

ZOI

A NOVEL

JANE MONDRUP



Denver, Colorado

1 CHANGES

The hologram zooms in on Natan. Throughout the recording, he has been updating me on his own life and what's going on in his family. I know him well enough to sense the concern beneath the cheerful tone. Now it surfaces, both in his face and his voice.

“That’s all for now. But I hope to hear from you soon. Of course, I understand if it’s difficult to find the time, or the energy. You’re in a pretty extreme situation.”

One of the child voices I’ve been hearing in the background rises to a squeal. An adult shushes them. Natan continues:

“Maybe you don’t want to deal with anything coming from Earth. But I’d be grateful to get a holo from you once in a while, no matter what it contains.”

He’s right. It’s painful enough to watch this depiction of him, hear it talk about a world I’ll never see again. The message has been waiting for me for several days before I finally worked up the

courage to open it. Sending a reply seems insurmountable. It's been at least a month since I last did it. Possibly longer.

"I know through ETLA that you're still alive, or that you were when you last sent a status report. That just doesn't tell me how you're doing. What you're experiencing. What you're thinking."

It was easier when we could still speak directly, that is, as directly as the distance of a few light minutes allows. During previous expeditions we had gotten used to the inbuilt pauses. It was like talking to a very thoughtful person who carefully considered all their answers before speaking, but it still felt like a conversation. When the zoi broke out of its orbit, we continued like that until the pauses got too long, and we had to give up. Since then, our communication has consisted of holorecordings going back and forth, and you can always postpone those. Besides, I don't know what to say.

"No pressure. I'll keep sending messages no matter how often you answer. As long as I do that, I haven't lost you completely." He raises his hand in farewell. "Goodbye for now, Amira. Take care and give my best to the others."

The recording ends. Natan's figure disappears, leaving me alone in the holeroom. I hang in midair while arguing with myself. Of course, I ought to make a recording right away. Natan stressed that it doesn't matter what it contains. I don't have to give a full account of all current events. Not that it would be much of an ordeal, considering how little is actually happening. But then, what can I tell him? How I feel? What I'm thinking? I hardly know that myself.

Around me, I see the zoi organelles, large and small, move around in the cytosol fluid, delimited from the air in the room by a partly transparent membrane. Sometimes, I still catch myself

thinking that they are watching me. By now, we're pretty sure they're just cell components without any agency or self-awareness. They're not independent beings. But they look like that.

It ought to be an inexhaustible subject: The zoi itself. The fact that I reside within a living creature, a denizen of open space, one that travels from one star to another. It's a form of travel that used to reside within the realm of fantasy, and no matter how uneventful it appears, it's an adventure. On this journey, we're truly getting to know this alien being, the zoi. Though we're not doing much about it right now. At least, I'm not.

Minutes pass. My arms float in front of me, as they do in zero g when you let them. Once or twice, I make a halfhearted gesture towards the recorder, but that's all it comes to.

Finally, I give up. I close the transparent cover shielding the holo projector from the zoi environment, and a slight kick against the wall membrane propels me towards the exit. The simple act of opening and closing the door makes me think of Linn. While the rooms and the passages connecting them are created by the zoi, the mechanisms closing off some of the rooms were developed by Linn during the previous expedition.

Linn's special skills are among the primary reasons this journey could even be considered. She's an expert in BB-tech, biology-based technology, and her most important task is to manipulate various zoi substances to develop the right properties, suited for technology components and utility items. But she hasn't been able to work for a long time. In fact, she has felt ill throughout both this and the previous expedition, but she managed to conceal it, until it was too late.

I continue down the passageway, past Linn's quarters which are located next to the holeroom. The transmitter on my arm is

buzzing, reminding me that it's almost three o'clock. It's a primitive model, not even able to generate holograms, but it can withstand the humid air and the changing chemical effects from the surroundings. The zoi has created an environment that accommodates human needs, but only extended to our biology. Technology must fend for itself, and our equipment is always in danger of being dissolved and absorbed as nourishment. That's why most of it is shielded behind protective surfaces while we're not using it. The transmitters are the only things we carry around with us.

Now at least I know what to do with myself. With deliberate kicks and pushes I move through the passageway in the direction of the living room for my daily meetup with the other three. From the beginning Evardo insisted on making it a regular appointment, and though I would sometimes rather be excused, it's something to hold on to. I need that right now.

#

The living room is the largest air-filled space in the zoi, located centrally in the network of air pockets and passageways constituting our home. It was here the first air bubbles emerged, beginning the now familiar process that I have personally experienced three times.

Evardo and Linn are waiting inside. I notice how thin Linn has become. Dark shadows have established themselves permanently under her eyes, and her round cheeks have sunk in. Her Scandinavian skin is inherently pale, but it has acquired an unhealthy, yellowish hue. She may have started losing hair. It doesn't show that clearly because she keeps it short, but I think I

spot her scalp in several places. Besides, I have suspiciously often come across short, fair hair straws floating in the air in places where Linn has been.

She looks old, and she is only thirty-one, the youngest of us by far. At the departure she was in superior shape. We were all training hard, but as always, she made an extra effort. Maybe it has helped her a little, but not enough.

“Hello, Amira.”

It’s Evardo, formal and quiet as always. He’s the oldest in the crew, forty-seven as far as I remember. Evardo has been my doctor for twelve years, ever since I got enlisted as an astronaut at Extra Terrestrial Life Exploration Agency, in short ETLA. Back then no-one would have imagined that the earthbound Mexican physician would even consider personally joining a space mission. But he surprised us all.

I mutter a greeting to them both. Linn smiles back faintly, takes a deep breath, and exhales slowly.

I gently stroke her arm. “One of the worse days, right?”

“Yes.” Her voice is weak but steadies somewhat when she continues: “I feel miserable. It’s like something’s happening to me. Evardo tries to figure out what it is, but I don’t think he’s getting any wiser.”

Evardo clears his throat. “May I take a blood sample from you, Amira?”

“From me? Why?”

“Because I just took one from myself, and the analysis showed some interesting results. But first tell me: how are you feeling?”

I hesitate. I don’t feel all that well, but I figured it was psychological.

“Not sure,” I answer. “Maybe a bit weird.”

“Then let’s see what the blood sample says.”

Obediently, I extend a hand. Evardo pricks my finger with a little instrument that also does the analysis. He nods to himself.

“It matches mine in showing distinct hormonal changes compared to the last sample. On the other hand, there’s no sign of infection.”

“Infection?” I give him a puzzled look. “You never get infections in a zoi.”

“It hasn’t happened yet,” he concedes, “which is no guarantee, but it doesn’t seem to be the explanation in this case. It’s hormones, once again.”

Evardo glances at Linn who is fidgeting uneasily. That’s the source of her health problems: hormone levels racing up and down. We’re all subject to hormonal stimuli from the zoi, but Linn’s immune defense system seems to be especially hostile to the external influence. When her adverse reactions cause the zoi to continually modify those stimuli, it only gets her system into even higher alert.

It started out like that for all of us, both on this expedition and the previous ones. Kiah has compared it to being pregnant. She’s the only one of us who has had that experience, and according to her, it felt somewhat similar: nausea, coupled with a constant restlessness making it almost impossible to sleep or even relax, no matter how tired she was. For the rest of us, these ailments eventually subsided. But Linn has only gotten worse.

When I first met Linn, I felt a certain aversion towards her, perhaps because she seemed like a more successful version of myself. But all envy is gone now. I still don’t know Linn that well, as she has always been reserved. But I feel sorry for her. I know how wretched she must feel, and I expect that by now, she has

given up hope that it will ever pass.

Are we all heading for the same misery? The thought worsens my slight nausea.

“What about Kiah?” I ask. “Have you taken a blood sample from her?”

“Not yet.” Evardo looks towards the passageway leading to Kiah’s quarters.

I tap on the transmitter. It’s long past three o’clock. A grumpy remark escapes me:

“I’m getting tired of waiting for her.”

Evardo regards me with mild disapproval. “She isn’t always late,” he points out. “Sometimes she turns up long before the rest of us.”

Both his tone of voice and his gaze reminds me of my father. It only adds to my annoyance.

“Well, yes. But if only she let her transmitter give a reminder, she could be on time. It would be easier for all of us.”

“Amira, we each have our way of settling into the situation. Kiah feels more comfortable without the transmitter. We have to respect that.”

I suppose we do. We can’t afford to argue over trifles like that. The positive atmosphere between the crew members must be maintained at all costs. But the little things are adding up, setting Kiah apart from the rest of us. She and I used to be friends. We started at ETLA around the same time, and we both joined the two zoi expeditions prior to this one. Now, I feel like I don’t know her anymore.

A couple more minutes pass, then she floats into the living room, naked as always. That in itself doesn’t bother me. We were never shy around each other, and I have seen her athletic, brown

JANE MONDRUP

body lots of times, both back on earth and during previous expeditions. The problem is what her nakedness represents: Kiah's quick and efficient adaptation to the surrounding. She feels just peachy in the zoi, physically and mentally. In return, she's uncomfortable with some of the stuff we have brought from Earth, such as clothes.

She approaches us without any greeting, without any word at all. Her gaze seems distant, as if she's thinking of something more important than us.

"Kiah, I would like to take a blood sample," Evardo says. "There's something we need to investigate."

Not asking any questions, Kiah extends a finger for Evardo to prick. Then she becomes a bit more attentive. She focuses on Evardo while he reads the results of the blood analysis.

"What does it say?" She sounds both curious and detached. Right now, she's focused on us, but she may lose interest at any moment.

"More or less what I expected: Significant fluctuations in your hormonal levels, similar to the test results for the rest of us. Have you noticed any changes yourself, either in your physical condition or your mood?"

"Changes?" Once again Kiah's gaze goes on long distance. "Yes. Something is happening. I feel... not tired, but as if I need to be left alone."

Those words make my blood pressure grow. Need to be left alone! We leave Kiah to herself almost all the time. She hardly ever seeks us out, except for the daily meetings, and if you manage to talk to her, all you get is a bunch of nonsense, as if she operates on an entirely different logic than the rest of us.

"Well, then we should probably leave you in peace," I state

coolly. “You don’t have to stay any longer if our company tires you.”

“Amira.” It’s Evardo with another, fatherly reproach. “Kiah was just answering my question. She can’t control how she feels.”

“No, and neither can I!”

I want to let it all out—my anger, my loneliness, my fear of both tangible and undefined threats. But Evardo’s gaze stops me.

“Your feelings are what they are. But they are probably amplified by the hormonal changes we have detected. They throw us all out of balance.”

“Even you?”

Evardo ignores my sarcastic tone. “Yes, even me. And I know that if I say exactly what I want to, I will probably regret it later. For that reason, I suggest we end the meeting. If any of you find your condition worsening, please call on me. But for now, I think we should all go our separate ways.”

So, we do. When my temper has settled somewhat, it’s a relief. I also need peace and quiet. Even though I feel lonely, I can’t cope with any kind of company. For the rest of the day, I keep to myself, and when the bioluminescence starts to turn down in early the evening, I retreat to my bedchamber.

Though I’ve hardly lifted a finger today, I’m overwhelmingly tired. Something inside me is at work, and I’m too exhausted to wonder what.

2 OBSERVATION

When the first zoi appeared, I was five years old; too young truly understand the meaning of the pictures that Uncle Karim showed me in holo format, but old enough to be captivated by the sight of the shining lump between the stars. Fluctuating patterns of color ran across the surface as the lump slowly changed shape.

I sat on Karim's lap, watching the hologram.

"Why is it bulging?" I asked. "Has it eaten too much?"

"You may say it's getting ready to eat. Or to absorb energy, in the form of light from the sun. When it traveled through space, it made sense for it to be oblong, so it didn't collide with as much other stuff in space. Now, when it has gone into orbit, it's widening its shape, and the area facing the sun darkens in order to absorb more light. Look."

Karim switched to another recording. Here, the lump first looked like a ball, but it rotated before my eyes; not all the way

around, but enough that I could see it had flattened, and that the other side was almost black. Not completely, though, for the dark surface still had a play of colors, with faint traces of light dancing across. I watched them, filled with wonder and excitement, partly because I sensed the same from Karim.

I loved Karim. He was my mother's little brother, much younger than her, and he was different from all other grownups. Not only because he was young. I had teenage cousins who were just as boring as my parents. But Karim always had interesting things to show or tell me about. Far off places he wanted to visit someday. People doing exciting stuff like building new communities in places ravaged by climate disasters, diving to the bottom of the sea to explore the ecosystem down there or studying the vast night space around the Earth.

“Is it some kind of animal?” I asked.

“Possibly. The scientists are pretty sure it's alive.”

“It looks friendly. Do you think I could visit it?”

Karim looked down at me. “Maybe someday,” he said smilingly. “Who knows?”

#

The astronomers had spotted the elongated shape as it passed by Earth. It didn't look like anything they had seen before, so they followed it closely, discovering that it changed shape, decelerated and changed its course to orbit the sun. None of those things would happen of their own accord.

At first, most people believed that it was a spaceship. The course change looked like a deliberate maneuver, and the shape was emitting radio waves which might be an attempt at

communication. But these waves quickly turned out to be too unvaried to contain any messages. Since the shape had entered its orbit around the sun, located halfway between Earth and the planet called Venus, the signals had stopped. The object showed no other sign of activity or of having anyone on board. All investigation confirmed the impression that this wasn't a vehicle, but something that was itself alive.

For the next two years, we followed the studies of the large creature, which was first named *zoion*, a word meaning *living being* in some old language, but it was quickly shortened to *zoi*. Gradually I built up some understanding of the relation between Earth, the solar system and the universe. Earth was only one among countless planets, and the stars were suns like our own, incredibly far away. No planet in our solar system, apart from the Earth, had turned out to be habitable, so we had never met any other form of life. But now, the *zoi* had arrived, out of the immense emptiness between our solar system and all the others. Life on Earth had company.

Not everyone liked that idea. Many initially feared that the *zoi* would attack us, or that someone inside it would do so. Despite being alive, the *zoi* could still have passengers. It may be populated by intelligent beings who had destroyed their planet and now were searching for a new one. That scenario seemed quite likely, considering how humanity itself had behaved. We had come close to destroying Earth.

But nothing indicated that the *zoi* or anyone inside it had ill intentions. A number of unmanned probes were launched, keeping a respectful distance at first. The *zoi* never reacted to their presence, not even when they got close. The astronomers now hazarded a direct examination of the surface, still prompting no reaction from the *zoi*, but also yielding no results. The smooth,

impenetrable shell rejected all attempts to scrape or drill. It also turned out impossible to transilluminate, no matter which technique was used.

Just under two years after the zoi's arrival, it began to change shape and color again. The dark surface grew lighter while the flattened shape first swelled into a sphere and then began to stretch itself long. At the same time, it accelerated and broke out of orbit. A brief panic ensued when, for a while, it looked like it headed for Earth, but once again it passed at a safe distance and continued towards the outer reaches of the solar system.

Karim and I closely followed the zoi's departure. A probe was sent after it, but it never caught up with the zoi, which accelerated through space, faster and faster, driven by forces unknown to the scientists. Day by day, observations of it got dimmer as the distance increased.

I cried when I saw the last speck of light vanish. For two years, the zoi had been there as a huge, silent friend, and then it just disappeared.

"Why did it leave us?" I asked Karim. "We never got to talk to it, and now it's gone."

"Amira, it probably wasn't the kind of being you can talk to. It showed no signs of intelligence. If it was intelligent, it evidently wasn't interested in us."

"Maybe it was hurt because we never came up to see it," I said, tears streaming down my face. "It waited so long for us, and we just sent those probe robots. It must have thought we didn't like it."

Karim stroked my hair. "It's not that simple. Human space travel is very expensive, and it takes a long time to organize. We have been following the preparations. It would have taken years to

get ready.”

“Well, then they should have started earlier,” I declared with all the conviction of a seven-year-old. “And they should have hurried. Now it’s too late!” I looked angrily at Karim, as if it was his fault, which, in a way, I felt it was. He was a grownup. He could have done something.

Karim new better than to argue. He stood up, went to the window and looked at the darkening sky. The first stars were blinking into existence on the dark blue background.

“Yes, it’s too late for now, but not necessarily forever. Maybe we will get another chance.”

“You think so?” I wiped away my tears.

“Why not? When it happened once, it can happen again. Another zoi may show up, or some completely different kind of creature.”

“I hope it will be a zoi. It seemed so kind, even though it didn’t say anything.”

I leaned against him, and he wrapped his arm around me.

“I think so too,” he said.

We stood there for a moment, then I pulled free and climbed into the windowsill.

“If another zoi comes by when I’m grown, I will go up to visit it. Just try to stop me!”

“I have no intention of doing so.”

Karim sounded amused. I glared at him angrily.

“Don’t laugh at me.”

His crooked smile vanished, and he shook his head gravely.

“I’m not laughing. I may have been smiling a little, because you seem so determined. But it’s good to be determined, especially when it comes to choosing your own path in life.”

His eyes darted towards the door separating his room from the rest of the house. I thought about the discussions I had overheard between and Karim and my grandparents, sometimes also my mother, about what he should do after finishing some level of education. They wanted him to keep studying, but he didn't want to. I knew he was twenty-one years old, and I could fully understand if he was tired of schools by now and would like to do something else. Karim wanted to travel and help people around the world with all kinds of things. To me, that sounded very sensible.

"I believe you, Amira," he continued. "You will go to space, if you really want to."

"And meet a zoi?" I asked.

"Yes, if more of them are out there. Let's hope they are."

3 SHADOWS

I'm still tired when I wake up, even though I've slept heavily all night. Whatever is happening in my body, it's still ongoing. It's not as bad as during the adaptation phase, but I feel sluggish and queasy, and I lack the energy to move or interact with anyone. Instead of getting up, I stay in my bedchamber. Usually, I wouldn't linger there during the day, but right now, I feel like hiding.

Basically, my private living space consists of a single, smallish cave with pliable walls, well suited for sleeping because you can't float around too much or bump into anything hard. The wall membrane is completely opaque; something which in this case happened by itself, perhaps because the zoi registered how visual stimuli can disturb our sleep. In some of the other areas we have intentionally altered the opacity to suit the room's function, using methods Linn have developed.

Opposite the entrance, my few personal belongings are

huddled together behind an organic grid. Linn helped me make it while we were still in orbit. Now, some of the strings have gone slack, and the smallest objects tend to work their way out and float around the room. But I'm even too weary to do anything about that.

Of course, I can't stay in here forever. I'm getting hungry, and I have almost emptied the water tube I keep inside the grid. Sooner or later, I will also need to use the toilet.

Eventually, I pull myself together. I move through the entrance and continue down the passageways, towards the room designed for disposing of bodily waste. To my relief, it's vacant, so lock myself in, prepare the toilet seat and turn on the vacuum tube. That part is a piece of technology we have brought with us; employing same basic principle that space shuttles and stations always relied on. Suction does gravity's work, ensuring that the waste does not end up floating around in the air. But from that point, the zoi takes care of it.

It happens on the other side of the lavatory's wall membrane, in a bubble outside the habitat, the air-filled area comprising our territory. An analysis of samples from the latrine bubble conveyed that our waste products are being converted into a substance which we aren't yet sure if the zoi can consume directly or needs to process further. Transporter organelles move between the latrine bubble and the nutrient deposits we call vacuoles. They don't correspond exactly to vacuoles in earthly cells, but they are similar enough to go by the same name. The vacuoles form a complex system of variously sized containers. So far, we have a limited understanding of how they function, both on their own and as a part of the larger organism.

Sitting on the toilet seat, I pull a couple of cloths from the net

fastened to the nearby wall. The seat provides a gentle rinse, but it's important to wipe thoroughly afterwards. The cloths are made from zoi material, a spongy substance suited for absorbing liquid. With another cloth, moistened with water from a tube, I wash my hands. I throw all cloths in the toilet before turning it off and conclude by disinfecting my hands in a similarly zoi-based gel.

The zoi provides us with air, water and food, and we can make a number of other necessities from its substances. But not all. The toilet seat and vacuum tubes are examples of devices we are nowhere near being able to reproduce. We have a certain stock of spare parts, but according to plan we should be well on our way to manufacturing them ourselves at this point.

Almost all the technology we brought is made of organic materials, and in principle, it should be possible to fabricate both components and entirely new devices out of materials synthesized from zoi substances. Unfortunately, we haven't made nearly as much progress in this field as we had counted on. We placed our trust in Linn, as the rest of us have a very limited understanding of BB-tech. With my xenobiology expertise, I ought to be the best qualified for taking over Linn's work, but when she tries to explain the engineering side of it to me, I have a hard time following her. Besides, I lack the manual dexterity which is evidently just as important as theory.

Kiah has that dexterity. Though her professional expertise lies within psychology and communication, she seems to have an inherent feel for the zoi substances, and she can more or less mold them as she wants. But the technological aspect is beyond her abilities, and maybe also interests. To me, she seems unnecessarily dismissive of acquainting herself with it. Perhaps she sees it as disturbing her perfect adaptation to the zoi.

After leaving the lavatory, I move towards the living room, which is the hub of all passageways, and from there I continue towards the pantry; the spot where nutrients can be plucked from the wall, and water reserves are available behind a thin membrane.

By now I'm really hungry, and at the same time I feel nauseous. Eating the food that the zoi produces for us is never particularly enjoyable, and right now the mere thought is downright repulsive. But my hunger and nausea seem to amplify each other, and I need to get something in my stomach. I force down a few lumps of the stuff, and I feel a little better. My urgent physical needs have been satisfied. For the first time today, I'm able to think beyond them.

I look around and listen down the passageway. It seems a little strange that I haven't run into anyone, specially Evardo. The fact that he hasn't been around to check on the rest of us, is rather worrying. I'd better go and find him.

The way to Evardo's quarters takes me though the living room. Just as I glide through the opening between the passageway and the large room, I notice it.

The shadow.

It may have been there for some time without me discovering it, as it's barely visible. My eyes have probably registered it as one of the many cell components swimming around me. But it's not in the cytosol, on the other side of the membrane. It's in here in the air-filled passageway, right beside me. It sticks to me.

"Amira?"

Linn's voice comes from the passageway leading to her bedchamber and the holeroom. It sounds weak, but also tinged with panic. She enters the living room with a skewed kick that propels her through the air, spinning and at too high a pace. She's

headed straight for me. I raise my hands to cushion the impact.

Before she hits me, I catch a glimpse of the faintly outlined structure that follows her body. Then we collide, and my hand brushes against something soft and sticky. Her shadow.

Linn's eyes flicker between the two elongated masses of clearly biological material; the one next to her and the one next to me.

“So... you have one too.”

I nod. Out of the corner of my eye, I see the shadow following even this small movement, just as an optical shadow would, but there are no optical shadows in the zoi, as the bioluminescence illuminates us from all angles. I haven't seen a regular shadow for nearly two years.

“What is it?” Linn asks in a trembling voice. She looks sideways, towards the shadow. Slowly she raises her hand, as if to touch the jellyfish-like substance, but then she halts the movement. A shiver runs through her and she turns her head away.

“I have no idea.” I reach for my own shadow. Even though I use the opposite hand, some part of it still moves—perhaps the vestige of an arm, with narrow strings going through the transparent material, suggesting the shape of a hand. The all but invisible shadow fingers flutter in the air while I touch the more substantial part, next to my upper body. The tacky surface yields to even the slightest touch. Instinctively, I pull my hand back, afraid that the touch might cause harm or even pain to the thing which is obviously attached to me.

“It's alive,” Linn exclaims with terror in her voice. “And it's stuck on me. I can't get off!”

Linn has reached the limit of what she can handle calmly and

composed. I'm still able to keep my reaction under control, mainly for her sake.

"It must be made by the zoi," I say. "And the zoi mean us no harm. It does its best to satisfy our needs."

"Perhaps it means us no harm," Linn grits out, "but it is harming *me*. It makes me ill. And now this happens."

What can I say? Fortunately, Evardo floats in from one of the passageways, just at that moment. He too has a companion; an oblong blob at his side, akin to ours. From a distance it's even more apparent how it follows the contours of our bodies. It's slimmer, but where the body is broadest, it is too. Up by the head, it seems to have extra substance. Here, the material looks more solid; at least it's less transparent. The same goes for some lumps further down, which could well represent internal organs.

The heart is easiest to identify. It's just a lump of somewhat darker and firmer material, but I can see it beating vaguely, though I wonder what it's pumping. The lines connected to it are too pale and faint to contain blood. It's all just rudimentary formations. In most cases, only their location discloses what they represent. Two murky patches around the heart must be the lungs. Other colorations can be seen where the liver and kidney would be. The darkened spots are interlinked by lines, most distinguishable between the head and the torso, while weaker traces extend to the extremities. Blood vessels, maybe nerve pathways too.

None of us say anything until Evardo has caught up with us.

"When did you discover them?" he asks in his judicious doctor's voice. If he too is frightened, he's hiding it well.

"I've only just noticed mine," I reply.

Evardo shifts his gaze to Linn.

"I don't know." Her voice is little more than a whisper, and

she speaks too quickly, as if she wants it over with. “At first, I thought it was a dream. I’ve hardly slept tonight, and I... wasn’t sure if I had fallen asleep. If I was seeing things. But then I could feel it. How it was sticking to me.”

Linn tightens her lips and closes her eyes. Drops of sweat are forming on her brow, and she’s even paler than usual. Is she about to faint? I glance at Evardo.

“Linn.” He puts a hand on her shoulder. She inhales in a gasp, and her eyes widen. Evardo addresses her again, in a calm and insistent voice. “Your reaction is understandable. You’re already exhausted, and this is a shock. I still haven’t figured out what kind of phenomenon we’re experiencing, but nothing indicated that it’s dangerous. I will try to examine it, and then we’ll all discuss it. Right now, I think you should try to get some sleep.”

“I don’t want to be alone!”

Bubbles float into the air from Linn’s eyes. I hate crying in zero g myself. Instead of running down your cheeks, the tears collect into a screen in front of your eyes, making you nearly blind. Linn doesn’t seem to care. Either she is too exhausted, or she has become used to weightless tears. I’ve only seen her cry a few times, but who knows what she does when she’s alone?

“Then stay here with us. But take a break.”

Linn’s shoulders tremble, her tears are followed by a resigned sobbing. Slowly it fades, and her body begins to relax.

“I’ll look after you,” Evardo continues. “Just sleep.”

Gradually, Linn’s breathing becomes slow and steady. She hovers in the air, her arms floating in front of her. Her shadow also remains still. Evardo watches it with a slight frown.

“What do you think it is?” I ask quietly.

“I’d rather reserve judgment until we know a little more, such

as whether all four of us have them. Will you find Kiah? Then I'll stay here with Linn."

I nod and make my way towards the passageway leading to Kiah's quarters. Not that I have any desire to seek her out, but Evardo has a point. Right now, we need all the information we can get.