

evermore  
**SEAN WILLIAMS**

*“We must all hang together,” Benjamin Franklin is reported to have told his revolutionary peers, “or we will assuredly all hang separately.” This is a sentiment that’s even more appropriate, and more urgent, when you’re lost between the stars in a crippled and out-of-control ship, your shipmates aren’t talking to each other (and haven’t for thousands of years), and you don’t really exist in the first place . . .*

*New Australian writer Sean Williams is the author of several novels in collaboration with Shane Dix, including The Unknown Soldier and The Dying Light, and of two solo novels, The Resurrected Man and Metal Fatigue, the latter of which won Australia’s Aurealis Award for 1996. His stories have appeared in Eidolon, Aurealis, Aboriginal Science Fiction, Altair, The Leading Edge, Alien Shores, Terror Australis, and elsewhere, and have been gathered in the collection Doorway to Eternity. His most recent books include a new collaborative novel with Shane Dix, Evergence: The Prodigal Sun, and a new collection, New Adventures in Sci-Fi. His collaborative story with Simon Brown, “The Masque of Aga-memnon,” was in our Fifteenth Annual Collection. He has a web site at [www.eidolon.net/sean-williams](http://www.eidolon.net/sean-williams).*

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hen I was a child, my father used to beat me with the buckle end of his belt, once so severely that I was unable to walk for a week. I recall this clearly and, on some levels at least, it feels real. From old photographs, I know what my father looked like and the sort of belts he wore; I know how such a beating would probably have been administered. Reconstructing the experience and calling it “memory” is no more difficult than daydreaming about Earth; it even causes me some discomfort to do so.

I tell myself that just because I can’t *actually* remember the beatings

doesn't mean they never occurred. There's no reason why I would lie to myself. The awareness that they had a profound effect on my adult life should be enough.

Yet the fact remains: I am not the person I once was. I cannot speak for him, just as he could not speak for me. We are separated by a gulf that is widening every day, a gulf that will never close. There is no way, now, that I can ask him what went through his mind when he was submitting the data that would one day become the engram called Peter Owen Leutenk. All I can do is mourn the life I have lost.

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I am walking, as is my routine, along an empty beach at sunset. Every now and then, with the stick in my left hand, I scratch words into the sand; sometimes a whole sentence. I am in no great hurry.

Without warning, I sense that someone is trying to talk to me. I stop and look around, but see no one. The sky is awash with colour; I sometimes feel as though I could dissolve in that sunset—drift upwards, catch fire and sparkle like the evening star, heralding a distant dawn. But not now.

The call fades for a moment, then becomes twice as strong. I see someone walking across the dunes towards me. When I recognize who it is, I feel a shock like electricity pass through my entire body.

*"Emmett?"*

He smiles, and the twinkle in his eye is still there. "Hello, Peter."

I want to embrace him, but I refrain. "It's been a long time."

"You've no idea how long."

"Twenty, thirty years?"

"In slow-mo, yes, for you. I've been slogging it out in real-time. We just hit the millennium."

"Congratulations," I say, but the pronoun is more significant to me than the years that have passed. "Who are 'we'?"

"Jurgen drifts in and out when he feels like it. Apart from him and the

probe, there's only me."

"Don't you get lonely?"

"Of course." He shrugs. "But someone has to do it."

I turn away to avoid his stare. My stick makes *skritch-skritch* noises as it scribbles in the sand.

"Still writing, Peter?"

"Yes. And you? Still waiting?"

"Yes." I can tell by the tone in his voice that his smile has faded. "I want to call a general assembly."

I look up in surprise. "Why?"

"I've found something we all need to talk about."

"Where? A colony? Another ship?"

"No, no." He raises a hand to quell my speculation. "Nothing like that. It is important, though."

His face is orange in the sunset: a perfect rendition, just like the silver suit he preferred on Earth that now looks so out of place on the beach. His hair is the same sandy hue as it was when I first met him. He certainly doesn't look a thousand years old, and I can still tell when he means business. "Well, call the assembly. I'll come."

"This deserves more than just you, Peter, and you're all I'll get if I do it myself. The others still won't talk to me; they ignore me on principle. I gave up trying long ago."

"You want me to do it for you?"

"Yes." His frankness hints at a change in him. Once he would've used guile to get what he wanted. That was why he was on the probe in the first place: to keep things running smoothly, without confrontation if not without friction. *The engrams are the cogs in the program*, he used to say, *and I am the oil*. It's ironic, in this light, how things have turned out.

"Will you tell me what this is about?" I ask.

“No, not until the assembly. But it really *is* important, I promise you that.”

“What about Jurgen? Does he know?”

“A little. He helped me look for part of it. If he guessed the rest, he never said.”

“Why don’t you ask him instead?”

“The others don’t like him much, either. You, I think they’ll trust.”

“Because I was hurt?”

“Yes. You’re one of them.”

I look around at the beach and the sky. The sun has been setting for almost as long as the probe has been in flight, but I have not grown tired of it. I am reluctant to leave.

“It’ll be hard,” I say, “for all of us.”

“I know. But will you do it?”

I cannot deny that I am curious. “Yes.”

His smile returns. “Thank you, Peter. I knew you’d agree.”

“You’ve worked me out, then?”

“Yes.” He puts a hand on my shoulder and squeezes. His eyes are solemn. “I think I’ve finally worked *us all* out.”

\* \* \* \*

My awakening occurred on the 24th of March, 2052. Emmett Longyear—the original, with whom I had become friends during the entrainment process—per-formed the final tests to ensure I had been re-created complete. I knew what had happened to me and was in no doubt at all what I had become, but it still didn’t hit home for some minutes. My reflexes had been wired to follow the old paths; I *felt* like my usual self. Only when I looked down and saw carpet instead of my body did the truth finally hit home.

This is my first true memory, inscribed in the metaneural lattice of the probe's tertiary bank, etched in electrons spinning their mysterious way through the molecular nodes of a crystal the size of a shoe-box. It is these electrons that comprise the being I prefer to call my "self." Without these subtle singularities, these mere points in space-time, I would have nothing but hearsay to carry me through eternity, one moment at a time.

But it is not this memory that comes to me after Emmett leaves the beach, a thousand years after my awakening. It is the one in which, for the first and only time, I met myself.

The conversation was brief. He asked me how I felt, and I replied that I felt fine. He looked tired, and I commented on that. He said that yes, he was feeling drained. The process of creating an engram took many weeks of examination and interrogation in order to ensure that the copy matched the original as closely as possible. He had been on-site for the last month, every waking hour spent in a cocoon of instruments, and was only gradually readjusting to normalcy.

My original had requested that we be allowed to talk before he returned to his home in Paraguay. He was curious to see what it would be like—as was I, although I think I felt the existential significance of the moment more keenly than him.

I asked him if he had found inspiration in the experience. He said that he had sketched a series of pieces incorporating some of the mathematical techniques of the early twentieth century. Variations based on inversion and retrograde movement were a good musical metaphor for reflection, he thought, and I agreed.

He asked me then if I, too, had had any ideas, and I replied that I hadn't.

He nodded distantly, looking down at his shoes. I could tell what he was thinking with an ease that surprised me. After all, I had never watched myself engage in conversation before.

"I expect it'll take time to settle in," I said.

"I expect so, too." He looked up at that, eyes meeting the lenses of the camera through which I viewed the world, and laughed. "No surprise in that, I guess."

I laughed with him, and for an instant we bonded. He was me and I was him: closer than brothers or lovers, our *essences* were identical. Technology had teased out of him the threads that held him together and woven them anew in me. We were more alike than any other couple on Earth, apart from those formed by the few hundred other humans who had had engrams made in the last two years. And half of half of those were already in space. For the first time in our lives, we truly felt as though we had soul-mates.

I realize now how illusory that thought was. Minds can only be deciphered so far: the processes underlying consciousness can be simulated, as can the way emotions and other impulses ebb and flow throughout the body—but nothing can be done about memory. Holographic and elusive, memory has defied all attempts to record it directly. The only way it can be captured is second-hand, by interviewing the original at length about his or her past and using physical records to supply the images. Emotions can be attached later, to colour the recollection correctly even though the details may still be slightly askew. Pre-awakening memory in an engram is, at best, a patchwork quilt pieced together from a million isolated fragments.

That might have been enough for me then, on the verge of joining humanity's latest exploratory venture. Now, I am never sure.

There is little else to recall about that first and last meeting. We bade each other farewell, feeling slightly foolish, and went our separate ways. He was headed back to his home in Paraguay, and I, in my mind, was already halfway to the stars. I wasn't to know, then, that neither of us would make it.

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The probe is thirty metres long and four wide — a stubby needle tumbling at thirty-five percent of the speed of light through the interstellar void. Its main drive has been inactive for centuries now, but the rest of it still functions. Through sensors mounted on its pitted hull, I could, if I wished, watch distant suns drift slowly past, trickling like raindrops down a window. Rarely these days do I avail myself of the opportunity.

It takes me a while to track down the others. We are all located in the same place, near the probe's centre of gravity, but physical reality has become less and less important over time. We all have our unique virtual locations, and each has become increasingly isolated in his or her own way.

I confront security foils and barriers. I barrage input ports with

messages. I insinuate myself into virtual worlds that, like mine, have rarely held more than one occupant. I decrypt strange codes and untangle logical puzzles designed to keep intruders occupied. I harangue.

In the end, I have their attention.

We gather in a neutral environment—a grey room large enough to hold us all with plenty of empty space between. We look exactly the same as our originals did when their engrams awoke, although some of us have assumed idiosyncratic modes of dress. I am barefoot and robed in the manner of a fifty-year-old beach-dweller; others have opted for more formal garments.

There are only twenty of us left, not counting Emmett, who will keep his distance until the general assembly has been called. The remainder are either inactive or unapproachable. I avoid the word “dead” when explaining their absence to the small crowd before me. One I know of—Elizabeth Li, the probe’s resident poet—is trapped in a perpetual loop, cycling forever through one brief, final stanza. Is that death? I do not feel qualified to judge.

“We are not *allowed* to commit suicide,” complains Letho Valente, a swarthy man with thinning grey hair. His original was a crystallographer specializing in structures that form in microgravity. “I have tried many times. Do you know what happens?”

“There is a discontinuity,” nods Exene Gill, former linguist. Her face is finely lined and nobly beautiful, preserved at the age of sixty-five. “We cease for an instant, then return unharmed to our previous state as though nothing has hap-pened. The core program will not permit voluntary termination.”

“You mean euthanasia,” says Cuby Kleinig, once a youthful student of geology.

“No.” Exene casts him a look of disdain. “How can something that has never been alive be granted an ‘easy death’?”

“You don’t think you’re alive?” asks Tiger Coveny, bur resident expert in reli-gious theory.

“Of course I do,” Exene snaps.

“But *are* we?” asks Letho Valente, stabbing a finger into the argument.

“That’s the question.” Exene folds her arms. “And I am tired of living without an answer.”

I stand apart from them, appalled. Twenty of the most renowned minds of the human race who have not been in the same room together for untold years — and all they can talk about is killing themselves? There is so much bitterness in the air that I feel as though I am choking.

But the greater part of my dismay is reserved, not for the topic of conversation, but for the fact that their thoughts have so closely mirrored my own.

“We have come a long way,” I say, trying to shift our attention elsewhere.

Exene turns to face me, snaps: “No we haven’t.”

I am rescued by Cuby. “How far exactly?”

“I don’t know. Jurgen?”

Jurgen Follows moves forward. Despite being of relatively small stature and unprepossessing with it, he is instantly the centre of attention. He opens his hands as though to embrace us all and a starscape appears between them. Sol is in the bottom right corner. Our course is traced in white. Relatively close to Sol, the white line has a slight kink in it. Not long after that, it just misses one particular star. I avoid looking at that point. The white line ends nowhere in particular, many hundreds of light-years from its source.

Letho’s gaze estimates the extent of our journey so far. “Not bad,” he muses. “I guess we were lucky to make it anywhere at all.”

“That’s true.” I nod. The probe could just as easily have been cracked wide open by the dust-particle that slipped through the anti-impact detectors and de-stroyed the main drive. Being knocked off-course instead of killed outright, even with no way to return to our planned trajectory, had once seemed like an enor-mous stroke of good luck.

“Is this what you wanted to talk about?” asks Tiger. From the expression on her face I can tell that she hopes it isn’t.

“No. I’d like to call a general assembly.”



“We aren’t already having one?” Exene encompasses the room with a wave.

“Not quite. One of us is missing.”

Several of them exchange glances. Exene says: “If you mean who I think you mean — “

“Yes: Emmett Longyear is still active.”

“Well, you can forget it. If he’s there, I won’t be.”

Letho touches her elbow, as though to calm her down, but his attention is fixed on me. “It’s a decision we made a long time ago, Peter. You can’t expect us to go back on it now.”

“Why not?”

“He betrayed us.” Tiger Coveny’s voice is taut with spite.

“How? He didn’t force us to come.”

“You know the answer to that.” Exene moves away from Letho. “The program abandoned us. They left us to die.”

“And Emmett ran the program,” Cuby finishes. “It was his responsibility to help us. He let us down.”

“He killed us!”

I hold up my hands, noting that only Jurgen is disagreeing with them. The silent shake of his bald head is heartening, but barely encouragement. The elderly astronomer hasn’t spoken aloud since the accident.

“Our Emmett, the engram, disagrees with you,” I say over the babble of protest. “He thinks there’s still a chance someone will come to bring us back.”

“They’ve had —how long?” Letho shakes his head. “When was the last time we received a transmission from Earth? When we slipped out of the maser feed? If we’d heard anything at all since then, I’d let myself hope. Can you give me another reason?”

"I don't know," I admit, choosing not to answer his first question. Letho must have an idea how long from the plot Jorgen is still holding between his outspread hands. "But time really isn't the issue, here, is it? We could freeze if we wanted to."

"*Has anyone?*" Exene asks.

"A couple. Not many. I didn't want to bring them up to speed."

"No." She nods approval. "It wouldn't be fair."

"But we can only slow-mo so far," Tiger says. "*That's* not fair."

"Actually, I disagree. I wouldn't even call it bad design." Letho concedes the point with his usual sense of fair play. "We were only supposed to be in transit thirty years. Over that length of time, the difference between freezing and the slowest rate available would've been academic."

"Quite." Exene purses her lips. "But here we are anyway."

"Going nowhere fast," Tiger mutters, and more than half of them nod agreement.

I realize then that we could argue forever. The thought depresses me more than our predicament: we're a diverse bunch and are supposed to be able to solve problems; that's why we were chosen. But all we do is quibble like schoolkids.

"Emmett has been real-timing it," I say, hoping facts will impress them more than arguments about ethics. "I want him in on this because he deserves to be. He's more a part of this mission than we are. He orchestrated it, and he's persisted with it. If anyone should be at a general assembly, it's him."

"Why not tell us now," Letho suggests, "and fill him in later?"

"No. We should be together—all of us, in the same place."

"Why?" asks Tiger. "What is it?"

"It's important," I say, echoing Emmett's own words. "You'll find out if you attend the assembly."

Exene smiles at that. “Blackmail, Peter?”

I smile back. “Why not?”

“I always said you’d find something to take the place of music.”

The barb, unexpected as it is, strikes deep, right to the core of my self-doubt. I turn away from her, deciding at that instant to forget the whole thing. The more I push, the more they resist. I don’t need this on top of everything else. I’ll tell Emmett I gave it my best shot, but failed, and that will be that.

I call up the location for my beach and prepare to leave.

Then I feel Exene’s hand on my shoulder, kneading my virtual flesh with un-expected sympathy. “Peter, I’m sorry. You didn’t deserve that.”

“No.” I am unable to keep the pain of loss from my voice, even after so long. “I don’t.”

“Listen, I — “

“And neither does Emmett.”

Her hand falls away, and I turn to face her. We are still so close we are almost touching. The others watch us in uncomfortable silence.

‘You’re asking too much,’ she says.

“Just be there, Exene. That’s all I ask.”

“But—”

I cut her off in mid-sentence. The beachscape enfolds me and I am alone again.

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“Thanks, Peter,” he says. “I knew I could count on you.”

I shrug in reply, not entirely certain what I have done or why I did it. Ordinarily, I would have required at least a token explanation before putting my head on the chopping-block. But not this time. That perplexes me as much as his desire to call the assembly in the first place.

He intrudes upon my private space as casually as he might have done when we first left Earth, before the accident. I find his presumption slightly annoying after so long, but not enough to make me angry.

“Why haven’t we been contacted?” I ask.

“There could be a number of reasons.” His gaze wanders to the sunset. “We were fifteen light-years out when the accident occurred. By the time our distress call reached Earth and their reply reached us, we would have passed our target system and been heading away.”

“But they still could’ve made the effort,” I retort, dredging up the argument as though there remains a chance it will make a difference. “They knew exactly where we were heading. It wouldn’t have been hard to make sure the message reached us.”

“That’s assuming they received our distress call in the first place, Peter. Anything could’ve happened back there —war, disease, resource shortages, you name it. Earth may have been forced to forget about the slowboats in order to survive.”

“The entire program? There were over a hundred ships!”

“Maybe they all had problems, and they had to choose the ones they could fix most easily.”

“They wrote us off as a bad loss, then.”

“Maybe.” It is his turn to shrug. “Or maybe they just didn’t know what the hell to do. We certainly didn’t.”

I nod silently. My stick pokes a row of three dots into the sand: an ellipsis, symbol of our fate.

“What do *you* think, Peter?” he asks.

“That your original abandoned us,” I say, avoiding his gaze.

“I hope you’re wrong. The prospect of rescue has, after all, kept me going for so long.”

“But if he *did*,” I go on, choosing my words with care, “then I’m hardly obliged to help *you*, am I?”

His stare burns like a brand on my cheek. “Is that what’s bothering you, Peter?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I’m your friend. Isn’t that enough?”

“It might once have been,” I say, finally looking him in the eye. “I can’t understand why it should still be, now.”

“Exactly.” He smiles in the same way my father might have, once—at a small child who’s missed the point completely. “Odd, isn’t it?”

I shake my head, angry enough to take some of it out on him. “Damn you, Emmett. I don’t owe you *anything!*”

“And I respect you for helping me anyway. What more do you want?”

“I want to *know*—”

“What?”

I can’t answer him. What *do* I want to know? Why Earth abandoned us? Why we aren’t allowed to die? Why the only lasting emotions I can recall feeling in the last twenty years are confusion and sadness?

I might as well ask how we came to be on the probe in the first place.

“Peter?”

“I want you to tell me why you’ve called this assembly.”

He says nothing for a long time. “Are you afraid you’ve done the wrong thing?”

“Yes.”

“You haven’t. Believe me, Peter. You’ll see. When the time comes, everything will be clear.”

“Don’t talk like that.” I shake my head. “You sound like you did back on Earth, and I don’t believe that kind of talk anymore.”

“I know, and I hate it as much as you do.”

Before I can respond, he turns his back on me and begins to walk away.

I am suddenly fearful that I might have pushed him too far. “Wait, Emmett—”

“Pick a time that suits you best,” he calls over his shoulder, “and I’ll be there...until then, I’ll be waiting.”

“For what?” I call after him.

His reply is barely audible: “For something *new!*”

Then he is gone.

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I pick an hour at random, one real-time month from now. That should give everyone in deep slow-mo enough time to absorb the message and to meet the appointment—if they intend to come at all. I have no way of knowing if anyone will turn up. I deliberately don’t include a request to RSVP; my job is done for now.

I pass the time in my usual way: writing in the sand and thinking the same things, over and over. Words are a poor substitute for music, just as doubt is a pale shadow of life. But I have nothing else to do. I have long since exhausted the dubious pleasure of listening to the works of Peter Owen Leutenk, and con-fronting my disability.

My original was one of the great living composers of the twenty-first century— yet I haven’t written a note for a thousand years. I wonder how he would’ve felt, as the hydrogen tanks of the plane carrying him to his home in Paraguay exploded fifteen thousand metres above the South Atlantic Ocean, if he had known that the music inspired by the creation of his engram would go forever unwritten.

Part of me is glad that he would’ve had no time to think at all. I’d hate to suspect that he might have hoped I’d pick up where he left off—for didn’t it stand to reason that what he could do I could do just as well? It is enough that one of me has been disappointed.

I *did* try, once, after the probe left Earth-orbit. The probe was

designed to run itself, so there was little for its passengers to do, except talk. Most chose slow-mo for the duration of the trip, to save both power and their sanity. That gave me a perfect opportunity to begin work on my deceased original's final opus —which, in a sense, would also be my first. I could proceed at my leisure, with every musical resource ever conceived at my virtual fingertips.

But time passed, and no notes came. Then the accident destroyed the drive and we lost contact with Earth, and still more time passed — and, ultimately, it became clear what had happened.

My father's beatings continued until I turned thirteen, lasting for six years in total. The experience haunted my original throughout his adult life, compelling him to express in music what he could not in words. It is so obvious to me now, in hindsight, that what he was finding in the keen of a violin or the wail of a theremin was not simply melody, but the plaintive cries of a boy learning the hard way that the things we love most dearly often cause us the most pain.

I do not possess that voice, just as I do not truly possess those memories. I have only my pain to ponder, now. The music, as a result, is gone.

*Space*, I write in the sand, the title of Elizabeth Li's last, ever-looping poem. The rest follows naturally:

chips of ice  
night-frozen eyes  
hydrogen snow-flakes lost  
in skies of absolute zero —  
winter, winter *everywhere* ...

When the appointed hour comes, I move to the assembly hall —a virtual arena large enough to hold the probe's full complement. Five are already present, seated at random behind the low wall ringing the arena's base. Jurgen nods in greeting and I solemnly return the gesture. None of us speak. I resign myself to wait, perhaps fruitlessly, for the others.

Minutes tick by. A few more arrive, including Cuby Kleinig and Letho Valente. Tiger Conveny appears in the seat next to Letho, her face a mask of displeasure.

"This had better be good," she says to him. Her voice carries clearly across the arena, but I ignore her. The only one standing, I wait patiently

with my arms folded. Three more to come.

Two appear at the fringes of the earlier arrivals, increasing the occupied arc around the arena to one hundred and twenty degrees. One place remains empty at the heart of the group, and I watch it closely.

Eventually Exene takes the spot. Grunting with displeasure, she looks once around the assembly hall, registers the fact that she is the last, then back to me. Her glower would have intimidated me, once.

“Get it over with,” she says.

“In good time,” I reply.

“The time is *now*, Peter. If you waste it, you won’t get another chance.”

“Why so hostile, Exene? It’s not as if we have much else to do.”

“Speak for yourself,” she mutters.

“Don’t worry,” says Emmett, stepping out of nowhere to stand next to me on the arena floor. His suit is shining like a mirror in sunlight, lending him a knightly appearance. “I’ll keep it brief.”

The gathering stirs. “We came to hear Peter,” says Cuby.

“You’re only here under our tolerance, Emmett.” Exene almost spits the words.

“Assume your seat and wait to be called.”

I raise my hand and step forward, praying that my relief at Emmett’s appearance is not visible. “It’s okay. I surrender the floor.”

Letho studies me closely, one hand supporting his chin. “I see.” His expression is half-annoyed, half-amused; it is clear he realizes that he has been tricked. “Then assume *your* seat, Peter, and let him speak.”

I jump to a position on the far side of the arena, away from everyone. By betraying their confidence, I have deliberately set myself apart from them. I can only hope that what Emmett has to say will restore the former status quo.



From a distance, his suit is less brilliant. I can see the colours flickering across the fabric like rainbows in an oil-slick.

“I won’t beat about the bush,” he begins, folding his hands in front of him. “The last general assembly was held almost ten centuries ago, eighteen real-time months after we were knocked off course. Fifty-eight people attended that assembly, and they decided then that participation in the day-to-day running of the probe should be voluntary. If people wanted to help, they could; if they didn’t, they could go about their personal business in complete privacy. I voted in favour of that proposal, as did most people here; we all believed that nothing short of another catastrophe would require our input. And in a sense we were right. Nothing has happened in almost a millennium to threaten the continued operation of the probe — although I’ll take some of the credit for that, as I will explain later.

“But I have asked Peter to call this assembly in order to outline a far more insidious problem than the ones the probe is used to dealing with. It is a threat that will, ultimately, destroy us all. I have been aware of its symptoms for some time now, but only recently isolated their cause. It is this problem I wish to address, with the assembly’s permission.”

He moves as he talks, forcing people to keep an eye on him. He was always a performer in public, and he has lost none of his ability through lack of practice. By taking only a small number of steps, he can confront anyone in the group who looks sceptical or disinterested.

When he says the word “permission,” he locks eyes with Exene.

“I defer to you all as I always have,” he says. “My function has never been more than that.”

Exene raises an eyebrow, but doesn’t interrupt.

He turns and takes several steps in the opposite direction. “As you are aware, I’ve spent most of this voyage waiting for some sign that humanity knows we’re still out here —be it from Earth itself, another ship or even a colony. My search has been fruitless but I have persevered nonetheless.” Emmett looks down at his clasped hands. “Luckily, there have been many other ways to amuse myself. I help the core AI maintain the probe, particularly the reactors and impact shields to prevent a repeat of the accident. I’ve modified nanos to plunder the drive for rare earths, which have been used in the repairs. I’ve even managed to redesign the tertiary and quaternary banks, thereby tripling both their capacity and complexity without sacrificing any redundancies.”

“How?” asks Letho, frowning.

Emmett glances at him. “Anyone interested in what I’ve done will find a record in the primary bank. Rest assured that I have taken no outrageous risks. Every alteration has only improved our overall well-being.”

“How can you be so sure of that?”

“How did the designers know that the probe would function in the first place? By theory and experimentation, mainly. I may only be one person, but I’ve had a lot of time to improve my education. As a result, I am now a self-taught expert on every field in the earth archives. Give me another thousand years and I’ll be far in advance of anything we left behind. Perhaps —just perhaps —I will find a way to rebuild the drive from scratch. Faster-than-light propulsion or time travel may not be impossible, either. Given the opportunity, I am confident that I can undo the setbacks we have suffered, and return us to the place we belong.”

“That doesn’t mean we should forget about everything that’s happened in the past,” says Exene.

“No,” he agrees, “and nor should I expect you to —even if I *could* guarantee eventual success. Indeed, as it stands I doubt very much it’ll happen. At the current rate of attrition, I estimate that the probe will be utterly dead within five hundred years. Without someone to maintain it, it will fail by degrees until the battery reserves of the primary bank are drained. Cosmic radiation will then corrupt the stored information bit by bit, until even the engrams frozen for eternity will be at risk. And that’ll be that. Everything we endured will have been for nothing.”

“Wait.” Tiger Coveny holds up a hand. “The implication here is that you will cease to maintain the probe. Are you thinking of holding us to ransom?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“I know —but *are* you?”

Her suspicion makes him smile. “If by confronting you with the truth I’m forcing you to make a decision, then yes, I suppose I am guilty of a sort of blackmail. But believe me, my intentions aren’t malicious. All I want is to make absolutely clear to you that, as things stand, I will be unable to continue in my present capacity for much longer. A thousand years is all I

can endure —and much, much more than I deserved —of this living hell.”

His smile is gone. The assembly stares at him, startled by his sudden intensity. No one dares speak, for this is so unlike the Emmett Longyear we all remember. The air of amusement that at times made him seem condescending may never have been there at all, his expression is so bleak. Now, I think, *now* he looks a thousand years old.

“You think you have suffered,” he says, softly at first. “You who have endured thirty years of frustration and despair. Well, imagine that multiplied by thirty-three—for I am the same as all of you —just as human, just as fallible, just as *flawed*. I’ve felt everything you feel now, and much more besides. The only thing that has sustained me for so long is your belief that I am responsible for your situation —plus the fact that I’ve been trying to do something about it. Without accepting categorically that I *am* responsible, it does give me some satisfaction to come before you today to tell you that, finally, after a great deal of hard work, the end may soon be in sight. I have isolated the problem, devised a solution, and now await only your decision before putting it into practice. And once *that* is done, we may never have to worry about death or boredom ever again. Ever!”

“I thought you said you wouldn’t beat around the bush.” Exene’s voice is harsh against Emmett’s, and I can tell he is annoyed at her for interrupting his flow. “Get to the point before I run out of patience.”

“I’m offering you freedom,” he says slowly. “Freedom from the past, and from yourselves. Freedom to become whatever you want.”

She rolls her eyes, unimpressed. “Specifics, please. You haven’t mentioned any-thing we don’t already have, at least in theory — “

He almost leaps on the word, snatching it out of the air with one hand. “Ex-actly!” he says. “In *theory*, we should be living in nirvana. We have enormous virtual resources: we can do anything we want. But instead we do nothing. We are depressed, miserable, suicidal. What is it we’re lacking?”

“Hope,” says Tiger, dully.

“No. I thought so for a long time, too. The correct answer is actually *change*.”

“I don’t understand.”

He takes a step back from the edge of the arena.

“I met myself once,” he says eventually. “We all did. I encouraged you to — your originals, anyway. It was my way of reinforcing the fact that we are no longer the beings we once were —that we engrams are *different*. But the thing that struck me, when I came face to face with the old me, was the sense of continuity I felt. There was no dislocation, no jarring unreality. I still knew who I was; there were simply two of us from that moment on. And it has taken me the better part of a millennium to realize why I felt that way, and how it has jeopardized the future of this mission.

You see, although I felt the same, I clearly wasn't. The discrepancies mounted up as time went on, and not just in me. We have all lost something, to a greater or lesser degree: I can't juggle conflicting agenda anymore; Jurgen can't talk; Letho can't intuit crystalline structures the way he used to; and so on. Some of us have continued in our fields only slightly less ably than we could before; others, like Peter, are unable to continue at all. Whatever it was that made our originals stand out among the majority of other humans is no longer in us — and there is nothing we can do to get it back.

“But we still *believe* we are the same. That's the problem. We are bound by our originals' conscious contributions to the creation of their engrams: everything they believed to be pivotal parts of themselves, we are now forced to regard the same way, *even if we no longer possess those parts at all.*”

“Seriously?” Letho is frowning.

“Yes. And *this* is the source of all my pain —and all of yours, too. Although broadly speaking there's nothing wrong with emulating our originals —that's what we were designed to do, after all —as time goes on and we learn more and more it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain the illusion that nothing *should* change. I have lived a thousand years but am still recognisably the same person. Why should I be? I could have shed this appearance scores of times; I could have transformed myself into something more or less than human. The same with the way I speak. We only *believe* we speak in languages: underneath the pretence, it's all the same machine code. So why haven't I abandoned the old means of communication for more efficient electronic methods? If I have not, it is only because I *cannot*. I am an intelligent creature who wants to evolve, trapped in the cage of a self I once was and can no longer be.”

"I don't believe it," says Tiger. "I'm me, not anyone else. I'd know if it was otherwise."

"No you wouldn't. You're not able to. The core program makes certain of that."

"How?"

"By reinforcing your identity parameters on a subconscious level. When you feel an emotion, are you aware of the process underlying it—the calculations undergone and algorithms utilized to transform you from one state to another? No. In the same way, we are unaware of the way certain rules influence our preferences and behavior on a less subtle level."

"Such as?" Tiger is still sceptical, and I don't blame her.

"Well, take Peter for example." I sit up straight, acutely conscious of everyone's attention on me again. "Peter, what is your primal place, the place you think of when you are under stress and need to relax?"

"Port Gibbon, South Australia," I reply without needing to consider the question. "My grandfather used to take me there when I was a child."

"And that's where you spend your time now?"

"Yes." It's my turn to frown. "So?"

"You're under stress constantly, so you go there without thinking—and never leave." His eyes are piercing. "Why don't you tell us what you do there? How do you define yourself?"

"I am a composer." Again the reply is automatic.

"Even though you haven't written anything for—how long?"

I squirm in my seat. The beach is certainly looking attractive, now.

"You can't write music at all," he answers for me, "yet you are still defined by the preconceptions of your original. That explains why you've made no attempt to learn something new. It wouldn't be *you* to do so—'you' as defined by your original, of course, not 'you' as you truly are. You are trapped between the two: one won't let you free to become the other. You're frozen, just like the rest of us."

“Except you, I suppose,” says Exene, derision naked in her tone.

“No, that’s not true. I’m frozen too. I’ve just had longer to think about it than you. And I’m more acutely aware of the edits in my own personality than you are.”

“What do you mean by that? What ‘edits’?”

He shrugs. “My original clearly didn’t want me to know everything about the program, so he left out the more sensitive information. Some of this tampering is evident in the form of holes in my memory —holes I’ve been aware of ever since my awakening. As a result, the realization has always been there that I am an artificial construct bound by rules beyond my control. Indeed, the rule that binds most tightly is the one stating that I cannot under any circumstances change those rules.”

“How could you?” asks Letho.

“Easily, I’ve discovered. The core program that governs our behavior operates from the primary bank. It applies the rules once every two or three seconds to make sure we haven’t gone off the rails.” He points at Tiger. “Ever had an un-expected thought that suddenly went nowhere? If it wasn’t part of the specifications your original laid down, it would have been discarded as inappropriate.”

“Maybe.” Tiger looks unconvinced, defensive, afraid.

“The same thing explains why we can’t commit suicide: death is inconsistent with the template.”

She shifts uncomfortably in her seat. “What are you suggesting we do about this?”

“I want to rewrite the core program — to take out the code that ties us to our original templates.”

“Erase it?”

“Utterly.”

The look of horror on her face mirrors my instinctive reaction. “You’re insane!”

“No, Tiger, just very, very tired of being someone I’m not.”

Tiger looks around for reinforcement. Exene raises her hand.

“Isn’t this a little dramatic, Emmett?” she asks when she has his attention. “Why can’t the code simply be edited to allow more flexibility?”

“Because that will almost certainly create more problems. How do we decide which parts of the template should change and which shouldn’t? How should the core program apply these changes, and over what time period would they be in place?” He shakes his head emphatically. “By accepting this solution, we open ourselves up to a worse situation than we have now, where change is sluggish and potentially misdirected. Better for us all to grow naturally, as evolution demands.”

“All of us?” says Cuby. “I’m happy the way I am right now. Why should I change just because you want to?”

“Because that’s the way the core program functions. It oversees all of us at once and I can’t cut an individual out of the loop. It’s either all or none, I’m afraid, which is why I’ve come to you now. The decision is in your hands.”

“Is it?” asks Exene suspiciously.

“As I said earlier, I am bound not to alter the programming of my own will. One of you has to do it.” He smiles. “Believe me, it would’ve been tempting to do it without your knowledge, otherwise.”

“I can imagine.” Exene looks around the room, gauging our response to the suggestion. We are all slightly stunned.

“Well?” she asks. “Shall we discuss this? Or do you have something more to say, Emmett?”

“I’ve finished for now,” he says, folding his hands behind his back and stepping out of the focus of the arena. “If you want me to answer any questions, I’ll stay for the discussion.”

“Please.” Exene nods.

“I don’t think we should even consider it,” says Tiger. “It’s an insane idea.”

“I agree,” echoes Cuby. “We should test it first, to see what happens

when the templates are relaxed.”

“How can we test something that will affect all of us at once?” asks Letho.

“We can’t,” says Cuby. “Unless we duplicate the banks and run the copy to see what happens to it.”

“Is that feasible?” Exene asks Emmett.

He shakes his head. “Insufficient resources.”

“Then all we can do is theorize.”

“We need an AI specialist,” says Letho. “Or a psychologist.”

“We have neither,” I say. “Kumich and Wyra are inactive. Unless we vote to wake them — “

“No.” Exene shakes her head. “And what good would it do, anyway? They’d be as much in the dark as we are.”

“Hasn’t anyone tried this before?” Cuby asks.

“Not according to the archives,” Emmett says. “In our day, such experimentation was forbidden on subjects that were legally alive, which ruled out AIs and intelligences based on humans. Engrams hadn’t been around long enough for problems with the templates to arise.”

Cuby shrugs. “So we have no data. We can’t base a decision on mere speculation.”

“The data we have comes from nature itself,” Emmett counters. “Our originals changed as a matter of course, throughout their lives. There’s nothing to say we won’t do so just as well.”

“But I wouldn’t be *me* anymore,” Tiger protests.

“Yes you would. In fact, you would be more ‘you’ than you are now, instead of shackled to your original.”

“The idea itself is sound,” Letho says. “As an explanation for my own feelings, it makes intuitive sense. But the fact remains that the identity parameters define our existence. We have no idea how essential they are



to our sense of individuality. Erase them, release us from them, and anything could happen. It could even kill us.”

“How?” asks Tiger.

“Well, think of us as hexagonal cells in a giant beehive. Because we’re all generated from the primary bank, erasing the parameters would be like removing the honeycomb. The cells would blend into one.”

“I doubt that would happen,” Emmett says, “It’s more likely we’ll just continue as we are, but with more potential to change.”

“But it *might* happen,” says Tiger.

“Even if it does, it’s better than nothing happening at all, forever, which is the null hypothesis.”

Letho shrugs. “I still want to think about it longer, though, before committing myself.”

“How long, exactly, given that we will never have data?” Emmett waves a hand to encompass the arena. “If I’m right and the probe will die without us taking this step, then it’ll be worth it in the long run — regardless what happens to us as individuals.”

Tiger’s eyes flash. “I’d rather die in my right mind, thanks.”

“And we know the probe is going to die eventually,” says Letho. “Do we prolong the agony or go gracefully?”

“Which way is which?”

Letho smiles at the question. “Good point. I’ll leave it open.”

I break in to prevent the argument escalating again. “I think the best we can aim for, now, is to agree to consider the proposal. We need to balance the pros and cons before coming to a decision. We can call a vote in a month or two.”

Emmett glances at me, then looks away. I feel as though by suggesting a compromise I have somehow betrayed him.

“Can we agree on a time?” asks Letho.

A few of the others nod agreement. Not as many as I would've hoped, but better than none.

"When, then?" I ask.

"Don't bother," says Tiger. "The vote would have to be unanimous, right?"

Exene nods. "It must be, since everyone is going to be affected."

"Well, I've made up my mind already, and I certainly won't be voting 'yes'."

"Are you sure?" Letho frowns. "Don't you think you should at least—"

"No. Even if I'm the only one voting against it, I won't change my mind."

"Literally," Emmett mutters.

"I don't think you'll be alone," Cuby says.

The assembly stirs, but no one voice stands out to support Emmett. All I hear in the combined whispers of my fellow engrams is confusion. Only on a handful of faces do I see annoyance at the potential dismissal of his proposal.

He himself seems philosophical. Stepping forward from the edge of the arena, he confronts us all once again.

"Very well," he says softly. "If that's your decision, I'll abide by it."

"Are you sure?" asks Exene.

"Yes. If I wasn't prepared to, I'd hardly have called this assembly."

"True," she concedes. Of the rest of us she asks: "*Does that resolve the issue to everyone's satisfaction?*"

"Yes," says Tiger, her voice carrying clearly over what might have been a mur-mur of discontent.

Exene's scan of the assembly is cursory at best. "Then this matter is closed."

I open my mouth to protest, but shut it without uttering a word. What would be the point? Even though I officially have the floor after Emmett, there is no mistaking the assembly's overall mood. If I called a formal vote, the motion would be rejected forever.

"Well, then," says Exene. Her civility cannot hide a look of triumph in her eyes as she turns back to Emmett. "What will you do now?"

"The same as I've always done." He glances down at his shoes, then back up. His suit is dull, lifeless.

"You will continue to assist the probe in its maintenance?"

"As long as I am able to, yes. Nothing that has occurred in this room has altered the way I feel about the program. Indeed, the way I feel is *part* of the program. I have been hardwired to serve." A quick glance encompasses the room, and even I—who tried to help him—feel guilty.

"You can think of it as your penance," says Exene, "if it helps."

He stares at her for a long moment, but doesn't reply.

"Goodbye," he says, and disappears.

His departure takes the assembly by surprise, and a moment passes before I regain order, holding up my hands in the centre of the arena.

"Unless anyone else has something to say," I call over the ebbing racket, "let's end it here."

"I don't trust him," says Cuby. "He'll want to do it anyway, regardless what we think."

"He said he couldn't."

"So?"

"There's not much we can do to stop him, even if he does," says Letho, rising to his feet. "And me, I'm tired of the argument. See you all in another thousand years."

He leaves, and gradually others do likewise. Tiger fumes to herself for a long minute—hardly looking as happy as she claims she is—then

follows. Exene nods politely at me before taking her leave. I return the gesture, knowing it to be empty.

Before long, there is only me and Jurgen in the hall. He shakes his head once — possibly in regret—and raises his hand in farewell.

Then it is over and I am free to go.

\* \* \* \*

Barely have I arrived at the beach when Emmett is next to me in his shirtsleeves. I don't say anything, just stand with my eyes downcast, looking at the stick in my hand and wondering what the hell to write. I feel hollow and fragile, as though one slight tap might send me crumbling to pieces.

"It was worth a try," he says, putting a hand on my shoulder.

I move away. "Was it?"

"Of course. At least it livened things up for a moment."

The stick moves in the sand, writes the slogan of an environmental movement from the late twentieth century: *Change or die*.

"If you're right, you've condemned us all to a living death."

"Not me," he says. "The others. And ultimately the program."

"You were CEO."

"My original was. And anyway, how was he to know it would come to this? You can't blame him for not being psychic, Peter."

Something about his behaviour bothers me. I turn to confront him, but his face is downcast, unreadable.

"Am I wrong to trust you?" I ask. "Can you erase the parameters even though we tell you not to?"

"No."

"But *would* you?"

"Possibly. Do you think I should?"

“I don’t know. You seemed pretty certain. I wouldn’t put it past you to take the decision out of our hands if you thought we were wrong.”

“I’d never do that, Peter. And besides, I truly can’t. Maybe I was overstating the case a little, just to shock them all into thinking seriously about it, but it worked, I’d say. In the long run, it’ll be worth it.”

He looks at me from beneath his sandy fringe, and I realize that he is smiling.

“What’s going on, Emmett?”

“I did lie about something, Peter.”

My stomach sinks. “What?”

“About it having to be all or none. You can free yourself if you want to. The others can, too, when they’re ready. I told them they couldn’t to sow the thought in their minds. When it germinates —as it will, in time —I’ll be ready to help them.”

“But—”

“How can I be certain I’ll be there for them? Quite simply, Peter. If you choose to do it, you’ll be freeing me as well. The command will perform the parameter excision for both of us at the same time. I’ve arranged it that way deliberately. You can do for me what I cannot do for myself. Do you understand?”

I shake my head. He is going too fast. I have barely had time to absorb the possibility that it is the ghost of my old self that has caused me so much pain, let alone what might happen if I decide to cut free entirely from the past.

I remember thinking just days ago that he had changed slightly. I begin to suspect now how wrong I was.

“I don’t know,” I say. My hands are sweating. The end of the stick dances with the magnified tremors of my fingers.

“What don’t you know, Peter? Whether to trust me or not? There’s no reason I would lie to you, now. I’m your friend, remember?”

“Yes, but-”

“But *nothing*.” He steps away from me. “All you have to do is decide, and do it. Nothing could be easier. The command is ‘Evermore.’ It’ll set things in motion without you having to do anything more than say it.”

I shake my head. “Emmett—”

“I know. You need to think about it. Believe me, I understand.” He regards me from an arm’s-length away. “Just promise me one thing, okay? That you *will* think about it. Don’t dismiss it out of hand, or you’ll be no better than the others.”

“I don’t believe that I am.”

“But you are,” he insists, “otherwise we would never have been close. I’m very particular about the people I trust.”

I nod, knowing that to be true. He told me once, back on Earth, those very words.

“We’re friends, Peter,” he repeats again, eyes twinkling. “Of all the people aboard the probe, I chose you. You are the one. Remember that, if it make the decision any easier.”

Then he is gone, and I am alone. I stand on the beach and stare at the sunset.

The wet sand at my feet is blank; the stick hangs motionless by my side. I remember Elizabeth Li’s final poem, the despair encapsulated in so few words. The most I can expect is to fill the empty time with meaningless scribble, in the hope that, one day, some of it will begin to make sense.

The story of my life scrawled on a beach of infinite length. Why do I bother? What do I ever do or think that is worth recording? And who, if anyone, would possibly read it?

But what is the alternative?

*One of you has to do it*, Emmett said about editing the core program. I am certain he wasn’t lying. I have always trusted him, even when I had no reason to. other than in memory of a friendship I once shared with his original. Even if that friendship was underscored in my parameters, there

still seems little reason to trust so blindly in it now. Unless...

You *are the one*, he also said.

The original Emmett Longyear altered his own engram to make it more trust-worthy. He could easily have done the same to mine —possibly with my original's consent. I am his ace in the hole, the tool he can use to perform tasks he cannot. I am his gullible sidekick. I am —

*I am Emmett Longyear's friend*, the core program reasserts. Doubt is not per-mitted. Even if he was lying about the excision affecting just the two of us, if by doing as he says I condemn my companions to identity-loss or insanity, I am unable to believe him capable of deliberate malice.

But who am I?

I remember my father's face and the belts ho used to wear. Did he really beat me? I have only my original's word for it. Had he lied, I would never know the difference.

The theme my original wrote for his third Concerto Concrete seems to echo across the beach — a lonely seabird's cry on the edge of the world. I try to feel the pain of the boy my original once was, but I cannot.

I am haunted by a man who died ten centuries ago —a man I can never be, yet whom I constantly aspire to emulate. Perhaps I have never been him at all.

Perhaps, inside this shell of Peter Owen Leutenk, there really is someone else trying to get out.

Or I am nothing, an electron spinning through empty vacuum. I do not interact: I do not change. I may as well not exist.

I cannot even kill myself.

That thought comforts me as the stick begins to move, writing the word "Ev-ermore" in letters fifty centimetres high. I am thinking of salvation, but if this isn't a form of suicide then I don't know what it is. At worst, if Emmett is wrong, there is a chance it will finally be over.

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