Sabotage - Angel Colony

comments

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I could not sleep. I tossed and twisted in the grip of my nest. My body was suspended in a bed of sculpted force, a shaped free fall. A more complex design, actually, than mere null-acceleration, gently but firmly holding my center of gravity within the heart of the field. A more comfortable bed could not be devised. Except that I could not help but see and feel the shaped space that penetrated my body to pin me in place. It took a constant submission of my will to endure that gentle caress, and it had taken me months to teach myself not to fight against that kind of passive influence.

during the week or so of our first dive I managed to curse the designers as far back as their tree-dwelling ancestors. Then I took it back because under normal circumstances I loved my nest. A hollow ovoid chamber about eight feet deep and five feet at its widest diameter, with padded inner surfaces concealing storage cubbies for personal effects. My berthing cell was one of four, stacked two high, two on either side of the compartment access. This put us against the inner bulkhead, close to the compartment door, and created a spacious common area for Morgan, Connor and i. If we weren’t actives, and if we three weren’t the sum total of our department, Connor would be shacked up with another lieutenant commander in a double, while Morgan and I would have two lieutenants in here with us.

originally our extra nest had been occupied by Sam Malthus. Formerly an assistant director for the interface systems project, he joined martin cannon Craig on the psi control project. At about the time our asset group was transferred full time to *Gabriel*, he had been assigned to us as our control officer. He had been rushed through the academy after us and hopped up to lieutenant commander in charge of assets. As a class three latent, with mind control training, he was theoretically immune to subversion and coercion. Unfortunately he was an asshole, and he wasn’t immune to extreme fluctuations in temperature.

my present discomfort was karmic payback for the way I had driven Malthus out.

normally field architecture did not bother me much, but as *Gabriel* dove through hyperspace my awareness was enhanced a thousand-fold. To my unblinking inner eye appeared a vast and timeless ocean of potential space. I was keenly aware of the shallow depth at which the twenty ships of exodus task group three rode. I could feel the shallow regions which mass-points projected into the interface, the beaches of stars and planets. There was a current, a constant twisting sensation as the natural universe spun around the axis of our formation. My mind, stretched tight over the infinite depth of the interface, was trying to orient constantly with the correlatives of normal space within which I instinctively needed a foothold.

to a ship in translation the mass shadows of celestial objects were nothing more than a kind of hyperspatial turbulence. There was no risk of collision to a ship in translation. Objects in the interface projected no material qualities, because the dive interface isolated the ships in transit from the universe. There were other dangers however. The techniques and the technology had all advanced tremendously from the first exploration diver *adventure*, but they still needed an active sitting as a backup to the artifact intelligence executing the dive. Unfortunately, the subjective time in a dive meant that inevitably I had to sleep during translation to be able to function shift on top of shift.

unfortunately, I had discovered I could not sleep during translation. Trying to do so only made my mental absorption with the interface sharper. I could take sleepers to reduce or block my sensitivity, but only at the cost of negating my function as a back-up. I could meditate to extend the time I could endure before sleepers would become necessary, and there was no reason why I couldn’t turn over my responsibilities to Connor and Morgan for long enough to recover my faculties. If I didn’t hate the sleepers with a passion.

but I was reaching my limit.

opening my eyes, I sighed and wiped a hand over my face. The images of the interface continued to play behind my eyes. I focused on my surroundings to blot the visions out for the moment. The dark, grained, organic-metal surfaces of deck, overhead and bulkheads revealed the growth patterns of the material components of the ship. Even the frame was grown on a molecular level within the directing influence of the field architecture of the ship. As a whole, the ship was as alive as any member of her crew and complement. An artifact life form.

I caught my attention wandering and bit my lip.

the display in my nest showed that my shift was still a few hours away. I groaned, and my cabin mate rolled over in her berth across from me and cracked an eye at me. Morgan was on a sleeper. Her face was a mask under its deadening influence. I recognized the look of blind confusion that crossed my friend’s face as she found herself unable to reach out and touch my mind. Morgan had become active during an accident about seven years ago. She had awakened to her power defending herself against a direct attack when a rogue active attempted to steal the cutter she had been piloting. I don't know all of the details, but apparently he was a class three fugitive from a European reservation, trying to get away from earth. In his attempt to mind control Morgan, he jump-started her mind to his level. My own abilities were awakened by an experience quite similar. While my mother was behind the assault in my case, the result was much the same.

the potential had been there in both of our cases, and *is* to a greater or lesser degree in everyone. It just needs a trigger sometimes. A powerful enough psi can do that. If he or she didn’t manage to twist your brain into pate first. It is the worst way to come into your power. It makes you hyper-wired and hair triggered. Makes you fight the sleepers and the dampers, or even the force architecture of artifacts and the other field technologies. It also makes you one of the best.

I gazed into the eyes of my friend and immediately felt the deadening pall on Morgan’s mind. Her thoughts were sluggish, weighed with sleep and haunted by the traces of hyper-dreams seeping around the edges of the drug’s influence. “you’re going to be a little numb for another day at least, Morgan,” I assessed.

“I can flush it out of my system quicker if I have to,” Morgan replied.

“if you have to,” I grinned, “but don’t take anything today. If you take another dose you *won’t* be able to and I might not be able to stretch it for the two shifts I had planned.”

“do you want me ready on stand-by?” Morgan asked.

“no, I can still hack my last shift,” I answered, as she struggled to slip out of the force cocoon, “besides, Connor likes doing the overtime. Go back to sleep for now. I’ll be fine. Rest while you can.” Morgan frowned, but relaxed back into drugged sleep. I smiled at my friend. Morgan was sharp as a razor, and there wasn’t a better all-around pilot in the entire navy. Her grasp of the interface was far keener than mine, but I had a few decades worth of experience on her. Morgan was the junior member of the team and I felt some guilt knowing that Morgan was down on sleepers more often due to my stubborn avoidance of them. Of course, Connor was senior to me, and I was his relief. Unlike Morgan and I, he did not have any trouble sleeping in the interface, and managed to get in enough sleep between long watches. I tried hard not to hold it against him, and most of the time I succeeded.

awake in spite of myself, I wandered into the shower compartment and skinned out of my uniform. In spite of the efficiency of the material, it was a good idea to recondition it from time to time. A special solution would give it enriched raw materials to repair molecular damage, and leach out any trace elements it could not metabolize. So the sheathe went into the purge bath while I stepped into a shower. A sheathe will keep you clean, but it can wear on you and it is no substitute for bathing. As I relaxed in a blanket of steam, my thought wandered to chief petty officer grant.

it had taken me a while to corner him during that first shake down mission, but when I finally did confront him he was quite forward with an explanation of his reaction to me. Grant had been a yard dog at the station that the *adventure* had operated out of. He had become acquainted with my mother during her assignment aboard that explorer. I guess that he was about in his late twenties, or early thirties then, and while he didn’t say anything about it, I suspect that he got to know Erin Sinclair rather well. When her ship was lost, his only knowledge of the fact came from the ship’s failure to return and her failure to rendezvous with him as planned. In time he wormed his way into circles where he could get a real answer as to her fate. On learning the story, he enlisted in the system defense forces of the solar authority which proceeded the formation of the astronautical navy of the solar authority. When he saw me the first time, I was about six years older than my last publicity pictures, and a dead ringer for my mom. He surprised me though, when I confronted him, because the thing that had bothered him the most was that I resembled my mother in all the subtle ways as well. Idiom, gesture, carriage, manners; so much so that he really did feel himself in the presence of a ghost.

I had explained the nature of our close rapport, to account for the similarity. I also explained how my mom had been my only family and he had adopted me on the spot and told me to regard him as my dear old uncle Jocko. I was delighted, he is an ornery, salty, sensible man. Jocko, perhaps twenty years older than me, makes a great surrogate father. Still, every time he compares me to my mother it sends a chill through me and sets me off to dwelling on aspects of our relationship I still don’t understand.

I was lost in thought when it hit me.

I gasped and braced myself against the wall, because the first thing I thought was that the internal gravity field had collapsed. Then I realized that the sense of falling away that had torn through my mind was more remote, external. I screamed, “Morgan!” As the alarm klaxons started. I darted out of the shower into the common area as Morgan was wriggling out of her nest. She looked panicked and confused—at my actions I realized. I grabbed her and mumbled in warning, “gotta purge your system,” as I invaded her biosphere. The principle psionic abilities are psychokinesis and extra sensory perception. Will and attention. Intent and intuition. Training psionic potential is in part the diffraction of a white light into spectra. One of the six primary colors then, is what we call biokinesis, the manipulation of life (complex bio-electro-chemestry). You could compare what I did at that moment to picking up a book, skimming through the text and ripping out the one or two pages that didn’t belong there.

Morgan staggered, barely braced by my warning as the weight of the interface crashed into her mind. And at once she understood. “oh my god! We’re off the chord! We’re cut off from our reference line. How deep are we?” She cried, grasping my arms in a crushing grip.

“without that reference line, we have essentially dropped to infinite depth,” I said. Before either of us could utter another word, the captain’s voice blasted over the com on general address. We were being summoned to the bridge. Immediately. We were out the door at a dead run, neither of us noticing my state of undress. Minutes later we stumbled onto the bridge. The captain took one look at me and dispatched someone to collect my uniform and bring it to me. Then he dragged Morgan and I over to the disaster seat. Connor was sitting there, face blanched and locked stiff in his seat. I reached out and discovered his attention was very far away and straining.

O’Neal must have guessed I was reading him and pulled me back a step. “don’t break his concentration, right now he s the only link we have with the task group,” he explained. “I don’t know why yet, but the interface com net has crashed,” he added as he saw me about to speak. I shook my head and interrupted before he could go on.

“captain, that’s not the biggest problem,” I declared. O’Neal gave me a stern look. “I’m not sure if Connor would have noticed it, he’s not hypersensitive to the interface. Captain we’ve dropped off the chord. When we went out of phase with the task group that must have cut the com net.

Connor interrupted the captain, still in his trance, to announce, “sir, Hawkins on *Azael* reports that they’ve lost the net as well. I agree with Arden, sir, we’ve lost the chord somehow. Anything to relay?”

O’Neal didn’t pause. “affirmative, relay back our situation and advise strongly making telepathic links ship to ship throughout the task group, we’ll do the same. If we can regain contact with anybody still on the chord we might be able to correct this situation,” he turned to Morgan and me. “this might feel like a mistake to you, but we need answers before we can act. Get in touch with as many other ships as you can.”

“aye, captain,” we snapped, stealing a couple of chairs. Spurred by a renewed sense of “panic time” I shifted up into my highest threshold. Telepathy is a strange ability. It is not remotely a spatial phenomenon. Telepathic proximity is measured in terms of intimacy. During our asset training for this mission, each of us assigned to task group three had voluntarily slept at least once with all of the others so that we would have the best chance possible—know each other well enough—to find each other at a time like this. Group by group we drew together in concert until we had a total net that would support itself, a world-mind of sixty people. A waking dream. All three of us noticeably relaxed then, and opened our eyes to report to the captain.

first the good news. All ships accounted for. The bad news was that all of the ships had lost the chord at the same time. A consensus of preliminary assessments pointed to a chain translation error. At the beginning of this dive, the coordinated dive program transmitted to all the ships had probably contained a fault. Corrupted data had instructed all of the ships to cut the chord. Without reference points, any dive is an infinite dive, because any group of coordinates is as good as another—the classic definition of a four dimensional geometry, the universe is an object who’s center is everywhere and who’s circumference is nowhere; all points are in direct contact. At the moment we were literally halfway to anywhere, right in the middle of nowhere.

O’Neal turned to me, “Arden, you are the closest thing we have to an expert in this matter. What is your analysis?” I opened my mouth to object. I didn’t see that I knew anything more about this situation than anybody else. Then I realized it wasn’t true. Any active has something to say about the mechanics of translation. Not every active participated in translating that understanding into comprehensive physics. I shut my mouth and considered the problem. There is nothing as stupid as a computer, because it will literally do anything you tell it to. An active has a sense of self preservation. Since I was involved in teaching a computer how to translate, I had spent more time than any other active—besides my mother—thinking about what could go wrong in translation, how and why.

“we’re not hopelessly lost,” I assured him, realizing it myself as I told him. “since we are still experiencing subjective time, the ship is still plotting a chord,” I explained. I closed my eyes and analyzed the twisting flow of the interface around us. I could pick up the other ships, each just slightly out of phase, but I could not establish an inertial track with the surface.

“what does subjective time have to do with it?” O’Neal broke into my thoughts.

“time is not a factor in point to point translation,” I answered, still trying to figure out what sort of curve the interface drive was calculating. “if we hadn’t designed the system to check itself, we wouldn’t have subjective time. A static translation is instantaneous, but a dynamic translation makes contact with the surface all along our track. Alpha and omega translations are read-write operations, while the chord translations are read-only translations. Here and now, we are existing in the system’s processing loop. I’m not sure you can call this a literal state of existence, because theoretically, we are inhabiting an artificial mental construct,” I explained remotely while continuing my scan.

“so far,” I amended, “all we have to worry about is the fact that we have lost our inertial plot. We don’t know where we are, we just know that we are not where the ship thinks we are. Chances are *Gabriel* could reach the end of the program and surface at whatever point falls on the mark. We might be light years off course, but at least we would have emerged on the surface. Alternatively, we could go on forever, live out our lives in these little pocket realities and never reintegrate with the surface. As far as the rest of the universe is concerned, we dissolved and didn’t resolve again.

“are you actually saying that the ship creates an artificial reality?,” Interrupted angelica Thompson. O’Neal stared at her and then at me and raised his eyebrow.

“well, yes and no. It is a pocket reality. We experience it as reality because it provides structured space and time for us to interact in, it is not, however, a part of our native continuity. It is sort of like a waking dream,” I elaborated.

“or a nightmare,” O’Neal mused. “if we ever get out of this you are going to have to explain this all to me again very carefully. But for now let’s work on getting out of this. Can you determine what chord we’ve shifted to?”

I shrugged. I was still looking but I couldn’t compensate for our displacement. “no, we’re not on a chord exactly. Perhaps we are on a curving reference scheme. Whatever the case may be, it is still trying to get somewhere. It is still thinking about where to go. There is probably some kind of feed-back loop in the calculations which produces a sliding reference. That would account for why I can’t achieve my own surface reference. If I knew how we were deviating I might be able to adjust my own calculations.”

my conversation with captain O’Neal reverberated through the world-mind of our telepathic net. Some captains had to go dig into their technical archives to find confirmation of my basic conclusions. If I’d had another captain besides O’Neal I doubt I would have been listened to. As it was, it summed up the situation. While I slinked away into the captain’s ready room to slither into my uniform, other authorities and assets were consulted. Diagnostic scans on all twenty drives were made and compared, with data from their inertial logs. By the time I stepped back onto the bridge, the captain was making a situation report to the admiral. Analysis of the logs and current calculations on the drive status repeating display confirmed my suspicions. We were locked into an uncontrolled dive.

with great effort, over the next several hours we managed to isolate the corrupted segment of the program and identify it. The fault was in the error checking code. At some point it had gone senile and had started correcting non-existent errors in the chord translations. At some point it had noticed that the resultant data conflicted with the alpha reference point, so it had corrected that bit of data too. From that analysis, we assembled a corrected plot. The news was not good. We were on a tumbling chord, which presented no close surface references.

no one mentioned sabotage, but it ground at the surface of people’s thoughts that a navigational data packet should not have corrupted a resident program in each ship’s computers. Not by accident. But, it was feasible that an encrypted key buried in the transmission could have activated a parasite loaded ahead of time into resident memory at a time when an individual, or a small group of individuals might have had access to all the ships in dock at Luna v. In such a manner, the task group could be crippled in dive with the sacrifice of only one conspirator. For such sabotage to have been initiated after departure, it would have to have been carried out by an active of class three ranking, or it would have to involve a conspiracy extending to crew members on all twenty ships.

our situation was too grim to entertain such suspicions. Our first order of business was finding a way to abort the dive without scattering our formation all over the local group of galaxies. Some genius suggested rebooting the system and reloading the programs, until I had to point out that at the moment the computer was running our reality along with those programs. Perhaps with careful psychic surgery, the corrupted programming could be burnt out of the loop, but that would eliminate all automatic error checking, requiring manual error correction and constant supervision. This suggestion at least had more merit, despite having come from *Azreal’s* staff asset control officer, commander Craig. As the former director of the interface systems project, he knew more about these drives than I did.

in the meantime, while these decisions were being considered, we were still tumbling through the interface, and the clock was still running. I had burnt out about six hours into the emergency, and the captain ordered me to take the sleepers from my control officer. Things were looking so bad that I didn’t even complain. I was wrecked.

Morgan and Connor held down the fort for the next forty hours. Connor, unaffected by the interface, was our backbone for the next several weeks, since his endurance made it possible for either myself or Morgan to be down on sleepers without jeopardizing the escape effort. On the first morning after losing the chord, the admiral ordered the purge of the corrupted programming. From that moment on, one of the three of us was full time engaged in correcting sequencing errors. We managed to smooth out the tumbling in the first week. We calculated a new chord and found ourselves unspeakably deep in the hyperspace matrix.

on the tenth day of our emergency, I spoke to Connor aside. “we can’t keep this up forever, Cal,” I hissed from the console where I was entering chord corrections. He looked at me and frowned. “don’t look at me like that. I know you’ve plotted out this chord as well as I have. We started from a ten degree chord—a shallow dive inside the curve—and look where we are now. This chord has been opening up in spite of our manual corrections.”

“yes, I know. We’ve opened up to about an eighty degree chord. Ten more degrees and we will be headed at right angles away from our surface reference,” he observed. We were talking about the angle of interface, the calculation of corresponding points in a field—a four dimensional geometry. A shallow angle of interface has a higher positive correspondence with surface continuity. A deeper, yet still acute angle of interface has a lower surface correspondence. A right angle of interface has no surface correspondence, literally zero. All points are equidistant. A straight angle, one hundred and eighty degrees, presents an inverse correspondence with the surface. As the angle becomes more obtuse, the surface correlation becomes negative. Points relative to the surface are remote in continuity, and close in discontinuity.

in other words, an obtuse angle of interface makes it easier to move from this galaxy to the next than it would be to move from one side of a room to the other. We discussed this, and he told me that I was not the first active to mention it to him.

“the problem is,” he concluded to me, “the only way we can think of to prevent further displacement would involve overriding the drive sequence, plotting a new surface reference and forcing convergence with the surface.”

“yes exactly!” I exclaimed, “that is what we need to do. Why hasn’t anyone mentioned this to the captain?” I demanded.

“oh, it has been mentioned to the captain, and the admiral,” he declared almost painfully, “but at the time we also had to point out that, since we dare not cut out the interface drive, everything we do is going to be resisted by the drive. I mean we almost literally have to get out and push the ships out of the interface while they are geared and driving in opposition to us. The effort will either kill us or cripple the ships,” he pointed out.

“yes. I know,” I said in a small voice. “I don’t think we have an option though.”

I added my endorsement to the opinion of the other actives who felt that direct action was called for and who were willing to accept the risk. Ten and a half thousand lives were riding on this issue, not counting the twenty million embryos in our care. Our best estimates of what we could do and what the consequences of our actions might be were given to admiral Niven, and discussed *in camera,* amongst himself and the captains. Aside from the actives necessary for that communication, the meeting was private. The rest of us, military and civilian alike, held our breaths and hoped for the best.

I do not think that most of the crew and compliment ever really understood the risk involved, they simply counted on our ability to overcome this obstacle. I am not even sure that many of them understood the danger to them. It was just an inconvenient hitch in the time schedule to them. A longer dive than was anticipated; but certainly nothing to get excited about. For some people, technology is a religion. I am talking about the kind of people who simply take it on faith that a machine will do what it is supposed to do. They regard those of us who know how and why a machine is supposed to work almost as priests and prophets, and if one tried to educate them in the technical mysteries, one might as well be reciting incantations for all the sense they could make out of it. During those days of uncertainty, I worried occasionally about getting mobbed and lynched for the sin of betraying their faith and failing to appease the whims of the gods of interface drives.

I don’t mean to sound biased, but superstition and ignorance have been linked together since the dawn of thought. Even educated men and women can be ignorant. I’m sure that the ability to place faith in an observed, but incomprehensible truth is a powerful survival trait. I only meant to point out that being between large groups of people and unrecognized danger is a distinct and disconcerting experience. Especially when people’s thoughts are audible to you.

when the order came I needed all the faith I could drum up so that I could invest it in myself, my two friends, and the other asset teams. It was going to take all of us, acting in concert, to override the drive complexes of our respective ships and divert the task group to a new surface fix. To start with, we targeted a narrow slice of compressed coordinates representing our region of origin. The plan called for closing our depth back to within a ten degree chord relative to the surface. There would be poor odds of achieving a position proximate to either our initial point of dissolution or our intended point of resolution. We would be ecstatic to consider the maneuver successful if we came up within our own galaxy, as all of our calculations were based on a jury rigged corrected displacement plot.

as a child I loved to watch action and adventure flicks. Null program. In reality—in space or hyperspace—the last thing you wanted to do in an emergency was rush or guess. If you didn’t happen to be dead, you took your time, checked your calculations and acted with precise care. You made fewer mistakes that way, and wasted less time. In those moments you performed like a machine, with metronomic precision. The only thing you had time for was doing your job. If you didn’t know your job...? Well, death is every man’s privilege. At least you have the satisfaction of going out learning something new.

still, in such an emergency situation, what you feel exceeds the rush of the most exciting thriller you’ve ever imagined. It’s like having to do calculus in the dark, during a thunderstorm, while somebody who doesn’t like you holds a gun to your head. You expect to die at any moment, for any reason, but after a while the only thing you can think of is whether or not you will be there to see how the equation works out. You don’t rip through the equation, because you really don't know how much time you’ve got, but you want to have the right answer if you happen to make it to the end, because you certainly don’t want to start the experiment over.

as Connor had predicted, we spent most of our energy fighting the drive. Between us, Morgan and I continued to rotate on light sleepers. On a morning, seven weeks into the struggle we had our first casualty. I was shaking myself out of a haze when Morgan came in to break the news to me.

“Arden,” she began with tears brimming, “it’s Leslie. She’s had a stroke. That leaves just Roberto and tiffany on the *Hanael.* Roberto was on sleepers, so tiffany is struggling to keep in the link while riding the drive complex.” We wrapped each other in our arms and cried for our friend.

“is she still alive?” I asked, choking on the question.

“I don’t know,” she sobbed, “tiffany hasn’t had a moment to spare for her since she took over. We all felt Leslie’s blow out on the net. It didn’t look good.” We held each other for a few more seconds, but I had to go; the longer I delayed joining Connor, the greater the chance that a similar calamity could happen here. Morgan understood, and urged me on, while she dealt with her grief alone for a while, before submitting to her sleeper.

I rushed down to the engine room, after picking up the link to the net from Morgan. I arrived quickly, not stopping for anything. Connor was phased into the drive array, his perceptual and kinetic fields tuned with the drive fields. With no choice but to work with the forces harnessed by the artifact mind, through the fields that expressed its designs, the only way to ensure that the ship reached the surface where we wanted was to deliberately interfere with those fields. We slipped into the array, and used our abilities to bend and twist the field output until it agreed with our calculated corrections. Part of the job was worked in tandem across the thought net, running the calculations and coordinating the dive.

“hey, my favorite girl,” Connor greeted me. He was sweating under the strain, but still managed to offer me a grin and a wink. “I hope you are feeling frisky, because our friend here wants to wrestle with you.”

I smiled, still blowing the cobwebs out of my skull, and retorted, “oh, are you getting tired? Awwww.... Just goes to show you, a man just can’t take the pain. No endurance.”

he chuckled, and returned his attention to the task at hand. No doubt I would have to be ready to relieve him soon. I was not about to let the darned fool give himself a stroke. With the others in the net, I lent tiffany as much support as I could spare to make up for her deficit. Connor did the same while I sweated the override an hour later. More calculus in the dark. Tiffany barely held out until she could be relieved by Roberto, and by that time we had had another casualty. The long hours were telling on us all, and Anna blew taking over for her partner. We almost lost the *Serael,* right then. Somehow Kristen managed to shoulder her burden again, while checking Anna’s condition. Catatonia. Morgan had to come on early to spell Connor who had overextended himself covering us while the drugs left us incapacitated. Any one of us could go next, and I knew I was at my limit.