grow into a light-heartedness. One of the scribes notes in a ragged, ink-smearred entry, that the Iron Bull, General U-Xhox himself, seemed to have overcome his feelings of pessimism, and to be enjoying the long ride and the companionship of his officers and men. There was a lot of laughter and joking, although often the men were laughing not because they understood a joke, but because they could not – and the joker laughed, it seemed, because he hadn't made a joke at all.

Some of the quick books of the scribes have pages dotted with blood. The Dozu army was now more or less in the centre of the Plain of RezSomia, passing right through its heart. It was during the morning of the fourth day of the crossing when it was realised that it was not just one or two people who had started to suffer from nosebleeds, but lots. The bleeding happened suddenly and without warning, so that often the person whose nose was bleeding was told by a comrade before they knew it themselves.

Some of the scribes' accounts of the fourth day appear reliable, although the handwriting is often difficult to make out. The logic of some of the statements is obscure; and often there seems nothing connecting a remark with the one which follows. Word order is often scrambled. Yet the scribes were conscientious – as anyone close to the Zulor would be – and they continued to write on, even when, it is plain to us now, the act of writing had become physically hard for them, and even when, towards the end, it is likely they were not sure what it was they were writing.

They wrote on.

It is not easy to know how clear any of them were as to the nature of what was happening to them. Perhaps they understood, but were by then incapable of recording the fact that they understood. Perhaps they understood intermittently. Perhaps they never understood.

One circumstance which a single scribe notes seems to indicate that this man at least grasped that the end was near.

He describes how some of the soldiers were beginning to lose their balance. Now, the Dozu of all tribes are proud of their horsemanship. They say of themselves that a Dozu horseman could ride a cloud if he could catch it.

Now, however, some of the riders began slipping from their mounts. Their

hands seemed unable to hold the reins correctly. Even this Dozu-pol scribe, used to libraries and to the lamp of study, was still heart, mind, bones and soul a Dozu, and he knew that for his people, to fall from a horse was the greatest ignominy, a cause of mockery and hoots of laughter in any witnesses, and a source of shame and damaged pride for the unfortunate rider.

The short passage describing one of the men dropping from his horse evidently caused the scribe immense pains, and he was extremely careful to concentrate his hand in recording this event.

After depicting the fall of the soldier from his mount, which the scribe saw while he was on the steps of one of the coaches, the scribe wrote: 'horse man fall off'. He underlined the words. This page is both bloodstained and tearstained. Soon after those words, although the writing goes on for some time and across several pages, it is mostly illegible, and what is legible makes no sense.'

## **xlvi**

'By the afternoon of the fourth day, the day on which E-Tzhi struck his favourite General O-Xhaz in the face when the General allowed his nose to bleed in the Shining One's presence, it was clear at least to some of the commanders that they were witnessing the disintegration, without a single enemy sword nearby, of the greatest armed power that had ever been raised, the glory and fear of eras and dynasties.

The most reliable accounts of these last days of the XaKryDozu, of the army in its death throes, and of E-Tzhi's actions, are those by the architect L-Qra and by one of the scribes.

Now, it was a curious fact of the events which unfolded on the Plain of RezSomia that not all of the army suffered in the same way or to the same extent the symptoms of the sickness which devastated the whole. Some of the men were clearly dying even on the fourth day; others were afflicted but were able, in some fashion, to go on; some proved strangely resilient, and some appeared untouched. Of the latter, it seems that by far the biggest proportion came from a particular people, the Dozu-xhi – those, in other words, from the Zulor's own tribe.

We know of course that the Zulor himself, E-Tzhi, was not an ordinary man. Though, unlike his father, of frail build, the Shining One seemed to pass entirely untouched through the gates of sickness, and to emerge upon the other side just as he had been upon entering – except, of course, without his army. Both the beast and the god in E-Tzhi seemed simply to shrug off the disease. Where the men of other tribes and peoples, such as his Dozu-pol scribes, or his Generals from the -dhra province or -xta, began to fall, the Dozu-xhi, in the main, remained standing.

The Shining One, we know, did not tarry long or often among ordinary men, or their ideas, passions, joys and sufferings. While his scribes looked with pleasure on the small, metallic, gingery ants, and noted with relief that their nests grew

abundant the further the army proceeded across the plains, E-Tzhi was in discussion with L-Qra on how deep the foundations would have to be, for a tower in four stages, higher than ZarakGar or SharAmor.

L-Qra notes with genuine amazement on how quickly the Zulor appears to be able to grasp the essence of a discipline – how, as they turned to the mathematical calculations required to establish what could be built, and what could not, the Unparalleled One seemed to grow almost visibly more intelligent, following at first but then rapidly joining the architect as virtually an equal, becoming wholly absorbed in the exercise, concentrating very hard, not wishing to eat or sleep. Like so many others, L-Qra comments on the E-Tzhi's brilliant, spellbinding gaze.

So fascinated had the Zulor become that he ordered he should not be disturbed. The curtains to the coach were drawn, and the lamp lit.

We do not know why it took so long for the Zulor to become appraised of the drastically deteriorating situation of the army outside the curtained wagon. Perhaps the creeping nature of the disaster overwhelmed the Generals in such a way that it was only on the afternoon of the fourth day that it was decided something had to be done. The effects of the sickness were insidious, and undermined the command in different ways: those who were most ill were incapable of making a clear judgement; those who were least ill, and most capable of clear judgement, underestimated the sickness precisely because they themselves did not feel it. Indecision, too, paralysed the Dozu command: even there, and then, with the evidence of the disintegration of the XaKryDozu before their eyes, it was difficult for a man, even a General, to disturb the Zulor when the Shining One had issued a categorical order that no one should enter the coach. It may seem ridiculous to us, happily living as we are in Illuminated times, but we have never had to look directly into the sun of E-Tzhi's gaze, and we have never met either the god or the beast in E-Tzhi – his Generals, we may imagine, had.

Perhaps, too, there was an unwillingness to believe in what was happening. Again, everything we have learnt about the sickness gives us the impression of a slow undermining, the gentle unravelling of faculties, rather than of sudden collapse. In any case, it was not until General O-Xhaz rode his way slowly and carefully forward to join the Iron Bull, U-Xhox, that the decision was made to enter the coach and speak with the Zulor.

U-Xhox was a man of Dozu-xhi; he was the most senior of the Generals, and although not unaffected by the sickness, retained something of his strength and of his command. Perhaps it was only when he looked into O-Xhaz's face, and saw that he was weeping, that the Iron Bull realised what he must do.

In truth, it was too late; the army, though still riding, was already finished: whatever they did, they were dead. The XaKryDozu could ride on towards LuinSom, or it could turn back – in either case, they would still have to spend days in the RezSomian Plain. And for most of the Dozu soldiers, their lifetimes were shrinking down to the scales of hours, not days.

O-Xhaz was a man of the Dozu-xta people. He was not loved by his men, but he was respected: he was brave, clever and strong-willed. The Iron Bull realised that the General from Dozu-xta had made an immense effort simply to ride forward from his position to speak to U-Xhox.

Physically, O-Xhaz was still strong – but there was a curious woodenness about his riding stance, and he had been undone in his mind, and heart, both because of what was happening to his own person but also because he remained clear-headed enough, at times, to witness what was happening around him.

What had manifested itself as a light-headedness in the Iron Bull had, in others, more severe consequences.

Individual horsemen began peeling off from their comrades, and riding slowly and aimlessly away, apparently into nowhere. They seemed to just be wandering off into the plains. At first, of course, they were stopped: some of their fellows would ride after them. By the fifth day, no one stopped them going. By the sixth day, no one noticed them going.

Other riders seemed to be under the impression that they were back at home in Dozu. They began speaking to their wives as if they were standing beside them. Some riders spoke to relatives – some to their mothers, some seemed to be seeing grandfathers or -mothers, older people who, perhaps, were already dead.

Some patted their children on the head, chided them; some sang lullabies to get their babies off to sleep. Other riders seemed anxious to check something, somewhere, outside the hut or in the stables. Some riders thought about going swimming in the great Daq river; others wished to go hunting, and whistled for their dogs.

As I have said, it is difficult to know how many, even amongst the Dozu-xhi, who proved so resistant to the sickness, were clear at that time as to what was happening. Even where the scribes' accounts are dealing with very odd behaviour around them – before the writings become completely illegible or begin to turn to strange, phantasmagorical episodes which are surely not credible – report things drily, with no, little, or ambiguous comment. It would seem that perhaps the most sinister quality of the sickness they contracted in the Plains of Quietness was that dream mixed with substance without clear divisions – the dreams came slowly down the blood, and went again, but perhaps settled, in some way, in with the substance, leaving the sufferer unable to detach hallucination from fact, and if not unable, perhaps either unwilling or (it all comes to the same thing) uncaring.

I take it as great sign of the courage and strength of mind of the stricken General O-Xhaz that he was able to make his dreamy way to speak to U-Xhox.

What was said, if anything, is unknown, but it was these two officers who dared the brilliance of the sun, and ordered the Zulorian Guard to halt the coach, so that they may speak with E-Tzhi.'

### **xlvi**

‘As it turned out, the meeting was a short one.

L-Qra notes the astonishment he felt at the temerity of the Generals. He also notes, perhaps with a rashness that was a sign of his own disorientation, that he felt a sense of immediate foreboding when the coach came to an unscheduled halt, but also some relief, as he had been closeted up with the Zulor for over a day, and was extremely tired.

O-Xhaz’s nose had started to bleed before he climbed the steps past the Watching Skulls up into the coach. It was at this point, although otherwise as serene as ever, that the Zulor struck him across the face with a ruler he happened to have in his hand.

L-Qra comments on the shock he felt at O-Xhaz’s appearance. The architect’s first thought was that there had somehow been a terrible battle, one which had lasted for days, which was the only thing he could think of to account for the blood and for the dull, shattered look on the young General’s face.

Oblivious to the blood running down his lips and mouth and chin, and therefore not really understanding why the Zulor had been so affronted, General O-Zhaz made a bow.

E-Tzhi waited for a few moments. General U-Xhox – looking, as always, the architect noted, as if he had just walked in from a field he had been ploughing – appeared unwilling to speak; General O-Zhaz seemed oddly incapable of speech.

The Shining One asked for an explanation.

There was a pause. All U-Xhox could say was, “Shining One!”, and bow his head. O-Zhaz – and the architect was struck by the inarticulacy of the man who, a few days before, had given a masterful and fluent analysis of the strategic position of the Zulor’s forces – seemed to be trying to form words, but was finding it extremely hard.

Finally, however, he managed to say, with a kind of massive deliberation: “Zulor – help us”.

And then he gestured, with a single hand, towards the door, and outside, to where the soldiers of the XaKryDozu were beginning to ride slowly around and past the stationary coach of their master.

E-Tzhi went to the door, and looked out.’

### **xlix**

‘Who can say what passes like clouds across the mind of a god?

The Zulor stepped down from his coach, and with a bodyguard of his Watching Skulls, set out to establish what was happening to his invasion.

He gave the order to General U-Xhox to halt the advance. L-Qra describes the Iron Bull as looking perplexed – as if a thought had rolled into his empty head, and he wasn’t sure what to do with it.

Experts in the study of these records point out that the architect's tone in these writings is increasingly flippant, and take this as a sign that the general malaise had affected the cultured man from the Dozu-xhi tribe.

The Zulor alone seemed clear-headed during these dark moments of a Dark Season. General U-Xhox appeared almost to wake up out of a dream when he was given this simple, direct command.

But the General, who mounted his horse and cantered off towards the head of the column, found he was unable to stop the advance. He ordered the officers riding slowly forward there to halt, which some did – but others did not. He commanded that the bugles be sounded to signal the XaKryDozu to cease advancing: some bugles did sound but, again, others did not. Some may have heard them, many probably did not. Again and again the bright silver notes rang out down the length and across the breadth of the Horse Army, the stabs of music growing progressively quieter the further back the order was sounded, dwindling away into the unimaginable body of the XaKryDozu as it unfolded across the plain – but, somehow, the order was not obeyed, or obeyed in such a haphazard and disorganised way that it was ineffectual.

The Iron Bull made another attempt to halt the advance, cantering out in front of the lead riders, which was like riding out in front of a vast, slowly moving wave: General U-Xhox held out his arms and bellowed his order, halt, halt, halt. But although some riders attempted to draw up, most riders did not, and they simply walked round the stationary riders and on; the vast majority of the Dozu horsemen were now just following the horse ahead, the bugles sounded somewhere and then stopped, some bugles sounded the charge, others retreat, some both; and officers shouted, and lashed out with their riding crops, but the momentum was too much, and the main body of the XaKryDozu continued advancing, at a walk, the whole army following the leading horses. Even those riders who at first had attempted to obey the commands, when the rest of the XaKryDozu begin pouring round and by them, either were caught up, either voluntarily or involuntarily, with the sea-like advance, and joined those who rode up to the General shouting from his horse, and joined their fellows, parting to the left or to the right, and left him behind, struggling to get himself clear and to make his way back to the Zulor's coach.

When General U-Xhox reported that he was unable to halt the advance of the XaKryDozu, E-Tzhi, looking around with his magical, troubled eyes at his own army drifting by, nodded and made a graceful, slender gesture with a wave of his hand – as if to say, L-Qra suggests, “I see. Don't concern yourself any further. It's of no consequence”.

Who can say what passes like clouds across the mind of a god?

E-Tzhi added, after a moment: “U-Xhox, I have a yearning to see Dozu again.”

And the Shining One nodded his head sagely, confirming the depth of his desire to see Dozu.

Here, apparently, the Iron Bull began laughing, and he laughed for a long time.'

I

'It is doubtful that many of the XaKryDozu realised that their Zulor was leaving them, or even that the coach train, reduced in number, had pulled out from the main body of the army and was beginning to move north, being pulled for a time alongside the horsemen relentlessly riding south.

There is an element of farce about parts of the testimony of the one remaining scribe who did not capitulate to the sickness.

The Zulor ordered his Guard, the Watching Skulls, who were all Dozu-xhi men, members of the Shining One's own tribe, to leave some of the coaches where they stood but to swing those he selected out of the way of the dying horsemen and form them up for the journey back towards the Vulture Gates.

Extra teams of horses were secured. Some of the officers of the Zulorian Guard hailed the ranks, and commanded that any man who was capable of understanding and following orders should ride out and join the formation.

The Shining One himself stood, a cloak wrapped loosely around him, near the steps to his travelling coach, waiting patiently while these various measures were implemented. He, L-Qra, U-Xhox and O-Zhaz lingered together in a small group, with some officers of the Watching Skulls nearby, while this residue of the Horse Army continued the preparations to ride north.

They watched as the moribund host of the XaKryDozu filed sedately past them. Bugles were still being blown the whole length of the army, which disappeared back into the distance, the sounds growing more and more muted the further away they were. Different and conflicting signals were still being played, the charge, the halt, reveille, but many of the sounds which floated up into the evening air weren't recognisable as orders at all, and were often just single notes, trailing aimlessly away, or repeated over and over again.

It was late afternoon, and a light snowfall was in progress.

The Zulor's words have been gathered for posterity by the faithful architect.

E-Tzhi's tone was relaxed and conversational.

O-Zhaz was no longer capable of standing unsupported and had sat down on the ground. He didn't have the strength or the ability to speak anymore, but just sat, holding the reins of his horse tightly in his left hand.

Although this small group of people were some way off from the passing XaKryDozu, L-Qra reports that they could still hear a regular thumping sound as men fell helplessly from their horses, their bodies dropping to the ground like heavy seeds.

Odd riders wandered from the column here and there, and rode towards the west, past where their Zulor and Generals were watching. One came so close they

could hear him speaking quite forcefully to someone in the Dozu-xta dialect, but the matter of his conversation was not clear.

The Zulor made numerous remarks. L-Qra thought the Shining One was politely doing his best to make the time pass.

He chided O-Zhaz, but in a soft, gentle voice which made clear he was not serious in his reprimand.

“Oh, I shouldn’t have listened to you, O-Zhaz” he said. The young General stared down at the grass, and the snowflakes falling on his boots. “Those old -xhi dogs we left at MoLitzSur were right. But never mind, never mind.”

After a pause he said: “Those Dainty ones have been very clever. They have made the air of space itself fight their battle for them. Eh, U-Xhox?”

The Iron Bull nodded.

The Zulor summoned a messenger from out of the ranks of the Zulorian Guard, and instructed his architect to write down a message. It was very simple, just two words: “I understand”.

He told the messenger to ride with the XaKryDozu. “Go with my Dozu angels. When the Dainty ones come to meet you, ensure these words reach Moin, the Unblemished One. Execute my order or I will execute you. Go. Go.”

A long pause then ensued.

They knew that, if they remained on that spot, they would be watching the XaKryDozu go by for several hours.

Finally, the captain of the Zulorian Guard reported to the Zulor that everything was ready for them to ride north.

E-Tzhi nodded and waved the captain away.

E-Tzhi looked at the ground for a while.

Then he looked up, wrinkling his face at the weather.

“It will be cold, tonight” he said.

Again there was a pause. The Zulor was meditative. He seemed to be in no hurry to go.

General O-Zhaz settled a little, slumping down, his left leg stretching out. He maintained his tight grip on the reins.

Eventually, the Shining One turned to face his senior General.

“So, we leave. U-Xhox, you are an old -xhi dog. I see you want to come with us, but I also see you will not.”

The General did something he had never done before: he looked, calmly and at length directly into the sun of the Shining One’s eyes. But he said nothing.

The Zulor nodded, then looked away towards the captain of the Watching Skulls, signalling him to get the column moving.

“So. Generals – to you goes the honour of taking LuinSom. Look after my Dozu angels: I will need them again in the spring.”

These were the last words of the Shining One before he boarded his travelling coach.

And then both columns were moving: the XaKryDozu southwards, and the Watching Skulls, with the Zulor and his retinue, northwards.

It was dusk on the fourth day of the XaKryDozu's ride across the RezSomian Plain.'

## li

'The Dozu gods, like many of the gods of the Eastern Lands are gods of place. In a river, a river god; by the shore, a god of the sea.

If there was a god of that place, the Plain of Quietness, he did not welcome the murmuring host of the XaKryDozu, he did not look kindly on his peace being disturbed. He was content with the company of the small, gingery ants with the shining bodies; he wanted nothing more than those teeming little ones. Perhaps, like people through eras and dynasties, he delighted in the industry of the ants, their endless mining operations, their marchings and their colonies, the elegance of their social order, perhaps even their very diminutiveness, upon which he could look down and study at a glance, a whole empire in a few paces of ground. He was a quiet and a simple god, perhaps.

We of the Way have no gods: we believe in peace, and if we find gods, believe they should be left in peace, their heavens uninvaded either by belief or doubt. It is the Subtle Way.

As I have said, there was an element of farce about the scribes' last days, something ridiculous. The Unparalleled One had ordered the train of his numerous coaches to be reassembled in a shorter order. E-Tzhi selected from among his retinue those he felt essential to join him on the ride back to the Vulture Gates and out of the Plain of Quietness. His decisions seem reasonable to those, like us, who do not think or live as gods. So, for example, he took with him his barbers, but his tailors he let go on with the XaKryDozu. He took his chefs, but not his fencing masters or his astrologists. He took his experts in maps and languages, but left all his musicians, except for one young Dozu-xhi singer, who was forced to share a coach with the Zulor's doctors. The Zulor took his experts in interrogation, who were forced to travel as best they could in their normal place of work, what the dying Dozu farmboys and herdsmen had called the Box of Screams, or the Singing Box. His experts in sciences, in metals and minerals, he left to continue their passage south, the coaches being drawn on by ambling horses with the rest of the now-unstoppable XaKryDozu, a force whose own animal momentum held them together and carried them on, down towards the waiting RoMayZir.

The Zulor took his architect, although in the confusion the coach containing most of the plans on which they had been working was left behind. And the scribes, too, were told that they were to travel north, and were directed to, and in several cases helped to, a coach, where they were told to wait. After a pause, during which the sun set, with a soft jolt, the horses began to draw the coach, and they were on their

way. There was relief on the part of one scribe, the Dozu-xhi, M-Araz, who retained a semblance of health; it is impossible to know what his Dozu-pol colleagues felt, because they could no longer record it. They made marks on the pages of their quick books, but the marks no longer resemble any known language. M-Araz watched his colleagues scribbling away, manically; M-Araz himself records his intense desire to remain close to the Shining One, the blessed and blessing one – M-Araz says that he feels, as long he is near to the Zulor, he will not be harmed.

As the scribes' coach bumped through the early part of the night of the fourth day in the Plains of Quietness, M-Araz realised that they were still going south. They were travelling so slowly now that he could open the door of the coach and step down. Looking up, he saw that there were no coachmen. No one was driving the coach: the horses must have waited until, following some instinct, they began moving of their own accord, joining themselves with the other horses and riders passing endlessly around them.

M-Araz is the only stable witness of the last two days of the XaKryDozu. He was clear-eyed, and accepted what had happened. He returned to the coach and continued writing. Several of the final pages of his quick book are devoted not to prose, but to poems. These are mostly love poems to his wife; they are tender and very peaceful. I have seen the book. It is hard to speak of it: we should be grateful to this obscure Dozu-xhi scribe, who left us this testimony. It is a matter of wonder that the book survives. We should contemplate carefully the example of this barbarian who, though he knew he was present at the death of his own world, yet continued writing, right into the heart of his own death.

We learn that M-Araz placed immense value on the art of poetry. He speaks of this at length. A world that loses its understanding of poetry loses its real life, he says. Without poetry, there are only walls and trees, pebbles and stones. He seems to believe that poetry is a unifying force. After a particularly beautiful love poem to his wife, he mentions a belief that somewhere in the universe there exists a poem which will save the world – and expresses optimism that someone, in some place, after unfathomable eras and dynasties, may write this poem. This is not a thought unique to M-Araz, but exists in the metal thoughts of the Ancients. Perhaps in the art of poetry, this barbarian descried a little of what we, the Illuminated ones, see in the Way. After a short passage describing the state of his colleagues, how one is now covering page after page in pencil marks, the doodles growing fantastic and whorling, M-Araz restates his belief in the mysterious poem which can save the world, and in the prospect that someone will write it. He adds drily: “But it won't be a scribe from the Dozu-xhi”; and then, “Perhaps this poem will be written. But will anyone read it?”

So the scribes' coach was pulled without need of drivers on towards the fifth morning of the ride of the XaKryDozu, the oil lamp swinging above the table.'

‘The symptoms of the last stages of the sickness which afflicted the Dozu Horse Army vary among the different sufferers, but M-Araz reports that a kind of apathy settled on most of them.

By the fifth day, there were large numbers of riderless horses. The XaKryDozu moved south, shedding riders all the time as a haycart sheds straws. The plain was littered with countless objects, a trail of metal and leather, boot and blade, canteens, knives, pieces of clothing; the XaKryDozu left this wrack behind, things it no longer needed or could not hang on to, dropping in constant pieces, a kind of rain, a wake of gear.

Among his own poems and his visions of a mysterious Great Poem, M-Araz describes in detached terms what is happening around him. He can no longer converse with his fellow scribes – they have deteriorated: they are not speaking any language he understands, or even knows, if they are speaking at all. When on the odd occasion a Dozu dialect is used, the words seem to have become uncoupled from the world. The scribes don’t address each other, but appear to be talking to someone else in the room, invisible to M-Araz. Or, if one does address another, the person addressed does not appear to be listening. Curious conversations go on, in languages which don’t exist, on unimaginable themes, to insubstantial listeners, or to phantoms. M-Araz does record that it is difficult for him to remain in the coach, and despite the cold, he leaves it for long periods of time, and sits up on the coachmen’s seat, looking down over the wandering host of the XaKryDozu.

The sickness is now well advanced. There seem to be thousands of men who, though ill, are not dying – the Dozu-xhi scribe here makes the connection with the resilience of his own people to the disease, and the susceptibility of other tribes – but thousands among the XaKryDozu mean a tiny minority. The Dozu-xhi men are unable to halt the advance or in any way ameliorate the disaster. Apathy, or light-headedness, or perhaps a disbelief or resignation, makes even the relatively healthy soldiers unable or unwilling to care.

There are no bugle calls anymore. Most of the Dozu horsemen are just trying to cling on to the necks of their horses. They are slumped. Almost all are bleeding from the nose, and some are bleeding from the mouth. Some hold their heads, and are evidently in pain. There is vomiting.

There is a murmur to the army, a quiet babble. Like the scribes, the majority of the riders are now not really with their colleagues, but talking in low voices to the air. There are still songs, whistles, occasional shouts. If you closed your eyes, the scribe says, you might think that the army was still entirely intact: the sound of the horses, chinking of gear, the sense of an enormous mass filing along in ranks – a dull, immense hubbub fills your ears.

M-Araz mounts a vacant horse, and picks his way through the throng, riding out to the flank of the XyKraDozu, trying to get some sense of perspective. It is quieter out there in the open space. He notes a large number of ant nests, the creatures still

active despite the snowfall. He says he feels at peace. Watching the doomed army no longer fills him with fear. He says it goes easily, like a force of nature, without strain; it is slow, and immense, but doesn't know its own pain, is unaware of its own condition. There is something solemn about it, like watching a column of mourners. The individuals fall away. But the XyKraDozu goes on. We are lashed to it: when it dies, we die. But we die, and it goes on, unheeding, carrying us with it. This is the XyKraDozu.

As evening draws in on the fifth day, M-Araz, scoops up in his hand a few mouthfuls of water from a brook, and waits and watches his horse drink, too. The animal is very thirsty. He sees from the markings on the saddle that it is, or was, the mount of a man of the Dozu-xta. I have never seen that province, M-Araz remarks. There is a small whistle hanging from the saddle, and a woman's headscarf, typically worn by the women of the Pure Way, perhaps a trophy of some sort from the earlier summer of conquest. There is a short poem, written that evening, which uses the headscarf as a motif: the poem is exquisite. I have seen and read this poem: the quick book of M-Araz came into the possession of one of my revered ancestors, Zomasosin on:suli, and lies in the library of the Household of the on:suli line, forever under the protection of the Mark of the Cherry Blossom.

M-Araz washes his face in the brook, uses the headscarf to dry his face. It is cold out on the Plain of Quietness. M-Araz then rides up to the very front of the XyKraDozu, where he finds a number of Dozu-xhi soldiers, still relatively healthy, grouped around General U-Xhox.

The General greets M-Araz.

"Ah, another dog of Xhi!" U-Xhox says, bluffly. And then, referring to his own nickname, and to his current station, riding out at the head of the XyKraDozu, he says, in a remark difficult to translate into our Imperial tongue, "You see, an Iron Bull draws a great weight" or, "to drag such a weight it takes a Bull of Iron between the shafts". And the General gestures back with his hand to the thousands and thousands of men and animals behind him.

There is a messenger of the Zulor, in full Zulorian livery. We may assume this was the man to whom E-Tzhi gave his message, instructing that it be passed on to the Unblemished One.

Of course, this did not happen.

There are other generals, also of the Dozu-xhi: General G-Muzhi, the Firehead, of whom the scribe remarks, 'his fire is put out'; General A-Zhop, a younger general of Xhi, who is described at this time as looking up to U-Xhox as a child looks up to a father; and General K-Xsiz, known as the Silent, a man famed for his efficiency and powers of organisation, an expert on seige, though a good horse soldier too.

Of the others of the Fifteen Generals, there was no sign.

"They are off chasing stray sheep" U-Xhox remarks, using a proverb of the Xta people of Dozu. He didn't use the full proverb, however, which goes on: "and leaving the flock to wander".

### liii

‘The morning of the sixth day began with a natural sign which, if the warriors of the Dozu Horse Army hadn’t already, in effect, died, would have been taken as a portent of catastrophe. As it was, the army rode on somnambulently, passively, unable to do anything else.

M-Araz’s final poem is called *Black Snow*, for this is what fell from the gloomy skies that morning. The poem is very short.

M-Araz describes the curious phenomenon of the black snow, in prose, almost without surprise. He himself says that five days before, it would have been as an augury of disaster; now, it is merely a kind of confirmation that the disaster has already occurred.

Well, it is a matter of wonder and dismay. I have said that we in the Western Lands are blessed with many rich and fertile provinces; and in all of those we strive to remain Vigilant, and so to maintain the Way. But the Plain of RezSomia is *az-ri*, barren, and there our people do not go: we keep no roads there, man no towers – there, the Way is closed.

The black snow fell all morning, and gradually began to cover the white snow which had already fallen. The scribe held a few of the black flakes in his hand, and watched them melt; on melting, they grew translucent; apart from a faint odour, they looked and behaved like the flakes of ordinary snow.

As the day went on, the snow began to change colour, the blackness phasing into grey – like riding through floating ashes, the scribe says – and so to white again.

By this time, there were more riderless horses than mounted ones, and among the riders, more dead than living. Many Dozu had simply died as they rode, slumped forward, their balance marvellous in death as in life. Others had tried to lash themselves up with their reins, so they would be carried onward regardless. There is a saying common across all Dozu peoples, that it is better to die on a horse than to live walking.

The bodies of many soldiers, legs caught up in ropes or stirrups, were being trailed and dragged along the plain by their horses. Although the mass of the XaKryDozu was still intact, it was now beginning to disintegrate: the dead and dying were spreading out across the flat terrain, the column mushrooming out of shape, beasts milling and turning, riders without will or sense, so that there were now more animal sounds than human.

The great Dozu draught horses continued to draw the coach in which the scribes were lying or seated. Several had died through the night. M-Araz left them where they were.

The remaining ones were still attempting to write, as if somewhere deep in themselves they felt that if they could keep marking the pages, they could keep living. The Dozu-xhi scribe notes that one curious effect of the sickness was that while the ability to write had deserted all of these men, one of them, a Pol man who was an excellent draughtsman, seemed to have not only retained his skill, but

to have found it enhanced. There are indeed beautiful pencil drawings among the pages of the man's quick book: he was a naturalist. The final drawings, however, are not of creatures which exist in substance, but of hallucinatory beasts, very carefully executed, which must have been making their way across the Pol scribe's mind – one animal, a fusion of a vulture and a horse; another, as if a horse has somehow been grafted onto a snake.

They say that those who smoke the *kaziah* root, who climb the vegetable stairs to walk from time and space, and who must be careful there they do not meet the King of Dreams, speak of strange creatures they encounter while the root is heavy in their minds, and of limbs which grow like tentacles and will not keep their proper shape. I do not know of these things: people of the Pure Way despise the *kaziah* as imPure, and rightly shun those who take to the pipe as being lost and polluted, incapable of the vigilance on which our life is founded. The last hours of the Dozu Horse Army, though, seem to have taken place for most who retained their senses, in a dreary, weightless *kaziah* dream, where things floated and changed, and came loose from substance, and meant nothing.

M-Araz's account continues to seem trustworthy for the main part. The black snow, for example, is a known phenomenon: though it is assumed to occur mostly over the Plain itself, the black snow has sometimes fallen on the city of LuinSom – it is regarded there with horror, and the people stay indoors, wear cannisters and respirators, and sluice away the snow with water drawn from pure wells. They have a saying: when black snow falls, find a roof and walls.

We cannot say whether M-Araz's account is entirely substantial. He had remained alive and apparently unharmed for six days, while around him the universe of the XaKryDozu turned to mush and splinters. He complains of headaches and nausea. He says that he is very tired. But he rides again, for the last time, away from the coach of scribes. The snow has stopped falling. He says he hears music from one of the coaches. Men are slipping from their horses all the time now, and the XaKryDozu, is at last beginning to lose all momentum. Still, M-Araz thinks, it will be hours before the column will finally stop. He wonders how near they are to the edge of the Plain. He says, then, they will never leave this Plain. The horses themselves are exhibiting signs of sickness. Some are lying down, some buckling. Their bodies litter the ground in all directions for as far as he can see. It is as if a great wave has risen far beyond the normal reach of waves, and dropped upon the land uncountable objects, then retreated, leaving them where they should not be.

As darkness falls, he returns to the coach. He hears the final chaos begin as up ahead the Eastern Hand of the RoMayZir appears on the horizon and begins to ride down the slight incline into the bowl of the plain to begin the simplification.

He steps up onto the platform of the now-stationary coach, and watches as the riders of the Marks descend upon the Dozu-xhi Generals and men at the head of the ambling, stumbling XaKryDozu.

He watches for a few minutes what happens, then goes inside, and writes the last

sentences in his quick book.

He says: “They are coming. They are not Dainty ones, but the demons we met at MoLitzSur. They are dark, and they have violet eyes.”

Then, the barbarian scribe quotes some of the words of Marinsomar, which had heard or transcribed in the spring: “The Way is all. The Way is both life and death, and neither life nor death; the Way is without life and without death, the Way is lifeless, and deathless.”

Then he adds: “But I am not a man of the Way. Now, I am going to die.”

And his final words: “Goodbye, my wife.”

## **liv**

‘It is getting late and dark, and we must ride on soon.

Still, I invoke the power of the *seria-ma*, and ask that the sun remain upon us, and that the ride be delayed, so that I may finish my history, and answer with the full resources of the Way a question concerning the Way.

Listen.

It was said by the barbarian historians that the army of the XaKryDozu was so vast that, if you could collect the dung that fell from their horses during a single day’s ride, it would make a hill a man would take a day to climb.

Well, it is vanity and spume. Yet the historians of the Western Lands accept that the XaKryDozu was one of the wonders of the world.

For the Host of the RoMayZir, the destruction of this wonder became, in the end, not really a problem of battle, but one of butchery. The simplification of such vast numbers of men, most of whom were incapable of serious resistance, almost came down to a question of mathematics, not of courage, and of a race to achieve the first phase of the No Answer strategy in a limited time.

The barbarian M-Araz had written, ‘they have violet eyes.’ It is doubtful that he could have gained anything more than a very sketchy impression, for he witnessed the first attack from a considerable distance – and, after all, he speaks of demons and not of men, which is an unIlluminated view of the warriors of the RoMayZir, the cream of the Marks of the Western Lands. Still, he also says that ‘they are dark’, and perhaps he was able to make out some of the details of the Pure warriors as they fell upon General U-Xhox and his fellow Dozu officers and men.

Not wishing to expose themselves to the imPure elements of the RezSomian Plain, the RoMayZir fought this decisive battle in what is known as Clear Armour. In other words, the skin of their bodies was entirely covered in the close suits of the Ancients, over which they wore their ancestral mail. They wore battle cloaks, not the heavy riding cloaks we use for journeys, but of a lighter, more supple material, which yet protected from the sun’s light. The cloaks were hooded, and the hoods tied up securely so they did not impede vision. On their backs, the warriors of the Marks wore cannisters full of good air; on their faces, full masks, respirators and

war goggles.

As they had chosen to fight the initial stage of the battle by night, they had switched their goggles to the dark vision, which would account for the violet eyes of the barbarian scribe's description.

Thus, the RoMayZir of the Eastern Hand were dressed for night battle in an impure region precisely as is laid down by the Ancients in the metal books of war.

It may be imagined that their appearance caused terror in any Dozu man capable of feeling it. They would never have encountered in Eastern or Western Lands any opponent like this. M-Araz spoke of demons and perhaps this, in their half-phantasmogoric state, was what the Dozu saw descending upon them.

However, we no longer need to depend upon barbarian accounts of this battle. Indeed, there are none. M-Araz's salutation to his wife is the high-water mark of the written invasion by the polluted ones of the East into our lands – unless one counts the message which the Zulorian messenger tried to deliver to the RoMayZine Shepherd Mark, but which remained in his pocket, or hand, or blew across RezSomia until it disintegrated, for the Zulor's messenger was cut down where he stood. No, the unilluminated ones penetrated no further south, either by word or footstep, than the rim of the RezSomian Plain. And no barbarian survived the Battle of RezSomia to speak of it; while the warriors of the RoMayZir, for the most part, remain silent about it.

The damaging air and light and water of the Plain of Quietness had already fought the battle for the Emperor. The XyKraDozu could not, as Kozosoyar on:noru of the Shepherd Mark later said, lay seige to space or charge at time. They were gently undone, their bodies and minds unbuttoned by the sickness, which opened up their souls, exposed, beneath garment of flesh and thought.

The initial smash-through between the advancing Dozu-xhi Generals and the warriors of the Shepherd Mark was the only significant combat which took place that night. It did not last long. Even then, it was not a serious assault by one force upon another – the Dozu-xhi did not attack, it seemed rather that U-Xhox and his men, though they must have known that the wonder of the XyKraDozu had already crumbled from within, still desparately sought to protect the vulnerable mass from the oncoming RoMayZir. It was only a matter of minutes, however, and then, the Iron Bull and his men simplified on the ground, the huge stunned creature of the Dozu Horse Army lay open before Kozosoyar and the Western Marks.

These are the true events of a Dark Season. Whereas at MoLitzSur, only RoMayZine warriors fought, here there were other Marks, those SurKuZor or Signs of Light Marks, such as the Cherry Blossom of my revered ancestors, the Pine Tree, Empty Barrel, Black Sun and Ploughing Oxen; however, and by prior understanding, the RoMayZine Marks such as Falling Snow and Red Cloud were to lead the simplification.

I imagine it was a lurid and a hateful hour. Kozosoyar on:noru's own memoir, which unusually has been seen by members of other Households than RoMayZine,

speaks of the darkness falling and the faint violet rays emitted from the armoured eyes of our warriors crossing and crisscrossing, with flashes of blades and grimace of face mask and respirator. Remember, they fought No Option: the Enemy was to be simplified.

They worked quickly, because they were on cannisters. The Clear Armour is perfect, and protects the wearer even from so impure a place as RezSomia, but the cannisters can only defend one against the air for so long: then, the warrior must replace cannisters or retreat – or risk the same death as that which overwhelmed the XyKraDozu.

Kozosoyar's tactic on realising the moribund nature of the Dozu Horse was straightforward. Firstly it was to arrest their forward momentum; then, to push them back, north, towards the centre of the plains.

There is another memoir, very short and shorn of detail, still regarded as the classic work on this engagement, by a member of the SurKuZor Dragonfly Mark, Alamsodin dai:kuni. Alamsodin writes that the Marks were taken aback by the sheer scale of the deterioration in their opponents. The No Answer strategy had, of course, sought to usher the Zulor and his forces through the wasteland, and so to weaken and demoralise them. However, the Marks still expected to be facing a terrible foe. Alamsodin seems to suggest – his elegant, concise prose is often ambiguous, deliberately cryptic – that, faced with an already impotent enemy, certain of the members of the SurKuZor Marks wished to reassess the No Option policy.

The Marks had of course discussed tactics in LuinSom. Because they fought a Clear Armour battle, they did not lift the respirators, and so did not speak: communication was by RoMayZine hand and body signals.

Kozosoyar's memoir, written after Alamsodin's, also speaks of confusion among the RoMayZir – especially, it is implied, among the SurKuZor Marks.

Whatever doubt or reassessment happened early that night among the SurKuZor, and whatever the Subtle battle later fought out between memoirists, Kozosoyar insisted on the implementation of the agreed tactics, and of the continuing execution of the policy of No Option. In other words, as his memoir, with typical RoMayZine incisiveness, not one Enemy soldier was to set foot off that plain. Simplification was to be total: no complexity should cloud the peace of the Pure Way.

It was not easy to turn the great XyKraDozu. Alamsodin writes of trying to turn back a wide river using bare hands. But with the RoMayZine Marks in the lead, simplifying relentlessly as they went, gradually the dying advance of the Dozu Horse was brought to a standstill, and then, after further simplification of man and animal, slowly the river was encouraged to flow back, through and against itself, into the wasteland.

Alamsodin, a man of Subtle Rank, uses the words 'too simple' to describe the destruction of the XyKraDozu during that night and the succeeding days. As is the Subtle way, this may even be an oblique form of praise. Kozosoyar's memoir speaks, less elliptically, of the danger of allowing war to become 'too clouded',

and restating basic RoMayZine principles with a provocative metaphor that was surely aimed directly at the memoirist of the SurKuZor Dragonfly Mark: ‘for the RoMayZine, if a dragonfly is the Enemy, it is important simply that the dragonfly ceases. The hands move quickly when the mind is clear. But if judgement becomes too clouded, as may happen with minds shaped by the philosophy of the Signs of Light, then the hands may shake, and the dragonfly escape.’

Well, it is foolish to seek to fight the battles of other men from earlier eras and dynasties. What is clear is that no prisoners were taken: Lansozar dai:juri’s strategy of No Answer to the Enemy seemed to have been interpreted by the RoMayZine to mean ‘no speech’ at all. It is the RoMayZine’s absolute adherence to the policy of No Option which the Dragonfly Alamsodin dai:kuni seems to find ‘too simple’. Yet it was the RoMayZine Marks which fought most of the crucial battles of this early phase of the Dark Season; and their philosophy of war, which to a man of a SurKuZor Mark may have seemed mysterious, surely underpinned the actions which saved the whole Way at a time of great peril.

Of course, uppermost in their minds as the RoMayZir of all Marks began cutting their way through the Enemy, and driving the Dozu back into the wasteland, was the location of the Zulor himself. It is the Dragonfly Alamsodin’s contention, if we understand him, that the failure to take prisoners and question them led to the escape of their prize.

This is debatable. In principle, Alamsodin would seem to have a point: but in fact, in this instance, it is questionable whether any real gains would have been made. Most of the soldiers weren’t even aware that the Zulor had left them. Of the few that were aware, most were unable to make sense of a question, never mind answer one. The Dozu-xhi Generals and men at the van of the XaKryDozu knew that the Zulor’s coach train and bodyguard had gone north, and when, but it is unlikely they would have given up any information speedily, and besides, evidently wished to die on RezSomia with the rest of the XaKryDozu. The Zulor’s messenger alone, perhaps, of the nonmilitary men, would have been prepared to speak: however, the Zulor had abandoned his army more than two days before, and even given the relative slowness of his coach train, had still made a lot of the ground towards safety. Even if the Marks had been instantaneously appraised of the situation, it is quite possible they would not have caught up with the Shining One. A further point to consider is that, in order to question prisoners, the Pure questioner would have to remove his Clear Armour, and would thus have endangered his own life. Again, it is foolish to seek to fight the battles of other men from earlier eras and dynasties: one may only seek to tell their story as justly and as truthfully as one can.

The Battle of RezSomia was thus fought on pure No Option lines. The coaches where the scribes and all other members of the Zulor’s retinue had journeyed were broken into and ransacked, the maps and books taken back to LuinSom to see if they might contain any information of value. For the RoMayZine Marks, their search for the Zulor was in accordance with a philosophy of absolutes: they would

simplify everyone they found, and thus ensure that the Shining One, wherever he was, was not on the Plain of Quietness.’

#### **Iv**

‘It is getting late, and we must soon ride on.

It took several days for the Eastern Hand of the RoMayZir to complete their work on the Plain of RezSomia.

A supply line was established, the main object of which was to ensure that the warriors who worked deeper into the plains were provided with freshly charged cannisters.

Once it was established that the barbarian Zulor had deserted his army, and that he and his Zulorian Guard were not to be found among the milling and threshing masses of the XaKryDozu, the Marks divided up, and sent forward detachments of rapid riders, searching for the hated enemy.

The second day of the battle was fought during a succession of short flurries of heavy snow fall, with strong winds driving in from the east. The following day there was more snow, although then the weather grew still. The combined effect of the wind and snow, however, was sufficient to remove the tracks of the Zulor’s retreating party, and the Shining One continued to evade capture.

It was said that Moin-so-zhure II, the Emperor of the Pure Land, returned to LuinSom before the first night of the battle was over. This was deemed a wise and welcome course of action, both by the people of LuinSom and by the warriors of the various Marks fighting out on the plains.

After the long initial chaos caused by the barbarians’ invasion, information concerning the death of Marinsomar had finally reached the venerable Emperor. He had heard, and believed, the rumour that E-Tzhi had caused Marinsomar’s body to be cut into six pieces, and to be transported in boxes along with his retinue in the coach train of the XaKryDozu. It was said that the Unblemished One left the field only once it had been established that the Zulor had escaped, and that Marinsomar’s remains were not among the shattered coaches of the retinue.

It has been suggested by warriors of his Five Towers Mark, which uniquely contains houses of both RoMayZine and of SurKuZor traditions, as well as other more esoteric or rare traditions, that Moin II rode back to LuinSom a man scattered among griefs. It is illustrative of our different traditions, and interpretations of the Way, that accounts given by RoMayZine sources imply that Moin II lost his radiance because he felt he had lost his son; whereas SurKuZor members of his Mark believed that the Emperor, contemplating the battle, broke upon his own compassion. It was too much for a Subtle old man to see hard death before him. It is bitter to think of this, the suffering of the bereaved Emperor, for whom the so-zhure policy of the Extended Hand had held such promise, as he watched his enemy being thrown down before him. The Emperor had not sought an enemy;

even there, on RezSomia, perhaps he saw friends dying. He was Subtle. It surely would have mattered little to him that, as a RoMayZine commentator points out, the simplification of the helpless horse soldiers of the XaKryDozu was an incidental mercy, for they were already dying.

Moin II did not survive the new era, that of the Dark Season, which was inaugurated during his reign.

As for the end of the XaKryDozu, all commentaries, both RoMayZine and SurKuZor, are silent. Alamsodin, who moved north towards MoLitzCor along with the main strength of the Eastern Hand of the RoMayZir, speaks of his last view of the conflict. He writes that the RoMayZine Marks of Falling Snow, Grey Monkey and Red Cloud, were forcing the barbarians north and east. The Dragonfly man says that there was no resistance at all by this time. The Pure riders were moving slowly, methodically, driving the body of the Dozu Horse Army before them, into the anonymity of the Quiet Plain, away from the other Marks, as if they were herding cattle, just as their farmers did on the expansive estates in the south.

Again, it is not easy to speak of the complete dissolution of one of the wonders of the world. I have been brought up in the ways of light: the Mark of my ancestors is the Cherry Blossom, famed for the pursuit of peace and the gentle Way.

Once built, what can an empire do but fall? Only an empire of true purity, built upon vigilance and maintaining the Way, can endure. Such an empire can happen between the left eye and the right eye of a single man; or it can encompass all the eyes of the world.

The Way, and not empires, is what rolls on. If we allow the Way to be disturbed or closed down, true suffering must follow. Of course, suffering must happen: but once the Way is abandoned, we cannot even say that our suffering is real – without the Way, even our agonies are lies, though we feel them all the same.

As for those who would build an empire of metal and stones, the fate of the XyKraDozu should be noted. Apart from the Zulorian party, fleeing to the north, not a single man or animal survived the passage of RezSomia. The RoMayZir pursued all. Those that were not already dead, were simplified.

We did not touch or bury the bodies, but left them lying where they fell. This was eras and dynasties ago. No Pure man ventures into that region. It was shunned before the Dark Season: now it is abhorrent to us. But we left the alien dead in a land to which their own folly had brought them. They rested there, left to the elements, the wind, the sun, the rain, and no doubt their bodies shucked off the flesh in time to leave the bones, shifted now and again over eras and dynasties by the local upheaval of a new nest of the small, gingery, teeming ants.

Man and animal, the XyKraDozu went down there. Not much, now, I imagine, is left. But the people of LuinSom have their own name for RezSomia. They call it the plain of the million horseshoes.

It is bitter to think that the man who led his people there did not die with them. But what was broken there on the Quiet Plain was broken, we think, forever.

He came to that place a god, with the army of a god; he left it like a hunted rabbit, with a few dirty minions.

He had sent a message, and asked for an answer. We gave him none. We gave him whatever remains out there under the RezSomian stars. And in the end, he was forced to respond to the people of the Way, although we had said nothing.

I know not what ink his message was written with. I imagine it was imperishable. When I consider those days, I think of the Zulor's messenger, cut down in an instant and forgotten. Somewhere, perhaps still in his pocket, or in a wallet, or in his hand, the message rested. Eras and dynasties have passed, the messenger has not moved. Cloth, leather and fingers have given up their charge. A scrap of the finest Zulorian paper, handwoven, flutters across the plain. The ink is cunningly mixed, it will never fade. But the paper is weak: it will not be able to contain its own atoms. The wind takes it, and the message is blown hither and thither across the sandy earth of RezSomia. The paper turns to shreds, the shreds to pieces, the pieces to dust, the dust to vapour, and the vapour to nothing.

And on that nothing the Zulor's words roll: "I understand".'

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*Dustless* is the name of a gigantic novel, itself part of a projected ‘hypernovel’, *Metallic*. I have been working on *Dustless* since October 2001. I’m currently on chapter 14 of an anticipated 16 chapters. I hope to finish the first draft later this year (2003).

The use of generic descriptions is often counterproductive, and so it’s rather diffidently that I describe *Dustless* as a ‘Fantasy’ novel. My own view of the novel is that it is a kind of ‘heavy metal fairytale’. It certainly draws on fairytale plots and scenarios, and *Dustless* at least (if not the whole of the *Metallic* project) is concerned with themes of childhood and innocence – and, therefore, of adulthood, and experience. Seen from another perspective, *Dustless* is a compendium of influences, a kind of sustained homage to entertainments which have given me pleasure – from cinema, from literature, from industrial and metal musics of various genres, and electronic music, from Kraftwerk to Coil...

*Dustless* is a highly metaphorical novel, quite musical in the way it repeats over and over again certain elements – some of which have symbolic significance to the world of the characters themselves, others of which escape the characters but which may be understood by the reader.

The main theme of *Metallic*, which is sounded in *Dustless*, is the theme of power, and of the futility of a human (and perhaps, more specifically, a masculine) drive to achieve certain kinds of power.

As I remember, even weeks before beginning *Dustless*, I had no real intention of writing a novel – but then the events of 11 September 2001 occurred, and this seemed to trigger within me a desire to model, on an epic scale, a metaphorical account of the theme of power. From childhood, I had carried an image in my mind of a lonely watchtower, set beside a road, where each night a man would ascend a platform to light a beacon fire and to keep a vigil – even though no one ever came down the road. For some reason, this image fused and crystallised with the images of 11 September, and so I began writing *Dustless*.

I am now in the later, rather exhausted stages of writing *Dustless*. In one sense, I feel the novel has distorted my writing life, in the sense that I have had to devote enormous amounts of time and energy into it – resources which, had I not started the book, may have been used to develop my poetry. I am certainly looking forward to completing the novel. If it is published, then I will continue with the *Metallic* project, of which *Dustless* is a part. However, if I cannot find a publisher for *Dustless*, then I don’t know whether I will continue with *Metallic*.

The world of *Dustless* is precisely that – a world. It is very difficult to précis the novel in any satisfactory way, and so I have elected simply to excerpt a section of the book, as it stands, in unrevised draft form, and with only this minimal introduction.

Hopefully, this will at least give a reader some flavour of the book.