



Chapter 6: Union

Deep within the implant molecular codes, we found subroutines waiting to normalize our reproductive systems, and, as inceptors, we had the keys.

So we reached into the Net to learn again the art of reproduction. Time was plentiful, and with it we probed archives intended for the First Generation. But we found no record of another inceptor pair having natural offspring. This filled me with glee, Duan with apprehension.

The clones were near their midway point by the time Duan and I felt prepared. We were checking their statistics in the vault when Duan spoke into the mechanical echoes.

"Will our birthed child belong among so many cloned children?" His probing look drove this question deep.

"Are you concerned our child will feel the way I did?"

"I feel pain when I hear about your loneliness. Imagine if our child experiences the same." Duan's voice quavered with strength and fragility.

I tried to be reassuring, "Our child will have parents, Duan. Being alone among friends was not painful, it was missing devoted adults that hurt. With clones for friends our child will learn tolerance for differences, else our task as Inceptors will fail on relatively stable ground."

I could see Duan's face lift with my words, but a darkness remained. I probed unconsciously, wanting to share his concerns – and something came through. I felt a twist inside, edging upward... a burning, unsteady sensation. I felt certain that a part of Duan was being shared with me without words or Net. Like thoughts from Duan were originating within

me, as if my own. This realization left me in shock, and I wanted to speak, but my respect for his privacy was greater.

Duan smiled, "I feel your support, Jama, but..." Duan paused, pensive. A long silence stilled the air between us before he continued.

"This does not feel rational. I know countless successful births have preceded us on the homeworld, and that we are completely capable of being a reproductive pair." This pause was shorter. "Even so, it is very difficult for me to accept that we can become *parents!*"

Still, the air invited nothing, so I waited. A subtle internal flux gathered like a waking storm.

"I have rarely known fear, Jama. But I feel it right now – like I have no center... no balance. We decide this and then we can do nothing but follow through – very much like our decision to stay on Luminar."

"Or to be Inceptors." I just spit it out – no forethought. A touch of embarrassment flowed over me with a cold prickly sensation.

Duan and I looked into each other's eyes. I felt a shift in emotion from Duan – and from me.

And from something else.

One of his eyes became my center of focus, and as I watched it turned to become a colorful planet... and I was falling, forward, into the orb.

Duan wrapped me in his arms, and my eyes closed – losing contact with a vision I did not understand, yet reminded of my dream under the tree.

Several quiet moments passed, and my balance returned. I twitched as if to support myself, and Duan replied by releasing me. *Yet another form of silent communication – between our physical beings.*

"Jama, It seems we are at the point of deciding. About mating."

His words cut through my fears, releasing nervous anticipation into excitement. But my abdomen was tight with worry. *Another disturbing balance of opposites.*

A voice inside said, *Let them coexist!*

I tried.

Thinking about mating stirred something deep. An excited invitation to the unknown – *Longing*. Giddy yet scary. Guttural yet articulate. I felt shaky, my voice faltering. "I felt this way as a child, before the Choice."

"So did I, Jama. But I may have been running away from my childhood. Now we simply invite something new into our lives without first throwing away what we already have. I see it pulling all our choices together, and that helps me settle with it."

I listened openly, and when he paused, knew that I felt the same. Fear was the intervening force here, not wisdom or intuition. I felt an inner straightening, a certitude welling gently up through the fog.

"All right, Duan. I actually feel ready."

Duan's waiting thoughts spilled into words. "The implants restrict several forms of hormonal activity, inhibiting our desire for and ability to complete the mating act. The keys we discovered begin a layered release of the hormone block." Duan grasped my arms, and an intensity I had never seen before glowed in his face. "I have already removed my first blocking subroutine. I wanted to wait for you, Jama, but after all these years, I needed some proof before deciding."

He continued to look at me intensely, and pieces of his thoughts came through. They played a sort of tune, and I relaxed into the interpretation as it drifted in. *Jama, the difference... phenomenal, irrational – do it together.*

Beneath his thoughts, I felt determination and aggressiveness. It startled me. I turned my awareness to my own research, and realized this intensity would also come to me.

I waited for just a touch of inner stillness, then spoke my mind. "I have grown to accept the responsibility of birthing a child, even knowing how little experience I have with the process. But the possibility we may lose command of rational thought frightens me. What about our responsibility to the clones, to our species and to ourselves? Too many variables to sort. I feel like hiding from it all." My abdominal muscles had tightened again and I felt chilled.

But Duan's visage was changing. As I felt his presence calming, a corresponding peace came over me. We drew each other close and stood quietly for several breaths. Then he spoke. "Suppose we just try it one layer at a time and see how it goes. If either of us becomes uncomfortable then we agree to stop. Acceptable?"

I knew he was sensitive to my reaction and wanted to help, but I needed time to sort this out. I just hadn't faced the likelihood of personality changes in this. I looked up to him and said, "I think so, Duan, but I need to accept the concept of irrationality before we go on... get used to the idea of changes I do not control."

We stopped talking then and walked toward the vault door. On both sides the clone habitats glowed silently red, a mute reminder to us of the commitment that brought us here. But I turned my eyes from them. My growing desire to have a child had dulled my interest in their future, and I was appalled to admit it even to myself. My thoughts reeled, *How can I be so selfish? Is this just part of my current mood? How can I know so little about myself!*

I looked at Duan and noticed he was focused on me, an understanding smile on his face. "Some of that came through, Jama." He paused, then, "Stop torturing yourself – remember, without *us* this civilization falls apart. We must care for ourselves."

I hugged him thankfully, feeling a sudden urge for activity. "Let us go home. I want to run this off!" I looked at him invitingly and jumped the full distance to the path from the vault threshold, bidding the physical to do work my mind could not, and took off toward home. Behind me I felt Duan smiling joyfully at my emotional upswing.

Duan did not follow me home. I stood at the base of the garden hill and watched him take the path to the Source Vault.

Our time apart is just as sweet.

It was my turn to prepare the evening meal, and as I walked alone through the garden gathering food, I realized I had never been this conscious of someone before. Sounds I heard while I worked made me imagine Duan was coming. Casual memories of him rushed through me with much greater vigor than their apparent measure.

Having collected several varieties of vegetables, I sat in the shade to reflect on the day. I thought back to our talk at the clone vault and recalled something Duan had said. *One layer at a time. Yes. It makes sense now. This is the way life unfolds – not all at once. If I close the door to everything frightening then I will never move. What if our ancestors never moved?*

One layer at a time.

Suddenly I felt certain and came upNet with a flush of emotion. Duan was *down*. Good, I thought, and with a wish I accessed our research.

I felt very impulsive, and an inner voice quietly warned me to think, too. I knew the warning well. I had placed it there to protect myself from jumping blind. With a dash of restraint, I requested Duan's hormone block leader. Instantly, I was flooded with information. But it was too much at once for me to digest – I only wanted information about the first stage reprogramming Duan had administered on himself. So it came, in a more

palatable form. I accessed and compared the parallel codes reserved for me.

My procedure was more elaborate than Duan's, and I winced, anticipating the physical implications of discomfort in addition to the irrationality Duan had mentioned.

I was recoiling again. My face felt twisted, so I took a breath and leaned back to relax. I came downNet, determined to remain focused. I wondered if this was foolish or just... natural.

How can this be anything but natural? I want to be whole, to discover who I really am. I have the potential to bring a new life into this world.

I returned to the Net and initiated the first of the slave routines for my gender.

My mouth and eyes pinched closed as I waited for some physical shock. But nothing happened and I looked inward for more subtle manifestations.

Nothing! I was disappointed. Impulsively, I looked for the next routine, wanting more. But a warning flared, and I decided to wait, understanding unhappily that any overt change might take time.

I realized our dinner might be late, so I decided to move. I came downNet, picked up the vegetables and began a slow run toward home. But my energy was high and I found myself racing along the path, feeling alive and connected with everything. The low gravity of Luminar and my physical energy combusted into a feeling of flight and rushing air.

It was a letdown to reach home. I wanted to keep feeling this alive, this powerful. This... *different!* I almost tumbled when I pulled myself to a stop. *This is new.* It was the change I had waited for!

I tingled from exertion as I walked up the path to our home. My elation triggered a memory of the opposite. *Discouragement could be nearby.* I swallowed hard, wary of a surprise fall.

My mood had not waned by the time I arrived, and soon my wariness was overshadowed again by a love of life. I was determined to eat well with Duan, my appetite unusually boundless and my palate distinctly well refined. *If this is irrationality I can easily learn to love it!*

I had started the vegetables steaming and was about to process some herbs when I felt a familiar voice whisper from the inside. I turned around to see Duan entering the main portal. He was looking at me, smiling in a way I had not seen since we were programming

genetics aboard ship. I knew he had found something, and felt a childish excitement mount as he walked toward me.

There was a vial in his hand filled with grass. He held it up to me, close, implying that the thing was small. He said simply, "This is the first animal I have caught! It moves, eats, excretes and breathes. Look at how it moves – its entire body is flexible." He paused to get his breath, then, "And Jama, I ran a genetic analysis on one of its hairs. It has a genetic code analogous to ours that has been evolving for more than a billion years!"

He looked at me with wide eyes full of movement. I had never seen him this excited. But I had yet to see the creature and I smiled mischievously as I grabbed the vial from him.

I searched for a moment, then saw it clinging to a small leaf. It was about as long as the width of my fingers, red in color, and almost tubular. Its tiny legs moved in odd unison and I marveled at the efficiency of what must be a very small brain. It was absently chewing on the edge of the leaf while I watched, transfixed by its beauty. Then its head end moved upward as if to return my gaze. The motion shattered my trance and I lifted my head, astonished by my thoughts. "Duan! Is it intelligent?" But my startled state abated as I spoke, and I motioned to Duan with my hand that no response was necessary. "Let's keep it," I said, setting the vial down carefully where it would catch the morning sun.

I returned to him with a warm smile all over, "Duan, I went upNet this afternoon and accessed the first routine! Something is changing, I feel... wonderful!"

I moved towards him to offer a familiar embrace, but once my arms encircled him my extremities tingled almost painfully and muscles tightened by themselves. My lungs felt suddenly empty and a powerful inhale filled me with the need for another.

I closed my eyes as fear darkened my joy, looking inward to the implant domain where solace was so often just a thought away. But before I issued the *silent* command, intuition pushed back from an independent corner, shining more powerfully than ever. It forced my eyes open to Duan and the natural intensity of the moment. With a mere thought I asked Duan if he was willing to mate and as easily I felt his answer. We entered our null-gee chamber and, together, unfolded the mystery of a long lost dance.

Roiling in a totality of senses, I felt Duan's every thought and sensation, and marveled how they paired with my own. We swam in

breathless ecstasy that fed back upon itself, intertwining until I could no longer differentiate our experiences.

Slowly, as we floated, our sensual union mellowed and I began to feel my own breath. But when I looked at Duan a visceral chill told me this would never completely dissipate. Our lives had been irrevocably changed.

The evening meal waited too long for us that night. It was flat and lifeless by the time our bodies remembered their need for sustenance. But, having nothing else, we imagined it palatable while eating silently in the twilight of early evening. Cleanup went quickly and we stepped outside to enjoy the night sky before the air became cool.

There were three beautiful displays in the night sky. The dazzling planetary ring, dramatic meteor showers, and the brilliant specks of distant light that filled the hearts of other systems. The constituents of the ring looked like a million friendly homes scattered across an endless valley in space. As I nurtured the image my balance reeled in favor of the ring as if to tell me how I longed for the proximity of so many friends. I closed my eyes to release the sky, and my reference shifted back to the pull of Luminar.

When we reached the spot beneath our tree, we sat close. A soft breeze moved inland, spiced with salt and plants from the sea. I imagined the vast water surface coming to my senses on the evening air, and I wondered about the sadness I had felt in Luminar's past.

I wondered what Duan was thinking and turned my head to read his face. But I knew before I turned that he was looking at our homeworld star. I rested my head against his and asked, "What do you miss, Duan?"

"I have been wondering what life on the homeworld is like. Do you think we could ever return?"

I was surprised but excited. I wanted him to talk more so I gave the rote response, "The inceptor's life ends once the new civilization matures, you know that." Duan sat up and stared at me, feeling surprised and betrayed, but I smiled to reassure him. "I want to hear more, Duan."

As he relaxed I consciously held back my perceptions so his voice could give me all the information. My eyes were closed when he spoke. "When I made the decision to receive an implant, I was still an impressionable child. I had developed more slowly than most children and did not understand the consequences. I longed to travel among the stars. Somehow I passed the tests, possibly because of my advanced math aptitude, and was offered the choice. But my desire to return germinated

the moment I left for the stars.” He changed to a lighter, curious tone and continued. “Our Homeworld star looks deceptively close.”

I waited a few moments to be sure he had finished. I held his words as I sat holding him, feeling the value of this closeness.

I decided to speak. “Perhaps we can find a way to return without contradicting our purpose here. We have vast resources and a great span of time with which to work. And I, too, would like to return.”

Duan moved his shoulders in a way that meant he wanted to say something difficult. I found myself recoiling slightly in response, but softened in relief once he spoke.

“I am very impacted by our mating. Making plans for us, distracted by thinking of you constantly. I fear losing focus, yet am elated at the prospect of spending moments with you. How can I be at once fearful and elated, yet not fall helplessly to the ground?”

He looked at me with a *who knows?* and I gave it back, silently. But it was beginning to make sense to me. Excitement and worry, happiness and confusion, joy and fear – all matching pairs, incomplete if alone yet defiant if together – *compatible yet opposing*.

I tilted back and felt the pull of lights from the sky, yet gravitation held me still as if jealous of the night. I held my breath, reminded that Luminar was laced with opposites too – vacant yet fertile, vibrating with beauty yet somehow saddened by the past.

I knew answers would come if I waited – but patience was something I had yet to learn.