

The Disappearance of the AJN Lion

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About this story

This is a short story about what happened to the AJN Lion. You may have noticed in the AJN ships section that the ship "disappeared under mysterious circumstances". This is its story. The AJN Lion was no longer a military ship – it had been permanently loaned to the Alliance Science Council as a research vessel. The story is told in the first person by one of the crewmembers.

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Suggestions about this or other stories from alioth.net are welcome.

[0] This may be wishful thinking on my part

The Disappearance of the AJN Lion

Editor's Note: Commander Zack Wilson gives his first person account. Assigned to command one of the Imperial Explorers attached to the AJN Lion, he witnessed the whole startling event first-hand.

I remember this event clearly – how could you forget the disappearance of a half million tonne vessel with 1,000 people on board? It was April 3276, and something very strange had been discovered in the vicinity of Liazeda in sector –12,3. The Alliance was really getting into the swing of scientific investigation, especially with respect to finding non-human sentient lifeforms. To this end, two of the Navy's battlecruisers were converted into deep-space exploration vessels. The first one to have the complete conversion was the AJN Excelsior. The Lion was ready only a few months afterwards, and this was to be her maiden voyage as an exploration vessel. She was despatched to Liazeda after a L/MF radio emission was discovered some 600 AU from the star. A science station had been established on Peterson's Legacy a few weeks earlier to prepare for our arrival, and had been gathering data on what was now known as the LRA (Liazeda Radio Anomaly). A strong signal was being received on a frequency of 206 kHz, with digital data encoded on the carrier. Accompanied with this data which we had not yet figured out how to decipher, was the gravitational pull of some fairly massive object. The gravitational field measured approximately 0.1 G's, but we couldn't see what was creating it, other than it was co-located with the transmission. It certainly wasn't a planet that was already out there – the gravitational field and radio signal had appeared suddenly and simultaneously.

The Lion had its hyperdrive targeted as close as we could get it to the LRA to cut down transit time. Carried on the Lion was not only some 820 researchers, research assistants and other personnel directly related to investigating virtually every aspect possible of this object, but a support crew of 195 who ran the ship. The Lion was to stay as long as necessary – this could be up to two years. I was fully prepared to be in for the long haul. My job was as commander of one of the two Explorer class vessels that tagged along for the ride on the special docking mounts that had been fitted to the Lion. We were to deploy a vast package of instrumentation in orbit around the object.

The Lion arrived about 12 AU from the object. There was really nothing that I had to do operationally whilst travelling from this point to the LRA. However, stellar science is my personal passion and I had work to do on my doctorate thesis on the accurate prediction of solar flares. Despite a thousand years of careful research, solar flares still caught deep space explorers by surprise, and I was trying to add my pieces to the puzzle. I had enormous amounts of data I had collected to analyse, and it would easily take up all the free time I had. There was no way I would get bored on this trip.

Time passed quickly. A day or so before we arrived at our target, I stepped into the small messroom for the last time for some dinner. Space on the Lion was cramped, and the interior was very utilitarian. Cables ran openly over the exposed structure of the ship in every room. The messroom was no different. The largest room on the ship, it measured approximately 25 meters long and 10 meters wide, and was painted a shade of green that even ocean going battleships of the 21st century had been painted. Naval traditions died hard. However, it felt like home to me – it's where we gathered socially over a meal and a beer. I grabbed something to eat from the cafeteria and a glass of beer. They served real food – instead of synthesising the food like normal deep space cruisers do, due to the length of our mission, the Alliance Scientific Foundation kept us well. We had a top rated chef with an experienced team who cooked food as good as in the most expensive restaurants on Argent's Claim in Alioth. There were big supplies of Riedquatian beer too. They certainly knew how to keep morale up. I saw Mike Hill, a member of my Explorer crew just settling at a table across the hall, so I thought I'd join him. By the time I got there, he was contentedly flipping through Random Intergalactic Gossip and contentedly chewing on a Doner Kebab. I put my tray down opposite and sat down.

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"Hi Zack, you look a bit tired," said Mike.

"Yeah, I've been burning the midnight oil on my thesis. Found some interesting data from those instruments I deployed around Liabefa."

"That figures."

"Anything going on in the world of RIG?" I asked. RIG usually had some scandal about the rich and famous. I didn't really have time for it, but it was popular amongst many of the crew.

"Oh, Hengist Duval lost another bodyguard on a hunting trip."

"Another one? It's a wonder they still come and work for him!"

"I dunno. S.L.A.M reckons these accidents aren't all what they seem, the latest 'bodyguard' was not exactly on friendly terms with the Emperor"

I shook my head. I was kind of glad I wasn't unfortunate enough to be stuck with someone like Duval. I had to admit that despite the fact I never had any money and lived on one of the poorest systems in the Alliance when I was not out exploring, I was happy and had a good job. Once I had my Ph.D I could probably get a better-paid job – although I enjoyed working as a deep-space captain on an Imperial Explorer-class craft, it didn't pay very well. I munched on some delicious chicken tikka, and washed it down with some of Reidquatan Anchor Ale. Suddenly, Mike put down his copy of RIG and looked at me seriously. He looked around furtively and drew closer to me.

"There's something bothering me about this mission," he said unexpectedly.

"Go on..."

He looked a bit uncomfortable, and shifted in his seat.

"Well, I know this sounds silly to you, knowing how you're into stellar science and all that...but...I don't know what's bothering me. It just doesn't feel right." His voice trailed off.

I don't know what it was, but I felt a little uncomfortable at that moment. Mike had been in space for almost as long as I had – I'd been flying to various weird and wonderful systems for about ten years now. Mike had been on my crew for three years as my first officer, and I'd never known him to be anything other than rather exuberant and self-confident. Now he looked like a mouse being hunted by an eagle. The hubbub of conversation in the mess hall seemed unnaturally loud. I had learned not to discount the human intuition. Even I once had a moment where something in my gut told me all was not well – a day later, I had a partial drive failure and ended up shipwrecked on the planet (fortunately a life supporting planet) I was trying to survey. I had heard of other spacefarers who got that nagging feeling in their gut. They soon learned not to ignore it.

The silence was broken as Ann-Marie Watkins clattered on in. She was the commander of the other Explorer that the Lion was carrying. In her mid-thirties and devastatingly attractive, she was always very bright and cheery. Today was no exception. Armed with a lamb vindaloo and a bottle of beer she arrived at the table and sat down next to me.

"Hiya lads, hows it going? Looking a bit sombre there – is your favorite supermodel not in RIG this month or something, eh?" she questioned cheerfully.

Neither of us could muster up and say anything. I still felt a ghostly chill in my body. It was if Mike was transmitting bad karma or something. Ann-Marie was noticing it too.

"If it's something more than that," she said, "talking about it is the best thing you can do, you know." She studied Mike's features for a reaction.

"Well..." said Mike, "I was just explaining to Zack. Something... something about this mission is not right."

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I've just got this funny feeling I can't shake."

"When did it start?" asked Ann.

"As soon as we arrived in this system. Whatever I do, I just can't shake this feeling as I look around the walls of this ship...something's just not right"

Ann-Marie was also looking like I had only a few minutes ago. I ate another forkful of food. The taste at least mitigated the bad gut feeling I was now getting. I could see Ann-Marie was also catching it. That vindaloo would do her good right now.

We finished our meals and beers without talking further about the subject. At least we all brightened up a bit after Mike told a rather embarrassing story about his flight training. When we left the table to go about our business, that feeling came back again. Now *I* felt that funny feeling in my gut too. Ann-Marie tells me she had started getting that weird feeling as well.

As a scientist, I know that weird gut feelings are perfectly explicable. When we went over the FDR from my shipwreck about five years ago, I made a theory about why I got that funny gut feeling. I think on a subconscious level, I could hear that the drive didn't sound right when the thrusters were being operated. It was just on the threshold of my hearing – not enough that my conscious mind would notice – but enough that I'd get that funny gut feeling that something was terribly wrong. I knew that I'd be a fool to think that Mike's subconscious hadn't noticed something a little out of place too. I couldn't think what it would be though. I lay on my bunk, staring at the cable conduits running across the ceiling wondering if there was anything I had noticed that was wrong with the Lion. Perhaps it was something wrong with one of the Explorers? I had checked out the one assigned to me very thoroughly, and had found it in good running order. Besides, Mike said he had got that funny feeling only when we arrived in Liazeda. I swung myself over to the computer, and began searching for similar anomalies to see if anything terrible had happened. The search didn't turn up anything. The object we were less than a day away from was unique. Not even when the human race had its first disastrous encounter with the Thargoids had anything so enigmatic appeared. It had already been established that the object probably wasn't Thargoid in nature, and since the Quest missions in the 50's, we had learned a great deal from the Thargoids.

I spent a lot of the ship's artificial night searching fruitlessly for any precedent to our situation, and found none. I went to bed and fell into a deep sleep, and woke up refreshed nine hours later. I felt much better. I was still intensely curious about what could be giving Mike the creeps. I got ready for the day ahead, and went to the messhall for breakfast. I didn't see Mike until our mission started, four hours later.

"Now hear this! Explorer personnel report to their stations. Explorer personnel report to their stations. That is all!" bellowed the public announcement system through the ship.

I saved my work, and picked up the petabit memory cartridge, picked up my equipment and left my quarters for the deck level. The activity on the ship had really picked up. The narrow, institutional green corridors buzzed with activity, and I seemed to be going against the flow to reach my craft. I could feel the vibrations from the powerful manoeuvring thrusters on the Lion as they adjusted the vast ship's orbit around the LRA. There was a level of excitement on the ship. I caught the elevator up to the space deck level, and walked along a further hundred meters or so of light green corridors. I arrived in the docking tube reception area and climbed the ladder into my ship. I felt the odd sensation of the interface between Lion's gravity field and the field the Explorer was generating as I entered. The Explorer itself is a fairly massive ship, and I had to go right to the front end to get to the bridge. My four bridge-crew had all beaten me to it and were already at their stations.

"Greetings everyone – you've all been briefed on our mission?" I asked, just to make sure. We had all been to

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different briefing sessions, so I wanted to check that everyone was familiar with the mission. Our mission was to deploy over a hundred different instruments at specific geostationary points over the object. It was probably a two day job. Everyone replied to the affirmative. I noticed the annunciator for the main hatch went out, indicating that the hatch was closed and we could leave dock. I pulled my safety harness on.

"Explorer one and two, you are cleared to leave dock," came the message from the Lion. Alice Jones, enlisted with the AJN was assigned to us today at the helm. She initiated the departure sequence and we were off. Glancing to the side, I could see Ann-Marie's ship was also lifting off. The huge floodlit behemoth slid away from us as our thrusters fired to start us on our mission. I looked out into the darkness of interstellar space. If you haven't been this far from a star you should try it one day – it really is eerily dark. I've never seen anywhere so dark as 600 AU from a star. Looking through the rear-view display, I could see the bulk of the Lion seemingly motionless against the backdrop of the Milky Way. Ahead was the LRA. It was completely and utterly black – it left a disk silhouette on the backdrop of the stars. You could only see it from the absence of the stars that you'd otherwise see.

"OK, deploy the first probe," I said. Mike keyed up the sequence. I looked over at him, but in the darkness of the bridge, I couldn't see his expression. I watched the probe slide away slowly in front of the ship. Mike called the science team on the intercom. About five scientists and technicians were on board each Explorer making sure everything was going plan. The technician on the other end of the intercom announced that the probe was working.

"Explorer one to Lion"

"Go ahead"

"First probe is out. How are you receiving its telemetry?"

I looked at the Lion filling up about half of the rear view. It looked like some sort of floodlit beached whale.

"We're gett...." came the response, abruptly cut off.

"Error, transmission interrupted" came the computer's soft reply.

I could hardly believe my eyes. I had just been watching the floodlit bulk of the Lion, and it was gone. No flash, no bang, nothing. The transmission ended and it was suddenly...not there any more. My eyes strained in the interstellar darkness to try and make out whether the ship was still there. I'd be able to see its silhouette against the starfield if it was, but all I could see was the majesty of the universe. I swung around to the front view. Where the LRA had been was now a starfield. We were no longer orbiting anything – the L/MF radio transmission had gone, the gravity field had gone, and the enormous object we called LRA had gone.

"Explorer one to Explorer two."

I paused briefly and tried again. "Explorer two, are you there?"

Of course they had to be there – the comms system had established a link with something, presumably Explorer 2. Perhaps they were as gobsmacked as we were.

"We have them on the scanner," said the flight engineer, a young man named Deke. He sounded rather uncertain. I pulled the scanner display up on my console, and sure enough, a big white blob showed up with a range of about fifteen k's. "Errr...Explorer one, yes we're here," came Ann-Marie's voice. I looked over towards where the scanner said E2 was floating in space. A pinpoint of light appeared. Ann had turned on all the exterior lights. We followed suit.

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I hadn't felt fear in a long while. I thought I'd encountered enough odd stuff that somehow I no longer had a healthy amount of fear reaction left. But now I was frightened. I tried to assess the situation as calmly as possible. There was one solution I could think of.

"Ann, we just have to get the hell out of here!" I said over the radio.

"I heartily concur," came her reply.

"OK, I'm setting a course for Peterson's Legacy, form up with us"

"Wilco," came her reply.

Alice had already set the course and it was ready to be initiated when I gave the order. We started on our long journey of approximately 600 AU. The Explorers didn't have a hyperdrive since they were supposed to piggy back on the Lion. Mike gave an order to dump the probes – they would be unnecessary mass to slow our acceleration. Perhaps they might find something as they monitored that would tell us just what happened to the Lion. The fuel totalizer showed we only had marginally enough to get us to Peterson's Legacy anyway. We could go slower and have a bigger fuel margin by not having to do such a long acceleration burn to get us moving along, but then we'd just run out of food instead. Even though the vast majority of the journey would be spent with the engines shut down as we coasted through space, the life support systems used up fuel gradually anyway.

It took us weeks to get back. To make matters worse, we had to severely ration food and water since the Explorers only had supplies for a mission of half the length of our journey time. We arrived at Peterson's Legacy in a malnourished and fatigued state. Only twenty five out of crew of 1015 had got back from the mission – those of us lucky enough to be on the Explorers...

We still haven't found out what happened to the Lion and the LRA. Our educated guesses were that the LRA was some sort of transport system, and one of our transmissions managed to trigger it. Perhaps the Lion is on the other side of the galaxy right now. I only hope they found a life– supporting planet, because even with rationing they'd probably have about 4 years supplies on board, and they've been missing since 3276. Maybe they did encounter some new alien race. We might never know. I still dream about it...watching the Lion from the bridge of my ship, and suddenly it's gone without so much as a hyperspace exit cloud. We never got any useful telemetry – the probes weren't out long enough to do their work. The ones we dumped overboard only showed the usual background noise from the many millions of stars that make up our galaxy and 80–year old soap operas from Alioth. Mike, Ann–Marie and myself still occasionally talk about that funny gut feeling. We certainly don't ignore it any more.

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