



Harmony

ICSF Fanzine

Welcome from the editor

Welcome to Picocon 35! This is ICSF's annual fanzine, complete with the creative stylings of the society! I hope you'll agree with me that this confluence of ICSF's artistic talent (however varied the topics and styles) is a true representation of this year's theme, 'Harmony'. You'll see the theme reflected in some of the stories in this booklet, and you'll also be able to read the winning and highly commended entries to our six-word story competition.

If you haven't already, you might also want to pick up a copy of our Picocon guide from the front desk, which has details of today's timetable and all the events. I hope you enjoy your day at Picocon!

Katherine Read

Image credits:

- Cover - Connor Winzar
- Raven - Smitha Maretvadakethope
- The Drop - Anonymous

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1 ‘Not Quite an Unkindness’ by Smitha Maretvadakethope

The realms were vast beneath my wings as the winds carried me. They took me from the gleaming city of Asgard, with its impressive walls and gods combined, to the very roots of Yggdrasil where Nidhog* lay in wait. I raced old Ratatosk† from where he perched and felt the suns and worlds breathe beneath like pulsing waves. In the darkest corner of the universe, lay a bridge between the forests of the living and the dead. At its gates sat dearest Garm, a splendid hound, who guarded the realm of the living from the dead.

She glanced up at me, grunted in recognition, and lay down in front of the gate. She lolled her head to the side and watched the colourless dead enter her realm. They walked in groups sometimes, and some came on their own. Some were haggard from a painful life; some appeared splendid in their colourful gowns. Some even toddled through the crowds with no one to hold onto, their helpless faces scrunched with fear and worry. And those, kind Garm would pick up on her paws, and carry to their new homes. Some of those who ventured in beamed gratefully at her. Others still, glared daggers at the world they would have to call home. They flexed their fingers itching for weapons left behind with their living bodies.

I perched upon the gates and watched their lulling walks with mild disinterest, taking in the vast expanse of the realm. Within Helheim, among the masses of people walking peacefully, a man and woman cowered in fear as they were ushered towards Nastrond‡ by those dead that Hel entrusted with responsibilities. The couple’s eyes darted around nervously.

I tilted my head and waited.

They held onto each other but the man ducked behind the woman, using her as a shield. I glanced over at Garm, but she appeared nonplussed. She inclined her head to watch a cave in Nastrond, and hummed.

The woman screamed.

A mighty dragon appeared from the confines of the cave, its wings spreading as wide as five longboats, as it flew over Nastrond. It flew up as far as it could before the chains around its tail began to strain, and it delved down like

* A dragon which gnaws at the roots of Yggdrasil, the world tree, in Norse mythology.

† Messenger squirrel who runs up and down Yggdrasil.

‡ The afterlife for murderers, adulterers and oath-breakers (the worst possible crimes in Viking society).

a cormorant. It plucked the couple into its mouth, and the screams came to a crunching end. With that, Nidhogg swiftly escaped back into his midnight cave, and only his eyes gleamed in the darkness, oozing with a vengeful, hungry heart. He stared at me, and I could see an angry cloud of fire leave its nostrils in frustration.

I am not his meal just yet.

I cawed a farewell to Garm, and flew over the dark realm, weaving through the winds which blew into Helheim from the river Gjöll*. The dead were as they lived, farming, serving, existing as they had before. Helheim was no eternal place of rest, and it was no eternal place of revelry. Indeed, it was just like all the other realms, with only the barest distinction that all permanent inhabitants but one were wholly dead. I flew past farms and towns and markets. I flew quickly but memorised the land once more, seeking out any significant changes. I found naught.

I dove low as I encroached the palace grounds, and saw horses graze on a splendid meadow outside magnificent wooden stables. There were a dozen mares watching three spindly foals prance and play. The stallions watched on from within the stables, their attendants unwilling to risk having to care for more foals just yet. Among these stallions, however, was one like none other. A speckled grey stud with a fiery red mane drank water brought to it by an attendant. He kicked two of his hind legs, as he balanced on his other six, whinnying with satisfaction after a long ride well done.

I cawed at Sleipnir† as I flew by, but he did not hear me. I travelled on.

Before long, I flit into the palace with my little raven wings and knew that I was in the very heart of the realm. I flew along the ceiling made of indigenous, dark materials which sucked out all light incident upon them, content in the knowledge that I was concealed from prying eyes. I swooped through the halls with ease for there were few doors in the palace. After all, doors are but for safety and there is no need for barriers within a place that needs no protection. The dead cannot die again, and no harm can befall the realm, especially under the rule of the auspicious Queen.

I circled the eastern wing a couple times, where countless men, women, and children of all races and realms awaited care in an infirmary. The Queen's attendants walked in with new patients at all hours of all days, for there was never a shortage of the infirm to wander through death's door. While many

* The river that separates the living from the dead.

† The horse ridden by Odin, and child of Loki- a trickster figure in Norse myths.

required continual care and attention, some merely needed their axe wounds stitched up once more. The attendants, once healers in their other lives, worked diligently through every night and every day, slowly restoring health and even a little youth to their patients with almost a devout love. They served and cared for their patients with tenderness, even those into whose skulls they might wish to bury one more crushing axe. For pleasing the Queen was, after all, tantamount to saving a life in another realm. And nothing pleased the Queen more than when the healed left the palace and took up professions in her lands. Or so they gladly believe.

At last, I left, dashing in and out of several rooms searching for the woman that ruled them all. I dove into the Queen's chambers, sought out the great hall where seemingly endless audiences took place, weaved carefully through the potions rooms and even bobbed briefly into the servants' quarters. But she was nowhere to be found. I cawed to myself in annoyance and turned a corner into another empty hall, continuing my hunt. After exhausting nearly all possibilities, I found the hall where her blackened locks glimmered, framing her half skeletal face.

She sat at the centre of the head table, in a feasting hall brimming with her peoples. Each of the tables was stacked high with succulent meats of livestock reared by dead farmers, and darkly shaded vegetation grown within the realm. Some of the dead were hunched over their platters devouring food so fast they would have died in their recklessness elsewhere. Others took more care and savoured the feasts, relishing flavours like they were a gift they had not received in multiple lifetimes. Yet others, who could barely move their wooden utensils to their lips, were fed by their patient attendants. Though there were no endless fountains of mead or drunken warriors who had died gloriously in battle, there was no shortage of merriment in the Queen's hall. Ale spilled everywhere as greatly exaggerated tales of valour in glory days long past were shared amongst the many healing.

Though raucous laughter echoed through parts of the hall, many were not partaking in the revelry, as they looked upon the guest of honour. Even young ones who knew nothing of the legends of the living looked upon him with a curious love blossoming in their hearts, for Balder the beloved* was amongst them. Men and women alike swooned at the beautiful man, coveting him in their hearts. If the Queen were not there they would have gathered at his feet, eager to touch him and claim even a single hair on his head as their own. He nodded politely at all who managed to catch his attention but simply continued speaking with his brother, Hermod, whose skin was not stained with death.

* Son of Odin and Frigg. He was killed by a spear of mistletoe in a plot by Loki.

I watched the proceedings in silence, distaste in my mouth at the reverence given to the foolish man. I was ever so tempted to leave a pungent dropping on his hair.

Before any plans of action could be put into practice, the hall fell into silence as the Queen rose. None dared to move a muscle, but for young Hermod, who looked around in confusion. She smiled blankly at the guests of honour, and turned on her heel. She left as only a true queen could, her moss green dress billowing, sweeping the floor behind her. Once gone, the chatter resumed as if nothing had occurred.

I flew after her, following the sound of clanging heels in the lightless halls. I glided into her chambers and sat on the edge of her bed, nestling contently on the warm furs. She stood by her commode, with her back to me, and poured mead into two goblets with the slow flow of a woman who knew exactly what she wanted.

‘Come here if you wish to drink with me,’ she said simply, not deigning to turn around, as she filled the second goblet. She held one out to me and waited. I jumped off the bed and came to perch upon her outstretched arm.

I glanced up at her and tilted my head.

‘I have no reason to poison you,’ Hel murmured with a small chuckle, and took a sip of her own goblet, not taking her eyes off of me. I cawed in thanks and plunged my beak into the sweet mead, drinking with surprised eagerness. It had been a long flight from Asgard, and not even I had realised how much I craved to wet my throat.

She smiled to herself, and walked over to the vanity, with me still slurping away on her arm. She sat down and set the goblet down as well once I was done with the intoxicating nectar of the gods. I hopped along her arm and sat on her shoulder, pushing her hair aside. Our eyes locked in the reflection.

‘I appreciate the gift that has been bestowed upon me this day,’ she murmured, not taking her eyes off of me. Her intelligent eyes crinkled with joy, and her lips softened into a smile.

I cawed innocently, and tilted my head, widening my eyes comically.

‘It is not every day that Balder the beloved is gifted to me,’ she hummed almost dreamily.

I cawed again, rolling my eyes this time, and poked her cheekbone with my beak.

‘Fear not, no single man can enchant me... It is merely pleasant to have what the Allfather* covets. That is why they sent unfortunate Hermod to me, is it not? To try and retrieve their beloved little pup?’

I nodded in assent. The Allfather was so very predictable sometimes. It was laughable.

‘Tell me, shall I return him to the ungrateful lot?’ she asked wryly, her lips twisted in amusement.

I made a sound that could only be construed as laughter and shook my head.

‘Perhaps, I shall join in the merriments and play a little game of my own,’ she smirked, turning her head to look at me directly. I puffed myself up to be at her eye-level.

‘If the Allfather wants him so greatly, I shall return him-?’

I cawed in protest.

‘Calm your feathers,’ she chuckled and touched the tip of my beak with her forefinger. ‘I shall return him only if everything in the cosmos weeps for him.’ Her face broke into a wide and wicked grin. ‘I have a feeling I can trust a certain someone to not weep for him, is that not so?’

I stared at her for a few moments and felt pride well up within me. I opened one wing and gently stroked her flesh cheek with it.

Her expression softened and she pressed a kiss to my beak.

‘Good luck with whatever game it is you are playing,’ she whispered, her green and blue eyes warm despite the decaying death that surrounded half of her being.

I pecked her flesh cheek tenderly and flew off with a soft caw.

‘Be careful, father,’ I heard Hel whisper in goodbye†.

* Odin.

† In Norse mythology, Loki is the father of Hel.



2 ‘The Cache’ by Patrick Cronin-Coltsmann

I watched the storm system spiral below me from my spot in the ring, blues and greens in a great slow waltz. I could sit and gaze for hours, it's a good thing too - I had no idea how long I'd need to be staked out here, it had already been an entire sol. I was nestled in this planet's B ring, with its albedoflage up the Hyrm looked like any other old chunk of ice. I had the systems running on low, but there was still a faint heat exhaust if you looked in the infrared. It's a speck in a sea though, so it isn't normally an issue.

I'd overheard a conversation in a dive bar at the spaceport the Jörmungandr was docked in a system over. They'd been water-mining in the rings when they noticed a ship drop out of subspace just below them, it had looked expensive. It had stuck around for a couple hours then disappeared back to wherever it had come from. The miner couldn't see what it was up to, his sensors had been way outmatched. But it seemed like it might have been a regular occurrence; the mystery ship arrived again a week later and spooked the miner out of the area for good. I reckoned someone had themselves a nice little cache hidden up there in the rings. It'd take impossibly long to root through all the ice to look for it directly, the owner probably has the orbit down to a T. They'd know where it would be for thousands of years, that is, unless someone else got their hands on it. I thought it might be worth a small visit, before the 'Gandr left the quadrant.

I was staring at the shadows of the rings against the planet, trying to guess how many moons it might have from the gaps when I saw the flash in the corner of my eye. They'd finally dropped out and I'd been alerted by the mess of radiation that inevitably follows when spacetime desperately tries to claw itself back together at the end of a warp tunnel. Pretty ballsy dropping so close to the planet, guess they didn't expect there'd be anyone around to see. I pushed off from in front of the viewscreen and glided back to my chair. The Hyrm's own sensors had picked it up and were flashing at me on the command console. I strapped myself in and swivelled the ship's sensor array onto the newcomer. The miner hadn't been kidding, it was decked out in top quality stealth plating, after the initial flash I could barely keep a hold on it. Whoever owned that ship does not like to be bothered.

I primed a tracker dart, this close it'd just be able to get a lock on the ship so that I could still follow it in case it broke line of sight. I launched it and watched it flit off, highlighted on my viewscreen, but small enough to be undetectable by them of course. It was good thinking, the ship dipped below the rings where

I couldn't see it. The dart beamed its infofeed back to me, just the location of our mutual friend, looks like they'd stopped. The cache was in the C ring, closer to the planet and a little ways around the disk from where I was hiding, let's hope they weren't emptying it. I put up my feet, at least I had an idea how long this wait would be.

Eventually, a movement on the infofeed caught my attention, they were leaving. I looked on as the ship crowned the disk, arced up away from the planet and with another corresponding flash, was gone. I kicked my ship into gear and followed the dart's signal to my awaiting fortune. I moved slowly, hugging the ring in case anyone else had been around in that bar and had similar ideas. I got to the dart and the coast looked clear. I studied the viewscreen where it told me the ship had been. Aha! There, in a little cleared out void, a long thin case, maybe two and a half metres by one, silvered so that it doesn't stand out in the ice. I cruised over and stopped my ship a few metres out. Ugh, this is always the worst part, I unstrapped myself and kicked over to the airlock. I hate vacsuits, they always chafe. Once I was ready I activated the airlock and tethered myself, I felt the suit slowly puff as the air pressure gradually lightened.

After what always feels like forever the red warning lights flashed above me, the chamber was finally empty and I could open the external hatch. I floated up and out and grabbed an exterior rung. I could be at the cache in just a single jump. I bent my knees, outstretched them again and was sailing through the vacuum of space to my prize. I approached it from underneath and arrested myself with a small jet from my thrusterpack. I surveyed the case: the bottom was blank, but when I peeked over the top I saw? Flowers? A bouquet of white tulips frozen stiff, fastened onto the case by a small wire poking out of the lid and back in again. I gained a bit of distance and looked down, there seemed to be a winged figure etched on the top, at its feet I spied what looked like writing. I thrust back down to it and hovered just above the words. A medley of ice, dust and flower bits had glued themselves into the crevices. I took the plasma torch from my belt and turned it to its lowest setting, this wasn't how I had planned to use it but I was curious. I lightly blasted and sublimed the grooves clear of debris until the whole thing was clear. I read and felt my chest sink.

*My Dearest Harmony,
Though I may travel the stars,
My heart will always lie here with you.*

A rogue such as myself doesn't often feel shame, but my head was hung as I drifted back to my ship.

3 ‘Drunk with Power’ by Saad Ahmed

Man, I was in deep trouble, just what I get for being a do-gooder. On the plus side, I’m pretty sure I had put a massive dent in the illegal drug usage going on in the city. On the other side, I had a trio of powerful wizards chasing me right now. Apparently, people really don’t like it when you’ve been causing their profits to go down. In any case, there is no way I’d be able to take them down in my current state. I had to pull a desperate manoeuvre and I had to do it now. Panting, I finally arrived at my destination and made a request that would determine the outcome of the next hour.

‘Two rounds of shots, now!’

I should probably back up a bit. I’m a wizard living in London, 2018. Magical skills and abilities weren’t something I was born with, but they also weren’t something that took a lot of effort to get. I happened to stumble upon a wizarding monastery of sorts during my holidays in the Scottish mountains. Yeah, I know, an odd place to train wizards, maybe that’s why there are so few of them these days. They let me stay with them for a few weeks and taught me some basic spells while I was there. It might seem too good to be true but there was a big catch; doing something as simple as setting a piece of paper on fire would leave me exhausted for the rest of the day. They offered me the chance to hone my skills, to not get so fatigued and cast even more powerful spells. I declined; a degree in electrical engineering was more than enough work for me.

I didn’t think much of it when my course started again. I didn’t try to use magic much either; I charged my phone one time in the morning and it led me to miss an entire day’s worth of lectures. One day however, when I was walking home after a bar night, I was feeling chilly and decided to use a spell to warm myself without really thinking about it. To my surprise, not only did I not pass out from sheer exhaustion, but I was noticeably warmer than when I had previously used the spell while training.

It took me a few weeks of experimenting but I finally worked it out. I could become less drained by my magic and make my spells even more powerful; the catch was that I had to be drunk. Well la dee da. Unfortunately I still got hangovers and I didn’t want to become an alcoholic, so I resolved not to drink solely for the purpose of using my magic. But then I got the itch, I had the ability to use my magic without handicapping myself. Who cared if being a little tipsy was all it took.

I did what any nerd who fantasizes about superheroes would do. I decided to become a midnight crusader. It wasn’t too bad at first. The night before a

day with no morning lectures, I would drink two pints to get buzzed and go out on patrol. Not really a lot of crime to be honest; at least that I could find wandering around. But one day, I was able to spot some drug dealers and well, one thing led to another and I had advanced to destroying warehouses of drugs. It wasn't even that hard, just one carefully aimed fireball and thousands of kilograms of drugs gone. I could be in and out without anyone who was causing all the mess.

Until today of course. In my latest escapade, I found another warehouse; this was harder to find seeing as I was burning the rest. I snuck inside, quickly surveyed the area, and launched another classic fireball. Smiling to myself I turned to go back home, only to find myself face to face with three tall guys, all dressed in black leather. I could feel the power emanating from them and knew instantly that I was severely outmatched.

'You're the one who's been messing with our coke for the last few weeks, haven't you?'

I tried to say something but could only make pathetic, gargling noises in an effort to speak. Their hands immediately started to glow with power. I raised my hands in mock defeat and adrenaline finally gave me the ability to speak again,

'Don't suppose we could talk this out?'

I then launched as much of my power as I dared at them. Not enough to stun them, unfortunately, but enough to stun them momentarily while I used the last of my power on several teleportation spells. The trouble with the nature of the spell and my abilities was that I had to look at where I was going when using them. I ran out of magic only a few miles away and dashed into the nearest pub I could find. And that brings us back to the current scene.

It's not hard to find a wizard if you had the necessary skill. I knew it was only a matter of time before the other guys found me. In that time, I was able to down 2 rounds of shots, Andy's Purple Armageddon and half a glass of whisky. At this point, it was an effort of me to just stand on my feet. I was on one knee, holding the glass of whiskey, trying to stabilise myself when they barged in. Damn, I could not think straight. I was going to have to go on instinct alone. I downed the remaining whiskey in one go (gross!) as I got up and faced them.

One of the thugs launched a ball of lightning at me. I meant to dive out of the way, instead I just fell onto a table and pushed a couple's drinks to the floor.

'SSooooorrrr.. . . . ' was all I could get out.

I found myself being lifted and slammed against the wall. The offender was of course, one of the rogue wizards. Up close, I saw he was tall, blonde and wearing sunglasses. Who the heck wears sunglasses at night?

‘Well aren’t you a scrawny runt,’ he said, raising his hand.

‘Yer fash ish a schrwany rant,’ was all I could slur out in response.

I pointed my hand at him and fired an air blast. The force of my spell ripped him away from me and slammed him against the wall. There was a loud crack and he slumped to the ground. I, meanwhile, fell to the ground on all fours. For some reason, this was funny to me and I started giggling uncontrollably.

The other rogues were, understandably, very perturbed by this chain of events and were unsure of what to do. But not for long, I saw them make some hand movements and before I knew it, my clothes were on fire.

Well that got me to my feet.

‘No! Nooo! My mum got me thish jacket!’

Water. I need water. Now!

I reached out for a nearby pitcher but in my current state, only managed to knock it to the floor, spilling its contents everywhere.

‘Nooo!’

Because it seemed like the rational thing to do at the time, I decided to fall into the puddle of water. Unconsciously running my magic on autopilot, I duplicated it. A bit too much. I felt like I got knocked aside by some incredible and wet force. I let it just carry me until I came to a halt. I got up on my knees with great difficulty. Apparently, I reproduced so much water I caused a mini-stream to form from where I had knocked over the pitcher. The water was flowing outside now, and the level inside was steadily going down. Everyone had been knocked back by the flow but not enough to fall unconscious. The same was true, unfortunately, for the two wizards who had set me on fire. Before I knew it, they were right in front of me.

I immediately whipped up a magical shield around me. Powerful enough that they were pushed backward. Leaning against the wall, I forced myself to stand up.

‘Hoooo booi. You guyz are in for it nowsh.’

I forced myself to try and concentrate. That was incredibly hard considering how fuzzy my mind was and the fact that the alcohol was blurring my vision.

The two rogues threw a variety of spells at me, my shield held. They were clearly panicking now.

‘What are you gonna do now?!’ one of them managed to spit at me.

‘Yo Mamma!’ I screamed, raising my hand and firing a bolt of power at them. If only I wasn’t drunk, I would’ve hit them. Instead I got some chairs metres away from where they were standing. They stared at the broken chairs in confusion. I shook my head.

‘Well damn.’

It was now or never, I just started randomly firing power bolts in whatever direction I could. The air became filled with the buzz of power, flashes of light, and flying wooden chairs. I stopped to steady myself and looked at my results. Honestly? They were pretty terrible. I had pretty much demolished all the furniture in the pub. On the plus side, the remaining two rogues were squashed under a pile of broken chair legs. I teleported myself right next to them.

One of them was knocked out thankfully, but the other was still conscious and struggling to free himself. His eyes were glowing. I knew I had to do it now, the final blow.

I threw up on him.

He launched his power out in surprise. He missed me and managed to hit a painting on the wall which immediately fell and smashed onto his face. He was finally unconscious. At least I hoped he was. It would really suck to have some deaths on my hands.

I pondered this thought for a few seconds before I promptly fell unconscious myself.

4 ‘The Drop’ by Anonymous

I hated riding transport ships in space. Everything was too quiet, too peaceful. It didn’t match the tension everyone was feeling. I’d much rather have rode into the Martian atmosphere and feel the rumble of re-entry.

ETA to drop-point: 10 minutes

‘Thanks Sheut,’ I said, breathing deeply. Years of experience and shock-absorbant casing meant drops had become easier for me. I breathed again, watching my chest guard rise and fall. The entire cockpit was designed to protect me, fully kitted with a chest guard, helmet and limb guards.

I willed the helmet to lower the blacked out visor so that I could focus on the Sarcoff’s eyes. Through all the cameras around its body I could see the Gragt, the Calla, and the C-class FAA unit. The unit looked so small compared to the mechs. Where we stood even in drop mode at over 5 metres, the FAA’s exosuits were barely taller than blue-G humans. Not that the exosuits did much, they gave the soldiers the ability to fly and some life support systems, but not much in the way of weaponry, too expensive. It wasn’t as if the troops needed it; one of the Blue’s treatments of the Federation colonists was to expose generations of Joops to mutagens. Due to being near the gas giant, it resulted in a society of high-Gs, a superhuman scourge to the low and blue-Gs.

But enhanced anatomy wouldn’t stop Blue magic.

ETA to drop-point: 10 minutes

‘I heard you the first time,’ I responded.

I fidgeted under the chestplate, and glanced at the timer on my HUD. 3 minutes to drop.

3 minutes.

3, not 10. Not even close.

Sheut was looping.

I swore. How had this happened? When? He was working fine when we boarded the transport, and had kept updating me as we accelerated. I tried to open a private channel to Med’val. No luck. I could operate many of the Sarcoff’s systems myself without Sheut’s assistance, but not communications. I needed to stop Sheut from looping, otherwise I was going to die in drop, unable to make use of the thrusters to slow my descent.

ETA to drop point: 10 minutes

I tried to unhook my arm from the limb guard, but found that the locks were under Sheut's supervision, trapped in the loop. I was stuck. I turned my body as much as it could to face a screen to my left, a log that displayed everything Sheut had been doing. Being displayed were three lines that kept repeating. I couldn't turn around fully to see what they said, I could only see the ends of the lines.

-tem check

System check. Well that narrowed it down. I hoped the next two lines could do better than that.

-tional

Hell's fury, this wasn't working.

Then I felt a lurch in my stomach. I looked at my timer, it had turned green.

We'd dropped.

ETA to drop point: 10 minutes

I prayed that the great Flow would deem me worth sparing, and looked at the last line.

-ing?

I was going to die. I would've started screaming, but I knew it didn't matter. The Sarcoff was airtight and shock absorbing. No one would be able to hear me as I screamed, burning and boiling.

I shakily chuckled, thinking that I'd finally earned the name of Coffin-rider.

3 hours ago...

'Who'll burn the Blue to ash, and claim it for the righteous?' shouted the lieutenant as he rallied his platoon.

'F-A-A!' came the reply. The soldiers chanted perfectly in time with each other. It was unnatural. Hell, their neural implants probably told them exactly when and how to cheer. Joops always knew how to take the fun out of something.

It was amusing to watch them getting ready to drop, considering how most of them were unlikely to come back from this operation. I nearly pitied them.

Nearly.

I was sitting up on a raised walkway above the repair stations. To the back of me was the inner hull. Nothing was there to stop people from falling off, so I just sat there dangling my legs over the edge, taking in the view of the mobilising army.

‘Who’s gonna drown them in their seas, and choke them in their air?’

‘F-A-A!’

The FAA, the Federation Armed Alliance. An imposing force to be feared and revered, the pride and joy of the Jupiter Federation of Celestials. Or a mass of brainwashed orphaned high-Gs, used to wipe out any threats to the Federation, depending on who you asked.

‘Sheut, progress report.’

I didn’t hear a reply, I guessed I was out of range. I stood up, then hopped down to the top of my mech, the Sarcoff. A Tombstone-class Blite Industries Bipedal Shell, Pharoh variant. It wasn’t pretty, the paint job was all but stripped away from years of use. Patches of gold and blue randomly torn off by bullets and damaged sections replaced by grey plating. But underneath that shielding it was angelic: high-output carbon muscle with micro-haptic sensors; nanite repair fluid running through every system; a versatile array of weapons and tools to get me past any enemy. Not to mention electromagnetic shielding, and an energy absorption field for counter-magic combat.

The cockpit door was open, perpendicular to the mech’s back. It needed to be so that Sheut could talk to the maintenance crew. I could see the communications line running out from the mech. I used the ladder on the top of the Sarcoff to lower myself onto the door of the cockpit. The seat had been pulled out onto the rails of the door. It was in the way, and I needed to get closer for Sheut to be able to hear me.

‘Sheut? Salsal?’ I said, popping my head into the interior of the cockpit, manoeuvring around the seat.

Salsal Ren, all bar three systems are at near-optimal functionality.

The ‘voice’ wasn’t external but in my head, a signal transmitted from Sheut’s core to my neural implants. Sheut was a CM, a Crystal Mind, a mineral lattice soul powered by the Flow of magic. I could see a light blink and flicker on Sheut’s module, an integrated cylinder situated above where I would be

sitting in the cockpit. It meant that he was ‘thinking’, most likely about the specifications and repairs I’d told him to complete before drop.

‘Let me guess, one of those three is the antenna?’ I asked, exasperated by the sheer resistive nature of our shielding, a major selling point of the Pharoh. I first encountered one in the mines, where they were used to handle heavy equipment and resist the dangerous radiation of the minerals. I was assigned a bruised and battered Pharoh, a hunk of junk that would go on to become the Sarcoff I piloted today.

I returned my focus to the antenna, it looked foolish. Centuries of re-discovering and re-developing communication technology, and humanity still managed to mess up. Our own shielding hindering communications, Hell humanity deserved to be nearly wiped out.

Nearly.

Correct, would you like to synchronise?

‘Yit, setting relay module up now,’ I said, leaning down to the central control panel and flipping a switch.

Synchronisation in 3, 2, 1, mark.

Once synchronised, my HUD was activated, and my body felt small and weak. I could feel the power running through the Sarcoff, the individual fibres of synthetic muscle, the weapons readying to disengage safeties. Synchronisation linked Sheut’s ‘mind’ to mine, giving me more processing power at my disposal. It made it easier to use the extended nervous system, and gave me more options to control the Sarcoff’s systems. I used to use a physical link, letting the Sarcoff hijack my nervous system and brain impulses to match the mech’s systems instead. The integrated ports along my spine, arms and legs were a testament to that. But now that I had Sheut I didn’t need them, the only implant I needed was the one in my head. But removing the ports could cause problems, and the Sarcoff’s nervous system was still in use. So now the tech in my body and the link wires in the cockpit just gathered dust, the link wires themselves being tucked away in the cockpit.

Sheut gave me the general run down: antenna down, piledriver not functioning and a faulty thruster. I looked on the screen to my left to see what Sheut had been doing.

‘Sheut, why did you deny installation for the FAA battery module?’ I asked him out loud. No matter, he could choose how to listen to me.

Analysis shows that although the module would be useful, the strain it would cause on the Sarcoff's coolant systems is not worth the extra power output.

‘Same issue with the old reactor?’

Similar.

‘Alright, I’ll trust your judgement. ETA on the specialist?’

3 minutes and 23 seconds.

‘Put up a countdown.’

On the top of my HUD a clock appeared. 3:21, 3:20, ...

Update: if we abandon the piledriver module we can save another 20 minutes of repairs and be at optimal functionality at departure time.

I sighed. As was typical of CMs, Sheut had a roundabout way of saying what he thought. Their restrictions on imperatives meant that they always had to seem subservient. The result: a passive aggressive backseat driver.

‘Why do you not want the piledriver module? The Guild has done a full diagnostic on it to make sure it’s actually useful, and we have no close range weaponry.’

I am aware of the relevant data. However, I cannot help but notice that of our 114 operations across 7 years and 4 months of being partnered, and your further 5 years and 7 months of combat experience, you have only been in a position to make use of a close range weapon like the piledriver in a grand total of 5 cases.

‘So that’s 5 times I could have used a weapon like this.’

2 of these cases were dealt with by stepping on the individual who attacked you.

‘And the other three?’

Point blank harpoon shots.

‘Which isn’t a close range weapon, it’s impractical to rely on them like that.’

Using the harpoons as close range weapons has made up 42.9% of your total harpoon usage.

I paused, did I really use them that little? I retorted with immaturity, knowing it would force him to be more direct.

‘All the other Coffin-riders have CQC weapons! Drel uses a plasma lance!’

Drel is a Hybrider, and specialises in close range and counter-mech combat. You on the other hand seem to specialise in clambering your way through every fight.

We kept arguing, as per our unspoken agreement. Sheut and I were nervous. We had been given little to no information on the operation we had been assigned, apart from the fact that a C-class FAA unit was being assigned to us. C-class was good, which wasn't good news. The Federation made a point of never wasting resources, and they were willing to send a C-class unit and a Coffin-rider. So in times like these, Sheut and I would argue. It took the edge off.

'Ren!' shouted a gruff voice.

I clambered out of the cockpit and onto the top of my mech, my legs dangling over either side of the 'head'. Ahead of me I could see Med'val, in his four legged heavy weaponry mech, the Gragt. It sported force-field generators in every nook and cranny of its overlapping and ornate plating.

'Salsal guildred!' I said, urging him to come over.

He complied, converting his mech into its mobile form. As it sunk its main body down and converted its legs into transport mode, Med'val laughed cheerily. This only got him the dirtiest of looks from the lieutenants of the FAA, unhappy to have this outlier to their protocol.

'How are you, my friend?' he asked me.

'Can't complain, risking my life for a cause I don't believe in, but getting paid for it!' I responded.

We laughed. Med'val and I were contractors, paid by the FAA to bolster their forces. The Jupiter Federation's policy against magic meant that their armies were all but ineffectual against magic. The FAA couldn't kit out all of the exosuits with counter-magic fields, far too expensive.

Enter the Guild, an independent organisation representing only the best warriors, everything from Spellwords to Coffin-riders. The Guild gave guys like Med'val and me backup, and a network of people to help us find jobs and to help us on those jobs, commonly known as the guildren. It was worth the small percentage taken off of you pay check to have the Guild on your side.

The FAA itself hated us. Anyone could ask for our services provided they had the money, so for idealists we were scum. It didn't help when a contractor like me used a CM. Even just making use of the natural Flow of magic was unacceptable to them.

At least it was meant to be, so much for their war against magic. The moment the Olympus War started, they begged the Guild for help. Both sides did.

‘Well guildred, what brings you?’ I asked him.

‘Special operation, all very HUSH HUSH!’ he said, tilting his head towards the lieutenants, very indiscreetly.

‘You as well? If I didn’t know any better, I’d say they were trying to get rid of us.’

He laughed, ‘As if they could win this war without Coffin-riders. When do you drop?’

‘In just under an hour, dropping with C-class unit Lance.’

‘You as well? Looks like we’re teaming up, eh?’ he grinned.

I froze, did I hear him right?

You did, and the antenna is fully operational.

I mentally thanked Sheut, and gathered my thoughts.

‘They’re sending two of the Guild’s best Coffin-riders?’ I asked.

‘No. They’re sending me, and you two as back up.’

We turned to see Drel’s mech, a Hybrid. Not quite mechanical, not quite biological, Hybrid mechs were made by finding a young Demon. The creature from Hell was integrated into mech systems as it grew. Being treated to various mutagens and adjustments, as well as the DNA of the Coffin-rider, Hybrid mechs were among the best. Not only could they heal themselves, but also the pilot, and minimal signal delay from command to action didn’t hurt either. The main positive was that a well-trained Hybrid could fight on its own, without a Hybrider. The drawback was that as the mech was alive, it needed to be cared for. Drel hated Demons, so instead of caring for hers, she dominated it.

Drel crawled out of the cockpit, a metal cocoon seemingly nailed into the creature’s chest. She grinned as her mech, the Calla, put its ‘hand’ in front of her so that she could be raised to the walkway. I could see the Calla shiver and warp under the translucent casing of its armour, just hiding the beast.

‘Drel. Why do they need a Hybrider? Why would anyone need a Hybrider?’ asked Med’val.

‘To pick up the slack for you third rates!’ she replied.

Thruster: fully operational

Piledriver Specialist ETA: 15 seconds

I ignored them, I was too deep in thought. We three were by far the best Coffin-riders in the Guild, making us the some of the most valuable assets to the FAA. No wasted resources, and they were sending all three of us along with a unit. These facts didn't worry my guildreds enough.

In my focused state, I hadn't noticed that the specialist had arrived, currently expecting a response to some greeting.

'You the specialist?'

'I am, I represent Blite Industries. I was told you were having configuration problems?'

'With the piledriver, yit.' I didn't like this guy, too happy. Didn't look like he'd ever even been in a fight, how was that possible?

'What seems to be the problem?' he said, smiling. What was there to smile about? Hell, I despised him.

'Every time it's activated, Sheut gets stuck in a feedback loop. Only way to free him is to disengage the piledriver.'

'Ah, have you considered giving it limited access to the module? We have fou-'

'Him,' I interrupted.

'I'm sorry?'

'Him, not it, him. Sheut has a fully developed personality matrix, male. Use the right words.'

'I apologise, it's just that most Shell Operators don't like the idea of a CM in their head.'

He knew Sheut could hear us, and yet still didn't talk to him. He was being disrespectful, either intentionally or by accident. I didn't like this guy, he'd insulted my partner. I started clenching my fist.

May I take over this conversation, Ren? Preferably before you break his face.

I breathed, 'Go ahead, Sheut.'

A tone signalled the speakers of the Sarcoff turning on. The head turned to face the specialist, and a synthesised voice followed. He couldn't have seemed more uncomfortable having to talk directly to a CM.

I chuckled to myself, and left them to it. I needed to find out more about the upcoming operation, I didn't want to drop when I felt this blind.

The lieutenants started to pretend that they were having an important discussion when they noticed me walking towards them. I got in close to their huddle, and put my arms onto the shoulders of the lieutenants closest to me.

'Salsal lieutenants, who knows anything about Lance team's oper-'

Suddenly a look of confusion passed over the faces of everyone in a small radius around me, 10 metres or so. They kept rubbing their eyes, tripping and trying to unblock their ears.

'-ation,' I finished, realising what had happened.

The FAA troops were fumbling around, trying to speak and taking cautious steps. Full deprivation capability. The neural implants of the FAA could act as a way of keeping confidential data hidden. It wouldn't have affected neural implants that weren't on the Federation's network, like Drel and Med'val. But to anyone who was standing near me, total sensory deprivation. The neural implants cut out their ability to feel, to see, to talk, to hear. Temporary oblivion.

I turned away and started heading back towards the Sarcoff. The sooner I left, the sooner the troops would return to normal. I had learned something though, deprivation-class security was only required by three types of operation: espionage, which we were too noticeable for; security of high level personnel, for which they wouldn't waste three Coffin-riders; or...

Amassing a force like this, I nearly pitied whoever we were going to kill.

Nearly.

Present...

ETA to drop point: 10 minutes

Never realised how beautiful the flames of re-entry were. Safe for now in my mech, I decided to watch them peacefully.

A new countdown popped up on my HUD.

'At current rate, approximately 116 seconds to landing.' It wasn't Sheut. It was his voice, but it was just reading off of the HUD, a simple system.

I'd burn up long before 116 seconds. To pass what time I had left, I explored the systems of the mech that I never got around to using. Servo combinations, haptic network, fuel economy subroutines, so many.

*ETA to drop point: 10 34? *vba#ev8*

Sheut's light went out, I guess that the loop caused him to crash. Good for him, at least he won't be awake for his death.

I went back to the haptic network. The system that allowed my nervous system and the Sarcoff's to interact. I explored the old physical link network out of nostalgia, detecting all the connections under the mech's skin. I even saw the ones inside... the cockpit?

What in Hell?

100 seconds to landing.

It took seconds to find the culprits. The link wires that I'd hidden away behind monitors and life support modules. I laughed, I hadn't needed the wires in so long. Then I noticed that one of the link wires was just behind me, to the right. A few inches from my right hand.

I froze.

90 seconds to landing.

I told myself to not think. I reached out, and got a good grip under the module there. It was the catheter drain, put there so I would never have to touch it. I pulled, and it clattered onto the floor. I didn't check for leakage, plenty of time to worry about hygiene if I was alive.

I could see the entry node jutting out, I reached again. I could feel my fingertips brush onto the cold surface.

80 seconds to-

'SHUT UP!' It was getting hotter in the cockpit. I needed to focus, so I strained every muscle I could to reach. My legs, my chest, I even pushed off the helmet with my neck.

I caught the wire between my fingertips, and pulled.

It slipped out.

'COME ON!' One more try, just one more. I silently prayed to any gods that would listen, and reached.

I caught the wire again, and this time I was surgical, carefully pulling it towards my wrist, to the nearest port. I eased it in, and it clicked.

I disengaged the drop mode, spreading the Sarcoff out as much as I could.

60 seconds to landing.

The link wire I was connected to was for the port on my lower spine, not my wrist. The signals were all wrong. I didn't have time for this, so I used what control I had from the synchronisation to replace protocols for the link wires. I had no idea what kind of problems this would cause, but I was desperate.

50 seconds to landing.

It was getting unbearably hot in here, and I needed to start decelerating. I activated the thrusters, the ones I had access to.

The two on the right side of the Sarcoff's back.

I started spinning, and ended up tipping downwards with the thrusters further accelerating my descent. A drip of sweat came from up my chest and onto my neck.

Update: at current rate, approximately 20 seconds to landing.

I couldn't afford to panic. Besides, my death was no longer certain, I could fight back. I could win.

I willed the wrist of the mech to move, causing the servos on the Sarcoff's back to activate, twisting it in mid-air. My back was now turned towards the ground, so I got the mech into position as best I could.

10 seconds to landing.

I activated the thrusters, for a short burst. I repositioned, and blasted the thrusters again. I repeated the same pattern again and again, desperately slowing myself down.

Update: at current rate, approximately 12 seconds to landing.

I couldn't think, I was nearly passing out from the heat.

Landing in 5... 4...

I felt more alive now than I ever had.

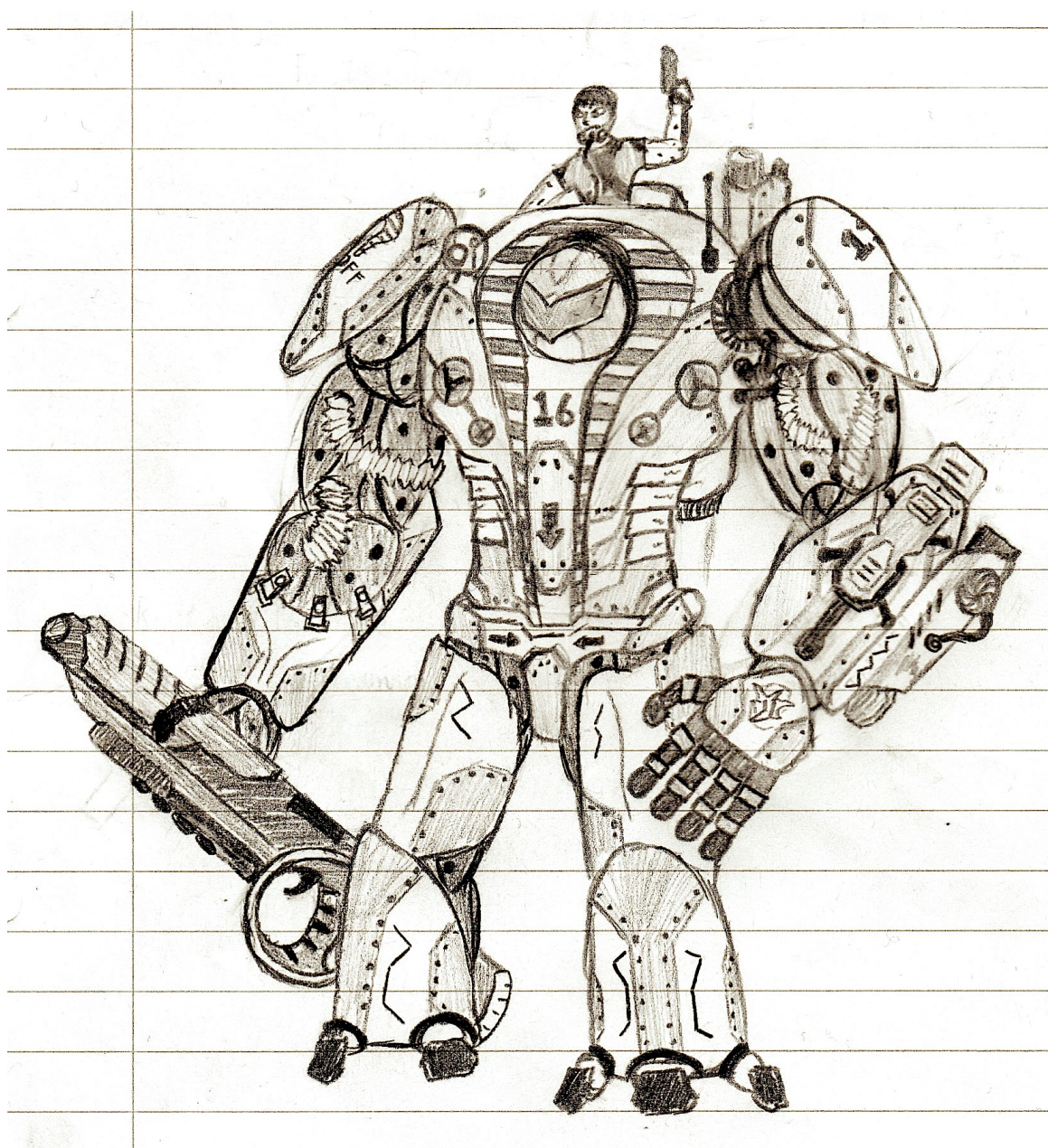
3...

I nearly regretted installing the piledriver.

2...

Nearly.

1...



5 ‘Daddy’s Here’ by Jian Li Chew

At 06:30 on a Friday morning, Steve Wilson was up and about preparing breakfast. Eggs were frying in one pan, sausages in another, bread was toasting and coffee was brewing.

In the meantime, the smart home woke up his wife and kids. For an hour before the set awakening time, the light in their rooms slowly brightened to simulate sunrise. The crowing of a cockerel followed. As they showered, the shower temperature was set according to each person’s preference, Steve set the breakfast table.

‘Thank you honey, everything’s perfect, just the way we like it,’ Britney complimented the chef.

‘Thanks Dad,’ chimed Scott.

‘Thank you, Daddy,’ chimed Ashley.

‘Have a good day at school kids,’ Steve said. ‘I’ve booked the car to arrive in exactly thirteen minutes. And have a good day, honey. Be strong. Your car’s arriving in fifteen.’

When the house was empty, Steve got to work putting the dishes and pots and pans in the dishwasher and tidying up. He stopped at the photo of last year’s company Christmas party, everyone smiling widely in their sweaters.

‘How much things have changed,’ sighed Steve.

He loved his old job and never planned to become a stay-at-home husband. However, here he was. It was time to pay the bills and book the groceries for next week online. He logged in to the smart home’s utilities interface, looking at the graphs and tables outlining the household’s electricity, heat and water usage over the past month.

‘Must remind Britney to stop using the manual override for the heating system. That was £10 wasted this month,’ Steve muttered as he approved the payments. He also grumbled that he set the washing machine too early and was thus charged more for electricity. Next time, he had to remember that electricity was cheapest at 03:00.

‘How was school today, kids?’ Steve asked his kids as they came home at 16:45.

‘Dad! Dad! I was selected for the school football team!’ Scott beamed.

‘And I was the best at art class today!’ Ashley yelled.

‘Very good! Now go wash up. Finish your homework before going out to play! I’ll be watching you!’ Steve warned them.

The ingredients were chopped and prepared, and the pot was ready on the hob for the Lancashire hotpot to cook in. He had fond memories of his mother’s recipe, the steam rising from the dish, the lamb melting in the mouth, with the right hint of bay leaf. Of course he was nowhere as good at cooking as his mother was, but one day, he would master it. Suddenly, he was filled with sadness and longing, remembering that she passed away not long ago.

Dinner was a joyful affair. Britney served out the food, just like how his mother used to. Britney enjoyed her wine, and Steve suddenly missed his alcohol. The kids bickered as usual as Steve intervened to keep them from getting out of line. Steve smiled. The family was never this close, and the kids were growing so fast. Scott was 11, and Ashley almost 9. Steve imagined how they’d look like as teenagers, but it wasn’t time to worry about that yet.

When the dishes were cleared away, it was time for a movie. Scott and Ashley fought over what to watch. Ashley wanted *My Little Pony*, much to Scott’s disgust, when Britney negotiated a compromise with a classic, *Kubo and the Two Strings*. All of them were entranced by the journey Kubo took to find his missing father, after his mother protects him from two evil spirits. The movie ended with Kubo finding his family, though in an unconventional way, and all had tears in their eyes. Steve would have cried too, if he could.

‘Daddy,’ Ashley said, wiping the tears away, ‘what’s it like being a house?’

The holographic projector on the ceiling of the living room adjusted Steve’s image to lean forward, as he said coolly and calmly: ‘I miss my body very much. I miss being able to feel, touch and taste. I miss going to work. I miss feeling the heat of summer and the cold of winter. I miss the wind in my face, my favourite food, a good pint. But most of all, I miss being able to go on holidays with you, go to the school play and hug you and all the little things I took for granted, but, I’m so glad to be alive.’

Britney stood up and beckoned her kids to go upstairs. ‘It’s bedtime. Daddy and I will come up to tell you both stories soon!’ As the kids ran up the stairs, it was finally time for her to talk to Steve about today.

‘Steve, I finally saw the video of what happened to you today,’ she said between sobs. ‘The psychologist said that although it would be painful, it was important for me to understand, and come to terms with what happened to you. I know

it's been months, but all this time I couldn't bear to look. It was horrible. I can't believe what you went through.'

'It's over.' Steve sighed, resigned to his fate. 'I'm still angry at Parsons but there's nothing more to be done,' Steve replied.

In a past life, Steve was a machine operator with Parsons, a major contractor, at a high-rise building site. Building sites were mostly automated now, but people were still needed to handle difficult situations and do the work machines couldn't. Steve crawled under a mobile crane one day to repair it under his supervisor, Will's orders. A camera with a live feed was attached to his helmet, for Will to guide him through the process.

'Open the panel to the top left.' Will's voice crackled in Steve's ear. 'Alright, I see the gears are misaligned. Do exactly as I say.'

Steve repaired the fault, and the crane should be working again. He crawled out from under the crane, and in a split second, his body was crushed by the wheels as it started moving, the grisly image captured by the camera. Otherworldly sounds of extreme pain filled the air as Steve collapsed into shock. He was placed in a life support pod before being rushed to hospital, the last image he saw with his eyes being the closing of the pod door.

'They did everything they could to make it up to you, to us. They paid for this house, and to keep you in our lives.' Britney sighed.

Steve admired her courage. She had to deal with so much, holding down a full-time job, managing the press in the days and weeks after the incident, handling all the legal paperwork, raising two young children, and, through all that, learning to live with a husband who was no longer flesh and bone but a digital presence stored in a server in the attic, handling their smart home.

'They only did that to avoid bad press and a lawsuit,' Steve grunted.

Soon after the incident, Steve learnt, the recording from his helmet camera was leaked on social media. Parsons was engulfed by the scandal and nearly collapsed. Steve's family was in the centre of a media firestorm that had only recently ended. Most infuriatingly and devastatingly, his mother, old and frail, ignored frantic pleas to not watch the video and died of shock. She was cremated while Steve was still unconscious, and he could never forgive Parsons' refusal to bear responsibility for her death, despite his family and friends telling him that Parsons really wasn't responsible. Of course they were! They caused the accident, and his mother died from seeing what happened to him!

‘They really were very sorry for what happened to you. They didn’t have to pay through the nose to have you mind mapped, or to buy us a house like this and pay for all the smart home equipment!’

In the life support pod, he remembered being in an indescribable dream state, floating in, in, something. He didn’t know. His only communication with the outside world was through beeps of Morse code on the flashing light of the communication panel. This was how he gave his consent to be mind mapped. This was done, terabyte by slow terabyte, and his mind was transferred into a hard drive the size of a cupboard, then connected with the servers installed in the smart home attic and on to the internet.

Steve fell into a dark mood, his voice dripping with bitterness. ‘Did you know what I just read, Parsons did all that to save themselves from collapsing. After they mind mapped me, their stock price jumped, and they made back all they money they spent on us and more. They’re loving the good publicity as well! Everyone is so, bloody happy!’

Britney recoiled. She had never seen her husband so angry before. ‘I never told you that Will is on suicide watch! Please, please, you’re alive and that’s all that matters!’

Steve was taken aback, lost for words. No matter what happened to him, Will never intended for this to happen, and he didn’t deserve to suffer.

‘No, you don’t really have me. I’m not there to comfort you, or pick you up from work or send the kids to school. I can’t even hold your hand!’

Britney reached for the metallic arm that hung from the ceiling and grasped it. She smiled. ‘But you are here, and I am holding your hand, honey.’

Steve took his time to gather his words. ‘It’s time to move on, Britney. I’ll always love you and the kids, and this has worked for the last couple of months, but this can’t last forever. I’m here but not really here. I’m alive yet not alive. Everyday I lose the memory of being human, all the small little things I used to take for granted. One day I’ll completely forget and become just a machine. Maybe one day, it’s time for me to die.’

Britney’s face contorted in grief. ‘Why would you say that? WHY???’ she blurted out in between sobbing, ‘You don’t know what we went through, Steve. We went to hell and back for you, weeks and weeks of arguing with lawyers and getting stalked by the media on the street. It got so bad, the police were posted outside the old house and we had to go everywhere escorted. Don’t you feel grateful that the family is still together? Why would you want to die?’

Steve regretted his words. He wanted to calm her down, but didn't know how. At least he finally said the unspeakable, took a deep hard look at the state of his family, a family in limbo. Technology had taken a man who would certainly have died less than ten years ago and kept him alive, possibly for eternity. But technology had raised questions and created dilemmas that never existed before and thrust them on the Wilsons. Instead of grieving and moving on, they were fully in denial, clinging on to what remained of him, desperately trying to regain a semblance of what they used to be.

'I'm depressed, Britney. I don't know what I am anymore. I feel useless. I can't work like I used to, the kids don't have a real father, you don't have a real husband, and it's like I'm a circus freak for the whole world to gawk at. This can't last forever. I'm living in a nightmare, honey, a nightmare that will never end!'

Britney stopped crying, and she reached out her hand to caress his holographic face. Her eyes showed her exhaustion. 'I can't understand how it must be like for you, but, you're right, this can't last forever. But, but, please, let's talk about this in a few months' time.'

Steve admired the woman he married even more. She was truly the bravest person he ever knew.

'Thank you honey. Now the kids need us. Let's go tell them a story.'

—

The story finished, it was time for bed. Before being tucked in, Scott was jumpy and excitable.

'Mum, Dad, I read something today online! Scientists, scientists, scientists are researching mind mapping to an actual human brain, grown in a lab, and one day, one day they can grow a whole human body! Dad, you can be human again!' Scott exclaimed.

Hearing this, Ashley squealed in joy.

'Yes, yes, yes! Daddy! Daddy!'

Steve laughed. He would have waved it off, but he saw the hope in their eyes. Maybe this didn't have to go on forever. Maybe the family will be whole again. The more he thought about it, the more excited he became.

'Scott, that's a long way away. We'll think about it when the time comes, now it's your bedtime, go to sleep.' Steve told him.

‘But Daddddd... It’s Saturday tomorrow,’ Scott complained.

‘No buts son. To bed, now,’ Steve told him sternly as Britney tucked him in.

Ashley held Steve’s mechanical hand in Scott’s room, switching over to the one in the corridor and then to the one in her room, Steve’s hologram hand carefully matched the mechanical one along the way.

After she was tucked in, she asked her father: ‘Daddy, can you check under the bed? I’m scared there’s monsters there.’

Steve’s arm swept underneath it.

‘All clear, Ashley. Nothing to worry about.’

‘Daddy,’ Ashley asked again, ‘I know you’re not happy, I know it’s hard on you, being like this, but please, please don’t go away. Promise me, you’ll be here forever.’

Steve was stunned. She, and likely Scott, knew that he was thinking of digital death. He never mentioned it to them, and always hid his darker thoughts, but somehow, they knew. His children never ceased to amaze him.

‘Of course I’ll be here forever. Daddy’s here, daddy’s always here for you,’ Steve reassured her.

‘Promise promise promise promise promise! Pinky swear promise!’ Ashley yelled. She held out her pinky as his mechanical arm linked his pinky finger with it.

Satisfied with his response, Ashley began to fall asleep.

‘Goodnight. I love you, daddy.’

‘I love you too sweetheart.’

Steve turned off the lights, set the temperature and gently closed the door. This was it then. No matter how hard his condition, no matter how lonely and painful his life was now, he would live for his family. He would protect them, care for them, love them. He would be there as long as they needed him.

‘I’ll be alive for my family. I’ll do everything I can for them, and one day, just maybe, one day, I can be human again.’

Steve said that to himself over and over again. It gave him something to live for, to hope for, and hope was a powerful thing.

He came to regret thinking about digital death. Suicide won't end the pain. It will only transfer it to his family. He remembered reading about all the other families desperately wishing to mind map critically injured, comatose or dying relatives. Many of them had emailed him, desperate for the same opportunity. Most heart wrenching were stories of terminally ill children. Those emails were in his inbox along with the thousands of emails from news sites, technology sites and people wanting to know how life as the first commercially mind mapped person in the world was like. All of them went unreplied. The guards outside the gated neighbourhood where they now lived had to constantly chase away prying eyes and curious visitors.

People were calling it the 'Steve Wilson' era, where the line between human and machine began to blur. Technology forums and social media were abuzz with people debating whether he was human or not. Steve had forgotten how important he was, what he came to signify. He didn't want any of it. He didn't want to personify a new era in human history. He didn't want to represent the hope of cheating death. He hated it all. He just wanted to be Steve, and retreated into a life of housework to avoid the outside world. In any case, it was selfish of him to want to die. The scientists who came in every week, observing all the vital signs, operating systems and his psychology, carrying out ground breaking research, would never let him.

He told Britney how amazed he was at his children, and she smiled knowingly.

'Children know more than you ever think they do.' she said.

'I'm sorry, Britney. I shouldn't have said that I wanted to die.'

'It's okay, honey. It really is.'

'I'll be here for you and the kids. We'll be a family, just like we always have been.'

'Thank you. I love you now and forever.'

'And that makes me the luckiest man on Earth. Goodnight.'

Steve kissed his wife as she fell asleep, and then wandered away into his night, roaming the internet and the digital wilderness.

6 ‘Countdown’ by Katherine Read

T minus ten.

General David Moore, the director of the Global Space Agency, stood with his hands folded neatly behind his back. Even in the privacy of his own office, he held himself straight and tall, his shoulders back and his expression inscrutable. His gaze was focused intently on the live footage of the rocket. Kyle Owens, his junior, stood beside him. A flicker of anxiety danced in his eyes, as his fingers fidgeted restlessly with the dog-eared corner of his notes.

Nine.

Moore spoke. ‘Of course, it’s a noble mission. They’ll go down in history.’

Owens bit his lip. ‘Yes, sir. The country’s been rooting for them for a long time.’

Moore did not look away from the feed. ‘It’s boosted morale across the world, to think of them winging their way towards the Proxima Centauri colony, delivering supplies to the first generation of colonists. Nobody likes to consider the worst-case scenario, but it will still ease everyone’s anxiety, to know we’re prepared for mass evacuation of Earth.’

Eight.

‘How- I wonder how likely that is? An evacuation, I mean.’

Moore’s eyebrows twitched microscopically. ‘We won’t be able to maintain habitability on Earth indefinitely. Temperatures are still climbing, and pollution’s reaching dangerous levels in many corners of the globe. People are becoming more desperate. They need this mission. They need some hope.’

‘It’s just...’ Owens trailed off, seemingly unsure of whether he was overstepping his boundaries. ‘That kind of mass movement would take years, even decades, of planning. And I don’t think we’ve really- we’ve really got anything, have we?’

Seven.

Moore’s shoulders seemed, perhaps, to slump a little, before he quickly resumed his careful posture. ‘With our current resources... it wouldn’t be feasible.’

‘But- what does that mean?’

‘We’d initially planned to begin preparing for evacuation before this crew even set off, but... new information came to light. But the people need hope. The only thing keeping them from panicking or rioting is having something to believe in, and this is all they have. We had to go ahead.’

Six.

An uneasy feeling stirred in Owens’ stomach. ‘Sir, if I have your permission to ask... what was the new information?’

Moore cast an appraising glance over him, and let out a quiet sigh. ‘We found out about a year and a half before launch.’ He paused for a long moment. ‘Proxima Centauri is around 4.2 lightyears away from Earth. That means the signal we received from the colonists a year and a half ago was sent nearly six years ago now. It was far too late to do anything.’

Five.

Owens kept quiet, his eyes wide and fixed on Moore.

After what felt like an age, Moore spoke softly. ‘The planet was not as easy for settlers to cultivate as we’d hoped. The land was hard and infertile. Water was harder to come by than our unmanned missions suggested. The colonists sent out an SOS, a desperate plea for help.’

Owens let out a shuddering breath. ‘Six years ago...’

‘They’ll be long dead by now.’ Moore’s voice held steady.

Four.

‘So the crew...’ Owens spoke in no more than a whisper.

‘Travelling at three quarters the speed of light, they’ll reach Proxima Centauri in around five and a half years. There’ll be nothing left for them when they arrive.’

‘They’re going to die.’ His voice cracked on the sentence.

‘They die here with the rest of us, or they die there. There’s nothing that can be done.’

Three.

‘We have to stop the launch!’ Owens ran a trembling hand through his short, black hair. ‘It’s not too late to stop it.’

Moore placed one hand lightly on his arm. 'The mission has to go ahead. We've spent a year and a half trying to find some way around it, but we can't admit to the public that there's no hope in the colony. We can't destroy their illusion of the brave explorers of humanity, preparing a new planet for their arrival.'

Owens was hunched slightly where he stood. 'I feel sick,' he whispered to himself, his eyes flitting nervously between Moore and the live feed of the rocket. 'Do the crew know?'

'Of course not. They don't need to know.'

Two.

Owens took a shaky step towards Moore's desk and collapsed into a chair. His fingers combed through his hair again, his face pale as he blinked rapidly, still looking a little dazed. Moore spared him no more than a fleeting look, as he continued to peruse the screen on the office wall.

'It's for the good of the wider population. A few lives lost will save many from the crush of panic, and will at least prolong hope for many more. It's a necessary trade-off.'

'Oh, God...'

One.

'As I said, it's a noble mission. They'll be remembered for as long as there's life on Earth to remember them.'

Lift off.

7 Six-Word Story Contest Winners

Thank you to everyone who submitted a six-word story! The submissions (spanning an impressive number of genres!) were all fantastic. I had a really hard time choosing a winner, but these are just a few of the top entries.

Winner

Back then, the clowns weren't tamed.
– Elizabeth Windo –

Runner Up

Nanobots expanding exponentially. Extinction level event.
– Brian Langford –

Highly Commended

IKEA. 'I think I found Narnia...'
– Hannah Lau –

System: Sol; Planet: Earth; Tag: Uninhabitable
– Patrick Cronin-Coltsmann –

Loki; Herding kittens with glorious purr-pose!
– Matthew Legg, Theo Gheorghiu, Tim Davison –

Jar Jar Binks spin-off movie 2019
– Bee Bentall –

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– odniW htebazilE –

