

The geese have returned to the Hidden Place, and I am glad. Some must have come in the night, for though I am an early riser -- the Prebendary is customarily up with the sun -- there are already groups and families feeding along the ebb-tide mudflats. Raucous voices over the Wester Greeting cloister make me pause and look up as I hurry to the Creche. I shade my eyes against the low sun and see a loose V cross the square of sky. It says with certainty that the winter is finally over. I truly thought it would never end. But its last breath is gone. Now comes the short, fierce High South summer. I must make the most of these few weeks of heat and life and growth, before winter closes its hand again. The summer I have never seen; the winter is a dire thing to a woman of kindly Tunshabhel.

"Show me these geese, please," the Prebendary asks as I help her into her clothes. And, as I bring her her favorite _thelbh_, with the ermine at hood and cuffs, she skips back, saying "I won't be needing that, today." The Ambassador of the Clade can wear what she wills, even if she is two weeks off her sixth birthday. I bow, say _as you wish,_ and we go back into the sleeping room to look at wild geese. We stand a long time at the big window that alone of all the windows in the Hidden Place looks outward, down the grey sea-lough to Hardhrissag and the great glacier beyond.

Winter is never far. The ever-ice chills me in the pith of my soul. One hundred thousand years deep. I now understand why the windows of this ancient sea-lord holdfast look inward. I think north, to Ahn Shabha, and Tunshabhel in its wine valley, and Fodhla.

Waterwater cool warm over breastbelly turn of head, gasp of breath, sting of eye, pull of muscle, smell coolwater, chlorine gaspaspasp then down into the water turning among the legs, the pale legs and the floating lank, swimming, we are swimming, slipped out from work in the midmeal hour as she tells me she does these days: we are swimming, together, and we are standing, together, outlooking from the sole high guardwindow through one pair of eyes.

Thremher.

I feel the Prebendary's small, warm fingers feel for mine. I know she feels me flinch away. I glance at her. She is looking up at me with that unnerving stare of nearly six that looks so so much older. But she is. Lifetimes older. Did you hear that, Prebendary Shodmer? No. She is sibless, solo, alone. _Thremher_ is a strange, alien sociological phenomenon to her.

She does chill me, this alien ambassador.

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Clarrigh and Clarbha busy themselves to make me my now-traditional morning mate as I call to give them my breakfast report. They are a funny, fussy little pair. No first-thing update on their marriage preparations today. Though I cannot imagine any pair wanting to marry them, I hope nothing has fallen apart at this late stage. I know better than to ask. In my almost-year in the Hidden Place, I have learned something from the diplomats. As usual, the radio is blaring Voice of Ahn Shabha news. Crime scandal vice corruption. Funny how one southern winter can make you nostalgic for all that.

"Geese," says Clarrigh.

"Maybe they don't have them on Naul," I say.

"Doesn't sound like they have much of anything on Naul," Clarbha says.

I sip my scalding, almost tasteless mate through the silver straw while Clarrigh checks the morning schedule. After breakfast and language development lessons, there is an open forum at eighth hour for all the legations. The Thraini delegation has an hour's private audience at nine, then we break until third.

Shodmer may have the mind, memory, and language of a Naulish Prebendary of the Clade, but a six-year-old sibless girl still needs rest and recuperation and running around.

"Here," Clarbha tosses me a plastic cylinder. Inside, a charged hypoderm.

"I keep telling you, it gives me headaches," I say.

"Do you have any Thraini?"

"I could order dinner in Klutaj."

"Use the tap, Fodhaman."

Clarbha has a half smile that melts opposition. He gives me it now and even though I do not exaggerate when I tell him that the language DNA gives me an afternoon of migraine, I take it and it seems all right. Maybe I begin to see a little of what the uThradhan see in the Brothers Gahhadd. So, before I go to the Creche to bring the Prebendary to be questioned by the world's diplomats and politicians, I slip to the toilet to empty my bladder, for etiquette requires that I remain kneeling throughout, and to bare my thigh and swiftly jab the needle into my flesh. So while I kneel on my cassock, new words dash in vees like migrating geese beneath the sky of my skull, settling on to the flats of my mind in groups and families, grazing, breeding, flocking, flapping their wings so hard I fear the draft of their wings will knock me down.

The chief issue of the Thraini privy session is the adnot, that mysterious Clade artifact orbiting our world. Thrain is a pedantic, reserved nation, given to secrecy and elitism; or so their image is in Ahn Shabha. They envy our success and our open, energetic society. They are our rivals, possibly our enemies, in this affair of the Clade. In reality, I have found Foreign Secretaries Auvaed and Hannaved cultured, witty, down to earth, and their supposed pedantry an admirable determination to penetrate to the heart of any matter. No doubt, they have their own preconceptions of Ahn Shabha.

The session is draining. The questions are finicky and repetitious to me, let alone to a six-year-old girl. After her lunch, I tuck the Prebendary Shodmer into her bed closet for her mid sleep. I set the sound mobile spinning above her: an old old Tunshabhel lullaby that she finds puzzling but attractive. What songs sing the children to sleep on Naul? The shutter is half-closed; early afternoon light through the high window is broken by the fretwork into warm glowing shards that dapple her face. I imagine her skin this color, patterned, marled, alien. Almost, I kiss that face. Almost. For I see her alone in that alcove, lying down the center, the white sheets like a glacier around her. She is too small for it in this one small body. I shiver, shake my head. Some vague premonition; or is it the headache I promised myself, starting? Whichever, I get up and close the shutters, then go and report to my handlers, the TaGahhadd. I have two responsibilities here in this Hidden Place, this ancient sea-hunting retreat. The first is as Guardian to Prebendary Shodmer of the Clade -- the second as spy.

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"It is not the adnot, it is an adnot."

"So, not the name of spaceship, but a type of spaceship, a class?"

"No, not a name, not any type of starship or spaceship. It is an adnot."

"An automated device? A robot, a sentient machine?"

"Perhaps. It is a thing itself."

"It cannot be used then to transport passengers between stars, or worlds?"

Some of the strain in the Prebendary's six-year-old voice as it tries to fit round grown-up words and ideas that must be hundreds of thousands of years old creeps into my own voice as I recount the interview. My recall, as ever, is perfect. I suspect that it helped me earn this position down in the cold south, eavesdropping, whispering, recalling.

"How can it? Nothing organic can survive transport at the speeds of the adnot."

"Prebendary, with respect, you did."

"My memories did. My personality did. This body, you conceived for me. The Clade is vast. Bigger and older than you can imagine. Perhaps the Type Four civilizations can transport human bodies across space at relativistic speeds -- though I cannot imagine why they should wish to -- but we cannot. We have contacted you through adnot. If it helps, think of this personality Shodmer as an element of the adnot orbiting your world."

Mild consternation. The Thraini Foreign Secretaries begged a moment's excuse and nodded with their advisers and attaches. The Prebendary rocked her torso back and forth on her kneelstool, wanting it all over now, please. I also wanted that, but first I wanted to ask them why they kept asking about this adnot, that might or might not be useful to their national ambitions. Ask about a society so huge that its boundary grows faster than it can be mapped. Ask questions that can dive deep into half a million years of history. Ask like men with stars in their eyes, not politicians begging for votes. I could see beyond the Prebendary's childish restlessness that she also felt this frustration.

"They're getting very hung up on the adnot here," Clarbha comments. He makes a note on his palm companion. "I wonder if they got anything from their satellite data we don't know about?"

A flicker of thremher between the sibs, policies agreed, actions decided, in that instant of joint awareness. It reminds me how few my moments of sharing with Fodhla have been. Before the lunch-hour swim, my last contact had been a twilight moment: dance music from the Narravhan New Wine festival, Fodhla with Adhmer and Adhmola driving through the thronged streets, trying to find a parking space. I remember fearing for the masked partygoers: Fodhla always was a terrible driver. I saw the Bhraith Brothers, the conjoint God of the Vine, rolling drunk in their sedan chairs as the young men raced them around the piazza, I smelled the searing pork fat, the hot oil, the charcoal smoke flavored with sprigs of herbs. I savored the faintly urinous taste of the broached new wine. I saw the fireworks burst over the Vintner's Chantry. Narravhan: the autumn festival. A whole hard season ago. Although thremher knows no physical bounds -- the Clade, thousands of light years across, may yet test that -- the distances of the heart limit it.

"Anything else of any great import?" Clarbha says, palming open a call channel to his own masters in Dahlit Thal.

"The usual cosmic jibber-jabber about joining the family of pan-humanity and all that. Nothing really."

"You really don't like that kid," says Clarrigh.

I shrug. I say: "I don't dislike her; she just makes me uneasy. You're not around her; I am. I know her."

Clarrigh gets up heavily to put the kettle on and make fresh mate. The amount they drink, the inside of their bladders must be like leather.

"I know you, Fodhaman. You just get freaky around solos."

"It's not natural for a child."

"It's not natural for any of you Xenos."

I give the standard psychology answer about creating an environment for the Prebendary as much like her home as we can recreate from the Monologue.

"Her home is here, Fodh," Clarrigh says. He offers tea but I have duties I would sooner be about rather than staying with the chubby TaGahhadd and their mate and happy marriage plans. As I climb the great staircase to the Creche, I chew over an old piece of information in my mind, an early revelation, before the adnot and its Prebendary, when first contact had been made by radio and we received the Monologue across eighty-seven light years from Naul. Everywhere, anywhere, however far you travel across the universe, you will find one sentient species: humans. Thousands of variants but one great family. The Clade. A zoological term, a taxonomic expression. A set of related species within a genus. And, in all that human diversity, one world where twin births are the norm.

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It is early afternoon, and we are up the glen. It is the Prebendary's favorite walk, a hidden place in the Hidden Place. Shodmer may speak with the words and knowledge of an adult, but she has the delights of a six-year-old. Here by the Shibhna stream are gravel coves and rock pools, rapids and stepping stones, mossy boulders, overhanging trees like hands and faces. Delights aplenty. The first time she saw a dipper plunge dauntlessly into the white water and emerge on a rock at the far side of the stream, she was so dumbfounded I almost called the medics, fearing some mental seizure: too many memories decompressing at once. The sweatlodge, the icehouse, the old hermitage cut into the rock above a deep, dark swirl pool are always fresh with wonder. Every time, she clangs the hermitage iron bell. Today the short chute of water that empties into the hermitage pond is loud, filling the stone bowl with spray, milky with run-off from the ice high up the valley. The chute is clogged with torn-off twigs and branches; we somberly watch a whole sapling turn in the foamy flow, run the channel, and wedge between the boulders in the plunge pool. She wants to move it: if it has not chosen this journey, at least it should be free to complete it.

"That current would sweep you away like that," I say, and see again the tension between the child and the adult sharing this body. We pick our way up to the falls through the wakening wood. The birches are unfolding tiny cones of leaf from their spear-tip buds. The green against the silver is as startling as a masked Nadthanhi dancer's costume. Amazing, I can smell the season. The valley sides are mad with birdsong.

"Come on, come on, I want to show you this," Shodmer exclaims, dragging me by the hand up the muddy footpath between the battalions of birch. I slip, muddy my trouser cuffs and the hem of my thelbh. Almost, I swear. The fingers tug. "Come on."

We top a low crest and stand on the lip of a hollow where a tree fell winters before and brought others down with it. The trunks have gone to rot, but the tilted root rafts shelter a carpet of more spring flowers than I have ever seen. Yellows, whites, the fragile purple of fritillaries, the blue grape clusters of wild hyacinths. I smell garlic, strong green growing. They nestle beneath the canopies like offerings at shrines. How many times have I walked the path just a few steps from this hidden place, never knowing, suspecting? Shodmer has kept this for me, the newcomer, the stranger here.

"This is lovely," I say, and hear how weak that sounds, so I turn it into a question. "Did Ardrahn bring you here?"

"No," Shodmer says carefully. "I brought her." A pause for me to think about who is the alien here, then

Shodmer asks "You don't have any children, do you?"

"No," I say.

"Ardrahn did. She told me all about them, Ahnlil and Ahnthabhan and Traybha and Trayvarra. I should have liked to meet them. I would have liked to bring them here."

We look for a time at the flowers. I am waiting for the next question. I have a fair idea what it will be.

"Why did they take Ardrahn away? You don't have any children, you don't know; why have I got you now and not her?"

There is refuge in my profession and skills. I take it.

"It's the stage you're at. Whole new levels of memories and experiences will come out in the next few months. There're going to be a lot of changes and we thought it best to have a xenopsychologist on hand. It's all part of the developmental plan. I was on the team that drew it up, so I was the ideal one to send. In a sense, I've known you a lot longer than you think. You probably don't realize it, but there were many years of preparation between the adnot's arrival and your being born."

Shodmer looks at me, realizing something for the first time.

"Was I the first?"

Somewhere in the distance is the drone of a tilt-jet on approach. The Venjet delegation. I could end this excursion now, make excuses about muddy clothes and dirty hands and briefings on the visitors. No. She has shown me her secret; I will share one of mine.

"No."

Her fingers loosen their hold on mine.

"How many?"

"You're the second, if you don't count the ones that either didn't take or spontaneously aborted in the first trimester. We were prepared for many more failures; the technology was basically beyond us, techniques we'd been given through the Monologue."

"And the first one?"

"A girl, like you. Identical to you. She was born alive and breathing, but there was no sign of brain activity. The memory nanomeres did not load properly. The autonomic nervous system maintained normal motor control, but there were no higher cognitive functions. She never gained consciousness, she was in what we call a Persistent Vegetative State."

"I understand," Prebendary Shodmer says in a voice so old it startles me. "Did she have a name?"

That tilt-jet is getting closer.

"Shothaman," I say.

The Prebendary considers this. Then she says, "so, I had a sister. And she was identical to me, she was a twin. So I'm like the rest of you then, I'm not an only, what do you call them, a solo?" The aircraft passes to the north of us, close enough to see through the birch branches. Its engines swivel into landing mode, it settles beyond the steep pitched roofs of the Hidden Place onto its pad. Shodmer cocks her head. "That

will be the Venjet," she says. "Time for us to go, then."

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Two beginnings. Two stories.

In this first beginning was the sea; Detrimher, the endless world-ocean. It stretched forever in all directions, tossed by many storms, white with waves. The water was clear as glass, not blue as we see it now, for there was no sky, only nothing, and nothing has no color. It was perfectly flat, and pure as distilled water. There was not a taste of salt in it. In Detrimher was no living thing. Likewise, no birds, for there was no sky for them to fly in. On this sea was a boat, Dhan-khu. No one can say how long it had been sailing on Detrimher, but it moved with direction and purpose. Two rows of oars drove it, and a pair of each of the Nations of living things took a pair of oars and drove Dhan-khu across the World Sea. These rowers were the Gods; germ, plant, fish, bird, animal, and man, each as divine as the other, each pair of sibs a God. Now this was a thing about Dhan-khu: it did not know where it was going, for everywhere looked the same, but where it had been, the sea curled up behind it. The water ran down the slope of the world and exposed the bare rock beneath and so the dry land was born. The water ran from the rocks in waves and foam and currents, and though the ship Dhan-khu was huge beyond saying, it was tossed like a toy on the white water, for nothing is huge next to the sea. For a hundred days and nights, the rowers of Dhan-khu strove against the storm water. On the hundred and first day, a wave greater than any other caught the ship and drove it one hundred and one kilometers on to the bare rock, where it broke like an egg, spilling all the life it carried. A council was held there, under the chairmanship of the redwoods, which were wiser than any other living thing. There were still no clouds in the sky, for the general light had not yet gathered up into the ball of the sun. The bare heat killed many living things. Three-quarters of the Fish Nation perished in the naked, universal light. That which survived only did so because of the lakes and puddles left by the tide of Detrimher. Yet they remained, for the Council of Redwoods must hear all things that lived. Eventually it was decided that the living things must scatter all around the round world. The germs rose up and were swept away on the wind to establish their great nation, the Fish Nation swam down the lakes and rivers, but the others were trapped there, even the insects, for they had not yet stolen the secret of flight from the birds. Being so small, they were good thieves and that is why the birds hunt the insects, to take back what was stolen from them. It was birds who came to the rescue. They fashioned perches from the wreckage of Dhan-khu, and slung them between their feet or their beaks. An animal or a plant or an insect sat on the swing and the birds whirled them up into the clear air so high they could see the world as a great blue globe. They transported them far and wide across the world and established them in all parts and places, and so the world is as we see it today, of many Nations. Originally, the Nation of Humans was six sib-pairs, male and female. The oldest woman was the first to give birth, and she bore Cantayuma and Astyaman, the heavenly twins, sibs but boy and girl, unnatural, an abomination. Because they were strange to nature, they repelled each other and one became light and one dark until their mutual opposition forced them off the round world altogether into the sky, where they became sun and moon, he and she respectively. But even still they are sibs, womb mates, and that memory is ever with them, so that even now the moon is at times seen with the sun in the day. But the eclipses of moon over sun and earth over moon are the memories of that old womb-rivalry.

That is one way the world was made. Here is another.

Eleven and a half thousand years ago a device known as an egg-ship arrived in our solar system after an eight-hundred-year journey from Lolel, one hundred and twelve light years away. That world itself had been seeded fifteen thousand years before by ships scattered wide from Drail, one of the eleven colony worlds of the first Seyyamang Expansion. Seyyamang itself had long since made the jump to a Type 2a civilization; its colonies had not received an adnot from it for centuries. Our system had been first

surveyed as promising for life by the Ujjire, an ancient and conservative space-going society. Fifteen thousand years Before Present, its fleet of ninety thousand space habitats had maneuvered out of interstellar flight configuration and formed a close shell around our sun. They spent three hundred years in stellar orbit, gorging on solar energy and manufacturing our asteroid belt to birth fresh worldlets. Then they moved on, ever inward, toward the colossal energies of the galactic core, where, it is rumored, High Type 3 civilizations of biological-electronic intelligences basked in black hole radiation that would have dissolved away simple smart compounds of carbon. The Ujjire greatly desired union with the core races. Our world, our Fanadd, was of no interest to them. They placed no value on pale blue gravity wells. But, at some point, they communicated to one of the gravity-bound cultures they had encountered the existence of a lump of rock they might find interesting.

Our unmanned probes have found evidence of Ujjire engineering activities on some long-orbit comets. Our theories of planetary evolution had always conflicted with our observations of our solar system. Now we knew why. They stripped out our entire asteroid belt.

Eleven and a half thousand years. Eight hundred years. One hundred and fifty centuries. Eighty-eight thousand years since the first light-speed probes left the Seyyamang system. The Ujjire signal to Lolel itself took one hundred and fifty years to arrive. One hundred and fifteen thousand, five hundred years. The recorded history of the Clade stretches over four times behind that.

The egg-ship was an automated world-maker. Nothing living traveled on it, no pioneers, no eager colonists. Its heart was a vast genetic database of all things necessary for a living planet, from soil bacteria to humans. The sequence was primeval; the Naulish rumored that it might have passed down unchanged from the original human hearthworld. The DNA was served by an array of machines. At one end of the scale were microscopic nanomeres that could manipulate strands of the DNA to engineer living things to new environments. At the other were the cloud-sized blimps that cruised the ionosphere, carefully destroying atmospheric ozone with complex chlorofluorocarbons. A few decades of hard ultraviolet would sterilize the native microfauna, then the swollen bellies of the blimps could rupture and let fall a gentle rain of bacteria. Once the concentric shells of machines had sloughed themselves off from the eggship, there was not much more to the thing than a dozen or so yolk sacs clinging to the spine of the anti-matter deceleration drive. To commission an eggship was a huge, magnificent enterprise that required the resources of a whole system, but once the launch lasers switched off and it went into its eight-hundred-year fall between suns, it was utterly alone. It was a bottle cast into the ocean. Lolel never expected to hear from it again. There would be no resupply missions, no surveys or exploratory vehicles. The settlers were absolutely on their own. The first five thousand years of our history belong to the bacteria: the Ujjire caravan had reported thoroughly on Fanadd's suitability, so it was the work of a couple of centuries to strip it down to the bedrock and reseed it. While our ancestors slept, microbiological food cycles were set up in the oceans, the engines of the complex bio-climatological feedback mechanisms that would keep Fanadd forever friendly to our kind of life. For the next twenty centuries, the plants ruled. Forests rose, jungles burgeoned: the conifers and flowerless forms first, then, as insect populations were introduced, the flowering plants and grasses. All in its proper time, in its due season. Thirty thousand settled planets had established best practice. Eight and a half thousand years after the eggship went into orbit around Fanadd and exploded into a million separate components, the first humans emerged from their gestation pods and walked on the pristine world.

It was at the end, the final step, that the nanoscribes made their mistake. A hundred million transcriptions, then one small slip, non-lethal but profound. To raise the population quickly enough to escape death by genetic drift, the settlers had been genetically engineered for twin births. Once the population reached a self-sustaining level, the gene was supposed to switch to double recessive. That gene never switched.

Two beginnings. One told through myth and faith. The other through the decades-long discourse of the

Monologue. Believe whichever you will. Both agree that we are a special creation, either divine or technological. The fossil record says only -- graphically -- that we are strangers to this world. Some of the religious cannot accept that we are the works of humans, not gods, though men who can blast a planet down to the bedrock and resurrect it might as well be gods. There is no archaeological evidence of the settlement, no buried gestation pods or fossilized seeding machines. The dead spine of the eggship burned up in our atmosphere when it ran out of reaction mass. It could have been the Pearly-Semen-String Star by which the Ardvha Dhran astronomers foretold the seven-year drought that destroyed the Cappadhridd Empire. Geophysicists and metallurgists are currently studying a number of small impact craters for metal ions. As yet, no physical evidence. What then of the other story? Deity requires no evidence. Our oral traditions share a number of core images, the world sea, the notion of the reality as a single seminal entity that divided into complementary and opposed twin emanations. Likewise, our languages seem to share one common root. Studies of our mitochondrial DNA show how closely related even the most hostile of nations are. The settlers were introduced at the technological level of iron tools. They would have had the sophistication for writing, but for those first few generations, the imperative was to survive. They would not have been able to raise their heads to keep records. There were desperately few of them. They were terribly alone.

We still are.

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Late afternoon is meetings, an introduction to the new, post-election Khumetran delegation, then the weekly analysis session of the Xenos, as we call ourselves. The xenobiologists, the xenoanthropologists, the xenosociologists, the xenolinguists, the xenopsychologists. _Ists_ would be a more honest name. The specialists. The scientists. The spies. No ist in that. No honesty. The hypocrisy amazes me; in a multi-national operation like this, everybody works for someone, but we go on with our reports, our agendas, our petty professional politics, as if somehow by pleading guilty to a lesser charge, our greater crimes will go unnoticed. Deghra Dhunn is his usual terrier self, going back again and again and again to the same trivial points, as if shaking a rat. It is a heavy session, and the truth is that our _ists_ and _isms_ are vanities; everything we know either came on the hotline via the Monologue, or was set in biochemistry eighty-seven years ago by the Naulish.

It is evening now, and I am walking by the shore. The tide is on the ebb and the geese are following it, pecking over the exposed mud, necks dabbing and stabbing. The sky is barred with yellow and purple streamers of cloud. The air holds an edge of chill; I fold my hands into the fur cuffs of my _thelbh_. I am quite alone.

That thought, that word, strikes a different chill, one that penetrates the thick material of my _thelbh_. To be singular, on a world where all life is lived in the plural. Solitude is a defect of birth, or a kind of dying. _Dhakhti_ is now almost unknown in our society, but I remember my gran'amma when she lost gran'tante, and I remember even at that young age thinking, sometimes, it is best to go with the dead. She lasted two months. I am certain that she willed herself out of the living. Half of her was already dead and burned.

Here is a stone pier, yellow with lichen, where the old royal sea-hunters set out on the whale-path. I walk to its end, by the grey stone bollards. Kelp is undulating slowly in the tide run.

A sudden, chill flaw of wind. I shiver. Is that what you fear, Fodhaman Sulbha Bhaskarbhek? Yourself, alone? When I was quite small, I would wake in the night in our cubby in the house at Bhrander. I would listen to Fodhla breathing next to me, feel the warmth of her, sense the movement of her body. I would push the sound and the warmth and the movement away from me until I could not distinguish them from the noise and movement of the late-night traffic. I imagined myself alone. I can still remember that awful,

cold panic. Here, brought to the water, it tells me things I have never heard from it before.

The fear, the _alone,_ the cold clutch at the heart of me. It is saying, time, time, time. And choices. Fodhla and Fodhaman, those clever clever sisters, their talent laying a path straight ahead of them. Friends branched off into other careers, into marriages, into families, but you, the dogged uBhaskarbhek, stayed true to that path, and it led true, to the Hidden Place and an alien embassy. All that time, you thought you had enough time to also go down those other ways, but you don't. The winter is coming; this one will never end.

I cannot bear to pass out of this world childless. But time, time ... and choices ... and the Prebendary, that alien mind incarnated in the body of a six-year-old girl?

"Fodhaman."

The voice is soft, calculated not to surprise, but in my state of mind, it is like a gunshot. I cannot hide my sudden start.

"I'm sorry, Ambassador, I was ... miles away."

"No, I'm sorry to interrupt," says the conjoint, Hadrha.

"There's something we have to ask you," Haddavher says, and from his tone, I understand that much more is known than needs to be said. I glance around, self-conscious. The Hidden Place has only one outward-looking window, but I feel hideously conspicuous, we three at the end of the pier.

"Ambassador, with respect, there are channels."

"And have Clarrigh and Clarbha fob me off with another packet of the Intelligence Agency's pre-digested baby food? No, I'm afraid I'm here to ask personal questions, and only personal answers will do."

I turn away to look out to sea, hoping that the Ambassadors will not see me stiffen.

"Ask whatever you like, Ambassador."

"The Clade, what do you make of it?"

"The Clade is an interstellar hyperculture of thirty thousand societies and civilizations so diverse that we wouldn't even recognize some of them as human. The Clade is so vast and ancient it does not know all of itself; it grows so fast and vigorously, it never can."

"And Naul, the Prebendary's home world?"

"Naul is not a single world. I believe the word in their _lingua franca_ means _system_. As far as I know, Naul consists of naturally habitable planets, terraformed worlds and moons, and extensive colonization of its uninhabitable gas giant satellites, as well as highly developed asteroid and comet communities and a halo of constructed space habitats. System population is close to one trillion sentients. Naul is a Type 2 civilization, a very junior member of the Clade."

I hear Ambassador Hadrha huff air from his cheeks. I have tried to keep my words simple and unexaggerated, but the scale of the Clade intimidates our aspirations. It is a society on the cosmic scale, building for eternity. Haddavher nods. He says, "Fodhaman, tell me, have we anything to fear from the Clade?"

"There aren't any wars between worlds, if that's what you're afraid of. The economics are unfeasible, and

anyway, what we hold so precious here doesn't have much value out there. There isn't a Cladish invasion fleet on the way. But..."

"Go on, please."

"The Clade is so big and old that its history consists mostly of rumors."

"What rumors have you heard?"

"You know that no non-human sentience has ever been found. It seems almost certain that our intelligence is unique in the universe. There are only humans ... but some variants have become ... alien."

"Well, knowing even what I do about Naul, I can see how our society could be considered ... exotic."

"The higher-level cultures are trans-biological."

"Machines? Computers?"

"No, much more than that. I can't begin to understand how life there is lived, but at a certain level, biology and technology merge and obey each other's laws. There was a society that did not make that transition. Its elite became machine intelligences and destroyed its birth world in a civil war between the electronic and the biological. The survivors expanded outward through self-replicating machines. In the quest for raw materials, they would devastate entire systems."

"Inhabited systems?"

"And mobile, space-habitat cultures too. They believed that all biological life was a threat. Their technology could annihilate entire worlds. The Clade stopped them."

"How?"

"The rumor is that it used a principle known as Asymmetric Separation."

"What is that?"

"I don't know, but I think it has to do with the structure of time and reality."

Hadrha breathes in, slowly, audibly. I add, "We are a very small world. The margin of the margin."

But I know my words have not given the comfort I intended. No politician likes to be told of his insignificance.

"I see," Haddavher says. "And tell me, and I won't trouble you any more after this: do we have anything to gain from the Clade?"

I sigh, look again at the sea and the great ice beyond.

"Ambassador, I cannot say."

* * *

That night, I tried to force thremher for the first time since my teens. Now, as then, it felt grubby, selfish, soul-masturbation. I would be deeply embarrassed if anyone were to catch me in the privacy of my own room.

There is rain tonight, cold and hard with a grain of ice still in it. It surges and clatters in the gutters along

the cloisters. The Shibhna will be high and wild, threatening the Prebendary's hermitage. I set out the items on my desk. I have printed out the best of the photographs and arranged them against the wall. The jewelry, the rings, the hair clasps and pins, the knick-knacks and curios and souvenirs and meaningless things picked up, scavenged or stolen, cover most of the right side. I arrange the music discs on the left, like tiling a mosaic. I uncapped the jars of oils half an hour before, and they are already working on the room's atmosphere.

The rain. I have never known the like of it.

The clothes are laid out on the bed. I hesitate between the formal pants we bought in the South Bank boutique in Methévher and the cold-weather *_thelbh_* we got for the winter sports holiday in Ithrháng. The *_thelbh_*. It's years out of fashion, the fur is coming out of the hood and cuffs, but as I touch it, I see Fodhla holding the tatty old thing as I dither over what to pack for the Hidden Place. "Go on, take it. Look, fashion sense won't kill you, hypothermia can." For a moment, the memory erases the rain, this drafty, lamp-lit room. Is it beginning? I slip on the *_thelbh_*. It smells of her. Fodhla.

First photograph. The Academic procession. A rare wet day in Vanhal, the long snake of doctoral laureates soaked to the bone as they cross the quadrangle and turn into the Hall of Sciences. The photographer is positioned in the cloister gate: flash, snap, as each pair turns the corner. Fodhla and me, in our hoods and aprons, hair slicked down, evidently miserable and wishing the whole thing was over and we had the scrolls and rings in our hands, but Fodhla with enough presence, despite a terrible hangover, to stick her tongue out at the lens. Me, serious, grumpy, very very wet. As it has always been. One vivacious, one frowning, wondering what she's missing.

I put on the music we were listening to that night at the cafe. Nuhr Widhrhu's *_bithren_* stalks chords and harmonies over Clarhabhen's solid *_ghadhla_* beat. Fond rememberings, the nonsense we talked, the guys we kissed. I lift the scent of *_neadhwood_* oil. Smell is the mother of memory.

I imagine I feel something.

Photograph two. Wet again. Two eight-year-olds caught in the waves at Narravher. One leaning toward the lens, mouth opening, shouting something stupid but quick, the other looking somewhere else, sky, clouds, a gull, the universe. They are holding hands. Next track: *_Messonghi_*, a big hit from that summer. It was never off the radio. Now, it sounds embarrassing, the sort of thing you play for friends very late at parties, desperate to catch an old groove. The smell, *_ahrum vettivher_*, scent of the pines at Narrevher, salt, iodine, sunburn. I had forgotten those swimsuits with the fish on them. Now I feel again how the straps would rub under your arms when they got wet.

One by one, I go through the images, the sounds, the scents. I open myself to them, I will them to open me. I wait for the characteristic small shiver of pre-*_thremher_*. I imagine it in many ways, but every time it is a draft under the door, a chord of music, a smell of memory, the cold rattle of the rain on the roof slates.

Last photograph. The others have all been turned face down to the past. All that remains are two silly girls in bed together, some time in their first month away from home, at the big exciting university. I can't even remember what friends caught us; boys or girls. It's early; we've been drinking the night before. Fodhla lunges toward the camera, mouth open, hair all over the place. I, as usual, am the dozy-looking one, frowning out from some unexpected angle of the big white quilt. I lift the porcelain jar of *_itrhain_*, clean, salty, driftwoody. It smells of the sun of Vanhal, its clean sheets and the sea tang that blew through the lecture hall's huge windows. I slip on the *Adduharppha*. It's a big, long dance piece, new that night, when we all rushed to load it and get our friends round to listen. I could always dance to that. Even now I can feel it move me. It sounds dated now, the rhythms are obvious, regular, but it was a great time to be

alive, to be young, to be on your own in the world. I venture a little step or two across the floor. Be there, I will. Be there. Do you remember? Do you remember? Be there. Be here, now...

I can smell it.... The room is suddenly so cold, I feel I am falling, falling through the wooden floor, into something, somewhere else.... I feel someone turn, as if someone has called her name. Fodhla....

Nothing. Nowhere. I am where I always was. I never left. The rain beats at the roof, the wind tugs the stone tiles. I put the music off -- stupid, adolescent stuff. I swiftly gather up the photographs, stuff them into a drawer. Though it is cold in the room -- I have never been truly warm in the Hidden Place -- I throw off the _thelbh_ and stand in my underwear. I feel silly and old and ashamed, as if caught poking at myself in the toilet. I shudder in embarrassment.

Go to bed, Fodhaman. You have things enough for tomorrow.

I am so afraid that I am losing her.

* * *

The Prebendary of the Clade is in a quandary.

"The fur or the silk," she says, sitting on the bed between the two laid-out _thelbhs_. "I dunno. Help me, Fodh."

"The silk," I say on no authority whatsoever. "It's a party, you'll be hot down there."

Shodmer pouts, picks up the favorite fur, then agrees and sets it down. We dress her up in the beautiful worked silk dress _thelbh_. Mythological animals dance around her hem and the cuffs of her trousers.

"I think you're right," she says.

"Okay, mirror now," I say and swing her up onto the leather stool in front of the making-up table. Slowly I paint her face. She frowns at the white brow patches, the ochre bars on her lips and chin.

"Six is an important age," I tell her. "It's the age you get a soul and become human. Before that, you're a waiting-to-be-human, a potential."

She grimaces.

"Hold still," I order, thinking it a Naulish adult's reaction to the realities of being a Fanaddhi six-year-old. The frown deepens, becomes physical pain. "Again?"

Shodmer nods.

"It'll pass."

"I'll get painkillers." I am already halfway to the medical kit.

"I keep telling you, they don't work!" the little girl snaps. The migraines started a week ago and have been increasing in frequency and duration. We have discussed little else in our Xeno meetings.

"It's probably a new memory level decompressing," Deghra Dhunn said.

"Or the whole thing unraveling," Marbhandd Tethrevhher warned.

"They know enough about our culture to program it for six years old."

"Ahn Shabha culture, or everyone's?" Bhent Ghaul, a Harppand man.

The truth is that we are all Ists and all we know are Isms, that, and that nothing happens to the Prebendary for no reason. But I find that I cannot bear the thought that I might have to watch the Prebendary -- old/young, wise/naive, innocent and savant -- disintegrate. So I hover by the medical pack, though I know its science is not up to this, and I watch the pain peak, then pass, then echo once, twice. Then Shodmer smiles and we are ready again for make-up and party dress.

It's a dreary enough little party. Most of the permanent staff has children, and some of the specialists and junior diplomats. They are done up in their finest and look as if they would be anywhere doing anything rather than lined up under the ivory lanterns of the Summer Hall as the Prebendary marches past them, like a reviewing general. The three factions: domestic, diplomatic, and Prebendary spend the first fifteen minutes spying on each other suspiciously. Ambassadors hover like unmarried uncles and aunts, feeling responsible for fun but unsure how to generate it. A music box plays the hits; they've never sounded so trivial, tinny among the carved beams and high-pitched roof. I wonder if Shodmer is hating it as much as I am. I slip away from the circle of solicitous adults overseeing the strenuous attempts at fun: there are grown-up drinks at the back. The TaGahhadd have already positioned themselves within easy reach.

The akvavit goes down sweetly. So does the second one.

Clarrigh looks at me.

"I thought you were on deck."

I let it pass. In the glow of the first, fierce little liquor going down, I felt, I saw. I was behind the wheel of a car. I smelled spring sunshine on black plastic trim. I felt the seat rearrange itself to my body. I heard the lucky Dhorthi Cross keyfob rattle against the steering column, the engine purr to life. I felt the gears engage and the car bump over the cobbled drive.

The Prebendary is playing Dusty Bluebells. The avuncular diplomats are standing round clapping their hands and cheering her on as she weaves her way in and out and in and out of the circle of linked children's hands. They look embarrassed. Shodmer looks radiant. Alien.

Tappy tappy tappy, on your shoulder....

She is a head and then some shorter than the Buddhaint boy, but he bows out of the ring and hooks on behind. In and out go, dusty bluebells....

Fast road now, evening light slanting into my eyes. The screen part-polarizes, heavy traffic heading home. Drive time. Driving fast: she always drives fast, too fast, too fast for me. One hand fiddling with the radio. Never enough attention, either. She scares me. News. She is a news addict. But where is she driving so fast against the flow? Questions clog in my throat. But thremher is not telepathy. There are no words, only sharing. I reach for the third. A hand stops mine.

"Hey, Fodh, don't you think...?"

Tappy tappy tappy on your shoulder....

I give Clarbha a look that invites him to cut his hand off before he ever thinks of laying it on me again.

Shodmer is smiling at me, beckoning me to join the game. I shake my head. If I move from this spot, this focus, I will lose Fodhla. The chain of people moves on, the Ath Shae Ambassador gamely taking up the caboose.

She is reaching for the tuner again, she cannot get the news she wants, which is news about the Prebendary, news about me. Celebrity gossip. Sport. Crime. Nothing about the international negotiations with the Clade. It is old news. Fanadd can join this supersociety of thirty thousand cultures but we will still want to read the same headlines. She is twiddling, the sun is low, in her eyes.

I feel it before she sees it.

Fodhla feels me. She looks up. The truck train appears out of the sun dazzle, head-on. There is nothing she can do, she is too close, going too fast, and she can't see it. What she sees is a ring of clapping people under smoky ivory lamps and a little girl threading herself in and out and in and out again. Instinct throws the wheel. The little car clips the hauler's offside wing, flips over, rolls across two lanes. And I see it all. I hear it all, I feel it all. In person.

A cry. The Prebendary clutches fists to her temples. She is on her knees. The snake of people behind her stands dumbfounded, holding on to each other's waists. Then the ring of people rushes in on her.

The car comes down and I go black. I see nothing, but I feel it. I feel myself slammed into annihilation. I feel Fodhla die inside me.

I cry out but no one hears it over the wailing of the Prebendary. The akvavit glass falls from my fingers. The thick glass bounces, rolls. Clarrigh and Clarbha catch me but all eyes are on Shodmer. She is curled on her side, wailing, kicking herself round and round on the polished wooden floor with her feet.

"Fodhaman," Clarbha whispers fiercely, "what the hell's wrong with you?" He is thinking, a collapsed Prebendary, a drunken Xenopsychologist, and the emissaries of the world's great nations playing Dusty Bluebells.

"Nothing nothing," I say, truly. Half of me has died. I have to go. I have to get out of here. "Leave me alone, let me go, please...."

Shodmer is crying out something, semi-coherent words. In a moment, they will look for me for interpretation. But I am not here. I am dead on the side of the Tunshabhel Highway. I slide through the shadows that cling to the walls toward the door. No one must see me.

"The adnot!" Shodmer cries. "Is! The! Collected! Collected Knowledge! Of the Thirty! Thirty Thousand! Member Societies! Of! The Clade!"

I make it through the door. The cloister is as long and straight and terrifying as a four-lane highway. I veer from pillar to pillar, half a woman.

* * *

People, somewhere, keep asking me how I feel. I answer, feel? What do you mean, feel? How can you expect me to feel, when I am dead? There is a woman. She gets up in the morning and washes and dresses. She eats a meal, she drinks mate, she talks to some people in the far north on the phone. They say soft, considered things to her. She can hear the discomfort in their voices but she cannot feel it. She returns soft, considered things over the airwaves. The day passes and she sleeps. I watch her from a distance, I see every detail of her life, but there is no connection between me and her. This is how I know I am dead, I am a ghost, apart, watching, untouching, unfeeling. This ghost understands that there are great events happening in the world of the living. Great revelations have unfolded from the Prebendary's memory about the nature and purpose of the adnot. Xenos and diplomats alike are running from room to room, meeting to meeting, conference call to conference call. The halls and cloisters of the Hidden Place chime with palm companion call tones. I know I should care about this, that its importance should push

me back into the world of voices and actions, like hammering out a dent in a pot, but I do not want it to. Half of me is dead. The better, livelier, lovelier half.

One day there is a light knock on the door of my garret room and I know that the thing I have feared has arrived. The Prebendary asks if she can come in. She delivers uncomfortable words of sympathy. Most strange, a tiny child offering such soft, considered words. The ghost watches and thinks, what do you understand, six years old, newly souled? The woman Fodhaman thinks, I know you now, alien child. We are half a human each, now.

The Prebendary does not stay long. I am thankful. At the door she turns, a parting word.

"Oh. Yes. I almost forgot. I will be going soon. In the next couple of days, I think. I am going to Dahlit Thal to address the Union of Nations about the adnot. Fodhaman." I hear a need for response, for warmth, in her voice. I cannot look at her, wise child. She says, hurt, cool, "Well, then, in case we do not meet again, I would like to thank you for your kindness and understanding. It has been a good time, here with you. I will miss you."

She knows better than to offer a hand, and I can only look at the place where she has been when I hear the heavy click of the door.

* * *

With any death there are necessities. The calls, the organizing, the rites and the relatives. Little has been left to me, far away on internationally significant business in the High South. I would have welcomed things to do, calls to make, condolences to receive, affairs to straighten. The necessities get you through. Now, with the Prebendary packing up her small court to transport it to Dahlit Thal, I have not even the business of work. My fellow Xenos are good, but they know that nothing they can do will be right. I have been left long days comparing the color of my thoughts with the color of the sky. And the heart-stopping, hammering thremher flashbacks.... My mothers and fathers make daily reports on the progress of my affairs, much as I reported to my political handlers. The cremation has been set, the burning tower booked. No avoiding it then. I go to Clarrigh and Clarbha with my request.

"I haven't much luggage, I'd leave most of my stuff here, come back down for it afterward."

Clarbha winces as if a tooth is troubling him.

"If I don't go on that tilt-jet, I won't get to the cremation."

Strange, how easy the word is to say.

Clarrigh puffs his cheeks out and sighs weightily. He flashes his eyebrows at his sib. I sense a moment of thremher. I observe, somewhere, that my inner sky must be lightening if I notice that.

"What's going on here?" I ask. "What's the problem?"

Clarbha shakes his head. A man in torment. Then he tells me exactly why I must not go on that tilt-jet. I listen to his telling me incredible things and I realize that, like the ice above the valley of the Hidden Place, there is a cold beyond cold. There is a place where earth and sky and water are all the same color and some people live all their lives there. I thank the TaGahhadd brothers, then go along the cloisters and up the winding wooden staircase and along the painted galleries to my room. I sit in a chair by the window and the world goes dark around me. What I feel now is as shocking, as paralyzing, as when Fodhla died, but it is different. Then, I felt I had died too. This time, I feel I have been killed. I sit, my head reeling, unaware of time or darkness or anything until I hear the gongs of Clock Court strike midnight. I have calls

to make, treacheries to perform. I get up from my chair and go through the dark, wind-loud halls to the Prebendary's creche.

For a moment, I feared that my codes had been rescinded. No. Clarrigh and Clarbha want this. I have always been their agent, even for their cowardice. The LED blinks. The doors unlock.

I watch Shodmer for a moment as she sleeps. As ever, she lies down the middle of the bed. Complex thoughts catch in my throat; time is pressing. The days advance with breakneck speed this far south, from endless night to midnight sun in a few weeks. Instead of calling her name, I start the little lullaby mobile. A gentle wakening. The old Tunshabhel tune seems to fill the night. Surely everyone must hear it. Eyes glitter in the dark. She is awake.

"Who are you? Fodhaman? What's going on?"

I have her bag in my hand, I lift it for her to see.

"Shodmer, get up. We must go. Now."

She props herself up, frowning, preparing questions. We do not have time for questions.

"Shodmer, please, trust me, you have to get dressed. We must leave the Hidden Place right now."

Shodmer sits up in the middle of the big bed and asks a very old question.

"Is there danger?"

"Yes," I say. "There is very serious danger."

I see Shodmer look at the red alarm button on the wood paneling beside her pillow. The Tunshabhel lullaby plays on, maddening now. I want to pull the string to shut the stupid plastic thing off. I reach for the toggle. Shodmer's hand beats mine.

"We mustn't waste time then," she says.

In two minutes, she is dressed and ready; the thick winter _thelbh_, and boots. It is cold where we are going. Already the night is turning grey beyond the window shutters. Convoluted sea dragons and krakens are silhouetted against the dawning day. By the time we reach the car pound, it is light enough to drive. The geese are noisy down on the flats, feeding, breeding. Much to do in a short time. I throw Shodmer up into the big six-wheel ATV. As I slip behind the wheel and press my thumb to the starter chip, I find myself in another car, afternoon sunlight streaming in, the wheel hot under my hand, the sun-heated air stifling in the confined space. I squeeze my eyes shut, force the memory away. My own breath hangs in clouds as the engine turns over once, twice, then takes.

"Are you right?" I ask.

Shodmer nods.

"One thing." She scrabbles in her bag down in the foot well, hauls out the music mobile, and hangs it from a handhold.

* * *

We are tracking up to the glacier foot on the old high road to the west. The head of the valley is a white glare in the early sun; up here the ground is stripped of vegetation, strewn with water-torn rocks. The milky, melt-swollen river storms alarmingly close to the road. Our way will take us up to the edge of the

ice plateau, west to the pass and down into the valley of the Garvadd, and Thrain. The driving is good, the road is old and holed, every melt season gnaws a few centimeters off its margins and eats a few more potholes, but at least it is free from snow. The wind up here blows constantly down from the high icefields of the Hundhra. It sweeps the road clear, dries off any runwater or slush. That is good. I want to make time. Soon they will notice that the Prebendary is gone, and I want to be within an easy run of Thrain by then. The tilt-jet could find me and stop me anywhere on the pass; they could even call in aircraft from the base at Navvhanddher. It would take some explaining, but they already have their cover story and there are few eyes this far south. That is why they call it the Hidden Place.

Shodmer has been drifting between waking and dozing. I have the heating up full, necessary, drowsy heat. I provoke conversation, more for my wakefulness than hers. That torrent down there would turn us over and sweep us away in an instant. I ask her about her memories of Naul.

"You understand that they are just that, memories," she says. "They're necessary for me so I have a genuine impression, but I never lived there."

Necessary. That malignant word.

"What do you remember?" I ask.

"I remember a life on a world called Emvraer. It's the fourth world from the sun, it's been settled a long long time, a couple of thousand years, but it's a poor place, cold, far from the sun, like here. It's the first world my people reached. It's a beautiful, unforgiving world. Its people are very serious and grave and gentle. They aren't dark, like the people here on Fanadd; they're pale -- at least on Emvraer. And of course, everyone is a solo. The winters are terrible, like here. The cities are built to hide from the weather, they all look in, like the Hidden Place. I can remember being in a house somewhere up in the high lands, where it gets so cold that carbon dioxide freezes out, and opening the door and there was ice frozen right over it, like a pane of glass. And I remember powerskiing through the forest and the night coming and having to get back before it got dark because you could freeze right through out there when the sun went down."

"Whose memories do you think those are?" I ask carefully.

"A man's," Shodmer says. "I remember being a man, for a time. He was one of the genetic designers for the Fanadd contact project. I suppose it's only right that he should have supplied some of my memory nanomeres."

The road has become a snake of loops across the valley side. We cross an old concrete bridge that barely contains the foaming, chocolatey water that minutes ago was glacier ice. The water is rising visibly. Good. It will make ground pursuit more difficult, and I am in the best vehicle. I shift the ATV into all-wheel drive. A check of the fuel gauge. Enough to get us over the pass to Garvadd village and a Thraini police station.

"But that wasn't me," the Prebendary says. "That's just a memory. There _was _no me until I was born. Everything I remember, is here. I belong completely to this world."

We reach the start of the pass, under the breath of the Hundhra ice. It is breathtaking country, fresh-minted, the only human scar the concrete strip of the road. Why is it that those landscapes most developed by humans seem oldest and most tired? Shodmer asks if we can stop.

"We should keep moving, we're sitting ducks here," I say, but we get out of the car and walk to a small rocky hummock close by the road. The Shibhna valley is spread before us, all the way down to the sea, and the Hardhrissag ice beyond. Shodmer's lenses polarize against the ice glare; black, intelligent, animal

eyes, framed by the fur trim of her _thelbh_ hood. It is savagely cold.

"Where?" she asks and I point out the vivid green woodland down by the water, and the spires and decorated gables of the Hidden Place, just visible over the treetops.

"What do you think will happen?" Shodmer says.

"The Thraini will give us asylum. Ahn Shabha will demand us back. Thrain will refuse. They'll accept the Clade's offer, the rest of the Union of Nations will fall over themselves to follow suit and Ahn Shabha will go along in the end. I certainly can't go back again."

"I cannot believe that they would have..."

"They would have made it look like a crash. There would have been an investigation, they would have blamed the Thraini or the Venjet or whoever they've decided have to be their enemies this month. While all this was going on, they'd send a fleet of shuttles up to 'protect' the adnot. The others would protest but no one else has anything like Ahn Shabha's sophistication in space travel."

"It would have done them no good."

"Why?"

"Do you remember me once saying that I was an extension of the adnot? In the same way, the adnot is an extension of me. If I die, it dies too. It would destroy itself and the Naulish would think again about contacting Fanadd. Maybe they would decide they had made enough of an investment in this marginal world, even with its unique sociology."

"I would not like that," I say, after a time squinting into the ice dazzle.

"I think it's a investment worth making," Shodmer says. "Should we go now?"

"We should," I say. We walk back to the car but I hold back from opening the car door. "Shodmer, tell me, why now? What did you tell them that made them decide to kill you before you could get to the Union of Nations?"

"I told them exactly what the adnot was."

"Ah," I say. Memories of a voice crying out from a ring of concerned faces. Collected knowledge.

"It's what I had been trying to say all along, but the memory had not come out. The adnot is not a space ship. It's not a communication device with the Clade either. What it is, _is_ the Clade, complete, as entire as Naul knows it. The adnot is a repository for the entire quarter-million-year history of the Clade's thirty thousand societies. But it's more than just a library, it's a way of visiting other worlds. Any part of it may be run as a virtual simulation. Clade information technology is advanced enough so that you would not be able to tell it from reality. You may never travel between the worlds, but the worlds can come to _you_."

"And a quarter of a million years of scientific and technical knowledge," I say. "Ahn Shabha would commit almost any crime for that advantage."

I take one last look at the ice, just a few tens of meters away from me. I am glad to be putting this south country behind me. Thrain is a cooler, wetter, more westerly climate than big Ahn Shabha, but we will acclimatize. But the ice says, I am always here. Down at the bottom of the world, I will always be here.

I know.

Then I pick Shodmer up, surprising her into a little squeal of delight, plonk her down in her seat and scramble in beside her. I thumb the starter chip, the big all-wheeler engine roars, and we drive off, up the pass to another country, where there are people who will welcome us.