



## Chapter 2: Union

“We need more prototypes.”

My voice echoed off the hard walls of the lab like some foreign irritant, and I glanced at Duan out of embarrassment. My verbal outbursts were more frequent now, and the crew was amused – another statistic proving how leaders crave speech.

I was startled when Duan touched my ears with his soft voice, “I trust you will find enough – we always have.”

Something about speech was unique. Knowing that I alone could hear what Duan said made my back bristle pleasantly. I felt special, honored by this simple act.

We looked at each other, affirming through our implant network that speech, even though valuable for individual relationships, could create isolation in this networked community. I knew then why I was speaking unconsciously – to prepare for departure.

Duan and I would need the intimacy of speech during our life together on Luminar. We knew this, but it had never been Netted in depth among the crew. We sacrificed many personal needs in exchange for our roles here – and intimacy was near the top of the list. It had no useful place on the ship mother.

This was part of my attraction to Luminar, and I found myself absently examining possible futures with Duan. My focus wandered to an imagined moment of intimate contact, completely alone on the surface. The skin on the sides of my face thickened and tingled in response to the disturbing image, as if in defense.

*I am afraid!*

I took a breath, turned to Duan and waited for our eyes to meet. Speaking was suddenly difficult, and words came out softly. "I have fears about staying, Duan. We will be so... alone."

His self control was obvious, underscoring his stiff response over the Net, *We will have our implants, and the automatons, Jama.*

I spoke again, not able to hide my disappointment with his Netset response, "But we have no idea what will be required of us on Luminar, Duan. What if something goes wrong?" A brief glance from him, and I knew he agreed.

His cheeks softened and this time he spoke, "I am afraid too, Jama, but also curious... and I have faith in this process."

A warbling timbre in his voice sent a subliminal, *please let me ease your fears, Jama.*

My sense of position shifted – as if the relatively short distance between my feet and the vacuum of space had deepened perceptibly. *Yes, I feel safe with Duan.*

"I have faith too, but your support makes it... real." My eyes said *thank you.*

Our brief connection helped me let go of my desire to speak. The time for speaking would come soon enough. This was my chance to experience the ship mother and crew, while I still could.

Duan and I returned to the task of gene selection.

The first generation would need to be genetically diverse yet compatible with the environment of Luminar. Our current group did not include enough samples of auto-immune prototypes. I was determined to fill the AIP quota without threatening our chosen attribute variation.

As I worked, a supportive Net query touched my awareness. Even after fourteen destinations, it was still a pleasant surprise when a comrade replied to some issue I was facing. Once aware of it, the query blossomed into words for me. *The destination 2 Inceptors used a gamete lock on the first four generations to ensure the desired transmission of recessive prototypes.*

My glee filled the Net – powerfully enough that offering thanks would have reduced the effect. *Thanks had already been given.*

Netwise to Duan, I thought, *Link up with the destination 2 conversions. I am hoping some of our recessives will respond to a lock.*

Duan moved his hands effortlessly over the console. I knew he agreed with my suggestion by his straight back smile and increased speed. The implants did more than ease communication, they taught us to interpret nuances in our closer comrades. As I watched him, curiosity took me into the future. *Would the Net someday be unnecessary between us?*

The rhythmic sweep of his hands relaxed my thoughts, and I recalled a lesson about the need for genetic manipulation.

*There comes a time when medical knowledge puts an end to evolution and we are compelled to arbitrate with destiny.*

So we injected variations into the genetic stream. Duan and I wanted to know with certainty that the required variation would pass to the eleventh generation. *The Disbursement Plateau.*

When the plateau was reached, we would celebrate *Inception*. The technology of implantation would be shared with the young leaders and our task would be complete. Duan and I would transfer our consciousness into the new Net, and allow our bodies, finally, to perish.

When my thoughts returned to the present, I could see our variation disbursement was finally closing toward our target. I looked at Duan, absorbing everything about him. There were deep creases beside his eyes, excitement in the drawn edges of his mouth and an elevated consciousness pushing beyond the Net.

My thoughts drifted. I could sense his progress through the Net, but I also sensed something new about Duan. For a moment it startled me, because I was unfamiliar with personal insights. Warming to the experience, a trickle of excitement touched every move I made.

I came out of my inward focus to see Duan looking at me questioningly. I knew he wondered why I had just colored the Net with excitement.

“Duan,” I hesitated, then spoke, “I learn about you by watching. I... enjoy your creativity.”

A wave-like sensation passed through the space between us, throwing off my balance.

Duan’s voice seemed unsure, like he too had lost reference. “Creativity. Yes, this may be why I chose Luminar.”

His spoken word moved me, like a wave coming back home. It splashed into me, chilling my chest and arms. *This is too much for standing.* I went downNet and dropped into a cushion behind Duan.

My eyes were closed. I suppose that helped fend off this overwhelming... *closeness*. I ventured them open, fearing blindness from what was real. Duan was close to me, his hand reaching to touch my face.

"I came downNet to be with you Jama. You have tears."

"I know. Something shook me and I am trying to understand it."

"Yes. Tell me what happened."

I looked at him intently, for a sign. "It happens when you speak to me. As if it changes space between us – I lose balance."

Duan looked away for a moment and my heart sank, fearing he would stop. But he spoke again, shaking. "The sound of your voice nearly immobilizes me. At first, I thought myself odd." Duan looked at me and continued, with effort, "The Net offers some explanation. I think they feel this way on the Homeworld. The Net insulates us, after the Choice."

We looked at each other for several moments. Finding words for this was difficult. "We have a lot of time to learn," I said, "If we can." I could see the changes forming in his face... feel him absorbing, adapting. My eyes and body told me – not the Net. How strange and exciting.

"Is there more information, Duan? Other Inceptors may have received help."

Duan took a deep breath and nodded – Yes. We looked at each other. I wondered what it would be like to watch each other come upNet – and there it was.

Duan looked the same on the outside but felt different on the inside. Right next to me.

Fresh information mingled with my thoughts. The Net was warm and familiar, but seated in the background was a budding presence we each knew to be the other. Something in the implants was expanding and encouraging our experience together.

A simple look at Duan and he nodded.

We knew this awareness would not be shared with the rest of the crew, and that felt strangely... *pleasant*.