

Chapter 8: Home

My spill of blood was insignificant compared to the bigger picture of raising a child. It was time to really learn about the process.

A huge volume of literature had been generated about birth and parenting. As I reached into it via the Net, my resolve was often shaken by accounts of pain and euphoria woven into the process. Was I doing this just to give my child the one thing I could never have? Would I expect something in return, or feel regretful after the birth?

The more information I absorbed, the more my questions stacked up, like walls trying to protect me from overwhelm. But dealing with them took so much of my attention that the rest of my world paled in comparison. When this happened, I reached out to Duan for solace, and found subtle lessons for myself within my requests for help.

I was monitoring clone status when a powerful series of doubts hit me. I looked deeply into one of the tanks and found myself identifying with the tiny sleeping soul. Some fleeting fetal emotions drifted into my awareness, and I wondered if I would sense my own child before birth.

Home! What if my child senses emotions too? *Would it be at risk from mine...*

Sitting down helped, and I thought, *Working around the clones triggers me into doubt.*

With face in hands, I focused on the questions and waited for some clues. As I felt myself relax, my first experience with the sea and sand came back to me. I could feel the tingling sensations on my skin, smell the mineral rich water.

I need to get outside into a dynamic environment, like the ocean.

Stepping out into the sunlight was a warm, visceral affirmation. I walked down to rest in the grass beside the vault.

I lay on my back and let go of the questions. A sense of peace brushed by me like a fragrant breeze, and grew. I imagined the breeze starting at my feet and running slowly up to my head. Relief came like a slow, deep sigh. The beauty of Luminar pulled me back into childhood – back to the Homeworld with teacher Shan. He spoke to me, and I could hear his words as if he was lying next to me in the grass.

The dimension of spirit is so finely resolved and intricate that within the heart of each being lies an answer to every question in the universe.

At first, I simply enjoyed the beauty of the words. His familiar voice echoed in my mind as I bathed in the sun. But then they hit me deeply, halting breath. My experience on the beach, Shan's words and questions about the birth had become mutual allies.

They required each other.

My body lightened from euphoria and a tangible need to expend energy pulled me to a sitting position. I held my legs close, trying to get a conscious hold on this moment. But as I grasped for it, fear of failure stood in the way. *I need to hold this idea – for sanity.*

Sanity. Sanity does not result from control and forcefulness, but from acceptance and invitation.

I began to relax. I allowed myself to look deeper without expectation, and went back in my thoughts to Shan. The moment returned, and I held it gently.

My work lies in the depth of the search, not in determining whether or not the answers exist. I shall notice depth in every aspect of the universe – in every aspect of myself.

I felt hopeful again for what lay ahead. An inner strength buoyed me as I walked back to the clones. *What if I interpret my next confrontation with the unknown as simply a step toward finding my place in the universe.*

Working with the clones was peaceful after my break outside. My thoughts drifted visually around our settlement – *Ahhh! this is my Home.* But it darkened as I mentally approached the perimeter, and shadows hid the unexplored. *Alien space.*

By the time my vault records were complete, I knew what I needed to do. Fearing the unknown had a classic antidote: *Explore!* It was time to expand my connection with this world around me.

Duan and I had recently discussed our exploration preferences, and until now I could not decide between the local or planetary scale. Planetary exploration felt expansive and empowering, in part because of the shuttle and connection with technology reminiscent of our ship mother. But for the first time in my life I was able to explore with my eyes and hands. Walking freely under an open sky was invigorating, and I longed for more.

I went upNet to call Duan, impulsively wanting to begin, and was pleased to find him downNet. He had been enjoying some independence, as was I.

Apart, yet side by side.

With a thought, I activated a Netwide call. I smiled inwardly, thinking he might appreciate the humor of such an absurd act, and he did.

Responding as though we were back on the mother ship, he sent his identifier codes embedded in a generalized response to my call. I responded by laughing out loud and on the Net, and I felt Duan do the same. What irony – two of us alone on a vast planet, laughing together on an artificial link, standing nearly in sight of each other. What a striking statement this is to our faith in the process – and our absolute need for each other.

Duan broke the Net silence. *Meet me halfway to finalize in person.*

I moved in response, feet beating out the quick rhythm of my excitement.

He looked vibrant when we met, and I thrilled at knowing our meeting pleased him too. We lay side by side at the edge of a small meadow. The sky was filled with clouds surpassing any from the Homeworld – shades of dark and light mingling to expose massive depth.

My voice seemed to crack Luminar's perfection when I said, "I would prefer charting the local region, Duan," and turned toward him in anticipation. He smiled and returned my glance. *Good, he is pleased with my choice.*

"That was easy," he said. "I was prepared for either, but my plans involving work with the shuttle were more from the heart." He paused, then looked at me curiously and added, "You are not doing this for me, are you?"

I smiled reassuringly. “No. I decided just before my call. I was certain for the first time, so I wanted you here to start planning.”

I knew Duan was eager to talk, but I kept the silence by grasping his arm and holding his gaze. “I also wanted to be closer to medical help while I carry our child.” I smiled. His shock was evident, so I did my best to speak to it. “Not yet, Duan, but if we want our child to be a peer to the clones then it should happen soon.”

I knew his emotions had just run full spectrum and I felt responsible. So I relaxed onto the grass and let my hand slide down his back. I let go of my desire to talk and opened a space for what he needed to say.

In a few moments, Duan asked, “Do you still want to conceive a female child?”

Something about his piercing eyes and full attention made my face flush, so it was a little hard to focus on my answer. Breaking eye contact gave me a bit of privacy, then I returned. “Yes, but not badly enough to implant a selected zygote. I want to create our child through a mating union.”

Duan broke eye contact and looked down, but his smile remained... embarrassed. Then he looked up and spoke. “I hoped you would. I imagine holding our child and recalling the union.” His silence said the rest. I returned the thought, *Yes... that will be sweet.*

Tingles rolled up my back to the top of my head. *I know we both feel this.*

Duan lifted himself up on one arm, speaking, “We can program our implants to improve the chances of conceiving a female child. There are some hormonal algorithms from the inceptor archives.”

Knowing we both wanted this drew me closer. My hand clenched the fabric on his back and I found myself breathing as though I had been running.

We looked at each other for a few moments, silently confirming our shared desire. I spoke quietly under a labored breath, “I will not be fertile for several days. We should plan to mate then... but now would be fine, too.” My skin flushed as I spoke, and when I felt the pressure of Duan’s arms, my body moved on its own for contact.

Mating outdoors felt exposed, inclusive, different. Like it was again totally new. I felt some pain from contact with the ground, but as sensation dissolved boundaries, I invited the reminder of Luminar beneath us, and felt strangely as if we were mating with it as well – a union with cosmic implications. To have so much present in and around our

mounting intimacy made it build more slowly and contain much more than I felt before. During our most explosive moment I felt as though I was united both with Duan and Luminar, living an entire life here with Duan in compressed time.

We stayed tightly embraced while our passions cooled. As I re-entered the present, I felt quietly curious about where such powerful experiences lie during our everyday lives. I marveled at the broad spectrum available to us, and wondered how many variations I had yet to live.

The future seemed ominous compared to our warm embrace, and I found myself wanting to dance away from the unknown into this closeness with Duan.

But the day was darkening, and the Luminar sun was no longer visible over the trees. I longed for a swim before darkness cooled the air and planning inevitably took us forward.

We separated, stood slowly, then ran together down the path to the beach. We rolled in the surf together, laughing while the foaming salt and sand etched our bodies clean of excretions and earth.

A large rock held us off the sand as we dried. Its warm surface reminded me of the day, yet the blossoming sunset pulled me into the future and I felt overcome with curiosity and fear about all that lay ahead. An unexpected tear formed then fell down my face and I reached to Duan for solace. In our embrace, my emotions seemed to dissipate into Duan, the rock, and the sunset, revealing a connection between all the elements of my life here that seemed willful, almost in waiting. I realized contact with Duan might be the trigger, but when we released each other and sat up to face the sunset, I knew the feeling was due to a kind of inner choice. I played with the sensation of connection as the ocean's horizon moved up to the sun, and the sun's union with the water harmonized with my own senses.

With the loss of the sun, wispy clouds blossomed with color, as if in farewell to their brilliant partner. When the air began to chill, we stood up together and began the walk home. It was getting dark quickly, and the path had begun to blend with the growth on either side.

Then, as I looked ahead, I noticed something strange. I gripped Duan's hand and stood still. The path ahead of us had begun to glow slightly, and I noticed shadows that gained contrast as I watched. Suddenly I knew the cause, and spun around to watch the meteor. It brightened for several moments, then exploded, scattering streaks in many directions.

I needed a moment to recover once the meteor was gone. The darkness seemed deeper than it had before, and the path gave me a feeling of uneasiness that I did not understand at first. Duan's arm pressed against mine, and I knew he was feeling it too. Neither of us had ever seen one so close.

As we walked I found myself wondering if the high velocity object shield was adequate to the task, and visualized a few tests I could run to find out. I looked up at Duan and said, "Do you think we will ever see another one that dramatic?"

Duan paused a moment, and I knew by his voice that he was still digesting the power of the event. He spoke while looking ahead on the path, "I really do not know, Jama. The habitat research did not predict a problem with meteors large enough to penetrate, but that display was unsettling."

I nodded, saying, "It shook me – like losing trust in a friend." I thought for a moment, then continued, "Would you come with me to the source vault? I want to check the shield settings before sleep tonight, and I would rather not do it alone."

I looked over to Duan. He turned his head and smiled, then reached out to touch my shoulder. I sensed he did not want to be alone either. We walked in silence to the vault, but my awareness was bringing in so much from the environment. All this newness – Luminar, Duan and myself spinning together in this wonderful, exciting yet ominous dance.

We are all both One and Separate.

The tests were quickly finished. I increased the available shield power by fifty percent, and sent a query regarding the meteor we had just seen. But the presence of powerful fields inside the vault made my skin tingle uncomfortably, so I stopped before evaluating the response – too tired and sensitive now for work. It could wait until tomorrow.

Luminar's satellite was high in the sky as we left. It seemed brighter than I remembered, and a quick Netwise query confirmed it was at perigee. I stood transfixed, absorbing the most prominent surface features, when a powerful sense of loss came over me.

Like a voice in the light.

I blinked hard and held Duan's arm in silence, continuing my gaze.

Sounds were coming through that cold light, like a re-awakened dream.

They were voices... but so foreign I could never have heard them before, even in a dream. I waited for more, but in moments they softened into silence.

I felt an inexplicable sadness filling me from the strange voices. Duan's eyes became a refuge, and I clung to his arm. All I could do was mumble, "Oh, Duan..." I could share no understanding for this with him – yet.

I pulled at him and started to walk. The sound of our footsteps cut into the silence, and grounded me.

Duan loosened my grip on his arm and the reminder helped me relax. I knew the memory of this night was too powerful and clear to wane, so my sense of urgency eased and I let the questions rest.

Luminar's satellite cast a potent light on the walk home. Ahead of us on the path, our tall shadows and the strange voices morphed from memory into a touch of understanding.

I walk toward the tall ones... just like in my dream.