

Consciousnesses. That was the only thing that existed in the never ceasing darkness. Floating, oblivious to each other, utterly alone in the emptiness. Time had no meaning, space had no meaning, not even physical things had any kind of meaning in the only existence there was.

Learning was strange. Each one found words for unknown objects through some kind of instinct. Where these words came from was a mystery; they came to describe, but never before the knowledge was imminent.

She was different. She was aware. She knew of the others, though they did not know her. She had lasted; the others faded into nothing, never to return for some strange force kept them bound.

Only two were left now; once there had been many, but now only she and one other were there. And he was strange and distant, exhibiting the sense of one of the many who had faded, for he was fading.

She was filled with something when she felt him start to leave. Words barraged her, but none quite fit: Cold, shocking, emotion, feeling, and many others failed to have any power to describe the thing. Then the word came: *fear*. Yes. That was it. She was afraid.

But nothing she could do would stop him from going. It was not possible to stop the fading. And so he slipped away until she felt him blocked from her. Alone. Now she was alone.

Some time later—or it could have been no time at all—she felt different. The word soon came: *solid*. The word defined itself to her and she suddenly understood what solid was. How she became solid was still yet to be found, but she felt no emotion towards the phenomenon.

Then something else changed. She felt something *beyond* the never ending dark. How was that? All that existed was herself and the nothingness. So why did something else seem to be there?

Examination of the beyond thing revealed it to be another consciousness, but how could it be so? It had not exploded into being like all the others she'd outlasted, it had slowly come to her, and it seemed... older than her. Much older. It teemed with an impossible amount of knowledge and experience.

She was afraid of it. She shied from it, but it remained, not feeling her, but knowing of her.

Then the solidness did something. *Moved*. The thing that had made her solid moved, and not being separate from it anymore, she was forced to move with it. And then the solid thing that she now was riding in had a name; *body*. The word suddenly expanded into a multitude of names describing the body, its parts, its functions, and how to work it.

Her body-it was a totally new experience for her to have something that she could be defined as *hers*- suddenly stopped moving and she felt a sensation blanket itself over her: *cold*. She was cold. No, her body was cold. And... *wet*. Or was it *damp*? So many descriptive words existed and she was not entirely sure which one was proper to use in this situation. She decided on damp, because it had come later, like a correction to the original descriptive.

She felt the odd, older consciousness again. She observed it warily, but the more she watched, the stranger it became. It was a he, and he knew of her, so unlike all the others. But his knowledge of her wasn't the same as her knowledge of him; She felt his mind, and knew his thoughts. He knew about her, but he didn't *feel* her.

Then her body moved against her will again and her observations were halted. She wasn't damp or cold anymore. In fact, she was warm and dry, covered by something that her mind had no name for. And she was laying on top of another unnamed something, a hard something.

She had control too; she could move her stiff fingers, clench them into fists, curl herself into a ball to keep the warmth from escaping, or any number of things. She chose the first thing she wanted to do and opened her eyes. There was a pale thing above her, and pale things to either side of her. There were no words in her mind now, no way for them to be described.

Struggling with her limbs, she pulled her torso upright and propped herself with her arms. There was another *thing* like her nearby. Or at least, she thought it was like her; it had the same basic shape as her, but was a little different in build, broader and taller.

She felt the older, wiser consciousness from it-him. She was unsure how to communicate with him; mind to mind seemed far too personal, but how else was she to do it?

Then his mouth opened. A strange sensation that only seemed to be affecting her ears suddenly began. Utterly bewildered, she projected her confusion out towards him. He felt it and closed his mouth before twisting it strangely. Then his thoughts came to her. She suddenly understood; the ear affecting sensation was *sound* and he was using that sound to try and communicate with her. Trying to *talk* to her. The way he moved his mouth and made those sounds was the standard form of communication for those like them who had bodies and consciousness tied together, for most, if not all, the embodied consciousnesses could not touch each other's minds in the way she did.

Slowly, his whole self seeming to radiate friendliness, he raised a finger at her and made more noises. Copying his movement, she pointed at him and repeated those sounds, although they were rather clumsy compared to his. She felt his amusement before his thoughts corrected her. The sounds he made were identification of *her*, not him.

Then, repeating the gesture, he made the noises again. "Experiment Seven Seven Seven. Serenity."

"Expermen seven seven seven. Seren-ee." She repeated, this time pointing toward herself.

He twisted his mouth in that strange way again before his thoughts helped guide her in how to say it.

"Ex-pear-i-ment seven seven seven. Ser-ren-i-tee" they said together.

She felt a rush of pride at her title before a new question came. Was she experiment seven seven seven, or Serenity?

Her confusion on the subject had barely reached him when he replied that she was both. To clarify, his thoughts channeled down a path of explanation; Experiment seven seven seven was what she was. Serenity was her *name*, what she was known as. What she would always be called.

Then, his mouth twisted up in that strange way once more, he gestured to himself and said something like, "ee-en". She repeated it, and his thoughts explained it was *his* name: Ian.

After a long time of learning words and speech through Ian's thoughts, Serenity felt another strange sensation, but this one came from within herself. Her mouth opened against her command, breathed in slowly and made a small noise as she pushed air from her lungs.

"Ah," Ian murmured. "You're tired. You should sleep."

Figuring that tired was the word for her sensation, Serenity asked, "Sleep? How?"

Not able to find a way to use words, Ian let his thoughts explain the concept of sleeping, and dreams. She was almost under the sleepy-dark when she felt his thoughts fade. But she knew he was just physically removing himself from the *room* so that she could be left to sleep in peace on the *metal table*, for she had no *bed* yet. He-Ian- would return for her-Serenity- *tomorrow* in the *morning*.

When the tomorrow morning came, Serenity woke to see Ian over her. He did the twisted mouth movement-*smiled*- at her.

"Good Morning. How are you?"

She shrugged, having learned the gesture indicated a lack of knowing. Ian's smile grew large enough for his teeth to be visible.

"I have something to show you. Can you get up and walk?"

Slowly, carefully, she placed her feet onto the cool floor, her long *white robe* brushing her ankles. Then she leaned her weight onto her feet, her legs automatically holding her up.

She was shaky, but standing. Ian placed his arm around her waist to support her. She put one foot in front of the other, and before she knew it, was *walking*. Shakily, and with help, but walking all the same.

They exited the room in this fashion, but before they had reached the destination, Serenity could do it on her own. The way they walked was filled with many strange

things, and each of them piqued Serenity's interest. Not even Ian's thoughts could keep up with her curiosity.

They arrived before a door that Ian entered, but she was to wait outside for him. Unable to hold in her curiosity, she approached one of the things. She reached out her hand to touch it. When she came in contact, a sudden sensation ripped through her body; she had no clue what it was, but she wanted it to stop, she must escape it.

Each second was forever, but it finally ended. Ian was over her again, emanating worry, and concern. Serenity sat up again, then mentally asked for what the sensation had been.

"Pain," he answered. "That was pain."

As she tried to stand, she saw something red on her hand. Closer inspection of it showed that it came *from* her hand. It was warm, sticky, and it had a *smell*.

"What is this stuff?"

"Blood," came the reply. Ian's thoughts automatically explained blood to her in an instant.

Ian helped Serenity to her feet, saying as he did so, "I should've warned you not to touch anything, but there's no use in crying over spilled milk. Come on, just a little farther. I need to show you something." (Serenity had no clue what crying over spilled milk was, but she ignored it.)

He calmly opened the door of the mysterious room and let her in. Inside, it was undecorated except for a small, covered chamber.

"Stay here," Ian commanded. He walked into the chamber and disappeared behind the door.

Serenity stayed put, as instructed. Within a few minutes, the walls and ceiling began to glow. She closed her eyes. Upon opening them again, she saw the room had vanished; she was standing in a strange green place with a bright yellow/white thing above her. The yellowish thing was warm. A strange *thing* touched her, but she could not see anything; it was there, brushing through her hair, caressing her skin, but nothing was there.

Then, the words came to her; not from within her, but some other, external force. The green thing was a *field*, the yellowish thing was the *Sun*, and the thing that touched her was the *wind*.

And then it was all gone; she had returned to the plain room again. Ian soon joined her.

"What- what was that?"

"This is a virtual reality center. It seems real, but it's not." he replied."It's a safe way for you to experience life before leaving this place."

Serenity thought about this. "Why am I in this place? Why can't I be in life?"

"You are in life. You're alive, so you are part of life. But you were not born like all the others; you were made, and are not ready for the real world. My job is to prepare you for that world."

"Why?"

He smiled wryly. "You'll learn in time."

Standing, he continued. "I need to let you know that not all of life is like that windy field on a sunny day. There is pain, and fear out there. You need to experience those too, but not yet."

Serenity nodded. She knew both pain and fear, and was not eager to feel them again.

Turning, Ian called over his shoulder. "If you stay put, I'll give you the experience of a warm summer's rainstorm."

"All right, Ian. I'm ready to learn and feel everything I need. I want to live life in this world first. Then I will try the real world."