Points of Contact - Angel Colony

A product of the Angel Colony revision. A moment of first contact that prompts a recapitulation of a previous first contact.

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What I discovered—or should I say what discovered me?—was impossible to believe at first. I came into that experience about as mentally unprepared for it as I could be.

After ten years spent in wandering exile, I was more than a *little* stir crazy. As one of the exceedingly finite number of human beings who have made the evolutionary adaptation to space, a decade spent inside a ship—with only rare trips out to scout a promising new star system—was *unbearable*. There had been other compensations and I’d indulged in them. But, when we hit the fringes of the Ao System, I could not waste a second getting to an exterior lock, if I wanted to be on point for the advance reconnaissance sweep of the system. The last opportunity like this, I had lost to my best friend Morgan—through being pregnant at the time. If I didn’t want to miss the present opportunity, I had to beat the father of my children out of the lock.

Connor had just stepped into our suite, coming off his watch. He told me that we were about to enter the system, as he headed for his locker to get his coif and helmet. I intercepted him, putting his baby girl in his arms and saying, “Kiss your daughter, and then take her to bed.” He dutifully pressed his lips to Astraea’s smooth brow, and then tried to slip the little girl back into my arms. I ducked past him and was already pulling out my head gear as he started to protest.

“Ace, come on, don’t be difficult. You should not leave with a little girl here to take care of. You’ll be gone for days,” he argued, trying to bar my way to the door.

“Oh, no you don’t,” I warned, settling the coif around my neck, and checking the seal it made against my body-sleeve. Along with the helmet, this outfit constituted an emergency environmental envelope. It was the standard uniform of the astronautical navy and expeditionary forces. I did not need it but it was wise to have some kind of back-up should anything go wrong out in the deep. I turned back to look at father and daughter. “Astraea has been weaned for over a month, and there’s nothing else I can do for her that you aren’t equipped to handle yourself. Behave, Cal, or I will have to spank you!” I added, slapping his arm down as it tried to snake around my waist, “You are not going to cheat me out of another run.”

I squeezed past him, and darted down the corridor. I knew that I had not won yet. He would be racing out to the Children’s Annex, to drop Astraea off, as soon as I was around the corner. At best I had only delayed him a little. Out of seventeen armed colony-explorers, each with a three man asset department, the best any of us could hope for was a shot at one out of fifty-one system runs on rotation. I wanted this one because I was credited with the sighting, and I just knew that this would be “the one”. This system had a life bearing world that I had been able to taste from about a thousand light years away.

There was only one way to win this race—get to the starting line first.

I hit the lock running and secured it behind me. “This is Active Lieutenant Sinclair in forward two lock. Standing by to take point,” I announced as soon as I had entered my access code and received a channel to the bridge. I stood in the airlock savoring the last air I would breathe for anywhere up to the next three days. i knew enough from the plot I had run to guess what trajectory would be used for system insertion. If I pushed myself I could close on the target planet far in advance of the ship—my recon escort. i was tempted. It had been long enough since I had the opportunity to walk planet-side.

The channel I’d patched into to reach bridge had connected with an open mike. I distinctly heard Morgan’s voice say, “And here you were about to ask for a volunteer, Captain.” The Captain responded dryly, “Thank you, Ms. Wildmuir, I can see that it is no longer necessary.” Captain O’Neal then addressed me, “Bridge, Captain speaking. I hear you, Arden. The rest of the task group is already taking up station here on the system fringe. System designation is now Angel. *Gabriel* is going in on system track: Angel Ten, Niner, Seven, Five, and Three. I want you on point over Angel Three in seventy-two hours. Standard drill, ten minutes and then you’re on the prowl.”

“Aye-aye,” I snapped, and then I killed the link.

I attached a pair of short tethers to my helmet, and then slipped my arms through the loops. The helm settled between my shoulderblades. I was stalling as I fidgeted with getting it to rest comfortably. Using psi to manipulate living matter was one of the hardest and most dangerous disciplines to play with. To use it on oneself goes against a natural instinct. Adaptation to space was a tremendous boon, but the process of adapting was agony. *Just think of it as jumping into cold water. One sudden shock, and then it’s over,* a voice within me said.

Once I was calm, I vented my lungs and depressurized the airlock. In about the same space of time it would have taken to hold my breath, my body began to unknit and restructure itself. Ever since the first time, the transformation has been automatic. I’d been about seven and I’d just come into my full power, when I accidentally thrust myself into the void. To survive, my mind was forced to adapt my body to the deadliest environment in the universe. But that is another story, the consequence of which has left me perpetually hyper-aware of my body, and those forces I could control to preserve and adapt it. Meaning that, under normal circumstances, it took an act of will to keep my mind from simply grabbing the requisite atoms and particles, and fabricating what my body needs. If I did not stop myself, I could go for weeks or even months not eating without even realizing it.

The ready light blinked on and I hit the outer door release button. The slightest breeze proceeded me out—the residue of air sucked out in a veil of microscopic frost. i grasped the edges of the interface with my mind, wrinkled its geometry with my will and flew free of the ship’s shadow.

I felt the rain of photons and oriented myself towards the distant sun. A large blue-white star from this distance, but clearly the center of the local gravity well. i drank in raw, full spectrum radiation, unconsciously converting it to a form that would sustain me in this fatal environment.

I composed and broadcast my status report to Morgan, mind to mind. A moment later the confirmation signal tickled my consciousness. As I drifted along my initial vector, I cast a last look over the vast sweeping lines of the vessel that had been both home and prison for more than nine years. From a moderate distance, the ship looked like a cross between a whale and a harpoon. Long, sleek, organic curves flowed from a wedge-like head down a streamlined body. She was pulling ahead of the remains of Task Group Three. I paused a moment to shake my head in wonder. These seventeen ships, carrying eight thousand, eight hundred and fifty-seven crew members, about three thousand children, and seventeen million frozen embryo colonists had been my entire world for more than a third of my life. I saw a legacy of children, born and unborn, who had never and probably would never see Earth. I turned and looked in the direction of Angel Three. What I saw was their new and only home for the future.

Or so I hoped.

Awakened into third order awareness, I could feel the curvature of space around me, and the texture of matter and energy on its slopes. Underlying that I could also feel the interface where mind, space and time unite to create the surface effect we call reality. The beauty of that invisible architecture challenged the majestic glory of the stars. My motion was only momentum at that point, so I turned my will to carving a precise *surf* insertion.

Where real space met the interface there exists a natural wavefront that could impel me along at the speed of light. Actives took to calling it the *surf* almost immediately upon discovering it. *Surfing* was perhaps more risky than the situation called for, but I’d reach my target area in hours instead of days. An attempt to bridge these distances was too energy intensive for my taste, since I’d be mentally exhausted in all but the most propitious circumstances by the effort. Riding the EM wavefront was an opposing risk. The *surf* was a sea of infinite energy I simply channeled myself into. My motion was incidental to my effort, which was to keep my focus clean enough to prevent too much of that energy from flowing into my reserves, where it could possibly over-amp my consciousness, and bootstrap me right out of my mind. Cosmic awareness might as well be oblivion for all the good it would do for my body in the *surf*.

As I reached the point, I took my first bearing on Angel Ten, a dusky world I weighed at a little more than Earth’s mass, with about ninety percent of Earth’s diameter. *Gabriel* would take a host of extensive readings on her pass, following me, but I would make my own analysis on each of the planets my track would hook around. According to tradition, the point man got to name the planets during this first run. For kicks I considered naming them after my kids, Athena, Apollo, Artimis, Nike, Hermes, Aphrodite, and Astraea. But, if I did that it would sort of be like committing myself to having three more babies in order to come up with enough names! Instead, I named them after my first impressions. So, Angel Ten was dubbed Dusk.

Angel Nine was medium gas giant the color of deep blue of Earth’s sky at twilight, appropriately named Twilight. I did not get to pass by Angel Eight during that first loop. I would name that one on the way out to regroup with the ships on station outside the system, along with Angel Six, Four, Two and One. Angel Seven was gas giant, and I was amazed to discover a fast revolving moon within the envelope of its atmosphere. This consort generated the most awesome storm in its wake, so I dubbed that world Typhoon. The system had two asteroid belts. The greater one was no doubt shepherded by Angel Six, which was a super giant world in the process of turning into a star. I detoured from my track to catch a glimpse of this baby star, and dubbed it Furnace. Angel Five was a terrestrial world about one and a half times the diameter of Earth and pretty much twice her mass. The world was entirely covered by water, so I named it Ocean. I had gotten ahead of my ship and was waiting just beyond Ocean, where the lesser belt marked the boundary of the inner system.

I was enjoying the stately dance of asteroids in their peculiar, complex orbits when I realized that I was not alone. After almost three days away from the sensation of anyone’s attention, it struck me like a blow. At first I thought that perhaps Connor or Morgan had come out to check on me, so I approached the watcher boldly. Who ever it was, they were guarding their mind, so I didn’t have a clue who I was about to confront, until I came close enough for my normal senses to form an impression. First I saw a person. Even at range the proportions that say “human” are distinct. But as the details registered, I thought I was losing my mind. Obviously, this was an active, and one of the few that have high enough potential to adapt to raw space. But this was no one I had ever seen before.

That was impossible.

More cautiously I drew closer. Whoever she was—and I was pretty sure that it was a she—she did not withdraw. She simply waited for me until I found I could not bear to get any closer. I was about twenty meters away. I could make out her appearance. Her hair was a chalk blond mane billowing about her like some silken raiment, and her complexion was very fair. Her ice blue eyes regarded me calmly for a minute before she spoke. Her thoughts, projected into my mind, had an odd flavor. I realized that she was thinking in an alien language but as usual, my mind made automatic translation for content and meaning. My mind supplied words, associated from my understanding of her understanding of the words she used.

*Sranger from afar, why have you broken the law and come to this shore?*

My eyes widened. *I am not aware of any law forbidding my presence here. I apologize. Are you here, then, to ask us to leave?* I barely managed to grasp that I was bound by the protocols of first contact, and avoided asking the questions that were at the top of my mind. *Are you real? Are you as human as you appear? How is this possible?* Unfortunately, she picked them out clearly from the chaos of a mind wide open with shock.

*What island are you from that you do not know of human islands in the deep and have not heard of the law binding all of humanity since the war in heaven—and the fall?* Although it barely seems possible, my eyes got even wider. I think the expression on my face could be described as “terror” because suddenly this strange girl looked concerned and reached out. *Are you from a fallow field? Are you from the garden of the serpents? You honestly do not know about these things. How did you ever get past the avatars of the archon in your ignorance?*

*Avatars? Would you call a stranger who destroys an explorer simply for attempting to communicate, an avatar?* I asked desperately as my mind was suddenly thrust back to that perilous first contact that had ended Earth’s isolation and began our desperate rush to colonize the stars. The memory welled up and exploded from my mind to hers, and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

At that time it happened I was still a child. I’d had no idea that I was special. I never realized I existed in a controlled environment. I was trained, like all the other children on the reservation, to develop and master the abilities of my body and mind. I was aware that I had a degree of talent, but of course all of us had our strengths, so I never perceived anything exceptional in what I could do. I learned quickly and applied myself to new challenges with creativity and determination. I could be relied on to take responsibilities seriously. I could go in and help my mother with her work, but I didn’t know that we were working for the government on highly classified research. As far as I was aware, we were all perfectly normal people and so I never had to deal with the fact that I was one of the most dangerous human beings ever born on Earth.

Deep space explorers had been commissioned with FTL drives developed more than thirty years before I was born. It was an established fact to me. I grew up as an unwitting resource the government exploited to make more practical interstellar travel a reality. The Interface Systems Project was dedicated to research into psionic methods of manipulating media in higher dimensions that had led to the development of a point to point translation and interface drive. It was during the final stage of development that I became involved, working on the experimental cores and array elements. The final prototype was installed into the deep space explorer *Adventure.* Something had to serve for a real time communications link. I wonder what the project directors were thinking—were they thinking?—when they exploited the intimate telepathic rapport of a mother and her eleven year old daughter to fill that requirement. My mother knew that she risked death participating in the field trials, but I was allowed to remain ignorant of the danger to my only family.

My innocence came to an end when I was only eleven years old. I had been relaying the status of the drive trials for about a month, as the *Adventure* ran through deeper dives and proportionately greater jumps. In between jumps I would watch the activity aboard the ship through my mother’s eyes. In a lot of ways, Erin and I were two sides of the same coin. Our minds virtually operated as one. So I felt her excitement at the sighting of the strange object that fatal day as if it had been my own.

I—Erin—stood on the deck of the bridge and looked with wonder at the strange object as it approached. I—Arden—grabbed the lieutenant outside of the control center on Earth and told him what Erin was seeing. Lieutenant O’Neal concealed his shock and quickly ushered me in to mission control and walked me straight to the director. Martin Cannon Craig listened to Alan O’Neal’s hasty explanation before turning and grabbing me hard by my arms. He looked me carefully in the eye and commanded, “Let me talk to Erin, quickly.” I turned my—Erin’s—attention back to Earth leaving me—Arden–to watch everything while my attention was split. I answered.

“Craig, you are not going to believe this!” I crowed with excitement. “We’ve been watching it approach for about an hour, but this is the first sign we’ve had that it is more than a celestial object. It turned toward us not two minutes ago and it is getting closer!”

“My god!” Craig uttered with shock. “What do you make of it Erin?”

“I don’t know *what* to make of it. Whatever it is we have only just begun to get visuals of it that show more than a glint of light. Whatever it is it is a luminous body. From about three astronomical units away it has an apparent magnitude of about minus fourteen, about half that of the Sun viewed from Earth. We’ve been reading a fourth magnitude power output from it on the geometric scale. That is just unbelievable! If that’s its drive rating, then this ship could jump accurately between galaxies about as well as *Adventure* could jump from Sol to Alpha Centauri!” I exclaimed.

“Are you positive that there is an intelligence behind that power?” Craig challenged. I—Arden—winced and turned my attention back to my body as he shook me.

“Craig, you are hurting us,” I—Erin—complained before responding, “I don’t know if there is intelligence behind it, but it certainly is aware of us. It was sailing by at a good clip when our first scans hit it. It instantly changed vectors to intercept us. That’s why I think I was reading a drive output, because this object obviously has control of its momentum and inertia if it can maneuver like that. Wait, hold on...” I—Arden—had been monitoring the ship again when I noticed the upset among the crew. I—Erin—picked it up and shifted my attention to see what had changed. The object had closed rapidly to within a thousand kilometers and then stopped dead. “Craig,” I said carefully, “it has stopped. We have been keeping station since our first long range scans. There is no doubt that it is taking a look at us now. I don’t sense any...”

I felt myself shoved back into my body, cut off from all but the faintest echo of Erin. Craig was shaking my arm wanting to know why I had cut off in the middle like that. “Mr. Craig, she pushed me out and blocked her mind. Why would she do that?” I asked puzzled. I reached out and probed against my mother’s mind. I couldn’t imagine any reason why she would cut me off like that. I worried at her shields until they relaxed enough to let me in. As I looked around the bridge, I saw the pallor of the crew’s faces and smelled the scent of fear. I—Erin—spoke tersely to Craig, “Director, the intelligence has just probed us. Whatever it is, it is a high order psionic, and it just peeled our minds like grapes and downed them whole. I... I’m a little shaken. I did my best to block Arden from their perception. Hold on a second while we try to hail them.”

“Wait, Erin!” Craig interrupted, “What do you mean hail them? You don’t have any idea how to communicate with them!”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Director, of course I know how to communicate with them, exactly the same way I am communicating with you. Isn’t that one of the reasons why I am on this mission?” I—Erin—challenged. Erin was preparing to reach out with her mind so she was already tuning me out to protect me. This was Erin’s dream. First contact. I—Erin—almost could not believe my good luck. I—Arden—would not allow myself to be cut out of the excitement, so I—Erin—subdued and disguised my daughter-self. I probed across the surface feeling for the edges of this unseen intelligence. The overwhelming scan I had just endured had given me a trace to find that alien mind. A stranger’s mind is harder to read than a friend’s. The only physical limits on the range of telepathy is familiarity. A mind you know is easy to find across any gap, but a mind you don’t know you have to access through a sensory scan of that mind’s physical expression. That was probably why that mind sweep had been so intense. I faced the same problem, since I had nothing to train my attention on except the locus of that alien object in space.

I reached out across the void and felt my way into the heart of that brilliant vessel. I could have analyzed the structures of the organic creatures inside its shell and built up a picture of the alien, but my attention was focused on finding a higher organ that would give me access to their thoughts. What I touched was vile. That mind tasted of anger and contempt. That was my only warning.

“They’re attacking!” Our voices screamed in unison. On the *Adventure* the crew was riveted in shock at our declaration, while in mission control Martin Craig was swearing. He tried to act immediately, issuing orders that the crew of the *Adventure* was not prepared to execute.

“Erin! Dive! Dive! Get out of there!” He shouted at me—Arden. I was already acting. I—Erin—extended my power to its greatest magnitude and gripped my ship and crew mates in a psychokinetic field. The barrage was violent and sudden. It was hopeless. The raw power at the alien’s disposal was an order of magnitude greater than mine. Double a thousand times over what I could manage. I—Arden—extended all the power I could spare to my mother-self. If there had been time, the ship could have made a crash translation. In the interface the *Adventure* could easily lose herself. I—Erin—held out for an eternal seven minutes, as the forces generated from the aliens threatened to crush my mind. I cringed as the strain began to burn out synapses in my—Erin’s—mind. I felt myself being torn out of my flesh. I felt the agony of my body burning away in layers as my resistance was overpowered. For a moment I held myself in a final embrace and then I felt the searing orgasm of death as everything that was me—my mother—was annihilated in the flesh. I felt her—my?—last thoughts shifting up into the interface and tried to hold myself together. I had been one mind existing in two bodies when I—my mother—died. After the shock wore off I realized I still had an anchor back to reality. A bridge across which I could retreat and survive. As I opened my eyes I faced the most difficult question in my—Erin’s? Arden’s?—life: Who am I? In my mind I am my own daughter. In my memory I am my own mother.

A mother and a daughter died that day, and what I am now was born from the ashes. That moment was just one tiny part of the human cost of earth’s first encounter with an alien intelligence.

*Yes, that was an avatar. Poor child.* She murmured among my dislocated thoughts. It startled me from my reverie. I regained awareness of myself to discover my body curled into a fetal knot and cradled in her arms. In exposing myself, I had retreated back into the pain and loss and shame that had driven me into a catatonic withdrawal twenty-six years ago. I felt a new shame at the betrayal of my body and mind in what I knew to be the most dangerous of situations.

As I struggled to collect my wits, I cursed myself for my stupidity. Historically there is nothing as dangerous to a civilization than encountering another civilization. The whole purpose of my reconnaissance of the system was to determine if there was any native culture or civilization where we needed to go. I was supposed to spot it far enough in advance to give warning to the rest of the task group. I not only stumbled into a premature contact, but I had failed to give any warning and then all but went into shock as the situation awakened memories of that tragic first contact disaster.

Disasterous.

I can’t explain it. My reaction to the appearance of this alien who was so disturbingly human—or worse, a human so inexplicably alien—had taken me completely off guard. I have no excuse. I should have been prepared. Maybe I could never have guessed what I would find here, but I should have expected to find something. One of the things all assets are trained in is the first contact scenario. Of all the people in the task group we were best suited for the unguessable challenge of initiating a dialogue with an unknown species. I, more than anyone, should have been conscious of the possibility of this confrontation, in light of what happened to my mother.

If I had thought about it, I might have had some warning as much as a week before reaching this point of no return. There are a vast number of tests that we had conducted prior to entering each system designed to detect signs indicating the presence of a technologically oriented intelligence before we committed ourselves to surveying it. There was a fair to even chance that any world that would suit our needs might have evolved some form of sentient life. I had come in on my watch each day, as we sat out in the fringe of stellar and inter-stellar space, to go over those scans. Like the rest of us, it didn’t even occur to me to devise some kind of test for the most advanced technology we were aware of. I know my excuse. As a psionic, I do not tend to think of psionics as a technology. On the other hand, I knew better than most how intimately psionics figured into the creation of Earth’s highest technologies. Applied physics is not a pre-requisite to applied psionics.

I should have thought of it, especially as my body adapted to face my exposure to hard vacuum, as I prepared for my EVA. I could have realized in time that technology is not necessarily a prerequisite to space capability. Nor should it have been necessary for the development of civilization. I had been lulled into error by the readings that indicated an absence of technology. The evolution of the mind which technology had stunted on Earth could have promoted another culture to advance far earlier than we did on Earth.

A deadly blind spot. My mother had been more alert and had *died.*

I carefully disengaged from the comforting embrace as it truly came home to me how very much I ought to be afraid of this compassionate stranger. The situation was both ridiculous and fraught with danger. I composed myself, and addressed myself carefully to the alien. *I beg your pardon. I was not prepared for this. I have made a fool of myself.* I apologized, feeling a keen professional embarrassment. *I am not alone. I have a duty to report this encounter to my superior officer—and what occurred. I am Lieutenant Arden Eve Sinclair, Second Asset Officer of the Colony-Explorer Gabriel. I am authorized to speak as the representative of my people to your world. We are strangers, and we are lost and far from our home. If we have transgressed upon you or your people I must know, so that I may convey all serious matters to the individuals responsible for our actions.*

She reached out a hand and traced her fingers down the side of my face. *Do not be ashamed of your pain. I understand the injury you have suffered—better it seems than you do yourself. Indeed you* are *a from an untouched world. It is no wonder that you were unable to understand your punishment or your crime.* She smiled and grabbed my hands in hers. *We were told of your coming and I have come to meet you here to ask your intentions. I, too, speak for my people. We did not know that you were kin, and it is amazing that you have risen so far from the wild. You have no need to apologize for what you are.* I didn’t have the feeling that she was referring to me, in particular, but speaking to me as a representative of my kind. Her formal request, asked next, seemed to support that impression. *I ask to go with you to see for myself the authority of which you speak. I must do this before you can be allowed to approach the sphere of living things.* She answered.

I squeezed her fingers lightly and nodded. *I understand. I will take you to my ship and we will then go out to meet the others. Among them Admiral Niven. He speaks for us all–and will be shocked, no doubt,* I smiled, *but he will be delighted to learn of you and your people. In our memory, you are the first being, not of our own world, our kind have ever seen,* I squeezed her hands again as I added, *or touched.*