Being Lost - Angel Colony

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admiral Patrick Niven commanded my attention as I followed O’Neal into the admiral’s conference room aboard *Azreal*. He was a tall man. He had a lived in face and projected an aura of confident authority. As we found our seats, I reflected on what I knew about him. He was a seasoned wet navy admiral who had been involved in the military development of space from the day alien contact had been fully disclosed. It had not been inevitable that a space based military would follow a naval model, but it was due in large part to his influence that it had turned out that way. The operational realities of the navy produced command experience and traditions that adapted easily to the operational realities in space, much to the disappointment of the air force, which had monopolized military interests in space from the end of the twentieth century. Niven’s command experience, and practical mind would prove invaluable to us during the days and weeks following our escape from the interface.

admiral Niven took his seat and the rest of us followed his cue. As everyone settled down, he opened the discussion, “OK, people, we are gong to begin with a rapid assessment of the situation. Commander Lowell will summarize the facts at hand and then I will take individual reports from each of your commands. I do not intend to make any decisions without your input at this juncture. As the surviving units of task group three, we have to assess the question of whether it is possible to fulfill our mission. The answer to that question has to account for the present capabilities of your commands, and any proposed action has to accommodate the capabilities of the most afflicted units. Commander Lowell, please begin.”

“thank you, admiral,” Lowell stood and picked up the display remote. He activated the overhead holographic display. In it our current tactical plot was illuminated, with codes noting the status of each ship. Only Gabriel showed nominal green on all points. I could see that many of the ships showed heavily damaged arrays, or even damaged drive cores. “you are all aware of the loss of *Hanael*, *Serael* and *Daniel*. We have no information with regard to their fates. It is highly probably that they remained intact within the interface, rather than breaking up during insertion. Situationally speaking, if they opted to abort the emergency insertion, due to casualties sustained by their asset teams, they had every opportunity to wave off, lick their wounds, and attempt an alternate insertion as dictated by the disposition of their drives. In relativistic terms, they are either now in surface space at whatever point in the universe that chance has offered them, or they are not in, nor will they ever regain surface space. Within temporal continuity, those are the only two options from our perspective.

“in either case, their official status is lost,” Lowell proclaimed.

“also, as your presence demonstrates, the seventeen remaining ships units of task group three are present and accounted for. While our units were regrouping here,” Lowell gestured to the real-time display, “each ship took readings for gravitational and optical fixes to define its position, according to sop. From those combined readings we obtain real and apparent positions for celestial bodies throughout the entire quadrant. That gives us a measure of stellar drift, absolute magnitude for stars, and the basis for a reverse plot to identify our position from possible correspondence with landmark celestial bodies. Initial observation confirmed that we are far outside of any previously mapped region.” He manipulated the controls, and the scale of the image compressed to a sector plot, showing local stars.

“as each of you joined up, we copied your initial position readings, and used them to reinforce the readings taken from here. Given the wide spread of our index positions those images have built up a model with respectable depth. More importantly, it turned up benchmark galactic references which were familiar.” The image compressed again revealing a familiar whirl-pool of cloudy luminescence. “that data is still being refined,” Lowell qualified, “but we have tentatively identified our position as within the milky way galaxy, approximately one-hundred and twenty degrees spin-ward of earth, relative to the center of the galaxy. That places us far across the galactic disk. We will continue to make celestial observations until we have thoroughly refined our position.

“theoretically, we will know within the next few days where we are, but speaking in practical terms, we are lost. The territory that we are in is completely unknown to us, and our ability to regain familiar space is extremely uncertain,” Lowell looked at the admiral, “that is the gist of it admiral. Leaving out technical and redundant support, that pretty much sums up our situation.”

Niven nodded and addressed the assembled captains. “as things stand, we are as far from our theater of operation as we are from earth. Whether we decide to abort the mission, or repair to our assigned area, execution will place the same demands on your commands.” Admiral Niven thanked Lowell as he sat down, and then by seniority, each of the captains stood to relate the condition of their command and status of their crews and compliment. The reports were not good. Several actives had collapsed under the strain of final maneuvers, some with serious neurological damage. On other ships, array elements had blown under the strain, and a few had suffered damage to the drive cores. That they had been able to initialize their cores and rejoin the task group at all was astonishing.

“clearly,” the admiral concluded at the end of those reports, “*Michael, Uriel, Raphael* and *Nadiel* are incapable of making a deep enough dive to return to the vicinity of earth. Nor, any protracted chain of shallow dives. *Gabriel*, which is in the best shape, would be severely pressed to do either, and certainly she would arrive crippled in any regard. I think that pretty much defines our options. We can neither abort or complete our mission under these circumstances. We will revise our operational stance to reflect these limitations. I am ordering the task group to remain concentrated for mutual support, but I do not see any reason why we cannot still carryout the intended purpose of this mission.

“our mission objective remains to locate and acquire a terra-compatible world upon which we can establish a colony. We will conduct a survey and search of this sector to identify a viable target for this objective. I will not risk individual units in the pursuit of multiple targets, but once we have established a base of operations to support further adventure in this sector, future colonization opportunities will become available.

“in the meantime I want to examine the combat capabilities and readiness of your commands. This is not our neighborhood, gentlemen, and I do expect any locals to object to our intentions. This remains a military operation and do not hesitate to remind your civilian complements that the change in our situation has not altered that fact. We will remain on station here while we carry out all necessary and possible repairs. This system has ample resources for our needs, and does not possess any life bearing worlds which should reduce the chances that any other intelligence has any vested interest in visiting here and encountering us.” He paused and looked at a man who I had studiously ignored since the beginning of this meeting. Commander Craig, asset control officer assigned to the admiral’s staff. “one last thing, gentlemen, before I dismiss you. Many of you wondered why I requested these asset officers, who have accompanied you to this meeting.”

I had wondered if the admiral would acknowledge our presence among his captains.

“I have selected an asset officer from each command for detail under my staff.” Niven met each asset officer’s eyes as he went on, “we cannot afford to lose your capabilities. You represent a vital but limited resource upon which the fate of the task group depends, as we have seen so clearly demonstrated.

“on the advice of commander Craig, I am concentrating you into a special projects group for the duration. There are a number of things that need to be done. Jobs which call for your special abilities. Jobs which could not effectively be done spread out over seventeen shifts among individuals on a three man rotation. You will be assigned quarters here aboard the *Azreal*, and your personal effects can be transferred over later today. Please report to the commander at the end of this meeting to receive your instructions. I apologize for leaning on your resources so heavily, but I cannot overlook any asset in this situation.” Nobody complained, we simply nodded our understanding. Turning back to his captains the admiral went on, “that is it in brief for now. Return to your commands, concentrate on repairs and preparations for what lies ahead. You have time, so do everything right. Don’t waste it. There may not be an opportunity later to repeat a job that gets done carelessly now. I will keep you advised of conference times and my chief of staff will handle requests for assistance and direct personnel and material loans to those ships which need it from those ships that can spare it. Any questions?” He paused. No one spoke up, “fine then. You are dismissed.”

O’Neal was looking at me with concern as I seethed behind an utterly blank facade. I could not have looked in Craig’s direction without succumbing to the urge to hurt him. There was nothing rational about it. There was also no questioning that there was no innocent explanation for how and why I found myself being placed under that man’s authority. Nor was there any question that martin Craig had made extraordinary efforts to achieve direct authority over me in the past. What really angered me, though, was that he had, with his usual knack, once again indifferently interfered in a way that caused me pain. To get what he wanted, he was tearing me away from my friends, my “family” and my lover.

in spite of what felt like a personal attack on me by martin Craig, it was true enough that there was a lot of work that actives were particularly suited to, which we probably could not have done singly or in groups of three. Martin had advised the admiral of the way we used to jury rig experimental cores on the interface project, which suggested employing us to psychokinetically repair damaged field cores and arrays. There were seventeen of us, and thousands of photonic elements in need of such attention. Of almost greater urgency was the rehabilitation of the actives who had injured themselves in the crunch. I am what is called a full spectrum psionic, which means I am as good in biokinetics as I am in psychokinetics. Lucky me. I worked double shifts, and overtime at that, doctoring cores and autistic units in the day, and doctoring brains in the evenings.

then again, lucky me, I was too busy to devote any time to any of Craig’s personal projects. In fact, I had promised both Connor and O’Neal that I would do my best to avoid him. Except for the minimum of courtesy due to a senior officer, I strove to ignore his existence. Actually, that is a half-truth. I always kept tabs on him, and saw to it that I was busy with delicate work that could not be interrupted whenever he sought me out. The other actives could see that he got my hair up, and occasionally ran cover for me. Ultimately, I could not actually get away from him. Living on the same ship, and sleeping in the same compartment—he had graciously offered the extra sleeper in his quarters to house the “odd man out” which conveniently turned out to be me—I eventually saw what lay behind his proprietary interest in me. Desire, fear, hatred, curiosity; it was the curiosity that really scared me for some reason. Craig was a man who had to take things apart to understand them.

I held Catherine Teague’s face in my hands, while probing the damage to her brain. Cathy had been one of the worst cases. I had spent the better part of a month researching and studying her case. She had held on past the point where she should have let go and the back wash of energy had seared a vast portion of her corpus callosum and portions of her cerebral cortex. The damage had left her incapable of speech, and greatly impaired her ability to coordinate her thoughts. The damage also seemed to interfere with volitional movement, leaving her largely paralyzed. I had consulted with three other skilled biokinetics and planned her surgery in every detail. All that was left was to go in and make the necessary repairs. I had a team of medical technicians backing me up as I prepared for the non-invasive operation. I had traced her neural net into every niche and corner looking for other collateral damage, and had been pleased to see that little damage had been done to her autonomic nervous system.

I had done everything I could to prepare for this operation. There was no need for anesthetic, but there was one final preparation to make, and that was preparing the subject—a friend, and once a lover—for the fact that I was about to take her fragile brain into my power and shape it. I had to ask for her trust and her submission. I entered her mind and tried to impress on her what I was about to do.

biological manipulation is difficult to impose on powerful latents and all actives. Without her cooperation I would not be able to work unless she was administered a sleeper. I did not want to use a sleeper because that presented a risk of forcing her into latency. To repair her mental scars along with her physical ones, she needed to be an active participant. Thankfully she did trust me, and wanted to be healed. I focused her attention within mine and carefully started rebuilding her neural net. I started in the remote areas of her cerebral cortex, then ran through her reticular formation, then out into the fringes of her cerebrum, before tackling the damage to her corpus callosum. I have no idea how long the job took. I was extremely careful, investing a lot of attention into the task. In many ways, these repairs were very similar to, if not as simple as what I had done with damaged cores. The greatest difference is that I had to work in the foundation of a living mind.

I came out of the operating theater wired up and focused on the mysteries of brain and mind. My diagnostic ability was whetted and hungry to explore, seeking out on its own for new neural territories to explore. I couldn’t help it. To my senses the people around me were always naked to me, inside and out, and I managed not to see what I perceived mostly as a force of habit. I had never indulged in such an extended and intimate study of the body mind interface as what that surgery required of me. So, I was at the mercy of this awakened interest, and behind my neutral expression, I neurologically undressed every single person I passed on my way back to my quarters. To add to the indecency of my voyeurism, all my unwitting victims were latent.

as I’ve said, they fascinated me. I mean, a latent mind just seemed so incomprehensible to me. I could so easily see how their brains are developed, and I could see where they lacked structures found in active brains. But, those physical differences were just that—developmental. The potential was there, it just had not been utilized. I don’t think that the majority of people realized how much their neurological structure reflected the uses to which it was put. That the brain literally molds itself to accommodate how a person thinks. Instead they seem to believe that their thinking is limited by the development of their brain. Just about everyone has seen evidence of atrophy in the body, but they don’t take that observation as far as the brain. Every time I examine latency, however, it always comes down to a basic question in my mind.

why *are* they latent?

it hit me there in the corridor. Having just held a brain its mind in my hands for whatever-odd hours must have tipped me off. The greatest cause of latency is *sensitivity*. It seemed so obvious that I reeled against the wall. The explanation wasn’t in something I had not seen, but in something I knew all too well. I mean, I knew that a latent mind was one that had recoiled from the onslaught of direct perception, I just had not looked at it that closely.

the mind is so sensitive that it is easily injured and scarred. Reciprocally, the mind is unbelievable durable and can heal from anything, so long as it is healthy. Still, pain is pain, and our experience in pain is often tainted by the carnal experience of it. In the body, the lesson of pain is connected to the mortality of the flesh. The reflex—flinching—will preserve one’s mind as well as one’s body, from accidental harm, but in the case of the mind it eventually builds a trap. To explore anything directly with one’s mind can result in the sensation, and *apprehension* of things awesome in their intensity, and it is in understanding them—a vulnerable moment without comparison—that an unguarded mind is deeply inclined to flinch away.

to be active, one must be open—willing to expose one’s self to the *understanding* implicit in that contact. To grasp the universe, you have to be willing to *grasp* the universe—to touch it and be touched by it. And that is the hard part. It is this obstacle that accounts for the latent majority of humanity. I suppose because it is human nature to be selfish about one’s own understanding—the essential understanding of one’s self. Most people are pretty shy about casting too much light on the foundation of their souls. Also, it is axiomatic that if you know how the miracle is performed, *it ceases to be a miracle*. That is an acid test most people are not willing to subject existence to. And every time the universe brushes the soul, it imparts a wealth of understanding—sheds a little more light in the depths of our understanding of who and what we are. So each of these glimpses tends to shake the foundations of our souls. We are often stunned by these moments, or we recoil from them. In that way we shun the universe, and we shun ourselves. The irony of it all is that the truth—the secret—is right in front of our noses the entire time. The whole thing is an exercise in strenuously not noticing it.

as I thought it, I realized what it meant. It was a bigger answer than I was looking for.

I paused there on the brink of understanding. Did I dare look at the answer in my grasp? Could I bear to look too boldly upon my own reflection? Did I admit then and there that I was too afraid to acknowledge *my own latency?* I think I shuddered there in my tracks terrified of a single step in either direction. It would be so easy to walk on in willful oblivion, but I had too much self respect to accept lying to myself about it. Instead I had a nervous breakdown.

*daughter, it is too soon. You have only just conceived of yourself. You are not yet ready to look yourself in the eye.* I remember hearing those words at some point while I my mind was in fugue. I did not make sense of them until I had recovered. I did not understand them for almost twenty years, by which point I had forgotten about hearing them.

active status for a psionic is based on the ability to generate a force of one newton under controlled circumstances, for a minimal rating of one on the geometric scale. The original scale went from one to ten, with measurable power doubling at each step. The power rating system became an accepted fixture of the science by the time it was established that psionic power is accelerative in nature, and was geared to different levels of attention. The geometric scale was broken up into orders of magnitude as a reflection of this discovery. An active geared for that third order can tap forces rated from one hundred to one thousand on the original geometric scale. That’s 1,267,650,600,228,000,000,000,000,000,000 kgm/s2 on the low end of that scale, read “one nonillion, two-hundred sixty-seven octillion...”—in other words it is a really big number, which frightens laymen and physicists alike when try to figure out how much power a psionic can have. Again I point out that that is an accelerative figure.

actives do not walk around with this god-like power in their back pockets. The theoretical power of a psionic is infinite, but that is because the ultimate source of that power is infinite. All measurements of psionic power are potentials; like a load estimate on a wire.

still, when a class three active suddenly goes off her nut walking down a corridor, those individuals who feel compelled to work out those power equivalencies tend to panic. I imagine that I had been discovered quickly. I was told later that I had gone totally fetal and curled up inside of a psychokinetic field. I had grabbed ahold of ambient space and dominated it, setting up a field of total control. It is a total physical defense mechanism, nothing enters such a space without falling under my control. Anything threatening is shunted out of the field.

the first thing they tried to do was put a damper on me. Unfortunately, they have to be turned on to work, and they didn’t count on me gutting the units as they were set up. They could have used the drive core to set up an interference field within the ship, but they didn’t think of it and I wasn’t about to suggest it to them, even if I had been aware of them. Several of my friends and fellow actives tried to drill through my shields and talk me down, but they couldn’t get past my passive defenses to get my attention. If they could have, they would have ejected me from the ship, but actively opposing my power to do so would have endangered the entire vessel. So in the end, they sent for Connor off of *Gabriel*.

all in all, my little tantrum was a quiet one. Sound and fury with no substance. My survival instinct had kicked in to protect me when my nervous breakdown had suspended my capacity for rational thought. You would be disturbed too if you knew that you could accelerate the earth at two-hundred and twelve kilometers per second—or even the sun in its course by a factor of point six meters per second—and had discovered that was the *latent* expression of your potential. The power that I have frightens sane people. The implication that I was ignoring my real potential, and the temptation to look at that potential and admit it, had almost scared me to death. Like a small child, I ran away and hid; and I would not have come back out of my little hole if someone I loved and trusted had not come in after me to get me out. Morgan was there with him, and later she told me how Connor had chewed Craig a new asshole for working me so hard I’d had a nervous breakdown, neatly derailing any noise from him about how I was dangerously unstable and ought to be leashed. I owe Connor more than words can say, because if I had heard such a suggestion in the frame of mind I was in, I would have agreed vehemently.

after Connor had put me back on my feet, I was able to realize that I was in no danger of acquiring absolute power. What I had discovered about the effect of sensitivity, with regard to latency, applied to my situation. If the apprehension of infinite power had shaken my foundation so badly, then I was too sensitive to wield it. That’s when I realized what Connor had rescued me from. I made extra sure to show my appreciation when we arrived back home on *Gabriel.*

It was later, as I basked in the aterglow, that I noticed the brilliant star that glowed in my womb that I realized it. I stroked my abdomen, nested in Connor’s arms and told him what I suspected.

I wonder how many people can say that they owe their happiness to a nervous breakdown? I did, for the days, weeks, months and even years to come. If I had not collapsed that day, things would have gone very differently. Connor joked with me about it after I had been reassigned back to the *Gabriel.* “obviously, you were willing to do anything to get back to me,” he joked as he held me in bed that night. I was so happy to be back with friends, and back in my old quarters, that I had nearly raped Connor when I finally got him alone. The next day, Connor went up before the captain’s mast where he was demoted for insubordination to commander Craig. I think he was delighted to accept that. His rank had been an obstacle to our relationship, and he had risked serious trouble that one time he had slept with me—and again when I cornered him in our quarters after my rescue—as I was technically an officer under him. He actually thanked the captain and then came directly to me and proposed marriage.

never having known my father—a man who had not been identified even in my mother’s dying memories—I had not been exposed to a key male family influence in my childhood. I had given some thought to being a mother, for which I had a wonderful role-model, but I had never got it connected in my head that the process could involve a husband. So, I had never given much thought to the idea of getting married. The question took me totally by surprise. I still had not looked very closely at my feelings for him. If he had asked me if I loved him, I’m sure I would have said yes, as I was intensely aware of my debt to him.

saying it, I might have meant it, but I would have been fooling myself.

the truth was that I loved him dearly—though I loved him less than I loved myself. Looking back, I should not have done it—for his sake, not mine—but the fact was that he made me happy, he loved me utterly, and we had that amazing animal attraction to one another. I said “yes”. He did not ask me to take his name, but I tacked it on at the end anyway, for form. The captain performed the ceremony with pride, having known me “since when I was still a kitten”. Uncle Jocko gave me away, and Morgan was my bridesmaid. Once we got through all the ceremony that my friends had insisted on subjecting me to, we had a wild party, which was the best excuse there was for having any ceremony at all.

our union gave Connor and me something to bear us up in the desperate years that followed as the task group struggled to find a terra-compatible world, and the capabilities of our drives inevitably decayed. My collapse was put behind me, but it was not forgotten; when Craig tried again later to appropriate my services, both Connor and O’Neal went before the admiral and explained certain aspects of Craig’s and my relationship, pointing out that that history had no doubt contributed to my collapse under Craig’s command. The admiral had ordered Craig to leave me alone after that.

during our wandering exile, I had seven children by Connor. He was a wonderful father to them. Our decision to have children was not smiled upon, but there was ample room for the small number of families that formed during those bleak years to expand. We also had a few deaths. Some by old age, and too many by accident. It was a wearying odyssey and children did a lot to lift the morale of the crew and compliment. Marriages and births signaled the emotional acceptance that—however military the mission remained—we were a colony, and we were looking for a home. Morgan also had a daughter, which implies that she had a lover somewhere. Most of those who had children had only one or two, and I think the reason why I had so many was that I felt some guilt for not loving Connor enough, and was trying to give more of myself to him in that way.

still, in all the ways that counted, I was deliriously happy. I could go on and on about how we raised our family, surveyed star after star, and occasionally spent some of our drives’ precious life spans to investigate a promising system only to be disappointed horribly. In fact, I maintained a story journal during those years, and dumping the whole file in here would be effortless. Still, however interesting these little adventures were, very little changed in our situation for a long time. But, inevitably the day came when everything changed. We didn’t know it as it was happening; the last days of our exile dragged by much as the days before did. I think those final days are all the taste of purgatory this account needs to bear.

a child is more likely to be active if his mother is active

a portion of the ship was given over to a children’s dormitory where older children lived together and attended school and where younger children were taken care of while their parents were on watch

other children became active through environmental factors but none of the children were pressed to grasp higher potentials

as an active mother I took on the responsibility of training them in reservation etiquette

my other responsibilities often caught up with me while I was working with the kids

...

so, what is this?

this came from the last series of remote surveys. Take a look at this one.

this? That’s a type a main sequence star, doesn’t seem like a good candidate.

certainly not at first. We’ve been looking at type g for the most part, but look at the spectral analysis.

whoa! Right in the grove. That planet must be earth compatible across the board. Who spotted it?

you did.

what? I haven’t seen this series until just now.

no, of course not. Do you remember a few months ago when you last reported a bio-signature in the matrix?

sure, but I wasn’t able to identify it. i worked out a vector but there wasn’t anything on it.

yes, that’s what we thought, but those flags are mapped and accessed in the survey filters.

wait, if that’s an a2 five, then we’re talking about an absolute magnitude of plus two and change. Why haven’t we seen it until now?

wrong question. If we didn’t see if before then obviously it was too far away. The appropriate question is why are we seeing it now? We’ve been steadily approaching its neighborhood on a bet the captain has with the admiral.

you’ve gotta be kidding.

no, we haven’t been making the best progress using the scientific method—oh we’ve found a hundred worlds that would be ideal candidates for terra-form colonization, but that doesn’t do us a lot of good now. Besides, the captain has a lot of faith in your ability.

o my goddess! That’s... What... But... No. I must have made a hundred wild-assed guesses like that since we got lost.

oh, is that so? Then why do all of your WAGs converge in the same sphere?

what?

yeah, I didn’t think you had noticed. Would you like to see what depth they converge at?

that can’t be right. That’s not even in this quadrant. Why didn’t anyone mention this to me before now?

are you kidding? You are the last person we would tell, and we didn’t plan on telling anyone until we got some kind of independent confirmation. This is it.

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