

SKY

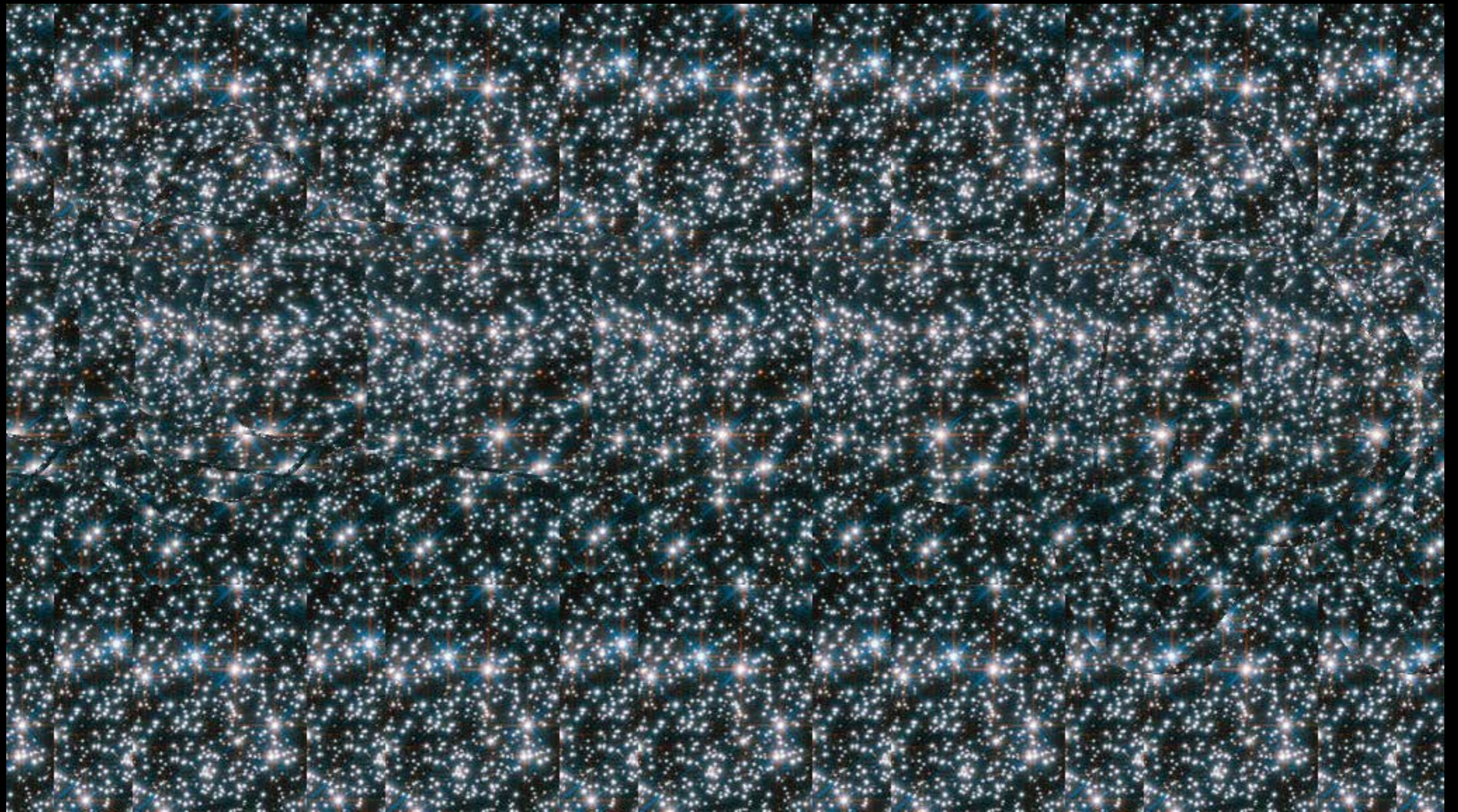
Part I: Luminar

Prologue

"If strangers truly understood the implications of distance between them, then the stars would seem but a step away."

...the Nameless Prophet

During five centuries of life, our ship mother touched the warmth of a hundred suns. Triggered by mere collective thought, she blinked briefly, opening a quiet yet awesome gap that reached deep into the endless unknown of isolation space. There, we were One. One universe new to itself, known never before and never to be known again. A universe spawned of field equations more intricate than the organic codes of life itself, devised to embrace a set of rules banishing inertia and melting the shackles of light. There we rode in deepest slumber until the delicate mesh of numbers reunited us with our home universe viscous ether a light lifespan away... and we awoke.



Chapter 1: Day

The sky chose to ripen.

I fell into consciousness, took a long first breath, and touched the day.

Eyeslits forced acceptance of where I was. Where *we* were.

I stood and waited for my breath to steady... my sinew to remember. All this because of a choice as children. *Implants permanently connecting us via the Net.* It was simply part of puberty.

Many chose against this life and sifted neatly into the Homeworld culture.

For us, Home was a distant memory that might forever pale. Implants allowed us to live off-world as the *fingers* of civilization. We were Inceptors – driven by a fundamental precept: *Before any individual can truly prosper, their species must demonstrate prosperity.*

So we spread our likeness across the stars.

I moved a hand across my face, fingers open to initiate the first command. Slowly, my enclosure dissolved. I watched absently as organic surfaces grew fibrous and then fell as dust to the ground – restructuring to perform another function.

Childhood flooded back, spawned from the falling dust. *How much we learned in the Century of the Field.* Words spoken by Teacher Jarar echoed eerily in my mind, which was still half awake. *We are fortunate the Century of Peace came before the Field – limitless power might otherwise have brought us down.*

I drifted out of memory, and my consciousness returned to the ship mother. Time to come upNet, I thought – and as I thought, it was so.

The tingling of implant energy flowed in icy waves to my extremities, and an inner consciousness clicked off questions. I knew all was well.

Walking on a field of sandy loam, a pathway of green curved gently upward before me over the vast cylindrical plain. It was no coincidence that I needed to travel in exactly this direction, and a glance behind proved we were synchronous – vegetation dissolved into soil with the lift of each foot. I knew almost without asking that soon a food crop would grow where I walked.

Almost without asking. I no longer thought of it as a question, but more like a moment of curiosity with the answer resting patiently beside, embracing the explanation. My implant was like a vital organ, and through it, details of this environment became intrinsic parts of what it was like to be... me.

I could know nearly everything about anything in this small world. All I needed was to wonder and the answer came – if not, then the answer probably did not yet exist.

The chill of isolation space still gripped the ship. It was the sensation of cold that took my thoughts again back to the Homeworld. Perfectly reliable days and nights had forged their lives contrary to what seemed quite natural to us. Here, each new day was created solely out of need: in response to crisis and at each destination. Nights could take days or years to complete – whatever fed efficiency in this, our only home.

I wondered, then knew, that we had been asleep for almost two Homeworld years. Our fourteenth destination waited below – patiently orbiting the star Thallium-C10, christened *Luminar*.

Another question surged, and I almost verbalized it before feeling the answer via Netwise osmosis. *The aquatic plant life that drew us here had no overt intelligent counterparts.*

A dark veil fell like mist through the Net. Disappointment was palpable beneath the air, and from a dissonance in my stride.

Our deepest dream still not realized. Was this thread of community enough to sustain our hearts in the midst of such vast emptiness?

There was no Netwise answer waiting beside these questions. If our hearts thrived again then it would be of our own volition.

Desired outcomes do not require a joyous path.

The thought simply came, as if by consensus. It flowed into the Net and bounced neatly off sharp edges in our souls – softening them, preparing us for resurgence.

A slow crescendo began to melt our loneliness, and we glimpsed its antithesis. Spirits rose, buoyed by the receding darkness.

For the first time since waking, I felt the *Connection*. Each of us essential, expecting only our best, nothing wanted.

Even though still alone, our purpose unfolds.

My walk to the junction became light... free. I stepped inside.

Two comrades entered with me. We shared warmth, but greetings had completed moments before, after coming upNet.

How different life must be without implants. Imagine having to decide blindly whether or not to make conversation. Here, we simply filled Net buffers with our current status so others need not ask the distasteful question “How do you find this day?”

I sent a silent query, and my comrades gave the slightest smiles. An aura of understanding and relief touched me over the Net. We cherished this life, but knew we could not be here without our Homeworld kin.

As we walked, thoughts drifted ahead and beyond. My legs shivered briefly, but not from the cold. I felt startled – then pensive.

My legs seem to know something is coming – well before my mind.

Each destination demanded an intense social effort. Because of our implants, a physical meeting of the crew was technically unnecessary – but we knew it was essential, both by personal experience and from our ancestors as recorded in the Beta Precept.

Much can be achieved once the three barriers to contact are disabled: intolerance, misunderstanding, and physical separation.

Our physical separation would be addressed by this meeting in the Hall of Persons.

We entered the hall to a brilliant display of light. The sun of the destination world was reproduced overhead, giving the crew a palpable empathy for those staying behind.

There was a golden warmth to the sun, and I paused, finding an affinity swelling in my chest, like a call to some inner sleeper.

Then the warmth changed me. I stood immersed in the light and my skin tingled painfully, as if exposed to intense cold or heat – I could not tell. A trill of fear/exhilaration shook me. Once mind caught up with skin and nerves, I realized this sensation matched the Net signature I had felt from others before they decided to leave the ship.

My life could lead to this place!

I regained my balance and extended perceptions into the group. I felt, saw, intuited that my emotions had affected everyone. My own sensation signature still reverberated around the circle. I watched, somewhat absently, until only a shared background awareness remained.

With a simple question, I became aware of two comrades whose reaction to this destination was like my own. I heard and felt their responses and exposed my astonished recognition that two of us might share the rest of our lives together here.

Already, the meeting had performed one of its primary functions, and...
I was on the Inceptor Team!

Because of the Net, we needed no agenda and no chair. Today, all the issues unique to this destination would be organized into the inception process. Consensus would determine closure.

We met for a full Homeworld day, and, when finished, a profound sense of weariness came over us. The ship mother responded by transforming the walls of the hemispherical hall. We turned in anticipation as cylindrical compartments materialized and opened for each of us. It was time for rest, but we participated with an air of childhood excitement.

Null-gee induction could provide us with complete solitude and revitalization. But we had agreed to remain upNet during sleep to share an intimacy rarely experienced among Inceptors.

Let us join in a group inspired dream.

We invited the possibility with abandon and joy.

Our collective mood softened concerns about my future on Luminar. As I entered the nearest compartment, a childlike innocence lifted me internally, matching the physical lift of the null-gee. I closed my eyes and a smile carried me into slumber.

At the threshold of sleep, my sense of location... *folded*. Like any foreign touch, it startled yet invited me. Deeper and deeper, I followed the folding. Like a *Water Dance* – steps growing smaller, ever smaller.

My folding steps lost definition, spinning in a *coda* of the Water Dance. *Location* was no longer a relevant concept.

The immense and the minuscule had joined. Here in the smallest of spaces came to life an expanse like I had never known. Dark, yet full of life.

Our connection struck me. *The entire crew is here! We all wandered to this place.*

We fell into a blissful closeness. Stars appeared around us, as if smiling. Timelessness... *presence.*

A strange but beautiful *note* sounded, as if from within our souls, and echoed off the walls of this small yet infinite circle. By its nature, the *note* suggested how simple *and perfect* this gathering would seem, if witnessed by the infinite.

We wondered as one – *Was this note some cosmic sigh, or a laugh? Is there yet another step we must take? Will we hear another note?*

The answer came, but this time it was more than a *note*, and had no Netwise signature.

Yes. The song is yet... incomplete.

We fell still, and reflected inward. Time lost its hold on consciousness. Our breath flowed as one – hearts beat in coherent surges, yet we knew there was another breath and another heart not fully present in our circle. With one voice, we opened to this absent beat an invitation...

May this be your home. Soon.

Basking in both awe and humility, we rustled back into what seemed like clumsy, disconnected units of being. We had tasted the potential of something new, and it drew us forward like scent on an ocean breeze.

Our rest was complete.

As we rode the trackrail to our project destinations, I felt warm but subdued, and gave a mental command to come downNet. I wanted to feel only myself, to learn what it was that pulled at my heart following a time of such great joy. But I knew the answer as soon as the command took effect and the dear voices surrounding me faded into silence.

During my second drop to the surface I decided to stay.

I sat alone on a sandy slope that disappeared into a seemingly infinite mouth of sea. The golden, radiant sun pierced the crisp indigo sky with a warmth I could neither understand nor resist.

An inner call held me still, waiting.

As the sun set, a planetary ring hidden by day became a startling field of twinkling stars. I felt overpowered by a sense of kinship to this world, but the fibers of my heart were woven so deeply into the fabric of the ship that I feared they would tear irreparably if I stayed.

I needed something to guide me, something to which I could attach my heart's loose ends.

In a dreamy state, I watched myself stand and walk down the wet, sandy surface into the churning water. Its frothy chill surrounded more than just my feet, it crept up and held my spirit motionless for a few moments before it pulled me into its intoxicating grasp.

Water surrounded me before consciously realizing I was lying on my back in the sand. Waves caressed my extremities. I closed my eyes as the tiny particles of broken rock tickled my skin. Between waves the foam sang to me as its constituent bubbles burst in alluring randomness.

My mind began to wander in a deeply meditative state. Questions and answers swirled in rhythmic analogy to the motions of the sea and sand – and, as if in some passionate dance, they drew my deeper self into participation, and seemed to pose an invitation.

Tell us.

Effortlessly, my concerns emptied into the sand, the water, and the sky. I simply lay in the midst of *everything*. Nothing commanded my thoughts, so they melted into simple existence. Time flattened, stretched, and opened.

*The sand, and the sea, and the sky... embody ancient knowledge.
Simply ask.*

Teachers.

I felt the match. The physical realization entered me like invisible tendrils from the sand touching my extremities, inward. The essence of Luminar touched my soul.

My analytical mind jumped from slumber so suddenly that the shock nearly erased all revelation – as if the sand and sea were insoluble under cognition. But I was able to return and see it, to control excitement long enough to understand.

My interplay with the water, sand and sky had paired my most
burning questions with a source of answers both wise and boundless.

Questions, with answers resting patiently beside.

It was a Net. A Net in a world without Nets.

I had found a place to anchor my heart.