Saving the Ship - Angel Colony

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by that evening, we had reached our goal. We were in sight of a solid surface fix. All that remained was to make a forced insertion. I was afraid that it would take all three of us together to shove *Gabriel* across the threshold, and I tried not to think of what that meant for *Hanael* and *Serael* (or for Roberto, tiffany, Kristen and Caleb). Laboring in the drive core annex, my surface thoughts stormed with distractions, as that was the only part of my being not locked into the struggle. Looming at the front of my mind was the terrible cost of failure. I grieved for Anna and Leslie, who had given so much in vain. Oh, we knew that they were alive—in a sense that made it worse, considering—and I ached for the pain they must be suffering. It was torture, but words like that are hollow. I suppose you have to be active to really understand—otherwise it is almost impossible; you have to explain the relationship between brain and mind, and the consequences implicit in that bond.

and yet if I don’t try to explain then it is all just words without substance. If you can’t feel it in your gut then you don’t know what was at stake. No. I won’t explain, if it is important to you, you can work out your own explanation—I’ll simply illustrate. I don’t care to argue it either. Opinion rarely admits much in the way of understanding. All I can say is that those who believe that the brain creates the mind are surprisingly correct, and utterly wrong. Likewise, those who believe that all of existence is a solipsistic event in the mind are equally tapping the mark—and aiming way off target.

physics, the mechanics of space-time, almost perfectly describes the validity of the first argument. The brain, the acme of evolution, is a subtle field generator that generates a quantum level tesserect. A trap of mirrors. What enters that trap is exposed to the most frightening thing imaginable—a reflection of itself. It admits a piece of an absolute, raw field of awareness and forces it into self awareness. Point paradox. Through positive and negative feedback, the mote of self awareness generates and refines a broader field of awareness we know as mind.

metaphysics—and later psionics the mechanics of mind-space-time—offers other valid descriptions of how, with the proper initialization of this tuned field of awareness, reality is engaged. It is a valid argument to say that reality is created by the mind; without the participation of mind, the universe is nothing more than a field of information. A statistical model of fantastic complexity, but still nothing more than an equation to be solved. A program running in oblivion.

both those positions were argued by Sinclair and drake back in 1997, and I doubt I am smart enough to add anything new to their conclusions—they being the mother and father of the science of psionics. (yes that last name does sound familiar. Caitlyn Sinclair was the younger sister of my great-great-grandmother Aislynn. Caitlyn became interested in the reconciliation of physics and metaphysics to account for the fact that her older sister could fly.) A mind typically resolves itself into a four-dimensional structure, attuned to a position in space and time through the extensive nervous system of the body. A mind grows dependent on that mirror and if that mirror ever shatters, it savages the mind. This is the agony that assaulted Leslie and Anna. This is the pain I sympathized with as the mirror of my own reflection screamed under the stress of fighting the idiot-savant mind of the interface drive.

I was so uptight I did not even notice my relief come up.

“OK, I’ve got it Arden,” Morgan said, as she took over the struggle. I released my hold on the interface and collapsed back into someone’s arms.

“are you OK?” He asked. It was “uncle” Jocko. I nodded feebly, and accepted his offer of a water flask and drank deeply. “that’s a girl,” he cooed, stroking my hair back from my face. I had not even noticed that it had come out of its customary braid. I remained limp in his arms for a few minutes before asking him when he had showed up. “oh, I’ve been here for a while. Had to make sure you didn’t over do it. You mom would never forgive me if I let you kill yourself,” he grinned. I sighed a chuckle, reaching up to pat him on the cheek. We were a-tumble on the deck. I looked around and saw Connor enter engineering. He asked how I was holding up and I confessed that I was wrung out. He tried to hide his fear and apprehension.

“don’t worry, Cal,” I said, picking up the surge of worry in spite of his studied calm. “I can stretch it for the translation. Just give me a few minutes rest and I’ll get back to work.”

“don’t push too hard Arden, we’ll do fine, Morgan and I, you just relax,” he ordered sternly. I just wrinkled my nose up. He knew as well as I did that forcing the translation would kill just one person, fighting against the drive. Two actives might accomplish it, but it would be an order of magnitude harder than just twisting the angle of interface. He turned to back up Morgan, while Jocko and I crawled back to our feet and wandered aside to collapse again at a work station. I really looked at him then. His salt and pepper hair was slicked back with sweat, his jaw was shadowed by a day’s growth of his beard. I could see it in his eyes that Jocko was bone tired. His legs cramped as he sat down, which gave me an idea of both how long he had hovered near me and how long I had been glued to the interface. That shook me. I looked around and noticed for the first time how hard this emergency was on the rest of the crew. They weren’t just lounging about. Technicians must surely have been running a higher maintenance work load, as our steering efforts constantly threatened to overload systems throughout the ship. Subsystems were no doubt crashing as the main computer appropriated processing time on secondary and tertiary systems. All of the plotting these past seven weeks had had to be done manually on slate-terminals, and officers had been combating a rising sense of panic as the sense of danger seeped into people’s skulls.

I thought of my earlier estimate based on individual, ignorant reactions.

I could have used a hole to crawl into at that moment. Instead, as I had my eyes open now, I asked Jocko how other people were faring. He shrugged and said that everyone was doing about as well as could be expected. Non-essential personnel had been required to hole up in their berths and stay out of the way. A little friction, but there was still discipline.

too soon, Connor was signaling me to form up as we approached our mark. The ships of task group three were forming up inside the curve as best they could. Erring on the side of caution, we should all be lucky to surface within ten astronomical units of each other. The effort of forcing translation would cut off even telepathic communication, so we would proceed to a planned rendezvous upon securing the surface. That black out was going to be hard on me, since I would be unable to avoid worrying about *Serael* and *Hanael*. There was no helping it, though. I just gritted my teeth and phased into concert with Connor and Morgan.

in my mind, naked to the interface, the shallows and beaches of surface space were again visible. We were sliding along the edge of one of these shores, counting on it to help us breach the surface, and depending on that shadow as a guarantee that we were not about to surface blind into the heart of some stellar inferno. Morgan was calling the drill, since she was even more sensitive than me to the interface. We passed our last message over the thought net and then cut contact. Connor and I double teamed the drive array, forcing the angle of insertion to zero. An eternal fifteen minutes. I could almost taste the tender tissue of my brain searing from the power coursing through the lens of my mind.

pain exploded in my head. For a moment I was sure I had blown my mind to bits.

it happened too quick, or it was too strange for me to recount; the universe unfolded in new clarity before my astonished inner eye. I saw a host of people, all reflections of myself, linked in rings about me and concentrating. A luminous being glided into view before me. She/he caressed my face with his/her fingertips and smiled. I was so amazed that I did not even flinch when I turned to receive the complimentary caress of a shadow. A devouring darkness that hinted at forms of all manner of beasts and men. Serpent, dinosaur, bird, cat, horse, wolf, fish, man, woman; all these things and yet none. All possible suggestion without commitment to anything. And as my eyes met this strange apparition, I fell head first into twisting oblivion. I seemed to fall for eternity until I slammed bodily to the deck in the core annex.

I heard Connor bark out, “now!” And felt, with an echo of that strange clarity, the universe roll, whole and unblemished into the grip of my outstretched mind. This sensation was accompanied by an immediate sensation of falling as Morgan split the core, severing the focus of the interface drive. The drive field, and all the subordinate systems that comprised the ship’s invisible field architecture were snuffed at once. I had never experienced anything like it. A ship’s drive, once activated is meant to remain active for the life of the ship. It is only cut to disassemble the key stone of the field systems, the artifact mind. Reactivating it would be a bitch, and not a living soul could be within a thousand yards of the ship, save the one active employed to prep the fugues, close the trap and light the mirror of the new ship mind.

Gabriel was dead.

there had been no other way to force the ship to phase with the surface—resolve within the universe. As I sat up, Connor collapsed where he was standing and cackled with relief. He flipped majestically head over heels while laughing all the harder. I was shaking from my own reaction. Morgan was hugging the drive core shielding, like a little girl sprawling across the chest of her father’s corpse. In a stricken voice she announced that the drive was inactive and that it was safe to purge the core composites and peripheral systems. Her announcement was picked up by an open mike and the captain returned his congratulations. The sounds of celebration echoed in the background from the bridge, but that could not penetrate the solemn atmosphere pervading engineering. The engineering technicians, ratings and officers shared instead a sense of mourning with the three of us.

Jocko was stunned at our attitude, and when he questioned me about my long face, I told him, as best I could, that we had killed our ship to save ourselves. The engineers knew it, they worked too close to Gabriel not to feel it. *Gabriel,* was still intact, not too much worse for wear, but Gabriel, that unique awareness that had endured seven transformations and which had balked at the company of task groups one and two—what had held us in our beds and ordered our little universe during jumps—was no more.

“you are talking about that machine as if it had been alive,” he grumbled.

“uncle Jocko, I don’t know if Gabriel was alive as we understand it,” I sighed. “all I know is that by my understanding of drake’s paradigm, Gabriel was self aware. She was bright, stubborn, and naive. I can’t imagine what passed for conscious thought through her mind, because we only designed her with autistic and autonomic processing capabilities. She couldn’t do a thing you didn’t tell her to do. It really was not her fault that something put it into her mind to do something that was impossible. She was still trying to do it all the way to the end.”

I realized that I was crying, and when I looked at Morgan I saw that she was crying too. I didn’t want to ask her, but I knew that peeling apart Gabriel’s brain had to have been very hard on her. I got up, moving by force of will, and went over to her, pulling her into my arms so she would know that I didn’t think she was a murderer. Connor caught us both up and led us out of engineering, with Jocko in tail. I allowed him to drag us along in the zero gee. Without Gabriel’s invisible body around us I felt lost, and I doubt I could have made it back to my compartment alone.

Connor stopped me as tried to crawl into my nest. I was not tracking very well, and the world was a blur to my eyes. I realized, belatedly, as he carefully peeled me out of my uniform, that Jocko was no longer around. Nor was Morgan. When I was naked, Connor carefully tucked me inside my sleeper. As I drifted into the cushions on its inner curve, I was again struck with the absence of Gabriel’s subtle blessings. My cell was no longer a nest. I could not have stayed in there if Connor had not snaked in then, skinned out of his own uniform. He took me then, gently, lovingly, for the first time in over a year. I had never need his touch so much.

in the close confines of the ovoid cell, it was feasible to couple. We didn’t have to help it much with our minds. The close space suited us for gentle loving—and a fevered passion unleashed as we gave into the full reaction of our ordeal. That warm, wet balm soothed the sharp edges of grief, and shock. A vital antidote for having hung too far out over the threshold of death.

“tell me what happened,” Connor breathed in my ear. All at once I began to shake again. He tightened his arms around me. I still held him deep inside me, in part as compensation for the fact that I felt too fragile to take him into my mind. I tightened my arms and legs around his back, trying to quell my convulsions. I knew what he meant of course. My epiphany. I had been pushed to my limits. My back had been pressed up against a threshold I had never encountered before, and at the critical moment I had torn through that wall. Whatever I had awakened to, I had not been able to engage it, and I had plummeted back into a sleep I had once considered my highest state of consciousness.

his fingers traced along my spine as he waited to see if I would answer him. He did not press. Having asked the question, he felt no need to repeat it or pursue it. It was enough to him that I know that he was interested. Or maybe he was just telling me that he had noticed and inviting me to explain what I had experienced. Or maybe it was something else. An invitation to ask a question which, perhaps unprovoked, I might not have thought of asking.

I pulled back and looked into his eyes.

“tell me, Cal, what *did* happen?” I asked. He kissed me lightly, without averting his eyes. He has this trick for it. He maintains eye contact, but his focus is deep within your soul, he does not cross his eyes. He pushes you back within yourself until you can meet his gaze comfortably. “what did you see? What did you notice as I collapsed?” I elaborated.

“what do I say?” He murmured, peering through me. “it was all so sudden. One moment we were pushing to the limit. I was frantic with trying to figure out how to balance on insertion, and stabilize our position at zero long enough to get our alignment square with the surface, and nearly panicked at the thought of performing a forced translation while holding the alignment.” He shivered and went on, “it seemed hopeless. I was certain we were going to kill at least one of us, when all of a sudden we snap into perfect alignment and translate. You are blacking out and crumpling to the deck, and the only thing I can think of is to signal shut down to Morgan.

“for all I knew at that instant, you had died,” he confessed, hugging me tight to his chest and rubbing my back tenderly. I felt him pulling slowly out of me, at length, to hover on the threshold of our contact. Slow gliding strokes, until he was seated deep, as if testing the boundaries of a reality he had cause to doubt. His need now was for assurance that could not be put into words, as certainly as I had needed his help to ground myself in reality. I took him into my mind to comfort his fears, as I kissed his body in the ancient way.

Connor had not known that he loved me until that moment, when he confronted the thought of losing me. In that moment, his perception of reality had been changed. It had complicated things for both of us. I took refuge from that problem in thinking about what had happened to me in that moment of crisis. I played with the idea that what I had experienced was a momentary fourth order of magnitude of awareness. I indulged in the troubling uncertainty of this question, because I was wary of examining whether I loved him back. For Connor, his discovery was an answer, a confirmation. It left him no doubts. If he found my doubts when he penetrated my mind, he did not reveal his thoughts on the matter to me. I was willing to love him. Maybe even desperate to do so. But I was also afraid. The only person I had ever loved unreservedly had died in my mind.

part of me could not bear to have that happen to me again.

instead of confronting my fears and doubts, I turned to worrying about Morgan, who had suffered as much or more than I had in the loss of my mother. She had used her mind to destroy another mind, and its artificial nature could do nothing to change the effect that must have had on her. I felt guilty over having taken comfort in Connor’s arms by shutting her out. Connor would have nothing of it, and verbally slapped me for feeling that way.

“woman, do not dare to suggest that again,” he commanded fiercely. “Morgan was not only welcome to share her grief and take comfort with us, she was invited to do so. I understand that you were in no mind to have thought of it at the time, but Morgan certainly knew what we needed as well as what she needed for herself.” Connor was washing me with a damp towel, as the shower had become useless and dangerous in free fall. He lashed me with the corner as I opened my mouth, and plowed on. “Morgan told me to take care of you, and not to worry. She is not ready to cry on anyone’s shoulder yet, and one of us had to remain on duty. There is a lot of work yet to be done,” he reminded me.

I blushed and resisted the urge to apologize. To do so would only have annoyed him with me more. Besides apologizing would have served only to satisfy myself, where as if I meant to take his reprimand to heart I owed it to them both to get my head straight and start thinking. After returning the favor of the sponge bath, we got dressed, made ourselves presentable and headed up to the bridge. Morgan was at her station, busy and composed. I realized that we were into the morning watch, and that Connor and I had spent most of the night salving our nerves. The rest of the crew was busy with damage control and system checks. In particular, engineering was up to its neck in bad news. Connor and I were called into the conference room to listen in on the engineering report. During the past eight hours, technicians had gone over the entire translation array and assessed the status of each unit.

second to the drive core, the array was what drove the ship in dive on under sail. Each unit was an autistic field interface. Similar in design and principle to the main core, each unit integrated with and supplemented the capabilities of the core. The core was more sophisticated and vital to unifying and controlling all of the units in the array.

another difference between the core and the array subordinates, was that the array elements did not have reserve or auxiliary processing capability. While the core had means to diffuse the stresses imposed on it by our actions, the individual array elements had no defensive capabilities, they docilely accepted the increased strain shunted to them by the core. All told, the inspection had concluded that we now had a severely brain damaged array. You could say that we gave virtually every single unit some kind of minor stroke while shoving ourselves out of the matrix.

“so what’s the bottom line, ms. Parker,” the captain interrupted.

the chief engineer sighed and turned over her data-slate, “none of the units are a total write off. These are photonic architectures, employing holographic processing with massive redundancy; which means that as a whole the array is impaired but functional. Furthermore, we are making excellent progress cleaning and reformatting the core components. I figure no more than seventy-two hours until we are ready for systems reboot. More likely we will be ready by as much as a tenth of that estimate, considering that the core took virtually no damage to its architecture.”

“I see,” O’Neal said, rubbing his lower lip with the flank of his forefinger. “we will need more than seven hours to evacuate the ship and the cryogenic holds. Assembling an emergency redoubt for five-hundred and thirty people will be labor intensive, but we can accomplish it in less than forty-eight hours with material on hand. The hard part will be the cargo.” He turned to the operations officer, “Mr. Devlin, get some people on that problem and give me a working solution by thirteen hundred hours. Jane,” he turned back to the engineering officer, “given that we can initialize the drive core without mishap, will the array stand up to another dive?”

Parker frowned and took back her slate to work out some figures. Her frown did not clear up, but she tucked her slate under her arm and responded, “sir, the array absorbed a lot of collateral damage, but I can guarantee that it can stand up to another dive. With qualification. Nothing deep, and nothing prolonged.

“the problem is that these units are as fragile as brain tissue, perhaps even more delicate,” she explained. “without replacement and total regeneration, we will begin to see signs of persistent decay inside of a year. We can perhaps delay that, but unchecked the decay will proceed on a geometric scale. At current the damage is nano-scopic. We could rotate out about ten percent of the array for continual maintenance to offset the inevitable. What we cannot do is manufacture our own replacements. Oh, perhaps if we pooled the resources of all the ships in the task group we could build a facility capable of fabricating array elements. Say about ten to fifteen years to set it up, and then we could turn them out at the same rate they were back home. But, I would want to be in a sol type environment to try it. Viable biosphere, space based industry and resources; a complete infrastructure is what the job calls for. This technology does not come cheap or easy.”

“understood, thank you Jane, just do your best,” he smiled. Parker managed to drum up a smile in return, settling back into her seat. O’Neal turned then to face Connor and I, “on to the next item on our agenda. Decide amongst yourselves who will initialize the drive core. Once we are up and running again we have to regroup. While you two were recovering from the translation, Morgan hooked up with assets on the other ships. On the last report, seventeen ships pulled through,” he paused, as I tensed, “*Hanael, Serael* and *Daniel* are lost.”

the task of closing the core and re-lighting the drive fell to me, to my surprise. I had expected Morgan to want the job, to atone for killing it, but both her and Connor nominated me on the basis of greater experience. All of us had been trained to perform this function and during the building of the ships, each of us had been asked to activate, or monitor the activation of a core. Still, in my time with the project I had activated a number of experimental cores and I was intimately familiar with the technology. I gave up arguing when I decided that they were firm in their position. When the time came, I watched from an observation deck as the ship was evacuated to a life support bubble. After the last of the cryogenic holding racks had been removed to minimum safe distance I turned away from the armored glass.

I had never been alone on the ship before. I walked through its empty shell, gradually making my way down to engineering. Everything had been prepared for me. The core elements had been checked, tuned and re-formatted. I had observed that morning as the program architectures were re-installed. Biting my lip, I approached the armored casing of the core. I lay my hands and cheek against the cold alloy and collected my wits.

as I shifted up into third order attention, I became aware of the cold photo-electronic life of the command core and the array, along with other systems which had been maintenanced, but which had remained live through the crisis. I let out the breath I had been holding and put myself into a light trance. I examined each element in the core, felt the light coursing through their atomic-photonic circuits. Every atom, in every molecule, had been specially introduced and aligned in a vast array of registers. The interaction of photons with electron shells served as the switching mechanism. These switches were capable of discriminating thousands of signals across the visible and ultraviolet spectrum. The core’s millennial processing was several orders of magnitude greater than the greatest computer ever devised a century ago.

after reading each element, I grasped the interface and drew them together. As I brought them into alignment, there were billions of connections that had to be checked before the core could be seated together. Such a job could not be done by the most powerful active in the universe if it had required her full attention to make each connection. Most of what an active can do is autonomic. An active has to do everything the hard way the first time, but when a successful technique is developed, it becomes part of a meta-program. The more sophisticated an active’s repertoire of meta-programs, the more powerful and precise her psionic skills and disciplines become.

the ability of the mind to effortlessly resolve seemingly infinite complexities was suspected even in the twentieth century. Autistic savants could perform astounding feats of mathematical legerdemain, because they had an ability unrecognized at the time—they did not consciously calculate, they simply turned it over to their unconscious mind and relayed the answer when it came back up. The most difficult calculations a person does in life are likewise done with little or no conscious awareness on the part of the person involved. Just resolving the raw data input from the physical senses requires constant and massive calculation. High stereo-scopic graphic resolution, tactile texture and temperature mapping, three-hundred and sixty degree stereo-phonic resolution, complex atomic/molecular chemical analysis—all cross referenced, indexed and integrated into four dimensional continuity.

ask a programmer how complex that task is to compute.

as I willed it, the connections sorted themselves out and mated. That is the way it works, I don’t sweat the details, I only have to worry about the design. Psionic ability can be considered the judicious development and extension of attention and will—structured awareness and articulate intent. All psionics involves their cooperative use. To me psionics is not *magic* because I know too well that I am actively involved in resolving the most minute details of a complex task. It is *possible* to do such complex and intricate manipulations because *most* work involves endless, mindless repetition within a limited framework of possibilities. A proper meta-program includes instructions for those variables; meaning that there is little or no conscious decision on my part required for completion of the task. I am consciously taxed only with the orchestration of the total effort.

so much for the mystique of psionic ability.

as the core seated together, the subtle fields overlapped and synchronized. The core became a complex, closed circuit. Already information was coursing through it as programs came on-line and began interrogating the subordinate systems throughout the ship. With an active array in the loop, it was almost inevitable that the core would wake up. This was the dangerous part. I reached into the fugue forming in the heart of the core. I waited—like a hunting cat crouched in the tall grass—for my prey to rear its head.

the ship shuddered.

instantly, my mind leaped and closed the trap on it. “caught you, Gabriel.” The ship bucked around me as the drive woke up. “ah, ah. Gently, friend,” I couldn’t help it, I soothed with words as I extended a probe into the newly awakened chaos of the core. I held myself in place as the ship rolled and twisted in confusion. Without my own telekinetic ability I would have been dashed instantly against the bulkhead at about seven gees. I spared a hope that everything had been secured properly as I reached again into Gabriel’s mind. Really, the only thing I could do was observe, and if necessary abort the ignition. It was up to the awakened core to sort itself out and access the programming waiting for it. I smiled as the artifact mind stumbled across the field architecture profiles.

I have no idea how it interpreted that discovery. Theoretically, all of the programming ought to seem as memories to it. The mental reality of the core was pre-defined in that context. There was no learning for this new mind to do, it simply had to accept the waiting definition of itself. My guess was that in activation the thing experienced a sensation like awakening from a dream while the body is still paralyzed by sleep. Now it had found the key to awaken that body. With minimal supervision from myself, the core executed the designs it had accessed. The invisible architecture unfolded, picking up the material shell and tucking it into its embrace. The complex geometry warped and segregated space, claiming a domain of its own. Under the influence of time, those geometries began generating forces—gravity, momentum, inertia—and balancing them. I sighed with relief, patting the armored housing, as Gabriel settled down and continued about the business of remembering its new self.

all that effort to evacuate the ship, and every scene to re-enact in reverse, did not make any of us fit company for a civilized human being. I didn’t get any pats on my back for making the ship live again. There was simply too much to do for anyone to feel anything like gratitude. I pitched in myself, terse and determined. Anything to get this ordeal behind us. There were serious questions to ask as yet. We had to make the rounds and form up, see to the wounded and chase down the lost and strayed. Of *Hanael*, *Serael*, and *Daniel*, nothing much was said. *Lost in translation* covered a lot of ground, and the best estimates of their fates were only guesses. We had seventeen ships, and over eight thousand living souls to trouble ourselves with. Once we were secure for sail, we set out for rendezvous with *Azreal* and an emergency staff meeting with the admiral.