

Chapter 4: Settlement

Satellites extended the Net down to the surface of Luminar so structures and components could be dropped with great efficiency. The entire crew was active in this task, constructing modules on the ship mother and fitting them into a labyrinth of systems on the surface. Everything from superconducting solar arrays to clone environment units were moved into position and molded into aesthetically pleasing shapes that enhanced the existing landscape. At every step, use of the field was paramount.

With the nearly endless power of subatomic fusion, we altered matter to suit our needs. Water lifted from the surface of Luminar returned as complex equipment and structures for the new civilization. Anything unused was recycled. As we worked, implications of the Contact Precept flooded the Net, reminding us of our commitment to the space we occupied: *If a species determines to occupy foreign space, its success or failure must not adversely impact indigenous species or habitats. True prosperity for one species is never achieved by extinction of another.*

Luminar was becoming home. Our private shelter was nestled among large rocks down slope from our special tree, where we spent many recuperative moments together. One afternoon we walked from our shelter to the clone vault. The green vegetation underfoot was wet and glistening in the sunshine. The clouds had parted long enough for us to feel a touch of warmth directly from the sun. I stopped walking and broke the silence. “Do you remember birth, Duan?”

Duan looked up, surprised. “No, but my parents spoke of it.” Then he looked at me with *why* written on his face.

“The thought of seeing the clones makes me uneasy. At first I wondered if it was because they are so helpless, lying alone in

environment tanks. But underneath, I noticed myself wondering if / would ever give birth.” I looked up at Duan, hoping he would understand what was upsetting me. “I started a Netwise search to help remember more about reproduction.” Something told me this was a delicate issue, so I proceeded with some caution. “Duan, I think there is no physiological reason why you and I could not conceive offspring.”

Duan surprised me with a sudden animated display. He turned to face me and gripped my arms. “Jama, what a relief! I found similar information and wanted to discuss it with you.”

I returned Duan’s grasp, and looked into his eyes, letting my sadness show. “I also found that our implants prevent fertilization. I remember being told as a child that we would not bear children – something about being essential parts of a ship’s social Net.”

Something grabbed at my breath, like a forgotten warning. I looked into Duan’s eyes, but it did not help me form words, so I dropped mine and continued. “I don’t understand this sadness.”

Duan’s face had darkened, but he spoke with an upbeat tone, “Help me run a final on the clone habitat. Once the sun sets we can consult the Net, but we should do it together.”

I wanted to talk more and tell Duan about my uneasiness. But too much was new – our settlement, our growing bond, our independence. I could no longer think clearly and gave in to doing the expected. “All right,” I said, “We will get back to work. I am ready to see the clones.”

Duan nodded. He seemed frozen for a moment so I took the lead, tugging at his hand, exposing a new excitement. We covered the ground quickly and soon were standing before the vault entrance. I stood for a moment, feeling impressed with the way the structure blended into the surroundings. I turned around and saw that we were on the side of a shallow hill, grass covering the ground all the way up to the crest. A small stream ran down the hill from a spring on the right and passed just above the vault biolock. The carbon rich vault surfaces matched the color and texture of rocks and grass around the perimeter so that at first glance no edge could be seen. The door drew our eyes naturally by its stark contrast. As we approached to enter, the door changed from pure white to transparent and lettering became visible as though permanently etched into its surface. *Clone Vault* covered the upper quarter of the door, with *Inceptor Access Only* in smaller letters beneath. I looked at Duan, and I knew through the Net we shared the underlying implications. This structure was permanent. Once the clones matured, further use would be restricted to Duan and myself, and then

only if required genetic lines were lost before the plateau was reached. Only then could the use of this structure be released, as a tool to vary the genetic pool by future administrators. By then, our lives would have ceased. This structure would see through our entire lives. Like a great mother.

I stepped forward and placed my hand on a shallow bulge at the center of the door. When I withdrew my hand, the door opened by sliding upward into the ceiling. I looked at Duan and, with hands clasped, we entered into a blood-like glow.

It was a beautiful sight. Before us lay two rows of oblate spheres jutting from the walls like flowers waiting to open. As we walked between the rows I felt pulled by gravity amplifiers within the walls. My mind adapted to the sideways pull by deciding that Luminar wrapped around me instead of beneath me. I shook my head to release the image and gave my implant instructions to help reverse the loss of balance I felt.

I privately wished away the gravitics, they always gave me discomfort. But I knew why it was required here – tissue development was an indicator of success or failure in specific genetic attributes. To ensure the success of the first generation program we needed to replicate home world conditions before *Birth*. Hence the need for normalized gravity.

“The clones appear healthy,” Duan said as we reached the last pair of spheres. The Net shows them within a small percentage of their expected growth.” We looked down the long rows to the entry end of the vault, appreciating the potential of what lay before us. Duan continued, “Just think, when they become adults, almost their entire atomic substance will be alien, yet their only practical difference from us will be very small. That fascinates me.” He smiled at me and I smiled back, affirming his Netwise question. *Yes, If we have offspring then they will be even more like us – they will look like us.*

A mix of excitement and dread hit me hard, and suddenly I did not feel well. As I looked at the fifty cylinders and thought of their precious cargo my abdomen and legs tightened. A flush was rippling my skin, and inside I was afraid. So much responsibility, and so alone, I thought. I closed my eyes to increase my ability to relax in this mood.

Duan’s hand touched my shoulder and I jumped, startled. *I’ll be here too, Jama. I feel the strain, like you. I am surprised you stayed upNet.*

I reached out to Duan and consciously came downNet – not so much from embarrassment, but for better understanding. I told him about my

fears and he said, "Jama, I have seen your determination. Maybe your fears are just one step in the process of self-motivation. Let them be."

I rested my head on his shoulder. Although not novel, his words tempered my mood. The timbre of his voice did more for me than finding some solution. We rested in a gentle embrace for several minutes on a bench at the end of the long vault. Being independent from the Net was both fearful and empowering for me. I longed to find a place for both these experiences in my life.

I watched inside as my mood improved, soon welling up to exhilaration. I envisioned a scene with our own child playing with the clones as friends. Energized, I jumped up, facing Duan and said, "We should go help with departure preparations. I want to show the ocean to the rest of the crew before they depart."

Duan stood up, eager. We had been to the ocean together several times and shared a love for its soothing atmosphere. "We will go, then," he said, and we left the clone vault quickly. We took the path to the residential center walking side by side. I turned back in time to see the vault door opacify to white, telling me the environment inside had returned to normal. I could visualize the cylinders bathed in the deep red warmth inside and felt a strange shiver run through me – *are these my children?*

But my thinking became grounded. I may love them as my children, I thought, but they will never be *mine*. They are clones, artificially selected beings without a genetic past, and without the gift of birth. *Like me.*

I tugged on Duan's arm to slow our pace, and closed my eyes, trusting his lead. I continued my thoughts. Yes, they are like *me!* The realization grew wild inside, and from some inner whirlwind I wanted to speak to Duan before words could even reach my mouth. So my thoughts formed on their own. *Duan! Did you know I am a clone? I feel for them, and know they can never belong through birth, just like I could not. I want to have my own female child – to provide her with the gift of birth I can not give to the clones..*

My mouth was hanging open, speechless. I closed it and looked at Duan, trying to organize my bursting thoughts into speech. But then he spoke to me.

He looked a little out of balance when he spoke, "Jama, being a clone has distinct advantages, but no – I did not know ."

Silence.

He heard me think! My hearing buzzed lightly, and I closed my eyes in an attempt to relax. Did I come upNet without knowing it – is that how he heard me? One pause, and I knew I had not. *Home! This is strange.*

Duan broke my mental stalemate. He said, “You were downNet, right, Jama?” Before I could speak, he interjected, “I am too, now.”

My voice held appreciation for his sensitivity as I spoke, “I was, Duan. Something just happened between us that I had imagined, but did not expect to show up so literally. I think I just communicated thoughts to you without speech or Net.”

Anticipating his next question, I said, “There is no precedent for telepathy among Inceptors. I checked.”

We looked at each other for several seconds – neither of us knew what was next. I broke the silence, “I remember having strong intuitions about other’s feelings as a child. But I had no reason to think it was anything but projection. Then once I received the implant, I assumed my insights were all part of the Net. It was when I decided to stay on Luminar that something seemed unusual.” I paused and smiled at Duan, “I found myself knowing more about you than I should have.”

“Would you like to test it?”

I shrugged and looked away, thinking of how to devise a test for something I did not understand – something so... *thin*. I turned back to Duan with an idea, “I notice it most when I am excited or curious, but it is always unexpected... transient.”

Duan was eager, saying “Well, could you just do something that triggers excitement?”

“I think it is not that simple, Duan. I must be excited about something I want to say in order to communicate. I can not simply manufacture a unique and exciting thought just to test myself. And thinking of something exciting out of my past will not have the same emotional effect on me since it is no longer new.”

“Try, Jama. If you have this capability, we can find a way to open it up.”

I felt uncomfortable pressing myself to perform. I reached my hand to Duan’s shoulder and spoke gently, “Duan, I fear pushing this. Something tells me to wait and let the intricacies come on their own. It will be something we share.”

I paused to let my words sink in, then continued. "I am coming upNet to gather the crew. This is our last chance to see the ocean together, and I want to get there before they do. Are you ready to go?"

I felt, heard and Netwise received his *yes!*

We ran hand in hand down the slope to the stream and followed it until we saw nothing but open water before us. The Luminar sun was more than half way down from zenith, warming us as we sat close in the sand waiting for the crew.

The sun, sand, and waves touched my life with Duan as one voice. We embraced, silently sharing appreciation for this new home.