Confrontations - Angel Colony

The follow up to the first contact at Angel Colony and a recapitulation of the disclosure of alien contact on Earth.

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I reached out for Morgan’s mind and announced my discovery, as soon as I had gotten my shock totally under control. When I sensed her disbelief, I opened myself to her and let her look through my eyes. I listened in as she reported my contact to the captain, and then relayed the message to the asset under Admiral Niven. I was about to confess how I had broken protocol and allowed the emissary unrestricted access to sensitive information—I’ll never get used to having classified thoughts!—when the emissary pulled me short. *If you had not shown me what you did, you would not have lived to make* any *report.* I whipped around to stare at her. I projected an inelegant *What???* before clamping down on my mind. I simmered in self-rage. I *had* to stop blurting out my thoughts! With more restraint, I ammended, *Why did you tell me that?*

*I did not see any reason for you to disgrace yourself.* She shrugged, looking me steadily in the eye. She composed her limbs gracefully in free-fall, giving an impression of delivering a formal statement. *It is a given of diplomacy that when confronting an alien one does not reveal unneccessary information. That is the danger of such exchanges, as so often diplomacy is ruled by fear and deception. That is one reason why Contact is forbidden between strangers under the law. By law, I am obligated to destroy any unlawful emissary. If you had not revealed your innocence of the law...* She broke off and bowed her head. I could almost feel the deeper turmoil of her thoughts, but her surface mind remained calm—perhaps the most effective mental shield there is. She looked up then from beneath lowered brows. *It will suffice to say, your diplomatic suicide has saved your life and that of your companions.* Again her eyes lowered, in a most uncanny impression of respect.

I touched her mind, and I was surprised to indeed feel an emotion of reverence and respect. *Why do you honor me?*  I asked in quiet curiosity.

Her head came up, and she regarded me carefully, before reaching out hesititantly to rest her fingertips on my braided hair. *You bear the mark of change.* Her hand moved to cup my face. *You have no face of shame.* Most shocking, she leaned forward and kissed my brow. *You bear the sword of blame. You are a living indictment of an avatar of the archon.* She released me, and then showed me a picture of myself, as I had suffered my mental lapse. An ageless young woman hanging erect in a sea of stars, arms wide and head held high with the blind expression of rapture. I flushed with embarrassment even as I wondered how such agony as I had felt, could show itself in an expression of bliss.

*Only greatness dares expose it’s most vulnerable side to adversity.*  Her thoughts declared as she pulled back and bowed her eyes again. I corssed my arms over my breasts, shuddering at the depth of my vulnerability. I turned my eyes aside and retorted. *A foolish child’s outburst. Nothing more.*

*Gabriel*  was not long in arriving. The emissary and I had sped to rendezvous with her at Ocean, for which *Gabriel* had already been bound during our encounter. I felt as if I were dreaming as I returned to *Gabriel’s* flank with the stranger in tow*.* The stranger paused at the hull, and laid her hand on the armored skin of the interstellar vessel. I felt her probe the ship, feeling vague alarm. I opened the lock and beckoned for her to enter. she aproached but again hesitated, this time with a look of consternation. I inquired what the problem was and was surprised by the answer.

*I do not want to offend the life keeper by entering his presence without his leave, but he does not respond to my hail.* I didn’t understand it and asked her to clarify what she meant by that. She raised her eyebrows and gestured around us and at the ship. *The one who shapes this space to acommodate humans in the void.*

It clicked. I looked at the field architecture of the ship. The by-products of the research my mother had been part of had extended to hyper-geometries of space-time that accounted for the forces of gravity, momentum and inertia. The drive core, in addition to propelling the ship through space and the interface, provided a constant, inertially buffered, one gravity environment within the ship. A powerful psionic active could produce the same effect with a psychokinetic field. I tried to explain that what she had sensed was produced by a machine, not a person, and so there was no possability of offense. I added that we would be met by a side party where the captain would probably receive and grant our request to enter .

She stared at me incredulously and exclaimed. *Your people have the skill to build* clockwork *that can control reality!* She looked again at the ship with wonder and budding excitement. I heard her declare, *I would not have guessed. it* feels *so alive.*

After we entered, and our bodies had reverted back to normal, we stepped out of the starbord midship personnel lock into the gallery. I saluted the Solar Flag, then the captain and smiled at my friends assembled in the side party. The stranger started to immitate me, but I advised her that whatever formal greeting was customary among her people would be more appropriate for her. She gave me a small smile and then composed herself. She bowed her head, touched her fingertips to her brow, crossed her hands over her heart and then swept them out to her sides, palms up while speaking.

“*Hah iyn ano ds’ai, ano avon’n’ai ool ahtha’ay o jiyn,”* her soprano voice resonated with base undertones, as she uttered this greeting. When she fell silent, she folded one hand over the other at rest in front of herself. I was trying to puzzle out the meaning of her pronouncement as I asked for permission to come aboard. The meaning was simple, *people of this house, I convey my blessings and the blessings of my people.* Word for word translation was more difficult and I was startled out of it as I heard her echo me, correctly guessing what part to substitute in the formula.

*“Ayena Naioma Aicovia, pur mih shun’too cahma vor ds’ur,”* she addressed the captain. Despite her accent, the words were surprisingly clear. Alan Eric O’Neal granted our requests with an odd smile, and I could tell that he had *tried* to brace himself for what Morgan had told him to expect. He did not show his shock as badly as some of the others in the gallery. I was happy to see that I was not the only one discomforted by the ramifications of this strange visitation. Under the protocols of first contact, the captain and even the ship could act only as chaperones while I acted as the Primary of Contact, and my two fellow assets, Morgan and Connor, were bound to assist me as the Secondaries of Contact. Only we three were permitted to have direct communication with the emissary, while all others were required to communicate through us.

Although everyone was under strictest orders to not show it, the emissary was met with mixed feelings on the part of crew and compliment. Those ten years we had so desperately spent getting here had been a taste of purgatory. When the task group had limped into the neighborhood of such a promising candidate, our hopes had soared. I spotted it on a remote survey, and we’d identified it through spectral analysis as a viable home. Our morale was high as we approached this new solar system. We thought we were heading for our new, last and only home for the future. Our arduous efforts had finally brought us within reach of the perfect world—one that suddenly proved to be too perfect. When we were met by a representative of that world, at the boundaries of the inner system, our hopes nearly died.

The discovery of an unbelievably anthropomorphic species was greatly offset by the fact that they resided on the world we had foolishly and desperately set our hearts on. Most of the men and women assembled in our honor were here purely as scenery for this historic occasion. Aicovia, as I sensed was her personal name, was only introduced to Morgan and Connor. I conferred with the captain while those three were getting acquainted and learned that we were already making our way out of the system, returning on a direct reciprocal course to the rest of the task group. As the reception broke up, Connor, Morgan and I, took Aicovia on a breif tour of the ship—during which the emissary evinced both awe and wonder at each new discovery of the colony-explorer’s technological nature—before escourting her to a cabin and familiarizing her with its utilities.

As soon as I could—when it seemed that my two friends were on top of the situation—I excused myself to find a little time and space to put myself back together. I was raw from reliving that terrible day yet again. I couldn’t just brush it away, because so much followed from that event that inescapably led me here to this situation. I didn’t want to go through it all again, and I tried to put it off. In spite of myself, I could not avoid confronting myself—the ghosts of myself.

Oh, how I tried not to think about it. I delighted in peeling out of that body-sleeve, and throwing myself into a long, hot, steaming shower. I buried my troubled thoughts in the pleasant sensations of heat, and the fluid rush over my flesh. I carefully kept my mind neutral—engaged, but not geared for thought.

As I stepped out of the spray and sluiced water from my skin, I could not help appraising the image in the mirror. At first the mirror revealed to me only a mask. Very plain, lacking in character, and almost too symmetrical to live in. There was a sculpted perfection to my body which was disturbing. On my mother the same features had been exotically beautiful, while on me they just seemed somehow unfinished. I took after her so well that any reflection brought her back to me. So for a moment I saw a young woman of sensuous line and curve. Damp, her hair was the color of a brooding coal. She was staring at me through opalescent, dove gray eyes. I dropped my gaze and watched her brush beads of moisture off of her skin. Her flesh was translucent and pale, like something carved from moonstone or mother of pearl.

As I looked at my mother, she gave me a comforting smile. She looked so sad, so alone, and I wished so much she had not died! As she picked up my thoughts, her expression turned to worry and deep compassion. As my mind flashed back to her death, her face turned away in agony.

At a second glance, the painful illusion shattered.

I stared into the glass until the ache was bearable. I held onto my gaze until I had regained my sense of identity. I was a pale reflection of her, but I had developed a sense of pride in my body. I do not believe myself to be beautiful, but I can admit to myself that at least I am well made. I took satisfaction in my body by knowing that, as a vehicle to life’s experiences, it is well suited to my tastes. Long of limb and firm of muscle, I am a lean and healthy animal. In fact, as a benefit of my psionic ability, I still looked exactly as I had when I was only seventeen, when—I felt a sudden stab—when I had been forced to share the most painful moment in my life that first time. I reeled back as the memory unfolded. I had been shoved out in front of the international media, where along with the fate of the *Adventure* I was forced to expose myself and the existence of active psionics.

I stood in the wings imperceptably quaking, breaking into a cold sweat. The sound of the assembled reporters carried over the stage from the gallery. Everything around me was chaos to my physical and mental senses. I was crowded by the busy tension of thoughts and disorienting flurry of activity around me. I bit my lip. I didn’t want to be here. I had been brought here by people trained in controlling their surface thoughts, and I had not been told why I was summoned until an hour ago. I had been to such assemblies before as an observer, but tonight I was here as the main feature. I had been out of the loop during the six years of my rehabilitation. I had not kept abreast of the developments following the disaster. I had not known how many other explorers had been annihilated in their breif encounters with the hostile contact. I had not known that the situation had become so bad that the people *had* to be told. And I had been chosen to tell them.

The fact that I was the only eye witness to the disaster had made me the obvious spokesperson. At first I had refused, shaking with terror. My protests had been brushed aside and I had been told bluntly that I had to face this down and not break. I had balked until I was pointedly told to look at this as a *test* of my rehabilitation. It doesn’t take much for a telepath to recognize a veiled threat. I was well aware of the fate of an unstable psi.

I had shut up and grabbed the binder with the prepared presentation and slammed out of the office. Rather than think of what loomed ahead, I had poured myself into memorizing the packet, detail by detail. The most intensive study I could make had still left me with time to kill before the lights went up. I would have looked like a drowned corpse under the lights, if something had not been done about it. I had nerved myself to tolerate the touch of the make-up artists. As I thought of myself being made pretty for public comsumption, I felt like meat dressed for a feast.

I was already being devoured by my angst.

The waiting ended as the Secretary of the Solar Authority and his aides shoved by me to step out in front of the cameras and up to the podium. I watched him fuss with his notes and greet the press. The mob finally settled down to a low murmur. He made the initial anouncement concerning the loss of fourteen deep space explorers, and briefly outlined the very limited number of facts about what was known of their fates. He cut the reporters off short when they began to ask questions and dragged me into it at last.

“I ask you, ladies and gentlemen, to hold your questions. Ms. Arden Eve Sinclair, a contractor and resident of the Curry Psionic Reservation and Research Project in Oregon has been asked to appear before you to share her first hand account of the first encounter with the hostile contact. In light of the extenuating circumstances and grave nature of this crisis, it is necessary to reveal her identity as well as the fact that she is, like her mother was, a government licensed, full spectrum active psionic. I will leave it up to her to explain what that means and to reveal to you the details of that encounter. Arden?”

I stared at him from the safety of the wings. Do, or Die. I gritted my teeth and steeled my soul. I stalked out in front of the lights, my face set in stone. I acknowledged the second most powerful man in the solar system with the slightest nod as he turned the podium over to me. I glanced down at the binder still in my hands, and dropped it on the stage beside me, dismissing it entirely from my thoughts. I willed calm into my voice and addressed the assembled world media.

“I have to explain a few things to establish the nature of my involvement in the final mission of the deep space explorer *Adventure.* You are probably not aware of the relationship between the PRRP’s and the space program. I will go into detail on that only so far as to state that my mother and I were contractors working for the Interface Systems Project. Our work involved the development of a hyperspace drive for point to point instantaneous transit through space. Our finall prototype was installed on the *Adventure* in early May of twenty-ninty-seven. My mother was selected to accompany the ship during it’s drive trials in twenty-one-oh-one, because of her familiarity with the technology and a close telepathic rapport with me. I served as the ground communication link for the mission.

“At the time that the *Adventure* encountered the object in space I was in total rapport with my mother. In effect I was present throughout the events that followed as completely as each of you are now in this room,” I declared to the assembly. Without pause I went into a full, unedited recapitulation. I am sure it made for great journalism; a tragic figure bravely describing the last moments of the deep space explorer *Adventure*, while quietly dying her mother’s death in her memory.

As I spoke, tears streamed down my face unheeded, and my hands were locked white knucked on the podium to still their shaking, but my voice remained clear and smooth. I could not stop the bleeding of my soul, but I would not give my benefactors the satisfaction of watching me fold under the weight they had placed on me. I simply cursed them in the silent vaults of my mind. I wondered, in another, detached part of my mind, what they had been thinking when they forced me to relate the details of this disaster to the world. To this day, I have no notion of whether my keepers gave any thought to how the event would make me feel. Maybe the wound healed better for being reopened and liberally bled.

I would not have thought it could have been re-opened at this late a date, but confronted with this impossibly human alien, and her terrifying first words, I had learned otherwise. I had always need to know *why* this horrible thing had happened. The idea that my mother died for breaking a law she had no idea existed was both terrible and promising. I don’t think anyone can deal with a senseless tragedy. When there are no answers we just suffer endlessly without catharsis. That public confession had relieved the pressure for a number of years. It did not heal me, but it allowed me to go on with life. Actually it forced me to confront the world and deal with it.

I washed my face again to erase the signs of tears. It had been a long time since I had opened the door to that particular memory. It had been longer still, since it had opened the floodgates. The worst of it had always been the dying, and I had not touched that memory again after my ordeal with the media until Aicovia had tripped it. It had not been possible to cry while my eyes were adapted to the void and made of a substance as hard as diamond, lubricated by a film of energy. So I suppose it had taken this double blow to bleed my soul. The memory of the pain has always been immediate, but the pain it had caused me *to* remember had lessened. I realized that I could bear it.

As I dressed, I allowed myself to admit that I had spent a lot of my life afraid to look back. There were many chapters of my life that had passed by, pushing me toward this future, and I had never examined them. I had lived in the present and hoped for the future. I had to change that.

As I worked my hair back into it’s braid I remembered that strange comment. *You bear the mark of change.* Aicovia had touched my braid as she said that, and I couldn’t understand what it meant. Dry now, my hair had regained its usual, unusual hue. The precise color of freshly spilled blood, I had inheirited it from my mother, and I had passed it to my first daughter, but I had never seen it anywhere else. Aicovia certainly was not the first to comment on it, but what she had said gave me an alluring hint of insight into her culture. I didn’t have enough to go on yet, since the telepathic nature of the exchange had necessarrily put the remark out of context.

As I slipped a tunic over my uniform, I decided that I could probably provoke her to repeat the words I otherwise had no way to ask her to repeat. I checked in with Morgan and found out where they were and what Aicovia was doing. *Arden,* Morgan’s thoughts laughed, *you’re going to have to see it for yourself. It is simply unbelievable. She’s like child on Christmas morning.* I smiled and turned my attention to my eldest child, Athena.

*Daughter, I hope you are awake. Do me a favor, get clean and dressed and meet me at Aunt Morgan’s quarters, got it?*

*OK, Mom. Dad told me not to bother you for a few days. Is it over now? Can I talk to you again?* Athena wondered. I held my thoughts carefully. Athena was as deeply ingrained in my mind as I had been in my mother’s. The natal bond I’d had with my other children had faded while my first child had become more and more strongly attached to me. Only seven years old, Athena, was latent in every other respect. Her telepathy extended only to me, and I did not want to discourage her from using it. A lot of what she read in my mind she didn’t understand, and I was being forced to learn how to hide my thoughts from her intimate probes. If I blocked her or shielded myself from her, I knew I could damage her budding potential and possibly force her into latency.

*Love, you can always talk to me, you know that,* I assured her, with a mental caress. *Just understand that sometimes I am too busy to talk back when you call.* I told her I had to go, and told her to hurry; I wanted her to meet someone. I tasted a flash of excitement before she turned her attention away. Dressed, myself, I made my way around to Morgan’s compartment, and the temporary residence of our guest while another suite was found to accomodate her. As I entered, I heard bells of laughter echoing around me. I stood in the access area surrounded by the mouths of the sleeping berths. On one side, Morgan and Connor were huddled together looking across the access at Aicovia who was pinned in the grip of the berth’s force nest. Aicovia was bubbling with delight as she spun on the focus.

The nest was a secondary shock buffer. It was mostly free-fall, but the space was shaped to draw the center of mass of a body or object inside the field into the heart of the ovoid chamber. Morgan explained the stranger’s initial reaction, which I was amused to find had not been much different than my own first encounter with the benign field efect. After the initial shock wore off, she had proceeded to have fun. When she finally noticed I was there she sobered up a bit and crawled out of the sleeper.

*“O fe wy’ay. O’qu, aney’iystas’ay." I let that get out. I must apologize,* she said. I smiled and reassured her and told her that I wanted to introduce her to my eldest daughter, if she didn’t mind. *“O wi. Chay’imenha’ay o iyn. Iyan ay?” I allow. I am delighted to accept the offer. Where is she?* she asked.

I peeked through Athena’s mind to check her progress, and answered, “She is on her way. It will be a moment.” Aicovia seemed to accept that. And then she did something that seemed impossible to believe. I almost didn’t notice it. I was turning to ask my husband a question, and caught the reaction of his eyes. He had glanced past me for a second, but as his eyes were returning to mine, they snapped back past me in shock. I turned to see Aicovia with her arm sunk to the shoulder in this little bag, or satchel. I mean *little.* It had to have been no bigger than purse, but her *entire arm* was engulfed! Aicovia pulled her arm out of the bag, and held up the prize she had been digging for, only to meet our stunned expressions.

*“Iya kset? Ajiai chaen’ahvhezha’ay!” What’s wrong? You have all become upset!*

Connor sucked in a breath to gasp, “How did you do that?”

*“Niaizo,”* she said frowning. *I don’t understand.*

Conner got a grip on himself and restated the question, “How did you fit you arm in that small bag?” I gave him a look of warning. He ignored me, and kept his attention focused on Aicovia. There was a hint of fear in his eyes. Fear of implication. A fear I could understand, as the witnessed fact challenged our understanding of the universe.

Aicovia’s response confirmed our suspicion. *“Jyn’ayv. Ayphniah emn’dza jiun’chen ahnga’ay.” I did nothing. The bag creates its own space to accomodate what you put in it,* she explained, thrusting her hand in again up to the elbow. I watched with every sense at my command. I could tell something was happening. I had no idea what exactly, but sensed enough of *something* to know that she was not doing anything to account for the phenominon. I could tell that, where the bag interacted with the matrix of the interface, something incredibly complex was going on.

Like I said before, I do not typically think of psionics as a technology. I realized then, that I was seeing an example of how our potential could be realized. If this was their technology, it might as well be magic as far as of us could hope to understand it. Before any of us could say anything else, a little girl’s voice caught us all off guard.

“That is so cool!” Athena chirped from the open access. Aicovia turned to see where this new voice was coming from, pulling her arm back out. Athena bounced over to me and pressed her entire body against me for a hug. I held her to me, a firm hug back, and studies Aicovia’s face. I could tell that she had not missed the significance of our astonishment any more than I had failed to read meaning in her first reaction to our ship. In the way of precocious children, Athena had broken the air of tension with her innocent chatter. She bounced from me to Connor, regailing us with her current adventure, taking full advantage of the lapse in adult conversation to steal the stage. I took advantage of the cover of her exuberant prattling to send guarded warning to my two friends. *We are dealing with a very sophisticated culture! Make no mistake! No more slips and no more careless questions!*

I received a mental nod f rom each of them, and then I borught my daughter up short. “Athena! Please, girl, we have company. You can tell me all about it later,” I smiled down at her, while smoothing her hair back. Athena’s face lit up as she remembered, and took a second look at Aicovia. Shyly, she took my hand and smiled at the stranger. I laid a hand on Athena’s shoulder and addressed my guest, *“Ayena Naioma Aicovia,* I would like you to meet my daughter, Athena. Athena, this is our new friend. Say hi to *Ayena Naioma Aicovia.”*

“Hi,” she grinned, stepping up and very formally extending her hand in greeting. It struck me that Athena was the first to make that simple gesture towards the emissary.

Aicovia accepted the proferred hand gallantly and beamed down at that tiny person so dear to my heart. Instead of shaking it, Aicovia bowed over the slip of a girl and in warm, formal tones, *“Neh. Ni’oonay, o an’aphi chenmazija’ay, iyoha Ahthina.” Hello. I am honored, eldest daughter, who is called Work of Art.* Aicovia looked up at me, and asked, *“Ahjiyn ano oon’ai ana’ay ji av’clunaph.” Do all your children bear the mark of change?*

“No,” I answered, running my hand over Athena’s hair. “My mother’s hair was this color, and Athena seems to have gotten it from me. No one else I’ve ever known, though. I mean, I’ve never seen blood red hair anywhere else. Have you?” I asked innocently. I really wasn’t interested in her answer, I had fished out a lead to pursue my questions from that initial encounter, and was concentrating on a way to exploit that opening when her answer took me by surprise.

*“Ai, qi. Anai, ylen. Aiv, ae anx’iysta o aluana’ay. Iys aen, arac ae anayxa, ayon’n amahnqa’ay iyav. In’dahi’ahnti avyn’n, ji naga’ay xan caoi jiun iyan.” Oh, yes. Well, in a way. I have seen the pennance of the Phoenix. Her hair was claimed before her execution. It has been in the temple of the dream-gate for over ten thousand years,* she said casually.