



Chapter 3: Home

The global survey results came, and Luminar could finally stop waiting. Duan and I had long discussions about the list of optional sites, and they were fruitful. Surprisingly, no effort was lost on deceit or competition between us – a good omen. Once we came to a decision, we simply moved on, without consensus from the larger group. Working with two was quite different than fifty, and I liked it.

A great deal of information was presented through an implant channel we now began to understand, but did not share with the others. A profound change was occurring within each of us that conveyed more about our social system than any lesson could have touched. We invented several phrases that became keynotes to this newfound knowledge. One of our favorites was “doing is believing.”

Duan and I took a drop to the site before any equipment arrived. It was a very wet day so we sat protected in the shuttle as we peered out through the open hatch.

When alone, we enjoyed touching – especially when fearful or moved. It calmed and bound us, tripling our strength. This time, we shared our awesome new home entirely alone, and our touching hands felt electrical, as if supporting each other directly through nerve endings without words or thoughts. In the silence we looked at each other frequently, showing our reactions to the experience with our faces and eyes.

I wanted so dearly for this to last, yet I feared it might decay into the familiar at any moment.

Out of this thin edge of excitement and uncertainty came a revelation. I turned to Duan and said, intently, “We need not let events determine what happens on Luminar, Duan. If we interject nothing of ourselves,

then our experience will naturally decompose, to find another purpose.” I stood up and pulled Duan’s hand toward me. “Let us make this *ours*, by our every move.”

Duan stood up, and I noticed moisture beneath his eyes. But he overcompensated and fell in my direction. We stumbled, and in a moment, we found ourselves standing outside the protection of the hatch on Luminar soil. I looked up, surprised by the rain, and found my eyes filled with water. Rotating my head sharply downward to clear my vision, I saw an interesting plant near one of the shuttle’s retractable supports. I looked at Duan and motioned to investigate. Once we were closer, I could see a solitary white blossom on the end of a long thin stalk covered with leaves and a random array of pointed protrusions. The beauty of the flower attracted me yet the points repelled me like a warning. I looked at Duan questioningly, hoping he might help me understand its message.

He touched the soft blossom, and bent close enough that I could see it reflected in his dark, wet eyes. His voice was animated, “The survey may have classified it. Let’s wonder again once we return to the ship mother.” Still holding my hand, Duan stood up, more steadily this time, and smiled at me. “Come.”

We walked in the rain through grass and shrubs until we came to the base of a tall tree growing from the side of a small hill. It was a strange species, but offered comfort as though speaking to us from our home world. A shared glance confirmed we would come here again.

I sat on the wet earth, leaning against the tree. The outer rim was rough, and its uneven pressure proved, viscerally, where we were. Alien nature in every direction, yet so very *real*. The only thing familiar here was us, yet we were actually the token strangers. I absorbed this juxtaposition silently.

When the departure alert buzzed over our local Net we found our arms wrapped around each other, sharing support in a way we had never before known.

Standing again was painful. Not physically, for in this gravity I could have jumped to the branches just above us, but emotionally. My skin felt the absence of Duan as though severed from his touch – a thousand tiny arms and voices reaching for contact lost. Some unseen force was pulling me, and I found myself moving close to Duan, grasping his hand. I looked at him and saw in his eyes the relief that I felt. I asked softly, “What is happening, Duan?”

It took little thought before he answered, “They called it *Bonding*. When we made the Choice, losing it was the greatest drawback to

implants. But I had no idea *this* was what I had lost... that I would live several decades before discovering what our peers enjoyed their entire lives.”

Despair emanated from him as we embraced. I spoke softly into the background of rain, “I think we knew enough, Duan. We were told either choice would offer powerful opportunities the other could not touch. Part of maturation was to choose for our heart even though we could not fully know what each choice meant. You and I went with our hearts just like those who stayed.”

I paused, feeling a thought coming, a piecing together about to happen. Then I knew, and spoke, “Maybe it no longer matters, Duan. Our lives are about to begin in so many ways that the newness of our bond seems fitting. We needed strength to live outside the Net and we have found it. When I touch you I feel empowered and hopeful, like moments after wakeup on the ship – strength from community and continuity. We have these together.”

Duan’s eyes turned melancholy as he spoke, “True. But I find it hard to accept when I have missed something this... good.”

The shuttle flight computer was running a second departure alert, wondering in its own way where we were. We walked arm in arm heeding its call, and as we stepped onto the boarding ramp I glanced briefly at the flower that had welcomed us to our new home.

Beauty and Regret – may I learn to hold these as one.