

Chapter 5: Loneliness

The ship mother departed, taking with it everything we knew. The construction machinery no longer accompanied us in the day nor did it sing rhythmically to us at night. Shuttle flights would not fly overhead or punctuate their arrival from space with cavitation shockwaves. No more voices floating on the wind, curiosity begging to identify who was there. It would always be Duan, now.

He and I rarely parted, but when we did, I felt a sense of loneliness mysteriously connected to my feelings of love for this world. I noticed myself finding balance in things – my way of dealing with the continuing unpredictability of life.

I loved the subtle, stimulating sounds on Luminar. When the wind touched the tallest trees, it created a stirring like many distant voices. I often found myself entranced under the trees, hearing bits of childhood memories come to life in broken series, each lost by the next in a carefree dance.

One afternoon after Duan and I had finished our maintenance routines, we decided to take a walk to the top of a nearby hill. Luminar's thin atmosphere tended to shorten my breath, so we took several rests on the way. On our last stop before the summit, Duan chose to continue while I rested. I lay down beneath a small broad tree with spiny leaves and fell asleep to a lullaby from the wind. Fleeting voices in the leaves took me back before the *Choice*, but my dream was more than memories.

I was about nine years old – judging by how tall the adults were. But something more than height made me and the other children feel distant from them. They were governed by different rules, treating us as if we did not exist, deciding our fate without guilt – like some contract had been signed before birth. The realization hurt, and my face wrinkled up

from the grimace I knew it held. There was no stopping the pain, nor removing the source. All I could do was wish I were different... wish I had real parents who loved me enough to birth me. But I was a clone. Parentless and intrinsically different, I could never look at an adult without longing for that subtle possession.

The pain built as I walked through the sea of adults. I wanted out but could not see where out was for all the tall bodies. I walked in a direction that seemed right to me, and after several steps, noticed something odd happening. The adults had stopped walking and moved aside as I approached them. They were all watching, as if waiting for me to do or show them something. Determined not to react to their attention, I continued in my chosen direction.

The backdrop of talking suddenly ceased. An opening formed in the crowd where no one stood. I came to the edge of the opening and stopped. Ahead of me were two strange figures with their backs turned, apparently unaware of the throng of adults. I looked up questioningly at the nearest adult who simply pointed at the strangers as if there was something expected of me.

My feet moved me toward the strangers as if steering my eyes for a better look. But as I approached, a sense of danger stung me. These two were not like the others – they were considerably taller and slighter than everyone else and their bodies were shaped in a way that defied understanding. I approached them and watched, as if distant, while reaching to touch their unusual, delicate hands. When I looked up, excitement passed over me like a gust of wind. They looked at me... and *smiled*.

No fear remained. I reached my arms upward, and with my heart, welcomed them to lift and embrace me.

My fondness for these strangers shook me. I absorbed their support with eyes tightly shut – and let their embrace fill the emptiness inside.

Susurrations nearby stirred my curiosity, and my awareness ventured outward.

Water had surrounded us, and was slowly rising. A sense of urgency filled me, and an odor, or emotion – or both, touched my senses, and I understood its meaning. A long arm raised in gesture toward the sky which then darkened, leaving a delicate ring of stars.

I delighted in the image at first. But then another sensation, thick and dark with grief, came over me – and I felt behind the stars something that needed to be held just as I did.

I perceived in the strange face above me the deepest desire, and saw a forming tear glisten with starlight.

The water had reached me now and I floated in the gentle waves. The beings were changing before my eyes – preparing to leave.

I watched, curious, while their bodies became smooth and sleek like water itself, then dove deeply and disappeared from view.

I felt at ease, recognized the dream was complete, and opened my eyes. Luminar appeared before me.

I am awake!

The details of my dream began to pull away – like a shy child. As it dissolved, a background of sadness remained, and I wondered what stories Luminar could tell, given the chance.

Something touched me on the back. Sensation emanated from the point like a spur of flow-web, and I remembered Duan. I turned to receive his visual embrace.

Eye contact triggered a flood of thoughts about conceiving a child together – about giving our child something I never had – about the strangers in my dream.

When I tried to speak, words just turned to tears. We sat quietly beneath the tree until I had relaxed enough to speak.

“Duan, we must determine...” if we can conceive.

A pause, then his Netwise response came. *Yes, we will.*

Luminar encouraged us with a gentle pull as we returned down the hill. The gravitational bond struck me as a metaphor for something shared with this huge being – who miraculously birthed vast oceans and a wealth of life, and who somehow understands the meaning of loneliness.