Shippping Out - Angel Colony

Includes material from a previous project, expanded and adapted to Angel Colony.

pages ∙ words

I opened my eyes. Faint light traced the narrow confines of the sleeper-cell with each rhythmic pulse of the message light. Unlike the nerve twisting snarl of the impending alarm, which I had grown to despise over the past few weeks, it aroused me to instant alertness. There were only two calls that would have found me here, and neither was to be ignored. Wrapping the sheet around my torso, I reached up for the flashing key on the touchpad. A glance at the chronometer reminded me to cancel the alarm before accepting the transmission. It would not do to have that electric monster start screaming in the middle of the call. Three staccato taps later, I lay back under the glow of the monitor as the circuit was patched in. I had a moment to wonder who I was going to have to speak to in this ridiculous position before the image resolved itself into the face of a young man—station liaison officer to project staff and sundry.

“did I call at a bad time?” He asked.

“no sir, not at all,” I smiled politely, folded my hands over my midriff, and pretended that there was nothing unusual about carrying on a conversation flat on my back, stark naked save for a distressingly thin sheet and with my hair in a snarl where it had escaped from its braid. “it’s just about time to crawl out of this crypt anyway.”

he chuckled; he was no doubt familiar with the joys of having “all the comforts of home” stuffed into a measly two cubic meters.

“well then, you will no doubt be happy to hear that as of this morning your request has been approved. Your posting has been revised. You can report to the deck officer at your earliest convenience today,” he smiled at my look of relief.

it had been a gamble, but it had paid off.

in spite of the fact that I had returned amicably to the project, they had been surprised by my compliance and suspicious of my avowed interest. O’Neal was right. I had made more than a few enemies in the project. O’Neal was also right when he said they needed me. I suspect that they would have rather forced me, leashed me with a neural lock and sleepers, and sent me on to their military overlords properly tamed and broken. Lacking that option, the best they could do was throw annoying delays into my path. Recommending military academy training appropriate to my assignment’s equivalent rank—of course the military was predisposed toward that one—and psi aptitude testing and re-training, because I had been away from the project for about a decade. I had spent my initial months avoiding these hurdles, placing my bets on the orientation tour O’Neal had scheduled for the actives assigned to him. Reasonable objections grew gradually smaller, but barring me from the field trials of the colony-explorer prototype on the grounds of past trauma was the final straw.

I had contacted O’Neal and informed him. He had returned to the belt where he provided input for the construction of the prototype seed ship barely a month after our conversation in the woods. After I explained the way my project supervisors were trying to block my transfer to space, he countered by issuing verbal orders to report to him at Arcology iv. *Just show up. It would be better arguing with them after the fact,* he had said. Just show up. Break out of the reservation, book interplanetary passage to a corporate-military belt station and *pray* I don’t get arrested—that’s what he was really saying. Still, I had made it this far. It was up to him to clean up the mess when it was over.

“I have to say, it was not easy to get you cleared onto the ship,” the lieutenant had continued. “as per your request we did get confirmation from captain O’Neal, but there were problems confirming your activation and assignment with your project supervisors.” I did not cringe. I knew that they would attempt to contact Craig or Malthus in Oregon, to assure themselves that I was here with the project’s blessings. On the naval side of the operation, I was the captain’s responsibility, and could take direct orders from him. At home, however, by stalling my fitness evaluations, the project was clouding the issue of whether those orders applied to me in particular. I could just as soon have received a call from my supervisors recalling me home. “however,” he added, “in light of the expense involved in requiring you to wait, on the chance of negative confirmation coming through channels—whether you remained here or returned home—your assignment was approved on a probationary basis. Systems experts and advisors from earth will be arriving this morning via solar authority in-system cutter. According to the manifest, there is a project director aboard. He will be notified of your status upon arrival at the station. If there any questions, he will have the authority to resolve them at that time. I’m sorry it took until the last minute, but you got your slot. Congratulations,” he beamed.

“thank you lieutenant Mitchell,” I smiled. Over the last few days I had been growing more and more worried that the gamble would not pay off. It had taken almost all of the credit I could scrape together to just to get passage to Arcology iv station; what little survived that two month journey had barely been enough to pay rent on the sleeper and file my request for operational status adjustment. That is, I had to grease the wheels of military bureaucracy to get looped in the proper hole, while Mitchell tried to think up a way to get me on that ship. Fortunately, the transient accommodations included a meal once a day, otherwise I would have starved by now.

“no problem, ms. Sinclair. You already have the packet captain O’Neal forwarded to you for this mission. That will tell you where to go to get checked in and what the orientation schedule will be,” I nodded, noting the wandering of his eyes. Lieutenant Mitchell cleared his throat and went on, “you have a busy week ahead of you. When you get yourself settled in please call my office and see if you can get an appointment to see me before Monday. If we don’t get together by then, you’re going to be on your own to figure things out for a few weeks.” His expression became mock serious as he added, “I promise you, that won’t be fun.”

I raised an eyebrow. I didn’t have to read him mind to know that he was hoping for a reward for his special efforts on my behalf. But how should I read the subtext? *Pay soon. I’ll arrange cover for our activity. Don’t put me off, or squeeze out of it, or I’ll make you regret it. I promise you, that won’t be fun.* I suppose he could be half joking, but he was definitely serious. I ran my hand over the sheet, and smiled, “I suspect I’ll be busy from the time I report aboard to the time we undock. I can’t guarantee anything but if I can find time, and I find that I need your advice, I’ll drop by in person to schedule an appointment.”

subtext: *don’t be pushy. I’ll think about it, but I want to meet you in person before I meet you anywhere in private.* He nodded and smiled a half smile, “I understand. I hope to hear from you then.”

I signed off, and sighed deeply as the interior illumination dropped to phosphor afterglow. So far so good. For a while it had looked as if my hopes were in vain. Of course, until I checked in, there was still a chance that the other call would catch up with me.

that thought was sufficient motivation to brave the chill of the corridor. I released the catch and slithered out through the access at the foot of my compartment. The hexagonal arrangement of the cells was predictably disturbing, but familiar to anyone who had worked in the space program. As was the necessity of having to dress and undress out in the corridor. I slipped into a kimono, provided by the station to transients who would otherwise end up stalking naked between sleepers and the facilities at all hours of the day and night. After checking the lock, I turned from the access and followed the corridor to the locker room. My path led me out of the dark confines of the sleeper block out onto an upper level balcony of the terraced atrium that was the real attraction of this station.

I stopped to soak in the view, combing out my braid with my fingers as I leaned over the railing to peer into the artificial chasm. Even this early, swarms of bodies were negotiating the layers and tunnels of this man made hive. After scanning the familiar features of fountains, waterfalls, gardens, arbors, and sculptures, I turned away from the railing and continued. As always, there were a handful of tourists who stared at me as I negotiated the lightly crowded corridors. To say that I am easy to recognize, is perhaps an understatement. By way of my mother and my alleged father, I am one quarter Japanese, a quarter Irish and half Scots. Somehow my genes had combined to produce hair the precise color of freshly spilled blood. That memorable, distinctive feature had been boldly advertised in the media. On average it took only a puzzled moment for people to place where they had seen it before.

as time had passed, recognition had gotten slower. I could now walk through a crowd or a public place without being accosted. I could actually linger in a place for a while before someone would approach with their questions and comments. It was not fame. It was more like the way people stare at animals in a zoo. Except people don't ask the animals in the zoo to show them how you do it, whatever “it” they’ve gotten lodged in their minds. As if I were some strange creature from another planet. These people burned my ancestors at the stake. I never let that fact slip my mind, no matter how sane and open minded they seemed.

anonymity is the most valuable possession an active psi has.

my wandering course brought me back through the sleeper-blocks to the locker room. I found my locker and slipped out of the kimono, hanging it inside. I stopped by the service window and picked up a towel as I entered the showers. One of the blessings of field technology was artificial gravity, achieved by four dimensional geometrical architecture. A static field that so far proved to permanently mold the shape of space. It had been astonishing to discover that relationship between forces and four-dimensional geometry, but man had exploited it lavishly in the construction of ships and stations where one could take an honest to god shower, among other benefits. It also spared spacers from the distortion of reflexes and instincts caused by angular momentum in the earlier stations, which had to rely on centripetal force to adhere things to the deck.

if only they had provided the transient accommodations with baths! Still, I entered a stream of steaming water and luxuriated in the heat. I was not alone. There were other men and women tending to the proper care and maintenance of their bodies. No one even turned their head at my arrival. Heinlein had been on the mark in his estimations of space culture. Skin was a practical form of dress in a controlled environment where survival depended on one’s ability to skinny into a pressure suit at the drop of a hat. Clothes had evolved for the environment which were barely more than a second skin, or otherwise could be removed and disposed of in less time than it took to blurt out one’s favorite expletive. Sexual predators which might have exploited the vulnerability of naked women and children did not survive long.

at first it is not obvious, but I discovered that while there were indeed some people who moved about totally naked—indecently exposed and thus vulnerable to the eye—one mostly saw people who went about nude. Dressed in an unselfconscious attitude. I initially found it as natural as breathing to be at ease in the unadorned flesh. Perversely, I gradually became more conscious of my body than I had been since puberty. I found myself on the edge of arousal and sensually aware of my environment at this liberation from inhibitions I had not been aware I possessed. I did not feel outwardly vulnerable, but there was an inward vulnerability, a desire to touch and be touched. In spite of myself I broadcast an aura of sexuality about on par with a woman dressed to kill. Socially dressed, but certainly not modest.

worst—or perhaps *best*—of all, however this shift in my self awareness had come about, my aroused state stayed with me even when I was clothed. What had happened to me? Simply, I had suddenly, for the first time in my life, really perceived myself as a sexual being and this shift in perspective had altered every nuance and gesture of body. In passing this is not the most important thing that ever happened to me, but as a psi I realized that suddenly falling in love with my body might one day save my sanity. It is a pity that I did not have the luxury to explore this new facet of my being in any depth until much later. Until the fascination wore off, I would stop at times and look at myself—not narcissistically, but with wonder at the complexity and elegance of a machine that beggars the aspirations of art.

I shook myself out of my reverie and went to my locker. I pulled out and squirmed into my uniform. If I were spending another day of waiting I would have pulled out the body sleeve, but instead it was the full body sheathe. These two items of clothes constituted my permanent wardrobe. Both were the product of one of the research projects. Nanotechnology had been quickly achieved with the influence of psionics; manipulating matter is one of the four cornerstones of psi ability, and for some of us as easy to accomplish as breathing. These garments, lightweight, elastic, and virtually indestructible, had been constructed on a molecular level, and were in fact extremely sophisticated machines in their own right.

given the potential of nanotechnology, it was feasible to design an emergency environmental suit capable of sustaining a body in hard vacuum, tough enough to resist micro-meteorite impacts in open space, and economical enough to be worn constantly without detriment to the skin. It is responsive and elastic, to provide total freedom of movement, and a full contact pressure of ten to fifteen pounds per square inch in a vacuum. A carbon based filament structure laced the fabric in a dense weave of staged, interlocking and overlapping spheres that absorbs high level kinetic energy, transmitting it over the total facing area of the body within; and which makes it exceptionally resistant to cutting or tearing. An active matrix absorbed raw chemical elements from the waste products of the body, catalytically breaking them down into neutral substances, purified water and oxygen, and materials to repair and maintain itself. It was so close to living that some people were superstitious about wearing them. Hardly surprising that it could literally be a second skin, an artificial organ specialized to complement the chemistry of the far more fragile organ within it, accommodating it at a molecular level.

of course while covering everything but the face—from the tips of my fingers and toes, to the top of my throat—when molded to a body’s contour it *hides* nothing what-so-ever. A fact not designed to comfort self-conscious males *or* females. It is a true body glove, a single piece of material with only one opening, not counting the neck. One slips in through the back, legs first taking care to properly manage the suit’s two necessary invasions of the body. Once secure about the waist, one then slowly and gently threads in one’s arms, then head. As one’s head emerges properly through the neck, the seam is drawn tightly closed across the tops of one’s shoulder blades. The material seals to itself like glue-—some kind of electrostatic attraction—and getting out of it again can be athletically challenging. A coif and helmet complete the sealed environment of the suit.

my body sleeve is made from the same material. While being useless for exposure to a vacuum, it had the distinct advantages of being durable, self cleaning, and immune to bullets and knives. I am not too proud to have my life saved by my underwear.

there is a snug jacket worn over the sheathe, made of a light material, that I threw on to complete the uniform. Dressed, I transferred the rest of my belongings into a duffel bag. I put my hair in a braid before quitting the locker room. Keeping my hair was a risk. Getting it, and my head into a helmet and properly sealed in a hurry would be difficult, I knew. Still I didn’t have the heart to cut it, and I knew there were other men and women who felt the same way. The system tolerated that weakness, and no one would shed a tear for a fool who died for the sake of their hair. Of course, I’m not to proud to have my life saved by a hair cut either, but the way I looked at it, I didn’t need scissors to cut it if I had to, so why not keep it until there was no choice?

I reached the docks in good time, and picked up my revised orders from the deck officer. I noted the berth, boarding time and my posting. Foul words followed. The cutter had docked while I was in the shower. The liaison officer had contacted the director as promised, and it had turned out to be Craig. He had not challenged the probationary assignment, and he had not blessed the assignment either. He had simply announced that he was acting as my chaperone and requested that my revised orders reflect my subordinate status.

in spite of the urge to burn the papers, I tucked my orders into my pocket.

seeing the time I had to wait, I made my way up to the observation deck and watched for the arrival of the seed ship prototype, *Gabriel.* She was stripped down to the vital systems. No armaments or armor, no crew or cargo accommodations beyond the needs of bridge and engineering. A skeleton ship with a skeleton crew. If she passed muster she would go on to earth for outfitting. As she was, she looked like a sleek and hungry predator, the way her ribs were showing. After a bit I realized that I had lost track of the time. Reluctantly, I stepped back a pace. The waiting had come down to minutes. There was still some distance to cover on my part before it could be over. i reflexively tugged on the tapered waist of my duty jacket, hoping my appearance was in order. i stepped over to retrieve my duffel, checked my inside pocket to be sure my orders were still there, and headed down to the boarding gate.

there were already half a dozen boarders waiting in the receiving area off to the side of the sealed access when I arrived. One of them looked up as I dumped my bag on the pile the others had made. It was martin Craig. As the man who had headed the interface drive project, he was the senior observer from the project for the engineering trials. Craig and his staff were here to rate the new design before advising on further construction. As part of the team which had developed the interface drive, I was on the list of qualified advisors, but my project superiors had not been willing to support me in that capacity. As O’Neal had said, my experience with the systems was of little or no interest to the powers that be—civilian or military. I had pointed out that as an active my experience was based on direct perception of the forces the drive manipulated, and advised him to take my assessments seriously. O’Neal, of course, was tied to the project also, which explained why he was picked for this command. Unlike my captain, Craig had done just about everything in his power to prevent my being here this morning. “Sinclair,” he greeted me with a nod, “nice of you to join us.” Between us, it was a slap. i turned and stared at him incredulously for a moment before shaking my head and walking away.

“what?” He called after me.

I almost turned back to explain, when my stomach decided to remind me of its existence. *Should’ve taken care of that,* I thought. i glanced up at the docking display to get an idea how long I had to kill before the ship access was secure for boarding. Time enough, I guessed. i crossed the reception area and headed across the bare deck plate toward a vending machine. i ordered a breakfast roll and flask of hot tea. My stomach had not settled enough to eat yet, but the reality was sinking in and I didn’t want to faint when I reported in to the captain. i stood and surveyed the activity on the docks while my thoughts ran off in other directions.

in typical military fashion, the order of the day seemed to be hurry up and wait. i wandered astray a bit and perched on a railing while I chewed my way through breakfast. The food seemed to help. i hadn’t been aware how tense I was until it started to ease off. Boarding nerves. Naturally, just as I was finally relaxed, I looked up at the docking display to discover that the status lights had somehow skipped to green across the board. i stuffed the end of the roll in my mouth and hopped to my feet. Thankfully, I didn’t choke on the last of my tea while running back to the group—which had grown to a full dozen in my absence.

I silently cursed myself as the seals popped and the gate split open. There wasn’t enough time to fall in. Sure enough, bodies began pouring out of the gangway as I tried to close the distance. i lost a precious few seconds disposing of my trash at the waste receptacle on the edge of the boarding area. i felt eyes on me as I slipped into formation and came to attention. Some of the bodies came past in front of me to collect our duffels off the pile and began to carry them aboard. One remained, and I had little doubt who that would have to be. The one who had held a fixed stare on me since I had dashed pell-mell across the dock. She did not say anything, though, just turned and paced down the line behind us.

“good morning gentlemen. This is a shakedown mission and hopefully it will be short and sweet. You are all skilled technicians and brilliant scientists, but I must point out to you that this is a military operation.” She came around the end of the line and paced in front of us, “I am your XO, commander angelica Lynn Thompson. For the next few weeks I will be the right hand of god as far as you are concerned. Some of you,” and at this, she looked directly at me, “have already picked up some ship experience before arriving here at Arcology iv. i’m sorry to say you’ve still got a lot to learn in a short space of time.” she stopped in front of the line and paused, “if you’ve all got your papers, you know who you need to report to. Your section leaders have already been informed of your assignments. As soon as they have released you to general access, you should report to the quartermaster for your bunking arrangements. If you have or develop any preferences for bunkmates you can apply at any time for reaccommodation.”

as the group pulled out their orders, Thompson smiled wryly and added, “this is a prototype construction, so I regret to say that she’s a little short on amenities. I assure you that if she works the way she is supposed to, the ships following her design will be an order of magnitude more comfortable. For now, however, we will make do.” One by one, she took each person’s papers and checked them. Everything was in order, so she wrapped it up. “very good, gentlemen. I have, of course, already reviewed your jackets, and I just want to say I have every confidence in your abilities. Some of you should expect to be summoned to the captain’s mess this evening at which time you will meet the captain. Carry on.

“Sinclair,” she added, holding out an arm to block my way, “you’re with me.” Craig and a few others looked back at this and then discreetly followed the rest up the gangway. i raised an eyebrow when we were alone on the dock. Thompson smiled and pointed out, “you’ve got orders to report to the captain. Don’t want you getting lost on the way.” The papers in my hand, which we both had seen, had placed me in Craig’s party under his discretion. The XO was reminding me that I had come on the personal order of the captain.

I was starting to feel like a bone with two dogs.

“thanks,” I said wryly, following her up through the ship’s access. At the top of the gangway, I turned to the chief petty officer, “active Sinclair, Arden eve, reporting. permission to come aboard?”

the CPO glanced at me, opening his mouth to respond, and froze. He scanned down my body and then back to my face. After a quick glance at Thompson, he reclaimed his voice. “permission granted.” His eyes snapped back to Thompson, “this some kind of joke, XO?”

“mind your manners Mr. Grant,” she countered taking my arm guiding me past. Aside, she murmured, “ms. Sinclair, please disregard that remark.” She pushed me into the cross corridor ahead of her and turned a sharp eye on grant. i stood there in confusion. Grant was looking between the us with much the same expression. Thompson waved me on with, “go on, I’ll catch up with you at the lift.” i hesitated for a second, not sure what was going on. Turning on my heel, I headed alone down the corridor. It was not as if I could get lost. i had memorized the layout of the ship before departing from the project, and the reservation.

I heard the XO talking quietly to grant behind me as I moved further away. i made a note to look up CPO grant later and find out what that had been about. It was possible that it was the usual annoyance, but it seemed almost as if he had been looking at a ghost. He had gone pale and gotten flustered; a very personal sort of reaction. i was engaged in thought, not really looking where I was going when I bumped into a man at the next corner.

he caught me, absorbing the impact; I ended up held in a loose embrace. His hands rested familiarly on my hips; his eyes locked warmly on my own. “sorry, red. Wasn’t watching where I was going,” he said innocently. Before I could say a word, he had disengaged and was off around the corner.

I turned, completely off balance, to look after him but he had vanished. i shook my head, vaguely alarmed. The man had hands that knew just where to go to disarm me, and I didn’t have a clue who he was. i tried to shrug it off and continued on.

Angelica Thompson caught up with me and delivered me to the captain. O’Neal invited me to take a chair and asked Thompson to collect the other members of my group so he could make the introductions. I made myself comfortable, enjoying the view out his stateroom window. It is one of those things about the space age, one only rarely gets to see space. While we waited he asked me to share the details of my trip. He was amused by my simple and direct solution to the problems of getting off the reservation, and acquiring transportation as far as low earth orbit. I found a nice remote corner of the reservation and I flew, under my own power, up to the Luna v transfer station. He listened to the measures I had to take in order to adapt to make this little trek, and I confessed that I would never have thought to try it if it had not been for the fact that my mother had once gone to the moon and back the same way on a bet. Of course for a trained active class three psi, it is no more dangerous than hiking through a desert.

O’Neal shook his head, saying wryly, “and I wonder what it is about actives that scares the generals and politicians.” We had had many conversations about the antipathy of politicians toward actives, but this was the first time I had heard him add in the military.

“so, now the military is having doubts, eh?” I asked.

“well, no. But not for lack of paranoid pressure from the civilian establishment,” he answered. “your name came up again. Some of your friends in Oregon have assembled a profile on you trying to build a case for their belief that you are a reactor pile a few rods short of critical mass. There was some noise about having you ejected from the operational side of exodus. Of course there are objections to allowing any of the selected actives to remain of the program,” he complained. “naturally, these objections are overruled, but some of the allegations they are making do worry some of the brass higher up.”

“you mean the allegations that, without some form of neural leash or synaptic lock to prevent us from ‘exercising our abilities with authority’, the authority of captain is dangerously undermined?” I corrected, scowling. “whoever thought up these ‘mind-control’ fantasies obviously had no psi capability what-so-ever.”

he leaned back and crossed his arms. “and, naturally, having no capability, they are not particularly inclined to take your, or any other telepath’s word for it that psychic domination is impractical to the point of ridiculousness.”

I sighed softly and gazed out into the depths beyond the portal. He watched me as I combed my fingers over my hair, tucking loose wisps behind my ear. “there are easier ways to make people do what you want,” I murmured, “and most of them don’t call for exposing the deepest and most intimate precincts of your soul.” I felt his eyes studying me as I reflected on the hard lessons I had learned as a child, before my abilities had been harnessed by discipline. “the problem with these people,” I went on, pushing those thoughts aside, “is they have no real concept of intimacy. Sure, I could take everyone over, and if I were real clever about it, I could seize control of the ship, but not without letting every person on the ship know things about me I wouldn’t tell my own mother. It’s just...” I didn’t have words to describe it. Even as close as my mother and I were, there were things we could hide from each other, but to control another’s mind you had to trap them in the depths of your self. Deeper than the most sexual intimacy. I had tried it once. It was, “...unbelievably indecent!” I finally gasped.

“as I said,” he began, cutting off that line of thought. “the objections were overruled. They just don’t stand up to scrutiny.” He shrugged and smiled, “the matter against you, however, did end up going before the board for review. It is bad enough that they are being so open about trying to get you under their control, but if they succeed, they will have a precedent to drag all of you into their scheme. They are attacking the qualifications of all the actives recruited for exodus by these allegations that, in spite of your superior reputation and a record of unquestionable conduct, your capabilities as a full spectrum psionic make you a certifiable threat to the safety and welfare of your ship and her complement.”

“so what was the board’s response?” I asked while he laughed softly at the expression on my face. He took a deep breath to calm himself and ran his hands through his hair. When he started chuckling again, I snarled, “well? What did they say?”

I didn’t get an answer, as Thompson had shown up with the two other class three actives of my group.