

Chapter 14: Observation

We left the shuttle and walked up the sand toward the center of the island. I tried to stay focused on our plans, but could not stop trying to visualize the beings. Every step I took toward their encampment made it harder to concentrate.

Suddenly, my body just stopped walking. I had reached a threshold of distraction and needed to rest. Duan sensed my state via the Net and was moving closer to me, asking questions. His outline shimmered as he approached. I reached for him, and our touching hands centered me like an embrace.

Thank you. So many sensations. Not sure what to trust. Did I sense something out there – or is this nullsuit throwing me off?

Duan squeezed my hand. *I am still shaking, Jama. I keep thinking about the importance of what we are doing. We must take this one step at a time.*

A couple breaths in silence gave me a chance to hear the waves crashing behind us. A memory from childhood flashed by – leaving just enough to remind me I was not here for myself... that any inceptor could be in this suit right now. *Our purpose is shared. I step with each of them, not alone.*

I remembered Sheerin.

Soon I was calm again. *I step into this moment, and then this...*

Duan felt my mood shift, and with little more than a Netwise nod, we agreed to place the first sensor where we stood – our threshold into the unknown. Once in place, the mission felt solid. I could feel the data streaming over the Net, and see the spectral signature of our suits.

As we moved on, the Net mapped our progress via the sensor. I could view our progress from any angle, even from the reported location of the native encampment.

We crested a low hill and started down into a shallow depression studded with vegetation. Ahead was the encampment, and beyond, the other side of the island.

New plant species surprised me with their variety and beauty, and were a welcomed distraction – I took specimens of my favorites, hoping to reproduce them for plantings around our shelter vault. My suit's sample pouch began to fill with blossoms and seeds. Against my skin, their shapes gave visceral support in this world of artificial sensations.

We placed the three remaining sensors in a semicircle surrounding the encampment. Once activated, the complete array began resolving three dimensional data in high resolution. We sat together to rest and review the sensor compilation. With a thought, I shut down my local suit inputs and opened a Netwise channel to the data.

The crescendo of visual stimulus sent my body into temporary vertigo, and I reached for something to ground my senses. Warm earth melted the blindness in my fingers as they dug deep into the sandy soil. Feeling this resistance was enough – I leaned back on my arms and exhaled deeply, welcoming the virtual space before me.

Netwise controls settled into my awareness – move left here, forward here, stop here. I was free. I could view the site without fear. I was truly invisible, yet in this sensor generated world Duan and I saw each other as solid beings.

What a relief. Our constructs approached each other and discussed plans.

Sensor blind spots could form around obstructions and terrain irregularities, so we started first to ensure that no critical information would be blocked at the encampment.

As we *walked*, we could visually recognize the blind spots. They were mere shimmers at first, but as we approached, they defined into shadows laced with Net generated diffraction patterns resulting from the attempt to generate substance in a data vacuum. With a wish to the Net, the shadows became highlighted stars – less distracting and easier to spot.

As we closed in on the camp, I was struck by the fact that just ahead was a pair of structures built by an intelligent, alien race.

After one glance at Duan, I performed the virtual equivalent of a run toward the structures, but there was none of the familiar glee, none of the wind washing over my face and arms, none of the physical exertion rewarded by arriving at my goal. *I touched and felt nothing!*

The falsehood embedded in this technology crashed down on me, suffocating all life and breath from this virtual world. The mystery was gone, and I wanted very much to turn off the machine and pull off my hood.

But the data kept streaming in, and my curiosity was still quite alive. So I made an agreement with myself to stay with it – missing any moment here would be a huge loss. I found myself standing mere steps from an extremely simple structure made of fabric supported by stiffeners. Instinctively, I looked around for signs of organized gardening. There were other structures, but nothing like a garden nearby, and I came to the conclusion that they were nomadic. Odd, I thought into the Net, that a group could survive on these islands without use of the soil.

Duan suddenly appeared at my side and Netted, *This structure is mineral based. Just look at it in the sub-visual spectrum.*

My desire to see the encampment first in the visual spectrum had kept me from seeing most of the available information. Structure, temperature and modes of recent use were all factors being isolated during this observation, and I had been missing it!

I felt an uncomfortable tingle creeping into my facial skin. At first I shied away from Duan, not wanting him to see that I felt so foolish. But then I realized my face never really reached him anyway. The virtual interface took care of that.

A Netwise request had barely been thought when my visual world deepened immeasurably. Interesting how the brain can be trained to perceive things its cells were never meant to see – colors beyond description, parsed by experience and a bit of implant programming.

The truth behind Duan's words was clear now. I stared at the collapsible fiber supports and photo-electric shelter surfaces. The Net's interpretive algorithms were showing a fairly low conversion efficiency, but the technology represented was far beyond anything I had expected. I had a powerful urge to touch the pole in front of me, then felt a deep frustration from being trapped in this virtual shell. I looked at Duan and Netted, *I have got to get out of this suit and see it for myself – too painful just to watch and wait.* I smiled into the Net with a knowing resignation.

Duan's expression was blank – and I reminded myself that the construct conveyed no subtleties. I moved closer to the structure. The desire to touch was compelling – to gather information through contact. I watched, distantly, as my hand passed through the nearest support without sensation. My construct hand retracted, and I sighed away the gnawing wish to stop this façade.

I took a moment to soak this in, wondering what was next.

Inside the quiet, a gentle tickle walked up the back of my neck and branched around to my ears.

The strange sensation was eclipsed by a coded alert from the array interpreter suggesting something we had dreamed of – but at some level, also feared. Something was moving within the sensor coverage field.

I forgot we were in virtual space and tried to move back away from the shelter by moving my legs. Reality awoke from feeling my real body in contact with the earth trying to run from a sitting position. I sat upright to look around and access the source of the alert.

We routed all available processors to the targeted movement. A construct image congealed rapidly and we found ourselves facing a low resolution image of two alien beings moving along the opposite beach a short distance from the shelter.

“Home!” I spoke into my mask. Fear and excitement had hit me hard, so I disconnected from the image to get some grounding before going on. A millennium of anticipation and longing was suddenly on top of me – a billion voices with excited questions spilling forth.

I ventured to check in with Duan, and was relieved to find him pouring through the procedures for gathering data. It didn't take much of a status check to find he was shaken too. I turned and wrapped my arms around him gently in support, and spoke through the Net, *Suddenly I do not know what to do, Duan. I am afraid of contact where I was once so eager.*

I feel it too, Jama, he replied on the Net. *I think once I have the filters in sync we should get back to the shuttle. They are likely capable of audio technology, and nullsuits are visible in the short wave audio bands.*

A physical tremble passed through me. The possibility of being seen by simple audio sensors was a revelation I had to absorb. It took only a moment before my mind was working again, and our immediate needs became clear.

I will open up the audio bands and see if we get any interrogation patterns. I was working with my suit display as I spoke. Our practice was paying off. Duan sensed my intense mood and injected approval, Netwise.

When my sensor display shifted into the high audio, the results were incriminating. Four harmonic peaks showed in the superaudible range, coming from three distinct locations near the structure. Power levels resolved to a range beyond where we sat.

I passed a Netpointer to Duan, with an intense *Look!* trailer.

We shared a moment of shock, but were not idle. Duan and I knew the implications immediately. We were trying to determine the location of the beings we had recently scanned, but in the interlude they had disappeared. A review of historical data confirmed they had entered a shelter.

Duan's intensity thickened his words on the Net, *It is likely they can read their sensor output in the shelter. We have to decide whether to leave our array in place or remove it before we depart. If they possess three-dimensional audio sensors then it is possible they could find our sensors and interpret their technology. That would be a mistake.*

The decision was obvious. We shared the knowledge that working quickly was essential if we were to retrieve the sensors before being discovered, yet knew such an act might reveal our presence. I felt vulnerable and confused – questions were emerging so fast that it slowed my thinking and movements.

I pushed myself into Net consciousness, allowing it to interface more directly with my body. I began to watch myself move, and from watching, relax.

We packed up the nearby sensor, then moved separately to retrieve the other three. I would get the one farthest from the shuttle, and Duan, the other two. If we were discovered by their audio sensors, we hoped the nullsuits would give us enough time to make it back. I felt the escape harness fitting snug, and shook in distaste at the prospect of using it.

As I moved in an arc to the sensor location, my thoughts darkened with remorse. In our excitement we had neglected to determine their level of technology before setting up the sensors. We had missed the application of a fundamental communication precept: *When meeting someone new, presume possession of the sharpest intellect and the softest heart.*

I willed the influx of shame aside and allowed the situation to create an alternative image to keep it in check. I became a predator stalking its

prey – the sensor. Hide behind this bush, stay low in the shadow back to that rock, then forward to a draw in the hill, then pause to plan my next move. The feedback pattern at my Net-depicted location was a reminder that I was getting close to the sensor. I would have to crawl for a while to reach it safely, and the nullsuit was somewhat fragile... *no time or energy to spend on worry.*

I moved quickly. Flat on the ground, I slid, crawled and rolled the final distance to the sensor. The collapsible design made packing easy from any position, and I was back into hiding very quickly. Now, to the shuttle, I thought.

I imagined a sheltered route to the shuttle and the Net completed the image forming in my head. Home! I was thankful for this tool.

But with the sensors removed, the image was constructed from old data. I no longer had visual access to current events. When I topped the rise near our landing site and saw where the shuttle lay in subterfuge, the practical implication of removing the sensors hit me: I could no longer trust the Net to help clear the way to the shuttle. I would have to trust my own senses.

Using the visual band offered by the nullsuit, I scanned the area within sight of the shuttle. Nothing. A quick query to Duan told me he was just packing up the final sensor – the one farther from the camp. I had such a good visual reference here that I decided to wait for Duan to return. If something appeared, I would be in a good position to alert him.

I sat on the ledge of a rock outcropping and waited. Luminar's sun was past zenith, and its golden rays danced in the waves as they crashed rhythmically on the sand. It invited me, exposing my discomfort in the nullsuit and my wish for an end to this tension.

I stared at the waves and noticed a waking dream morphing my thoughts. The waves and sand, falling lazily in swirls leaving tiny bubbles behind, falling deep into the blue – very deep, until a group of tiny suns shone from below in greeting.

A sound from behind me brought my thoughts back to the island and our purpose here. I turned around, expecting to see the signature of Duan's nullsuit ascending the hill.

But two unsuited beings were there instead, and my nervous system fired an icy shock that burned my back side from head to foot. It was so powerful that I lost balance as I jumped down to hide behind the rocky ledge.

I missed a foothold and my back grazed the ledge on the way down. I rolled in the sandy soil, delirious with fear and confusion. My thoughts raced urgently, but I kept moving.

I kept low, crawling to hide behind a small bush near the ledge. Duan spoke urgently over the Net, powerful concern venting through his status buffer, *Jama! What is happening? Are you hurt?* It was clear that he was running to help.

Do not come close, Duan! The beings... since they use audio for sensing, they might be able to hear you! I made sounds while hiding, so they may try to find me. What should I do? I felt silly asking – but knew I had to act, and my thoughts slid towards the escape pack.

But Duan held me back, saying, *Resist using the pack if you are not in danger – the noise will surely expose us. Can you judge their intent, have they sensed you?*

I calmed, and tried forcing myself to look at the beings with eyes of curiosity. But it took so much effort to keep my emotions in check. Moment after moment I fell into amazement at what I was seeing – a regular digression into awe that kept me from gaining any understanding for their motives.

But I did make progress. Once I became used to the sensory overload, it was easier to determine status.

...their height! Taller than I can reach! Digression.

They reacted to the noises I made during my fall, and from my perspective, seemed concerned about the source. But I *felt* safe near them.

Two forward facing eyes! Bilateral symmetry! Digression, excitement.

My insides were boiling with emotion, and I found myself speaking out loud to Duan, “They have opposing digits!” Then horror struck as I realized my voice might have been heard. Back on the Net, I thought, *Oh, Duan, me and my love of speech!*

The beings seemed to be looking in my direction now, and my imagination began to introduce the option of making contact. It would be such a relief!

I spoke silently to Duan over the Net, *I am tempted to make contact but have no clue how. I should be prepared with something they can understand.*

Duan was eager too, but his Netwise words and tone was restrained, *I am not prepared to make contact now and I do not think we should. I think you should wait until they leave, or move away yourself.*

I took a moment to think, then replied, *I may not be able to pull myself away without making sounds, besides, if I wait, I can use my nullsuit as a sensor to gather information – possibly to help understand their communication process. Surely they communicate!*

But the concept of waiting brought me back to our technical environment. I accessed the nullsuit power data and received a shock. *Duan, I have nearly taxed my suit to capacity! I thought we had an unlimited power reserve!*

Duan was clearly shaken. *We did! Are you sure there was no damage when you fell? You should do a diagnostic... here... OK, let's test your pattern sync.*

I held up my left hand, turned it to show the back side to my nullsuit visor, and waited. The results reached me just as fast as Duan, and instinct told me to get lower to the ground. The suit was not transducing in the upper color bands, which meant that if the beings were sensitive to light in that range, they could see me.

I thought into the Net, *Duan, I can not do a physical diagnostic alone without removing the suit.* Then more privately, *Home! that was obvious!* Fear was playing with my mental processes – one of the problems I always had with the Net – everyone got to see how my mind worked!

But Duan responded with something that nearly made me laugh. *Jama, did you wear something nice under that nullsuit?* The absurdity of the question lifted my mood, and I recalled donning the suit earlier.

All I have on is the suit liner, and it is nearly transparent.

I loved how laughter sounded on the Net, something like a loud exhale with a little echo. Duan was doing it, and it warmed me – softening some of my fear. For the first time in the last few moments I was able to look at the beings without going into mild shock.

Look for weapons or other implements, Duan suggested, and I scanned them visually. They were carrying nothing in their hands, but wore belts with small attachments that could have been anything, given my lack of information about their level of technology.

I was lost in a short digression wondering what the attachments might be, when suddenly I could see them from two directions and knew that Duan had arrived higher up on the hill. I looked up and saw him circling behind the beings, and asked, *Are you going to the shuttle?*

But his affirmative answer was lost as my attention shifted. The beings were making sounds, and I shot a Netwise request for silence hoping to determine the source.

It was speech. Not the guttural sounds that preconceptions had formed beneath my conscious, but rich intonations with varied accents and clicks.

I startled. Something else was being communicated in a medium beyond the realm of sound. An extravagant flow of excitement begged me to call out in delight.

Duan felt it over the Net and grabbed my attention with a compelling undercurrent of alarm. But beside the alarm he asked, *Do you sense something else?*

I was still resisting believing it myself, so I could not honestly answer. My silence was honored, but I knew Duan was anxious. What was it, indeed? Why could I not take my eyes off the shorter of the two? Why did I feel kinship with it/him/her?

While unconsciously boring into the shorter being with my curiosity I noticed a mild ping inside my head. Then, as though watching a dream, my nullsuit sight revealed the being turning directly toward me, pausing, then raising an extremity in an obvious pointing gesture.

I froze. Panic welled up in me, and I knew the danger in it. Taking a moment to calm myself, I crouched lower behind the bush and closed my eyes – then dropped off the Net.

Darkness felt secure. My senses awoke from tension panic, and with them, a burning awareness of the *other* presence. I felt compelled to look around behind me, but caught myself before responding to the false reflex.

I focused intently on the presence, and it became a small glow in the darkness that mastered a specific location.

Consciously holding on to the glow, I came back upNet, zeroed out the suit's nav control and turned to face the direction I imagined it came from. My intuition proved correct. The glow and my sight overlapped, a rigorous confirmation that I would never have believed from another.

I was spinning inside. It was a wild ride on waves of excitement... searching for a link to this alien Other.

Before I understood anything of the process, a nudge came out of the glow. It was like *feeling* a smile. Cast of pure emotion, aimed at *me*.

The nudge held just long enough.

My excitement acted by itself, and an automatic response swelled from a place I had used unknowingly before. It swirled along with the spinning sensation, as if I was sending an echo back to the source – something like... *peace – safety – comradeship...*

The smile sensation came back – multiplied.

Then I did something impulsive. Focusing back into the Net, I issued the nullsuit deactivation command. Determined, I removed my hood, stood up behind the bush and faced the strangers.

In the beautiful silence of the moment, I was awash with sensations from within and without. I could place Duan with his shock-mixed-pride up the hill behind them, but more powerful tones of excitement-mixed-fear-mixed-wonder were emanating from the shorter of the two standing in front of me only a few steps away.

I kept very still, not wanting to do anything that might threaten these new beings, holding warm-mixed-safe feelings for them in a desperate attempt at communication.

The space before me brightened inexplicably – emotion, sensation and universe interwoven to form some visceral shared expression of pure excitement. Safety inherent to this spatial magnetism invited me to step out into full view.

Then I perceived movement. The shorter being stepped toward me and moved an appendage like an arm upward in my direction. Counterparts like fingers opened in what I sensed to be a gesture of greeting, and I experienced an excitement like nothing I had ever felt before.

As I extended my hand to meet the other, I trembled with an awesome realization of success for myself and my species, and I thought how this day would not come to a close lightly.

I wondered if the very fabric of space would tear at this point of union, as if the universe itself could not contain the potential of such a moment.

Tears flooded my eyes. Oh, Home! So very much has just now begun...