

Chapter 11: Intelligence

I was cataloging plant species at our current inland perimeter when I received an excited Netwise call from Duan. His inflection made it clear something important had happened.

I laughed from appreciation when Duan's presence filled the Net as he prepared his thoughts. So much more information was perceptible without a hundred minds constantly interfacing – interrupting the subtleties. But I was shocked by the message when it came.

Too casually, he Netted, *Analysis of the first complete scan indicates a likelihood of intelligent life. We will have verification after an enhanced resolution pass this evening.* He paused for a reply, but I was stunned to silence. Discovering intelligent life on Luminar overshadowed our fundamental purpose here. It tantalized deep subconscious yearnings, and I felt the need to sit, disoriented by the revelation.

I was so moved that I had not thought to come downNet while I processed. Concerned by the Netwise flood of emotion, and filled with excitement for the discovery, Duan set up a Netnav fix for my location and ran to me.

As soon as Duan's footfalls entered my physical senses I stood up and walked toward him. I came downNet, hoping to meet him in the sensory, not Netwise realm.

We embraced, and waited for words while our excitement met and leveled. The air practically churned between and around us. "Jama," he said, "I have never felt this way before in my life. Tell me if you see any other way to interpret the data."

I extended my hand and led him back to a level spot in the shade. We sat down together holding hands while I came back upNet, closed my eyes and opened a display link between the satellite data and my visual cortex. My excitement made focusing difficult, but soon I was able to visualize the target site.

The display filled my awareness with a three-dimensional image resulting from the structural channel data. Colors in the high visual wavelengths generally indicated the presence of complex structures. Many of these colors were present at the site in small, randomly shaped zones, but were too poorly resolved to be conclusive. I fully understood why Duan was eager for the next satellite pass.

Closing the display link while opening my eyes, I gripped Duan's hand tightly and spoke, "With enhanced resolution we might be able to interpret the specific material structure. Have you narrowed the satellite bandwidth?" But immediately I realized how naive my question was. Having discovered the anomaly himself, surely he had taken the obvious steps. I smiled, exposing my presumption, then said, "Could we get home to view the next pass? None of my work will get done now."

Duan brightened noticeably and stood up quickly. "Neither will mine. But waiting will be so difficult." Then his posture shifted and he darted off down the path to our dwelling. He looked back once, and his face told me he was in a playful mood. My mood shifted to, and I jumped up, ready to join Duan in the *Mazes* game he clearly had in mind.

We raced down the path, gleeful and purposeful, diverting our excitement about the possible find into energetic play. He did his best to outbend me, but I held to his footprints. When we arrived home the distraction felt complete, but too short. We looked inward at the Netstatus buffer for the current time, then outward at each other, sharing disappointment.

But the run brought us to a state of intimate readiness. A trial embrace led to a null-gee interlude sufficient to shorten the temporal gap to the awaited news.

We were resting outdoors in our artificial pool when Duan received the transmission alert. He looked at me and smiled, saying, "The data is coming in, Jama. Dump and processing will only take a short time."

Silently, we left the pool, drying ourselves as we walked into the dwelling. In quiet agreement we chose the main viewer – it would provide full scale three dimensional imaging. I felt my breathing and circulation advance under the anticipation, but sitting next to Duan took the edge off, and I began to calm. I came upNet and watched Duan's work to route the data to our viewer. I let go of thinking I should help, and relaxed into observation.

The view began with a disturbance in the air at the center of the room. I could see through it, but objects on the other side of the room lost definition. I had not seen this phenomenon since descending to Luminar, and I felt a sense of fascination and excitement from past memories. I walked around the disturbance, watching as it took greater form, like a large sphere of liquid metal suspended in the air.

I returned to my seat next to Duan, and he smiled knowingly at me. When I looked back at the display, the sphere had lost its reflective

sheen. Colors became visible within and my eyes fused on the forming image.

Shapes fell into place in the image like objects falling from above us. I found myself drawn to each new piece, hoping for one to form into a recognizable shape. Time slowed as I jumped from thought to thought, riding the crests of excitement. But a voice inside questioned my expectations, twirling an unseen hand against the flow of hopes. It turned into thoughts, like, *How self centered to think I would be one to find alien intelligence. We've been looking for a millennium to no avail, and here I am hoping it will appear under my feet.*

The internal shear from opposing hopes and fears was so strong I could no longer bear to look at the display. I rested my head in my hands and soon felt a tear running down my arm.

I froze. Opening my eyes, I saw where the tear hit the floor. It glistened with reflections from the display above, like a portal freshly opened to another world. That flickering spot of water held me transfixed, and I waited for the stirring message to coalesce.

I began to think inside it, letting it tell me a story – about pain, sorrow and growth. About facing both hopes and fears for balance.

Through that tiny image, I saw again the great sadness in Luminar. My breath quickened, and the very sensation of air moving into and around my body was a counterpoint to its pain. *Our presence here balances the sadness – as if in answer to some ancient desire.*

I pulled back, looking consciously at the teardrop... reveling in the balance between disparate concepts.

A portal of hope held by a single alien tear.

The insight was strangely relieving – like a long brewing thought finding its way into acceptance.

I blinked and lifted my head – shocked back into the room and to what we were watching. There, in front of me, resting on a rectangular platform, was a shiny violet sphere about as big as my head. I wanted to glance at Duan, but could not tear my eyes away – I needed to know more about what I was seeing.

He spoke first, from the other side of the image. His voice was strangely muted by the display fields. "Jama, this is *not* one of our devices. Over here I see some sort of conduit leading off image, so I would like to open the cubic on this side."

But my cry came before he could execute the command, “No! Duan, please, let me see it!” I feared losing the image – my only fragile hold on this precious contact. I hurried to join Duan, grasping his arm firmly and forcing my eyes to take in what he saw.

It was true. Connected to his side of the sphere was a short, dark cylinder, and from the cylinder, several strands joined together into a long, narrow carrier that ran along the ground towards us out of the image.

I was ready for anything, so I urged Duan to open the next file.

The new image had already been stored locally so it filled out very quickly. A little shaken from the visual transformation before me, I stepped back involuntarily and inhaled deeply. There, in the opposite corner of the cubic, part of a small triangular structure was visible. An open side was facing us, and shadows of various geometric shapes overlapped within.

I had enough. Suddenly I wanted to see the site directly, investigate without the distraction of structural color-coding and see if anything was moving. I turned to Duan to drag him with me, but when I saw his face I noticed a special look. The look matched what I sensed from him, begging me to follow his gaze.

Duan had loaded the next cubic, and the image held a prime surprise. This time I could not contain myself, and cried out as if injured by the shock.

Badly blurred from motion, a region in the center of the cubic carried the color signature of a warm bodied organism. As it ramped repeatedly through the visible spectrum, it struck me as both a flag of warning and triumph.

I gripped Duan’s arm powerfully, and his face told me it was painful. Struggling to steady my voice, I blurted, “Duan! What else could give that signature?” And without waiting for an answer said, “How should we investigate? What if we make contact? How will we communicate? Should we...” Duan firmly but carefully removed my hand and held it in his. From the patience in his grip and look I found the means to stop asking and start thinking.

Odd, how we looked into each other’s eyes. Something was different between us, and I knew it came from an awareness of this newfound responsibility. It reminded me of how I was impacted by our decision to bear a child together, but now it came from a social commitment we

made years before, from an understanding of how extrastellar contact would necessarily impact our entire civilization.

I needed these moments, feeding off of our shared awareness and moved by the sense of direct contact I felt with Duan in silence. Ideas started to fuse from this space, and I conceived my communication skills forming a bridge between us and our newly discovered neighbors.

I felt warm and delighted, filled with purpose and value, and buoyed by the bond I held with Duan. I closed my eyes and basked in the belief that this was where I belonged. Open and centered, I felt my awareness vibrate with the knowledge that Duan was disengaging the viewer. I knew he felt touched by this mood too, yet could not stop mentally preparing for observation.

I found myself silently cataloging Duan's undercurrents like some data log: This one simple and careless, that one mindful and ready for action. I found myself wondering if this was an invasion of Duan's privacy, but let the concern go, knowing how worry had the potential to destabilize this kind of passive state. Besides, I felt totally able to reciprocate if needed.

I knew when Duan wanted to leave the room, but moving with him posed a challenge to my state. *If only I could move without focus on balance and navigation.*

I directed a fraction of my awareness to the task of asking him to move slowly so I could keep my focus. Speech would take too much, so I attempted to share my thoughts – and tugged back gently on his arm for effect.

After a moment he responded, showing a little surprise. "Yes... we can walk slowly."

I smiled and let my eyes half close, with one hand on Duan I could afford a minimum of visual awareness. I knew where we were going, and it was easy keep up with occasional reference to a mental map.

Duan sat down at a work station next to our little kitchen and I sat on a soft chair near the wall. My body sank into the cushion with a deep sensation of need that told me I was extremely tired. In fact, I realized that my body was already asleep and my breathing had changed in depth and rhythm to accommodate.

At first, I found humor in the experience of mind awake yet body asleep. But then I started to piece things together in odd ways. I visualized clouds shrinking in size and doing a kind of dance around a strange alien being, who held one hand over its face. And I imagined Duan holding some boxlike tool just perfectly so as to catch the golden

light from Luminar's sun. But my sense of humor vanished, and I slipped into a series of confusing thoughts and images.

Soon my internal dissonance grew wild. Two opposing elements spun in spirals – gathering energy as they converged. The discomfort was so distasteful that I reached inside and forced myself awake. I sat staring into Duan's startled eyes as the storm passed.

A few moments of silence pulled us into contact. I settled my racing heart, and Duan sensed that I was OK. Words came easily for me into the stillness, and carried answers without bidding. "I am having trouble mixing the fear and excitement. Too many questions and concerns, if there really are native beings on Luminar. It felt strange enough to wake myself up."

Duan spoke with a mild lilt of confusion in his voice, "Right when I thought you were enjoying a meditative state, I saw your face turn sour." He paused, and I thought I saw him shiver briefly before he continued. "Jama, there are times when I live in that kind of confusion. The Net has provided distractions over the years, but hearing about your experience reminds me how much everything has changed."

I waited through the silence for Duan to finish.

"Ever since the ship mother left, I have noticed my uncertainty growing right along with my desire to know this place. I suppose that describes the mystery I experience here."

Uncertain desire!

His closing Netwise words came through clearly enough, but I perceived much more than the artificial synapses conveyed. They were another opposite pair – describing Duan's experience when held as one.

I noticed how quiet it was in our dwelling at that moment, and my voice softened as I spoke. "I wonder if part of this is our response to coming out of *hiding* on the ship mother, where we were in many ways all the same. Now we get to face something, *maybe someone*, different, and it makes everything come alive like we have never known."

I felt gently reminded of a lesson from my youth. *Any singular entity can bring forth the self, but participation by another is required for enlightenment.*

I realized how close to singular we were on the ship mother.
Connection through likeness.

We held each other close. I perceived *another* in Duan, and took it in as good.

Many silent moments went by. I noticed myself opening to the new *Others* as good, too – a natural extension of what was good between Duan and me right then.

I found myself activated again. “Duan, could we run through a nullsult test and then get some rest?”

I waited silently as he stirred to reply, “I think so. But about the Homeworld... shall we follow the expected procedures?”

Shivers ran around my neck to my eyes. A sensation of mild shock hit me as I faced our place in history. Our responsibility was clear, but my energy deflated at the thought of others from Home coming here. I looked directly at Duan and let his question do the work inside. *Procedures.*

I knew what I needed to say, but could barely speak it. “I do *not* want to send a message drone until we know more about the... *Others*. We hardly know anything yet, and it would be a mistake to give inaccurate information, or let them come before we settle into this.”

I felt myself smiling at my unconvincing tone. My eyes were downcast as I spoke, and when I looked up at Duan he allowed a laugh, and then said, “Do you *not* want the Homeworld to know about our discovery?”

I did not. But I was embarrassed from being so self-centered. My life was riddled with moments like these, and not understanding it well was a further embarrassment. I wanted to hide my face in my hands, but Duan was looking at me and I found it hard to move.

I closed my eyes, trying to understand a new concept that caught my attention. I visualized my embarrassment as walls sealing me off from the outer world, carrying a dark warning.

I took a deep breath to help maintain focus, and the embarrassment began to calm. I turned back to the warning, and its message. I remembered how often embarrassment had pulled me from contact into isolation.

Isolation feeds on embarrassment, which feeds on Isolation... So I stop feeding, stop fixing.

I opened my eyes, and with a countenance that expressed my resolve, opened the Net to my selfishness and embarrassment. Duan smiled broadly, tilted his head back and let out a short laugh, eyes glistening with delight. I was stunned for a moment into silence, then, realizing that he was actually empathetic, I too found the need to laugh.

I put my arms around his shoulders in an appreciative embrace, and, after a brief exchange via the Net, we stepped outside onto the path to the equipment vault.