

Excerpts from a Log

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Furtive Wanderer Personal Log (expurgations);
Carson, Neil Andrew;
Information Systems and Maintenance Specialist.
Mission Year 20, Incarnation 1.
PLAYBACK BEGINS:

The screen fills with the familiar figure of Neil Carson. He is one of The Eight. His is the classic image of a cultural hero; swarthy, fit, and confident. His face, familiar from portraits in countless schools and government buildings, is sitting framed, motionless for a moment. The image is an icon. As soon as he moves the illusion is lost, he looks... unsettled... unsure... human...

“The war is worse than anything we imagined. I’ve been filtering the feeds from all over known space. The archives are packed with the stuff. About eight months ago we reached a real-space velocity too great for the lateral array to hold a signal lock. It’s just as well. Rienman and Ichen were both right. Unprecedented refugeecism pursued by fanatical hunter fleets and eugenic tactics depopulating whole planetary systems from within. But we got out early enough, and in good order. We are clear to the galactic rim. Nobody even noticed us leave. We’ll be out into intergalactic space in about six years.

“Wish I was going to see it, but my time is up...”

Neil shifts awkwardly, and breathes deep, regathering his thoughts.

“Thirty years ago, who would have thought that empirical proof of the human soul would have caused such a mess? Okay, we all know it was more than that. The pattern replicators that reduced the entire economy to a quest for pattern software didn’t help anybody. Then again the replicators are what proved the soul, so maybe it was just them. Not to be maudlin but I guess the epitaph of the whole galactic civilization was the twelfth and final corollary to the principle of uncertainty, succinctly summarized by someone as ‘who cares’. Can’t know both the position and velocity of an electron at the same time? Bah! When people make an apple they want molecules and structures, you can measure molecules just fine.

“But I’m avoiding my point. Who wants to die? Even if they know they have a soul and there is going to be a new young body made for them right away. Especially since it’ll be made from snapshot twenty years out of date. It won’t have my memories, it won’t know what I’ve learned since the moment I stepped into the recorder. How can it be me?

“Then again, I knew all that when I made the recording. I knew this would be several centuries of inconvenience administered in little twenty year chunks with no opt-out. It had to be done of course. Those millions of people in the holds locked in transformative stasis need to be shepherded to a new galaxy. Somewhere away from the madness eating up everything. If I’d just let the idealists run everything on the trip it would have been unforgivably naive.

“Still, Willson’s incarnation expired early. It was grotesque. Her body just shut down and started falling apart. We cleaned her old body up before her new incarnation got out of her quarters. I’ve decided not to wait. This body should expire in the next few days but I’m going to recycle myself. This is going to be a little ugly, but like I said, I knew that when I signed on.

Carson; Mission Year 104; Incarnation 7;

PLAYBACK BEGINS:

Neil, in his thirties, standing in an open floor access hatch, covered in something greasy, the camera angle floating about him in an odd orbit.

“Something weird happened today. So there are only eight of us on the crew, and tempers can get tight. Still there isn’t much to do and we spend a lot of time just looking for things to occupy our attention. I’ve been checking the system logs and I’ve discovered that the lifespan parameters for reincarnation have been revised downward. Average lifespan is now set to just over ten years instead of the twenty called for in the mission plan. The weird thing? The captain didn’t even react when I told him. It was like he didn’t even hear me.

“I’m installing taps in some of the key protein conduit memories while I do maintenance. It’s against mission parameters but I think it’s necessary. There is no record of who or what ordered the revision. Somebody has been tampering. I thought it might have been a previous me but that doesn’t make sense.

“My current incarnation still has eighteen years to go but my next is set for only ten. If I’d done it myself, to myself, I’d only have ten years this time out. Of course if I were trying to outsmart myself that would be an excellent ruse. But I can’t think of any reason why I’d do any of that.

“And... incarnation seven? I should just be starting out on six. There is nothing, not a single thing, that explains why number six only lasted five years. Someone has been revising logs. Covering something up and... dammit...”

Neil disappears into the hatch while the wasp-camera AI rises and angles down in an attempt to recapture his face. Neil is struggling to stop a bright, unnaturally-orange fluid that is seeping out around the seams of a small device grafted to a group of cables. After some swearing and fiddling he looks up at the camera.

“Its a good thing we get reset, some of my previous work is damn sloppy. I guess it gets boring doing the same job for twenty years, not that that matters any more.

“Now if I can just think of a way to make sure that all of my future selves know about my little secret while nobody else gets a whiff of it at all.”

Carson; Mission Year 157; Incarnation 12;

PLAYBACK BEGINS:

Neil clutching his side, gasping with exertion and sweating profusely, his voice is thick with panic.

“Dammit! Maurine just stabbed Lyle.

“Captain Thomas and Chief Alvera have been on each other’s case for days. Lyle and I were both in the mess ignoring each other when she came in. He said something to her, I couldn’t hear what, and she snatched a knife from the table, jumped on him, and stabbed him like five times. When she looked up at me I ran.

“I really don...”

Neil sags, revealing a glimpse of Security Chief Maurine Alvera standing behind him.

The record stops as Neil's hand comes away from the comm panel.

Carson; Mission Year 189; Incarnation 16;

PLAYBACK BEGINS:

The picture consists of a doorway. Above the doorway is a quartz window into a complex mechanism. In the center of the window is a spinning gold disk. The angle shifts slightly and the disk is revealed to be the face of a cylinder penetrating deep into the machine. The cylinder comes to a stop and the door opens, revealing Neil, naked, age 34. His hands rise to his face and he drops to his knees mewling.

After a few moments and a few expletives he crawls from the replicator.

"I knew that was going to suck, but not that bad. . ." he mutters to himself. He gets to his feet "What the hell is that?"

The wasp-camera AI follows his unconscious gesture, turning and focusing. The wall opposite the replicator has been defaced, permanently scored by something. It says "Be careful, they are all insane -Neil-15"

He stares at the wall for a few minutes, unmoving, then he notices the wasp camera. "And what are you doing here?" he says as he snatches the wasp out of the air.

Carson; Mission Year 190; Incarnation 16;

PLAYBACK BEGINS:

Neil, bruised and bleeding, hiding in a repair conduit and talking to a security camera.

"There are hundreds of miles of these conduits. I should be safe. They've opened the colony orbital facilities mid-flight. I didn't even know they could be powered up before we reached orbit. The power requirements must be huge. I wish I knew more about the fuel and drive systems. I don't know if that'll use up enough fuel to prevent braking. I've put in some controls to prevent anybody from doing anything to the colonists. I think they were planning to jettison them all.

"Them. What the hell am I saying. It was Maurine. She's messed with her life-tracker. She's convinced her incarnation system to maintain more than one of her alive at a time. I've counted at least eight of her running around here. Damn Amazon. I think I'm bleeding internally. . .

"I also think I've figured out what's happening.

"It's the dying.

"Your soul remembers. You can feel it. Like a scream in your head. You die and you die and the meat in your head doesn't know what to make of it all.

"It makes sense sort of. We each stepped into our recorder and every time we step out we are exact copies of ourselves, the people we were at the moment when we originally stepped in. We were, I don't know, innocent. We stepped into our little booths and let ourselves be disintegrated and recreated. It sounded like hell to me but the others. . .

"I know these people.

“They were all romantics embarking on a huge adventure. All eager and happy and criminally altruistic. Completely the wrong mood to have in your head when you feel yourself die eight or ten times.

“Eight or ten. What am I saying. Maruine’s incarnation count is up to the forties and I think Cathy Willson is stuck in a cycle of repeated suicide. She’s up to like 80 lives.

“Captain Thomas is in denial. The other four members of the crew are in hiding. I haven’t seen any of them but they are on the ship somewhere. One of the safety measures... reincarnation can not be stopped. The systems are independent and no other crew member can enter your sanctum to sabotage it. One smart thing in a not-so-smart scheme.

“I can’t really blame the mission planners. Nobody had tried serial incarnation for more than a couple of iterations.”

Neil coughs, and a surprising amount of blood spills down his down his chin and chest.

“Yep, internal bleeding.

“Too late to learn to fight now. Maybe next time.

“Anyway I’ve got an AI filtering my most important logs into a safe place. Captain Thomas’ little scheme to expunge the truth isn’t going to leave me unawares in the future. I’ve reconstructed some of the important past entries, he’s not that good in my field. There isn’t that much storage in my secret cache but it’ll... um... it will... uh...”

He coughs again and then snickers.

“At least I’ll... I get for to... er forget things.

“This part sucks...”

He shivers, twitches, and then lies still. After a while the wasp decides the session is over.

Carson; Mission Year 277; Incarnation 42;

PLAYBACK BEGINS:

Neil is twitching and trembling, obvious implants and enhancements have been made to his physical form.

“Look at this. Just look. What a mess!”

He holds his arm up to the wasp revealing a device embedded in it, but he pulls it away before the wasp can focus on it properly.

“Eighteen hours? Eighteen hours! What kind of a lifespan is eighteen hours? What is wrong with this place!”

He indulges in a couple of minutes of ranting then consults his terminal for a while, and then begins swearing again. The wasp wanders about him, trying to decide between a face shot and getting a view of the console. Several dropouts are evident in the video. Finally Neil slumps slightly and sighs.

Looking up at the wasp. ”Freaking mess! Pause.”

PLAYBACK CONTINUES:

Neil addresses the wasp. “Command mode. Route wasp video feed to bioterminal,” he touches a spot below and behind his left ear and blinks “N-2-5-4... ”

Good... Load combat scout program.”

A series of brief inter-cut images of interior hallways. Some show obvious signs of disrepair and conflict, the sequence ends in a series of bright flashes.

Then Neil again, an obvious low-light post-processed image. Eyes fixed in the middle distance. Neil crouches in a dark crawl-space just inside a maintenance hatch. A small cable runs from a tap in his forearm to an open access panel in the wall.

“Security subsystem. What is the status in command five?”

“That doesn’t make any sense. What is the status of crewman Neil Carson?”

A long pause.

“What the hell is an ‘emergency incarnation’?”

Another pause.

“Stupid machine. This is Neil Andrew Carson, emergency incarnation; execute termination order for incarnation Carson-forty-one, authorization Carson-forty-two.

“I know there is no protocol. Equip a wasp with an actual stinger and neurotoxin.

“There has to be a suitable analogue device in the archives.”

Three slow breaths.

“Eew... Yes, that will do. Authorization Neil Andrew Carson, commence operation.

“New initiative. Command module corridor five, automated defenses are active against ship’s personnel. Stand down systems.”

Another pause.

“Dammit! Open housekeeping subsystem. Select dataset ‘deus vox soulm’ and execute.”

After a minute of tense waiting Neil snickers to himself.

“I am good, and I’m predictable if you know me as well as I do. Old joke... ”

“Security dataset. Stand down internal security on command five. Confirm.”

Neil pokes his head out of his cubbyhole, then waves his left hand out around a nearby corner and snatches it back. He extends it again, smiles at the silence and detaches the data tether from the wall letting it snake back into his right arm.

He runs down the corridor at a surprising speed and jumps through the door to the command bridge.

The place is pristine. So clean it belies nearly three hundred years of occupation. Captain Lyle Thomas is reclining in a command couch, idly paging through holographic displays.

“Sir?”

“Yes, Lieutenant Carson?”

“Sir, we are late for turnaround by two hundred forty hours. The colony orbital systems are deployed and on-line, the ship is still oriented for outbound thrust, and the primary impulse waveguide cores are cold.”

“Nonsense Carson. The orbital platform isn’t to be powered up until we find a suitable planet for the colonists.”

“Sir. Mission status is in jeopardy. We need to shut down and retract the orbital platform, realign the ship for braking, and restart the engines. At current speeds we are already losing the critical breaking distances for the first targets of the ML-227 outer spiral.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. We are barely into this mission, don’t make me confine you.”

“Sir. I . . .”

Neil steps in front of the command chair and his eyes go wide in shock. There is just a glimpse of blood and infection before Neil waves the wasp back and then continues around the couch. When he comes along side the Captain he acts. With augmented speed and strength he pulls the captain’s head forward by his hair and then strikes the back of the base of his skull. There is a wet snap.

“Dammit.” Neil blinks a couple of times and then leans down over the captain’s body and begins typing on the keypads built into the command couch. The background noises change and automated displays all over the command module come to life. After a minute or two of furious typing the displays directly in front of the chair go dark.

Neil checks Captain Thomas for a pulse and then touches his head and whispers ”By tomorrow we’ll both have forgotten, but now I have to get the impulse core on. . .”

Neil groans and stumbles to one knee and then all fours.

“That was creepy. Forty-one just died. I could feel it.”

The image skips, followed by another fast sequence of visual cuts, corridor after corridor in a circuitous maze punctuated by confusing moments of hand-to-hand violence. Finally a low-light shot of Neil coming to a stop against a substantial bulkhead. Neil strokes the bulkhead, feeling and listening for some clue, and then pulls the data tether from his arm. He paws around a bit to find the access panel and gets himself plugged in.

“Requesting Confirmation; is the impulse core in operation?”

“Excellent. . . ah, or not. . . open core access bulkhead. . . um,” Neil looks for something, “port-side seventeen.

“What hazard? Is the core shutdown or not? Is it open to space?”

“Fine then open the access bulkhead.

“Radiation hazard? Confirm current status of crewman Carson as ‘emergency incarnation’ and then open the bulkhead.”

He snatches the cable out of its port as the bulkhead begins to make opening noises.

“Thats right you stupid machine, I’m dead by the end of the day anyway. And you need a personality transplant something fierce.”

Neil looks up at the wasp. ”You, on the other hand are doing great. Fly the length of the core.”

The door opens onto a vast and cavernous horizontal cylinder.

PLAYBACK CONTINUES:

Neil is half climbing and half sliding down the smooth concavity of the inner cylinder wall. When he gets to the bottom of the slope he looks up at the wasp.

“I don’t suppose you know which end is the front? Wait. Don’t be stupid. I came in from a port side entrance; so with the door behind me the bow is to my left.”

Neil jogs along the floor of the cylinder.

“I had to kill a bunch of Maurine...? Maurines? What is the plural of a proper name anyway? She’s roaming the ship in twos and threes. I wonder how she did that... it can’t be good for her.

“Anyway, I had to kill her, uh, them. Scares me though, any one of her should have been able to take me. I’m not trained for hand to hand combat. It must be these augments.

“The scary part though was how much I liked it... wanted to do it. It was... satisfying... Captain Thomas too. It was something in me. I don’t want to go hunting my friends, but when I see them I feel... driven. It’s like I can feel that they’re wrong inside.

“I can’t even imagine myself feeling that way about the colonists. I don’t have the slightest desire to go reconstitute one of them and do something nasty. Still, just underneath everything I just know it would be a bad idea to run into any more of my crew-mates. I don’t like how much I liked the killing.

“Better stop taking my time, I don’t want to get half done just to end up another emergency incarnation, even if I wont remember. I don’t know why a machine can’t do this. I don’t know why the computer picked *me* to do this. I’ve got to drag a gold alloy wire from the fore to the aft. It’s some kind of starter. Why a person has to... .

“Son of a bitch... .

“Look at that! If that’s not sabotage I’m, well, I’ll be living into my eighties.”

The wasp pans to show a machine lying in large pieces a few dozen meters in front of the forward wall, then snaps back around as Neil grunts in appreciation.

“That’s why a person’s got to do it alright. I’d guess that all that wreckage is the thing that’s supposed to thread the core. I better push some of this out of the way.”

PLAYBACK CONTINUES:

“Well I know why I got minted with all the extra strength. This stupid cable is getting heavy. The floor is pretty smooth and the cable is really thin but at this point I must be dragging a mile and a half of this stuff behind me. I think I’m running a fever too. Probably the radiation. All I’ve got left to do is climb up this wall and plug this end in.”

PLAYBACK CONTINUES:

Neil is hanging from one arm and one leg hooked through the rungs of a wall ladder, the thin golden starter cable arcs in a catenary off into the distance behind him. The biowire data link is stretched from his arm to a plug on the spidery support right next to the starter-cable junction. He is short of breath and covered with a heavy sweat.

“What do you mean the impulse core can’t be started from here? No you damn machine it doesn’t matter that crew members are in the impulse core. I’m disposable. Initiate core startup. Alright. Alright! Set core startup to begin as soon as my life signature no longer registers within the core.

“Hua?”

“What other crew life-signs?”

“Fine.

“When no crew members are within the core, auto-initiate startup. Confirm.”

Neil yanks the biowire free of the port, slams the cover shut on the device, and then, after a moment’s pause, screams and pounds a wrench against the wall again and again in savage frustration. With the worst of it out of his system, he slides down the ladder recklessly fast, and runs back up the core.

As he reaches the wreckage of the core-threader he ducks down and presses his back against a large chunk of the debris.

“Doctor Lides? What the hell are you doing in here Bob? We have to restart the engines and they aren’t going to start up while we’re in here.”

A second voice; the wasp tries to refocus on a distant figure climbing the ladder on the forward wall. “Who is that? Neil? We shouldn’t be here Neil.”

“You’re exactly right Bob, we shouldn’t be here. Let’s leave, go to the lounge, or the park, and catch up.” Neil has his eyes closed as the wasp looks back to him. He looks at the wasp and whispers “look at him, not me dammit.” But the wasp doesn’t change focus.

“Don’t play stupid Neil. God is angry with us. I felt his anger. You’ve felt it too. I know you have, I just had you with me. I made you tell me.”

Neil whispers to the wasp, “So much for the psych profiles. There aren’t supposed to be any faithful on the whole ship, let alone the crew. If doc is a god nut we’ve just brought the war with us. Look into this, future Neil, you’ve got to find out what’s happening with the rest of the crew.”

Neil grabs a fist-sized piece of debris, hops up screaming, and throws. A wet thump, a resounding clang, and another wet thump. Neil runs over to the doctor, finds a pulse, visibly fights back a spasm of violence, and starts dragging him up the incline to the nearest exit.

Neil shakes his head, “Idiot.”

He stops dragging the doctor and gets him up onto his shoulders in a fireman’s carry.

When the bulkhead door closes behind him Neil drops the doctor with a little less care than strictly necessary, and jacks-in.

“Engine Status...? I can wait...”

“Good. Establish engine control as a security-protocol-required subsystem and then restart all navigation programs.”

Neil jacks-out and starts to slump down the wall.

Just as he reaches the floor Neil snatches at the Doctor, “wait a minute you sick bastard. What did you mean you ‘made me’ tell you?”

Neil gets up, staggers, and looks at his watch.

“More than three hours left and I feel like crap. I don’t think I want to go to sickbay but I better find out what the good doctor’s been doing.”

Neil starts running.

PLAYBACK CONTINUES:

Neil sitting somewhere against a neutral gray background. He is sweating profusely and trembling. The skin near the edges of the implants in his face and arms is starting to show sores and weeping eruptions.

“Doctor Lides is probably a total loss. He’s got the orbital facility hospital filled with bodies. Lot’s of them his own. I found mine, number forty-one, he was half vivisected when the wasp got-him. I wanted to vomit but couldn’t. No guts. Literally. Well, at least none worth mentioning. Apparently I’m half full of machinery, and emergency incarnations aren’t expected to live long enough to need to eat. I’m not hungry but I am thirsty, and it would have felt good to throw up after that.

“Anyway the twisted freak figured out some way to stop our incarnations from breaking down. I didn’t understand the chemistry but I fixed him but good. Housekeeping systems are in there expunging every organic molecule and they’ll keep doing it regularly. I also broke into the medical records system. I’ve been rewriting him, getting rid of all the religious musings. I spliced in a few of my observations about the way our models are biochemically unprepared for re-embodiment. He’ll almost certainly know his stuff has been rewritten but maybe it’ll keep him interested in something less ghoulish for a few decades.

“Did I mention I think he’s been hunting down other members of the crew to do live experiments on. I think I did.

“I uh. . .

“This wired-in data jack is great stuff, shame I can’t have one for real. You should check into that Neil. See whether our incarnation prints can be edited more subtly.

“No that’s stupid, of course they can. We have our lifespans set and we. . . um. . .

“Where was I?

“I am way over time on this body.

“I wonder if I could have. . .

“Oh, yeah, I had to kill Doc fifty-seven so he wouldn’t re. . . um. . . re. . .

Neil starts to twitch.

“I should have recycled, this really hurts. . .”

The wasp continues to record for a few minutes and then cuts off on its own.

Carson; Mission Year 277; Incarnation 43;

PLAYBACK BEGINS:

Neil looks shaken, his eyes are wide with shock.

“Note to self. Do not use the recyclers.

“I got curious after that last log and I did a systems check.

“I guess it made sense to. . . No, I don’t want to talk about it. . .

“I’ll give someone the benefit of the doubt. I don’t think anybody imagined what this would really be like. What some of these systems are doing... They went for fast and reliable but...

“Better to eat a bullet or breathe vacuum.

“I’m gonna add to the note on my replicator room wall.

“Stay out of that thing.”

Carson; Mission Year 354; Incarnation 291;

PLAYBACK BEGINS:

Neil against the background of his private cabin, moving and pacing un-self-consciously, sometimes looking at the wasp and sometimes staring at the middle distances.

“I don’t know what is happening to me. Two Hundred and Seventy Five incarnations in the last 150 years. I haven’t even tried to leave my quarters in the month since my current incarnation. I’ve just been watching the logs and trying to find out what’s happening out there. My data terminal has been blocked by some outside faction. These systems are mostly isolated by design anyway. I’ve been using my food replicator to make parts and I’ve got a EM tap into the outside systems through the replicator controls. As near as I can figure there are at least two members of the crew I haven’t had any recorded interactions with since my tenth or eleventh incarnation.

“I had to delete a lot of stuff to get the replicator reconfigured, so here’s the short version...

“Apparently I’ve been doing some odd research into possibly editing my future selves, and the general details of the meta-printers. I like that name for these abominations. Meta-printers. Sounds so friendly, so harmless.

“I’ve got to find a way to shut them down.

“I don’t think that’s an insane urge... I’m not really sure...

“Cathy Wilson’s incarnation count is up to nearly one thousand. She must be in a hell I can’t even begin to imagine. I hope all those deaths were as gentle as she could manage, but I doubt it. None of the others have had their madness turn out to be the gentle catatonic kind.

“If I can’t rescue Cathy from her printer and let her die finally and permanently then this colony ship is the worst offense against the human soul in all history.

“God, I can’t believe this is happening...

“God?

“Am I turning into a faither?

“I don’t think so.

“I think the problem is something totally different.

“I am not sane.

“I don’t think I’ve been sane for years.

“uh... no, that’s vague... I don’t think I’ve ever been truly sane. My biological time-line, this body, if it hadn’t just come out of the printer, is only thirty four years and change old, but I can’t remember a time when I wasn’t filled with ‘the urge’.

“The ‘vile impulse’ is my old, private name for it.

“My inner dialog, that whispered voice we each think to ourselves with, has a decidedly unpleasant view of things.

“Oh, I’m a nice enough guy I guess, but the thoughts that I don’t ever share; they have always been a thing to repress. To acknowledge, and then harness to my needs.

“I’ve talked to many people over the years who’ve said the same thing, but maybe for me it was more. Maybe I have never been sane and somehow I have been managing to fake it.

“And so here I am, under the kind of stress that would punish a whole mind at the breaking point. Maybe mine is already broken, so I can take it. . .

“Or maybe not. I just can’t tell.

“I remember the dread in my heart when I stepped in there. And the burning bright flash as the scanner kicked in and began disassembling me one molecule at a time, and the seamless moment of deep eternal agony. The echo of now nearly three hundred ugly deaths.

“I’ve looked through the records of the research done by the idiots who caused all this. . . uh, the people who proved the human soul. I’ve come to realize that they must have been true monsters in that self-absorbed, uncaring intellectual kind of way.

“My favorite is ‘The soul as a non-local phenomena.’ It all reads so safe and dry. But they did things. Sometimes to animals, sometimes to people. They worked out the basic rules well enough I guess.

“Recreate a man, tear him apart and then immediately put him back together and he’s fine. Bright flash. Nothing to get excited about. Except that if you transmit the pattern a little ways away you have yourself a nice transporter. Safe enough for everyday use.

“Twin him. Send a copy of the data somewhere and make two or more of the guy, and he’s still fine. It happened a couple of times by accident. Best policy? Just keep the duplicates away from each other as much as possible.

“But then someone gets curious and does a study.

“Barring asymmetric brain damage the two separate people, sometimes living planets apart for decades with zero contact, have exactly the same personality. Sort of the identical twin thing but orders of magnitude more intense. Take one of those people and put them through a psychological trauma and they will be incredibly resilient. Traumatize them both in similar ways at the same time, and they are no more resistant than normal. Break one and soon the other starts to decay. Sort of an averaging out.

“Interesting enough, some sort of psychic bond, so the military types take an interest. Super soldiers, again, as if that idea never gets boring. Deliberately twin a guy two or three times. Keep the spares happy, healthy and alert and then send just one off into danger. ‘Intriguing idea’ they say, and then they do it and it works, more or less. But what about the averaging effect? Action guy starts to rub off on the anchor team and they want to get out into the fray. They get less happy, healthy and alert. . .

“Next is the thought to massively duplicate one guy and send a squad of him into combat. Bad idea. Terribly predictable bunch of... guy. The whole unit thinking and feeling exactly the same about everything. Total washout. Even if you take a functioning unit, say a squad, and twin it into two squads. The second is going to largely make the same mistakes as the first.

“Then comes the obvious, deadly, idea.

“Why not take the other tack. Train a guy to his peak mental and physical abilities and then make a recording of him just at that peak. When he finally gets killed just print up another copy.

“Thing was, almost every time the new copy was just a useless zombie that died almost instantly. Why was that? Perfectly good organism, biological machinery A-okay and within minutes nothing but a corpse. What was different when it worked? What was the key factor?

“Time.

“Well, that and the original corpse.

“They usually found out the original was dead after some delay. The more the original was damaged the shorter the time they had to produce the copy. Drown a guy in icy water and you had nearly two days, as long as the body stayed cold. Bash his brain in with a hammer you had about 12 minutes. Incinerate him, well that one was tricky, there was a whole sliding scale based on how fast and thoroughly it was done. After all when is dead really dead?

“The most peculiar thing was that distance wasn’t a factor. Light years, or inches, could separate the body from the printer and variances in persistence time were statistically identical.

“And they did the tests, god help them. When the first results of the controlled and responsible researchers started to leak out, other, less scrupulous people started in. Reactionaries and fanatics alike began doing their own research even as they began to fight over the intangibles.

“Was it the soul? Everybody seemed to agree that it could be nothing else, even though the animists insisted on calling it other things like ‘the spark of life.’

“Where did it go? Did it even go anywhere? Maybe it just disappears back into the collective unconscious.

“So there is a soul. Fine. But who was right about what comes after? Isn’t that what people had really been fighting about for centuries anyway?

“Oh, and I forgot something too. If you could support the expired copy, force it to keep doing the little things that a body must do, after a while, say a few weeks, it would start to revive. The new person, and it was a new person, would have all the knowledge of the original because the neural pathways were all mostly intact, but the intangibles were different. Well maybe not that intangible. As the new person regained full function they would invariably be different in every way that mattered. The genetic effects were there of course, and brain damage was brain damage. But the person was different in temperament and intuition and compassion.

“There were experiments there too. If you took the new person and reproduced them you’d get the new person again.

“If you took the old data and made the new person you had to support it, but only for a day or two. Less time if you let the two copies interact.

“They did it. Tried it all.

“And then someone started the great collapse, the holy war to end all holy wars.

“They decided to create a prophet.”

Neil pauses for while.

“So how did we end up in such a mess? Why is the Furtive Wanderer crewed by the damned?”

“In all the reputable studies, and I use that word with many reservations. . . In all the reputable studies the researchers anesthetized their subjects before they killed them.”

Neil stares into the eyes of the wasp meaningfully for a few moments and then his aspect changes. He plucks a box and a tangle of wires off the desk and displays them for the camera.

“That’s the summary, the details are in our private comp along with the plans for this tap. I’m going to go try to install it in the systems control core. I’ve set the printer to make our next, and only our next in case it’s a really bad idea, incarnation with a few enhancements. If I make it back, I’ll back out the changes. Meanwhile I’m leaving the wasp on, set to follow me. We have to find out why we’ve been dying so fast.”

Neil exits and the wasp following him diligently. At the first major intersection there is a tiny click. Neil stiffens and then tumbles to the ground in pieces and the wasp’s attention is caught by the moving parts of a mono-wire anti-personnel trap resetting itself.

Carson; Mission Year 355; Incarnation 304;

PLAYBACK BEGINS:

Neil is crouched against a corridor wall. Implants on his forearm and face. He looks intent and alert, but not strained.

“Made myself a weapon.”

He waves the vaguely rifle-shaped device held in his right hand.

“Now I’m one of the bad guys.

“It’s effective but. . . I’m ah. . .

He frowns and recomposes himself.

“This thing sprays a focused E.M. field that triggers the cleanup nanocites. I might as well be spraying acid all over my crew-mates. Not nice. Not pretty.”

Neil flashes into a sudden rage, “but that bitch Alvera deserves it!”

Then he shakes off the rage by force of will.

“Not fair. I shouldn’t, no, I must not, let myself get excited. I can feel rage pushing at me constantly.

“The last me was a real bastard, thinking up this gun, and I’m paying the price. He set me up as another emergency incarnation. I guess it’s not that hard to trigger these things once you know the trick. Four days down out of five.

“Nice lifespan.”

He nudges a cable with his weapon, it's connected to a power conduit in the wall and disappears under his clothes.

"Embedded chemical reformer. Not as satisfying as eating but really a relief, it just takes way too long.

"I've almost made it to command, if I can get this last remote installed I won't have to do this again, I'll completely own the ship's systems from the terminal in my quarters.

"Shoot, I can feel a couple of Maurines coming."

Neil scrambles to unplug both ends of the power cable and then stashes it in an ankle-pocket. He waits. Suddenly he rolls out into the open and fires.

His weapon makes a high-pitched whine to no visible effect. He continues to operate the weapon as he rises and runs down the hall. Two female figures are writhing on the floor and he begins kicking and stomping them in an animal rage even as the bodies dissolve.

The scene persists for several dozen heartbeats and then suddenly Neil recovers his faculties. A horrified expression washes over him and he looks at the wasp.

"I am not well. I probably shouldn't be recording this."

His hand envelops the wasp.

Carson; Mission Year 358; Incarnation 305;

PLAYBACK BEGINS:

Neil looks excited and invigorated, nearly happy, with only a slight overcast of manic apprehension marring his affect.

"Hi future Neil. I've got the internal security and a few choice automations keeping the Maurines busy. I am about to attempt the rescue of Cathy Willson. I just thought I'd record it in case there are any problems. No point in repeating myself if this doesn't work.

"So our private quarters are each in different places throughout the ship; independent and isolated defense systems keep all the other crew out of our own. What is with that anyway? I'm beginning to think at least one mission planner had doubts. . .

"Well, anyway, I've caught the current Miss Willson, number two-thousand six-hundred and four if you can believe that, and I have her drugged into a coma. I've got a remote here that will terminate her on cue. It's on a dead-man's switch just in case. I've also got this little toy."

Neil pats a blocky ramshackle construction piled in the middle of the hallway. A central column rises from the equipment at a thirty degree angle, nearly reaching to the ceiling. A continuous stream of heavy vapor pours from various ports on the device only to dissipate quickly.

"According to the plans, the armor around the meta-printers is weakest coming up through the floor. The dataset and controller is directly above the replicator vessel. Unfortunately directly above that is the matter-feed conduit for the printer."

Neil points to various parts of the device while talking.

“So this little beast is a modified particle beam weapon. A micro-replicator produces a stream of random ultra-high-energy particles. An accelerator gets them up to a respectable speed. Then the long lens sends them right up at the ceiling here. According to ships plans this is pointed right at the center of her data-store.

“Optimal outcome, I’ve got the output balance just right and this will drill in just far enough to destroy her data-store and voila, no more Cathys.

“Second best outcome, I was too conservative with the power levels and I only get into the replicator vessel. This thing puts out so much hard radiation that the replicator can’t function while it’s on. I terminate Cathy and keep the beam going for a few hours then shut it off. By the time the auto-repair system finishes decontaminating and rebuilding the vessel her soul is long gone. She’s free. If the printer does start making bodies again, they’ll have no soul so they’ll just die.

“Worst outcome, too much power. The beam will punch right through to the matter conduit. That’ll blow the printer, and her quarters, and this whole section of deck twelve right out into space.”

He hops around to an obvious control station and puts on some goggles. Then he grins and takes them off.

“Goggles. No point really. Lot’s of radiation or an explosion...”

He pauses again.

“Oh, if it does blow out, don’t try this on any of the others. Probably shouldn’t even if it works perfectly. There is nothing critical or irreplaceable on deck twelve between bulkheads sixty and sixty-four, or from here on out through the outer hull. None of the the others have a good safe angle.

“okay, so lets do this thing.”

Neil hits a switch and there is a bright light. He can barely be seen in in the glare excitedly jumping around like a maniac, then the image saturates with light and cuts out.

Carson; Mission Year 358; Incarnation 306;

PLAYBACK BEGINS:

“I guess it was too much power. Two whole sections were blown out. The auto-repair systems nearly have the hull closed and Cathy’s replicator is just so much ionized gas out there somewhere.

“I went down to the hold to check on the colonists. I know why some of the crew wanted to dump them. It was so peaceful. I swear I could feel them all there, drifting in oblivion. Contented. Waiting. It made me angry after a while.

“I just wanted to see a friendly face.

“I must have forgotten. Transformative stasis, what a crock.

“Bank after bank of meter-long cylinders in charging racks, each containing just enough DNA and neural structure to keep body and soul together. The pattern data and the raw mass all in one easy package with enough battery in each one to keep it all working for a few decades if the chargers cut out.

People lozenges. Slide one into a converter and slide out the living man. How convenient.

“I could feel them there.”

Neil shivers violently and then, barely audible. . .

“I hated them all.

“I’m not going to go down there again.

“Ever.”

Carson; Mission Year 398; Incarnation 313;

PLAYBACK BEGINS:

“I finally found statistical planetologist slash ethno-biologist Hendrics and geneticist Otaci and it’s eat or be eaten on the lido deck. . .

“It’s actually funny, all things considered. They have been plying their respective trades together. The park and esplanade, in fact the entire crew recreation section between bulkheads one-seventeen and two-oh-three has been filled with critters and monsters. Half of them are fantastic creatures from ancient fantasy stories and the rest are unimaginably grotesque. They aren’t making an ecosystem or doing experiments. Those ladies are just getting off watching things get killed.

“I guess that isn’t really funny is it.

“I figure they are killing each other by proxy. Playing the same game as the rest of us, except cleaner in their minds I suppose. Of course they’ve been burning up about the same number of incarnations as the rest of us. Those monsters must be aimed at more than the odd unicorn.

“I wonder how many of the rest of us have wandered back there to sit in the park or something only to be torn to pieces?”

“Don’t suppose it matters much.

“In the mission plan the hard science staff was supposed to be doing a little generic tinkering. Thinking about ways to deal with possible colony worlds. The genetics systems have built-in limits that will keep their creations contained. As long as neither of those geniuses think to hand-build a replicator that isn’t limited, nothing lives more than a generation, and anything trying to get out of green sector will be toasted by internal security.”

Neil thinks for a moment.

“Nobody else is living in-program. . .

“I’d better add some safeguards.”

He slaps his forehead.

“I guess now I know why we haven’t seen the Engineering Chief lately. His private quarters are aft of two-twenty. With all the monsters he could only get up here by EVA, that’s impossible under drive; the impulse core, which is full of entangled quantum plasma; or a heavily armed assault on the park if he knew about the monsters before hand.

“No. . . wait. . . if the maneuvering waveguides were shut down you could get just about anywhere on the ship. You’d have to crawl. . .”

PLAYBACK CONTINUES:

“I was only partly right about the chief. He’s playing with the ladies. He seems to have taken very personally the goings on in the park.

“He’s been making those armed assaults but with no interest in getting through. Just doing a little hunting I guess.

“Now that’s funny.

“You know, all eight of us really are prisoners of the people we were on mission-day one. We’re just the people we were when made our recordings. You really can’t grow as a person when you keep getting reset.

“Maybe Maurine was right. She’s managed to get some continuity for herself by being able to talk to herself.

“Of course she is also totally paranoid, and the only reason we aren’t waist deep in her is she keeps killing her own older selves off in what I can only describe as minor military coups.

“You know, the Chief may be the answer to what to do about Maurine. Just now I have to play hide-and-seek with her every time I leave my quarters and I use a good bit of resources on keeping her busy. If I get her thinking that the critters in the park are a threat to the ship she could throw herself at that for a while.

“Meanwhile the Captain is having himself a nice simulated mission on the bridge.

“So long as I can stay far enough away from all of them not to fall into a rage I’ll be okay.”

Carson; Mission Year 403; Incarnation 313;

PLAYBACK BEGINS:

“Well I’ve had a pretty long run of luck so far, it had to come to an end sooner or later.

“I woke up from a dead sleep the other night, I guess it was two months ago, with a troubling realization. I am the whole crew. Keeping the ship functioning isn’t that hard anymore, but the entire mission is up to me. That involves a whole lot of skills I don’t have. Skills that would take me decades to learn and possibly longer to master.

“The Wanderer should be reaching the north edge of the galactic arm of ML-227 in about forty years. That’s just about the right amount of time, but I don’t live that long. Even if I could manage to live that long all at once it will take even more time to find and qualify a suitable colony world.

“I found a partial answer in the proscribed technology archives. A couple of hundred years ago... er... before mission year zero, a very-flawed technology was invented to harvest a body of knowledge from one person and implant it into another. It’s proscribed technology because harvesting the knowledge was incredibly destructive to the donor, and seriously no fun for the recipient. The technology was partly useful for mining the brains of the recently deceased. It was dropped because, living donor or dead, the recipient would suffer personality damage. A good bit of knowing something is personality and opinion.

“But I should be able to donate knowledge to myself shouldn’t I? I mean my personality is already damaged and I’d only be carrying across personality

traits I already possess.

“I’ve edited my next incarnation to have the augmented neural tap necessary. He’ll have to decide if it works well enough to inflict on the rest of us. At the least, it should help him study. He’ll also need to have the guts to do a terminal transfer of his knowledge. I’m fairly sure it should be terminal, as I don’t think we can afford to have one of us running the whole mission under diminished capacity.

“Anyway, since I seem to have the guts to terminate myself, I figure he will too.

“I’ve set up the recyclers to operate on a delay. I figure, step inside and take a coma cocktail, recipe’s in the private terminal, and after the delay expires so do I, but without all the unpleasantness.

“Don’t forget the applicator. Once you are inside, there is no abort.”

Carson; Mission Year 407; Incarnation 314;

PLAYBACK BEGINS:

“I haven’t been able to sleep without drugs.

“It’s the data tap. I’ve redesigned the thing a little and built the scanner. Next guy out ought to have it much easier but the ‘donation’ cycle is going to suck. For a high quality transfer you have to be conscious so the scanner can find the right materials. I guess that is why the experiments with the deceased only had ‘some success.’ It shows you pictures through the tap and measures the brain’s activity. That’s the destructive part. Lots of nasty chemicals and unhealthy voltages.

“I looked for a way to apply the information directly to the next incarnation as an edit but it won’t work. Three-fifteen will just have to strap himself in and take it like a man.

“I’ve only done about two years worth of training. I spread it across a lot of disciplines. That should be enough to know if this whole thing is going to work. I didn’t want to waste a whole lifespan. If this is a failure we will need the extra time to come up with something else.

“I am a little worried that the whole process may cause too much damage so I’ve set the printer to only carry forward the implant one more generation. Also we have to be careful that the knowledge gained is worth the damage caused. Sanity here is in tight supply and, day to day, I imagine I can feel mine slipping. Other solutions must be found if all this does is drive us insane. Three-fifteen will have to decide. Better safe than sorry. . .

“Seems to have been my motto for some time now.”

Neil sets the wasp to record him in the scanner then gets in.

“I’ve built the scanner off in a secluded area of Maintenance-seven. No point in having three-fifteen have to walk out and find my body right there. That can’t be a pleasant experience.

“Oh yea, when you are studying you should be putting together the slide-show for the scanner at the same time. The neural tap is great for studying, hope version two feels better for you.

“Break. Wasp Command Mode. Place the remainder of the current recording under time-lock, interval one year, from break, inclusive.

“That’s just in case this is as bad as I expect. Kind of a dirty trick to play on your future self, but I don’t want me getting cold feet about taking the upload.

“Here goes nothing.”

Neil inserts a braided cable into a receiver in his skull just below and behind his right ear. He slips in a mouth-piece and proceeds to strap himself into a lounge starting with his ankles. Finally he slips straps across his chest and upper arms before sliding his hands into gloves built into the armrests. All the straps cinch themselves tighter, digging into arms, legs, and chest. After a moment a complex device rises up and envelops head and shoulders. He begins thrashing immediately, hard enough to tear muscles and break bones.

The straining and thrashing continues for several minutes and the machine continues to run for several more. The machine retracts just in time to reveal Neil’s last breath.

Carson; Mission Year 407; Incarnation 315;

PLAYBACK BEGINS:

“Three-fourteen was quite a guy. The new implant isn’t keeping me awake at all and the upload went really well. It burned. okay, it was like being drowned in a bright spume of lava but oddly, I can’t really remember the pain. From the bruising alone I know it hurt but... It’s just odd.

“I forced the lock on the last part of that recording before I tried the upload.

“I should know me better than to try to hide something like that from myself.”

He snorts.

“Gives me something to look forward to.

“I figure I’ll start with the statistical planetology. I’ll have to be able to spot the candidate star systems and likely planets before anything else.”

Carson; Mission Year 458; Incarnation 323;

PLAYBACK BEGINS:

Neil is in a rage, surrounded by broken machinery and smoke, he is aggressively attacking everything he sees. The image runs for a while as Neil plays out most of his rage and slowly becomes calm enough to speak.

“I found a perfect colony world according to the mission parameters.

“The bastards have a terraforming mission-stage planned.

“A Forty member terraforming team. Forty! For a task that can take hundreds of years.

“Guess the details!

“Idiots!

“Damned Morons!

“They’ll end up at each other’s throats just like we did!”

Neil swings something that destroys the recording panel.

Carson; Mission Year 603; Incarnation 347;

PLAYBACK BEGINS:

“Fifteen hundred star systems explored so far. Six hundred that were close enough to specs to terraform. I’ve been thinking that maybe I could wake the terraforming team and if I helped them prepare for the strain and then made sure they always died easy and. . .

“No, it’s not going to work. Who am I kidding?”

“Either I find a ready-made world or I find a way to do a complete terraform job all by myself.

“I’m starting to have problems with the information transfer.

“The transfers are getting less precise, I can barely follow some of my older work. And medical scans of the last few incarnations show increasing signs of overall degradation immediately after upload.

“I don’t think its safe to try to do a multiple upload, you know, start with some of the older downloads and roll forward incrementally.

“Each upload session does too much damage.

“I’m starting to lose critical knowledge.

“I’m running out of time.”

Carson; Mission Year 718; Incarnation 361;

PLAYBACK BEGINS:

Neil is twitching and trembling as he moves, he is prone to sudden barks and ticks.

“Can’t walk any more. Cumulative replication error effects from the learning implants. I’m still functioning well enough, and I do most of my work through the interface anyway.

“Three-sixty-one. The last Neil Andrew Carson there will ever be.”

He pauses to suppress a violent tic.

“I finally found a world that doesn’t need terraforming, just a little adaptive genetics. okay that’s a little generous, I’ve been here in various forms for thirty seven years. The independent resource collection infrastructure is already installed all over the system and the orbital facility is deployed, detached, and fully operational. I’ve completely obliterated every trace of the terraforming plan and every possibility of its necessity. Nobody else will have to suffer this abomination. Ever.

“I’ve got spore ecologies down there merged with the local planet biosphere and everything is within prime colonization parameters.

“As soon as I’ve got confirmation that the first few colonists are reanimated and medically sound the Furtive Wanderer is going to have an ‘accident’. Poor old thing is going to have a gravity waveguide collapse at a coincidentally convenient distance from anything important; and one molten blob of metal plummeting sun-ward later, her entire crew will finally get some peace.

“I’ve taken some time out to perpetrate a little fiction. I have enough guilt on my soul already, I can’t let the colonists feel guilty for what this has done to us. It was our own damn fault anyway. We volunteered, even if we didn’t really know what for. But this is the new hope of our people. If it died on the vine of remorse or contention then all of this was for nothing.

“The ship’s logs are full of the detailed lie-history of an interestingly boring passage. Everybody was competent. Every one did their jobs admirably. There were a few trials and problems. Then we lucked into this perfect world. Even have a technical excuse for the upcoming accident thanks to Cathy Willson, ‘asteroid damage’. The logs now say we were holed-through by a micro particle some years back. Ruined everything from the outer-skin through to deck twelve between bulkheads sixty-one and sixty-three. We decided to take the ship to a safe orbit as soon as we got the colony platform deployed but we are very concerned about the maneuvering engines.

“We’ll all die humble heroes, as we should have.

“What other choice do I have? Let the monsters we have become loose on those unsuspecting refugees?

He closes his eyes to consult his neural tap.

“One hundred eighteen are awake. Enough to see to the others. Their physical exams will be finished in just a minute or so, so I have to be brief.

“I figure if there is absolutely no record of our journey, someday someone will try it again. Maybe try to get back to our home galaxy or something equally stupid. I’ve biased the records against such an attempt for obscure technical reasons. All lies of course, the technology works all too perfectly.

“To stave off that eventuality, this record is being preserved, hidden in various deep and obscure places in the libraries and archives we’ve brought with us. I’ve had to edit it down to fit but... never mind, my mind wanders.

“Oh, and in the wasps. I’ve seeded the planet with colonies of the data wasps. They should be able to exist for centuries. Once someone gets curious enough to find out why the wasps are out there, they will find this record. Meanwhile the wasp AIs will collectively monitor the communication grid. If anybody proposes using this technique again for any purpose, the wasps will infiltrate the comm-net and...

“Whoops, out of time.

“Forget me. Forget us all. Remember a fantasy of us that will help you get on with life.

“I am tired.”

Neil stares off into the middle distance and sighs contentedly.

Colony Orbital Facility; Exterior Camera 47

Year 1, Month 1, Day 1 (Extreme Magnification, Annotated.)

PLAYBACK BEGINS:

The Furtive Wanderer maneuvering to planetary Lagrange orbit at L4. With the colony facility and all the cargo modules long since detached, she looks sway-backed and spidery, almost ephemeral. Identical to the classic recording everyone has seen before, this version also has a superimposed telemetry stream documenting the ship’s near perfect condition as ton after ton of iron atoms are fed into the impulse core. She shivers and flares as the core begins to rupture. The safety systems engage the gravity drive in a brief chrome-and-violet burst of visible radiation. The camera barely manages to follow the

tumbling, collapsing superstructure for a few slow-motion seconds before it is lost in a bright implosion.

PLAYBACK ENDS.

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