

Futures

The first five minutes of ReBirth

Once in a lifetime. By Matt Thompson



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

In the first minute of ReBirth, Lusa Minori K'Yolo flexed her extenders and stretched out her exoskeleton, marvelling at the strength contained within the ferro-joints. She wondered whether the slight stickiness to the suit's left elbow would pass. The roaring in her ears told her she must be deep within the bowels of a lunar cargo ship. Around her, she sensed the presence of others; the creaks and snaps and pops of a hundred pods all coming to life at once. The floor beneath her juddered. If the motion was transmitting through her foot-pads they must be about to land. She hoped, in a vague, chemically cocooned way, that she'd last longer than a minute or two. If Earth was at full phase she might get a good look at it before she died. Seeing something blue would be a pleasant change.

The ship began to tremble, and she felt a sharp needle-prick as the entactogens coursed into her bloodstream.

In the second minute of ReBirth, she forced her eyelids open. All she could see was a gauzy film of grey-hued abstracts flitting across her

sightline. Well, Lusa Minori K'Yolo, she said to herself, you're about to die. Again. This time on the Moon.

Other deaths came back to her: sucking in gouts of salt water in an endless sea, spasming on the dusty floor of a derelict warehouse, a sudden fly-sting at her temple, her torso splitting like a jackfruit, her eyeballs bursting under the intolerable pressure of a deep dive, a terrified pair of eyes at the end of an arc-nozzle.

Lungs collapsing in the cold lunar vacuum would be light relief after some of those. Grimacing, she balled her hands into fists to enhance the blood flow, and gulped in what air she could from the stale atmosphere of the ship's hold.

In the third minute of ReBirth, she heard a voice: "You're fighting in a forever war, Lusa."

The words burst into her head as if beamed in by a malfunctioning transmitter relay. Relax, she told herself. Just a memory squib. Through her anaesthetized haze she recalled the face of Jasslien, her commander: aquiline nose, enhanced jawline, deep-set eyes that had seen

too much and learnt too little. A pneumatic female body designed for combat rather than titillation. Pearl-and-metal teeth, scarred lips saying: "It'll all be over soon. Your pod is able to maintain your vital bodily functions for up to 20 hours after expiration. If we can get you out, we will. Not because we care; but because these suits don't come cheap. Good luck, Lusa."

A visor, closing. A jouncing ride. The shock of flame, and then blackness.

And now this. Retro-jets firing, a yaw and sway as the vessel settled onto the lunar surface. A cry of terror from another team member, cut off by the application of synth-pharm to the bloodstream.

Joints crack. Muscles tense.

The pneumatic hiss of clamp-release, and freedom.

In the fourth minute of ReBirth, silence fell. The enemy must be close. Who were the enemy? She couldn't recall. Had she ever known? Maybe it didn't matter, in the same way her identity didn't matter to them.

Or to her.

Futures

Snapshots of childhood recollections flashed around her cortex: dusty fields, vapour trails hanging like cotton threads in a reddened sky. Twenty storeys of glass and chrome teetering on the brink of collapse. The snatch-gangs barging into her school room, terrified tutors clustered around the principal's twitching, bloodstained body.

The pod-fitting process, agony piled onto torment, her limbs and sensory organs remodelled around a carapace of ferro-plastics and nerve-activated hardware. Her first death. Jasslien's pursed lips, robo-wasps flitting in and around her helmet, the sting of needles and the stench of scorched flesh.

And now the wait for her latest demise. Was it her tenth, twentieth, fiftieth? Her complete memory-store lurked, safely inaccessible for now, its presence less a comfort than a curse. Futility almost overwhelmed her. Why try? Even zombies can be terminated, eventually – a final death, a tumble to nothingness. But wouldn't that be a relief?

Smiling, she pondered on the dysfunctional logic of the militarized mind, as the cargo hold echoed with the hoarse breath of her comrades, her partners in obliteration.

In the fifth minute of ReBirth, Lusa Minori K'Yolo opened her eyes and screamed. The ship lurched. A grinding sounded, ramping up in volume until her eardrums burst. The walls caved in, lethal metallic shards showering death onto the hundred-strong team. In her final seconds she attempted to activate her nozzle, but her joints were melting and her lungs were aflame and she didn't think it would have made any difference anyway. As the shell of the ship dissolved she caught a glimpse of the lunar surface: dust, rock, the churn of liquefying plastics.

And, suspended above the carnage, the blue-green orb of Earth. Her flesh had become blessedly numb from the shock of imminent death. Idly, she cast her gaze across the oceans to the only land-mass visible. It took her a

moment to realize that she was looking at an upside-down Australia, a vast weather system swirling white along the northern coast.

Some day, she mumbled to herself. Some day, some day, some day ...

Pain.

Blackness.

In the first minute of ReBirth, she tried to blink; but her eyelids wouldn't open, and the slight stickiness in her left elbow was more of a concern, and so she kept her eyes closed and observed streamers of coloured light from within a blissful, narcotic haze.

Matt Thompson is a London-based experimental musician and writer of strange stories. His work has previously been published at *Nature Futures*, as well as at *Interzone*, *Black Static*, the *Best of British SF 2018* anthology and many more worthy venues. You can find him online at <http://matt-thompson.com>.