



## Chapter 13: Approach

I awoke, startled at the amount of light coming into our dwelling. Thinking I had slept too late for the scheduled observation, I vaulted out of the null-gee – forgetting again that blood responds to gravity. I collapsed to the floor and stayed there – wishing away my impulsiveness while body fluids came up to speed.

Coming upNet made it clear I was not late – It was just a cloudless day.

Duan entered the room. I turned away, embarrassed, and dropped off the Net, as though hiding from him for a few instants would spare me any pain.

I found myself wondering what pain, exactly, I was being spared. Then Duan's voice appeared above me. "Jama – anything I can do to help?"

It was easiest just to give in to the situation. I closed my eyes tight, fighting a desire to keep this mistake from Duan. It lasted only a moment, but it was definitely there: a basal desire to hide the truth. A sickening sense of failure came over me, and reaching up to Duan for support, I knew the source: How could I participate as an Inceptor when such simple mistakes triggered a lie.

Coming back upNet, I looked into Duan's eyes and called up a literal reference to the Fourth Precept. I allowed it to tell the story of my grief: *In order for an entity to participate successfully in society it must first experience connection. Connection derives from birth, bonding, growth, contribution and communication. It matures in response to the unrelenting presence of Truth.*

Duan met my gaze and took a moment to digest what I had communicated. His face softened and he sat down on the floor with me – pensive, yet on the verge of speaking.

But we held the silence. A new awareness was building, and needed silence to complete. As moments passed I experienced a brightening like the sun breaking through a gap in the clouds. It developed into a nerve rush that expanded into my extremities. I found no words coming to explain this.

I spoke into the silence. “I really must stop getting so excited after wake-up. I was embarrassed, and came downNet to hide it, but after a few moments with you it simply changed to relief. It happened so quickly...” I looked at Duan, not knowing how to verbalize the rest, wondering openly if he experienced emotional transitions like I just had.

Duan just looked at me, silent. But an unspoken essence came across – an image of water flowing between two rocks in a stream, exposing clouds in shimmering reflection.

*Strength and beauty from partnership.*

I held onto the image, letting the implications address my concerns directly.

Yes. I closed my eyes and sighed deeply, sending Duan appreciation for the support. I needed nothing, feared nothing throughout a long, sweet moment.

We stocked the shuttle with supplies for several days. Recent high resolution scans of the target site ramped our excitement and helped us fine tune our procedural script.

The final script ran in simulation, giving us an on-site view of the approach, setup and departure phases. We discussed an overall escape procedure in case everything fell apart, but timing was unpredictable, and focus on it took our spirits down.

After departure, I needed to do something to calm my excitement. So, I extended automation routines for the clone vaults, and Netencrypted an emergency Home call into the vault hardwire network for the unlikely event we could not return.

I was excited by our adventure, but in the forefront was a simple enjoyment of g-assisted flight. Without acceleration forces, velocity transitions were dynamic visual experiences devoid of physical sensation.



Atmospheric irregularities were uncorrected, reminding us this was not a simulation.

Our sub-orbital trajectory placed us a considerable distance short of our target. This ensured our re-entry shockwaves would not be heard by the native beings. The last segment of our trip was spent sub-sonic just above the open water. The sun on the sea flickered like crystals in a band behind us, while a misty rainbow led us forward into the unknown.

The Netwise destination alert took me out of reverie into responsibility. We were stationary over the water, and dead ahead was a narrow strip of land.

I stood up to prepare for the observation and felt my skin tingle as Duan activated the shuttle's null field.

As I slipped my legs into the nullsuit, a wave of anxiety rolled over me from head to foot, taking me by such surprise I sat down on our supplies to regain some balance. I looked up at Duan, and realized I feared him seeing me like this just before the survey.

*Home! I can not start this way. I must stop telling myself that my reactions are substandard.*

Defying my embarrassment, I quickly finished with the nullsuit legs and approached Duan, placing my hand on his back. I spoke, close to his ear, saying "Duan, I am quite anxious."

The skin on the side of Duan's face pulled into a smile, and I felt a wave of relief as he spoke. "You are not alone, Jama. Good thing this flight is automated – just feel my hand!"

I reached down for his hand and felt a unique sense of union as my trembles met his, as though my fears were gratified to find another in sync. Our hands clasped in shared recognition, and I resisted an urge to embrace Duan. The display showed us entering our final approach turn.

I held the back of Duan's chair as the island panorama spun around us. We could not fly over the target site – the shuttle was not masked in the lower audio bands.

As we landed, my thoughts shifted to the Home World, and to the importance of this event for our species – the first steps toward inter-intelligence contact! My body shuddered with the thought.

We settled onto the sand on the opposite side of the island. As motion ceased, I visualized the size of this island compared to the whole of Luminar. For the first time, I seriously considered the question of why

this was the only site we spotted traces of technology. *Should we have answered this?*

I felt uneasy, then concerned. *Should I interpret my uneasiness as a warning or simply a reaction to the unknown.*

I looked up. Duan was gathering the equipment and I felt relieved this was something we could do together. *This is too important and exciting to miss.*

I moved to help. My fears would just have to wait.

All we needed on this first excursion was to find the site and get a set of short range sensor dumps – hopefully with readings from the intelligent entities.

I found myself packing personal equipment in a mild trance, like watching myself from a distance: *emergency escape harness with two single use charges and descent augmenters, five audio decoys, food concentrate and water packs, and a standard flow-wrench.*

The nullsuit fit over everything easily and tingled mildly when activated. I watched the status indicator inside the hood and touched the suit below the escape interface panel. Immediately a low level status warning appeared, visuals showing an opening in the nullsuit where it had been touched. Good, I thought – suit seam release and warning system tests complete.

When I looked up I found myself startled to see essentially no sign of Duan. All that was visible in the low light was a poorly reflective transparent sheet facing me that took his shape. The broad spectrum masking had taken effect, giving us a minimal visage for identification. I invited Net contact and immediately received his response. Here we were, seeing each other as translucent ethereal beings. Looking at Duan, I felt myself wondering how *that* could ever muster enough substance to give support.

The thought sent a chill rippling over my skin. I spilled it into the Net, and found Duan realizing too for the first time how frightening it was to lose apparent substance and support during our first steps into the unknown. I found myself wondering if I reached out, would he return contact... or had he entered another dimension?

My mind and the Net agreed that of course he would. But secretly I knew sometime during this adventure I would have to put that theory to test. This was already proving to be quite different from our test run. Uncomfortably so, in fact.