

Futures

Self from self

What gets left behind. By Brent Baldwin

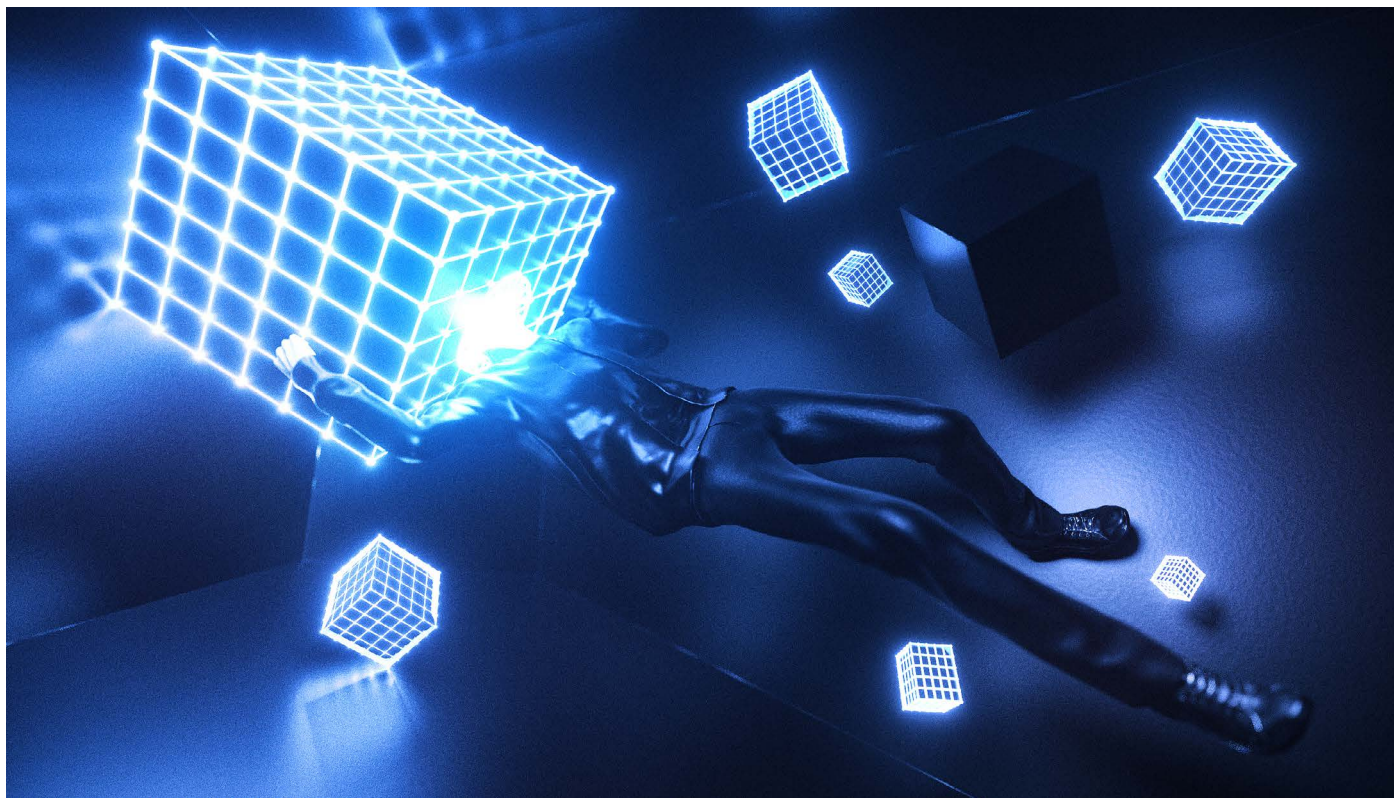


ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

The posse of mechs crouched in the hills above the target gang. Missiles carved trails through the smoke that fogged the valley. Hot brass fell like summer hail.

Yarro, raid leader and the posse's best DPSer, switched his missile targeter to the next enemy. His sweat-slick hands gripped the joystick and throttle. "Give 'em hell, Roughriders."

The posse, their mech's power output already at max, overburned to 110%. For 15 glorious seconds, mechs – friendly and enemy alike – shed limbs like dandelions shed seeds, until nothing moved in the valley but the parachutes of the surviving enemy pilots.

Despite being firmly strapped into his gaming rig, Yarro's heart pounded as if he'd sprinted 100 metres. He couldn't remember ever feeling so alive.

The posse's best Outrider, Sisho, glowed orange with overburn to Yarro's right. Everyone else had damage, and Eshire wasn't going to make it home without field repairs. But

they were all alive.

"Yeehaw, sharpshooters!" Eshire shouted. "That was a great fight."

"Good job, team." Yarro's mech limped as he walked it down to the valley. "Let's get our salvage and get home."

"Hey Yar, Sish isn't moving," Eshire said.

"He'll be fine. Probably a disconnect."

The posse gathered their loot, packing their enemies' highest-value parts into storage racks and empty ammo bins.

"He's still not responding." Eshire's mech climbed up the hill. "Help me with a tow-line?"

Yarro latched on a line. Even hauling Sisho's mech back to base couldn't take the shine off the raid's success.

Through exhaustive testing Yarro had concluded that Blue Goo was the best breakfast flavour. Not so much because of the taste, or because the texture reminded him of the brie his dad had occasionally brought home when he was a kid, but because it was the cheapest

option covered by basic income.

Some pods had enough space for private kitchens, but he had intentionally accepted one with the bare minimum. The lack of kitchen meant more room for a fully immersive gaming rig, which was the height of human existence as far as Yarro was concerned.

He was in the middle of breakfast when his headset chirped. He expected it to be someone from the posse, but Dad's picture glowed on the display.

Yarro pushed the headset to his forehead and squeezed the last of the Blue Goo from the package. A message awaited him when he pulled the headset back into place.

Miss you, son. Just checking on you.

Yarro deleted the message and logged in.

Two days later and Sisho was still offline, which wasn't like him. Sish was always online.

Yarro messaged Eshire, who was already farming credits. "You find anything?"

"He lives in Narruk. That's near you, right?"

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Yarro's stomach clenched. "Sort of. My dad lives there. Why?"

"I found his address from his posse comms donation, and I called for a health and wellness check." Eshire went quiet. "He's in some hospital. Could you check on him?"

The absolute last thing Yarro wanted to do was go to Narruk. Not only did he not want to endure the sun and the heat outside his pod, but he didn't want to run into anyone who would pester him about "not calling" or "how have you been" or "I'm so sorry about your mom".

"Yar, you there?"

"Yeah," Yarro said. "Just thinking." They were the lost generation, educated but jobless, in a world too expensive and too hot for in-person gatherings. All they had was each other. "I'll go."

"His real name is Langston Miller," Eshire said. "If they ask."

The receptionist at Narruk General met him with a squint when he asked what room Sisho was in. "I mean Langston," Yarro corrected. "Langston Miller."

"And you are?"

"His friend." It was true, after all.

The receptionist stared into her headset. "Room 3912. You're the first visitor."

Yarro trekked through a dozen corridors and elevators until someone pointed him to

"the new wing".

The room had four beds, three with elderly people. An emaciated boy with tubes in his arms lay in the other. The boy's chest rose and fell.

Something in Yarro unclenched. Sisho was alive.

"Um, hi," Yarro said. "That you, Sisho? I mean, Langston."

Sisho's head lifted. "Yarro? I recognize that voice."

"Hey, Sish. What happened?"

"Nutritive failure." Sisho looked away.

"I almost starved to death. You and Eshire saved me."

Yarro edged away. "We ... I—"

"I was just so in the zone," Sisho said.

"I couldn't let the posse down."

"You wouldn't have," Yarro said. "No one makes every raid."

"I did," Sisho said. "I get so lonely when I'm not with the posse."

In Sisho's position, Yarro would have done the same.

Sisho's eyes drooped. "Thanks, Yar. For everything."

"We miss you." Yarro edged out of the room.

"Can I come by later?"

"Later."

Yarro found himself walking the familiar path through Narruk Common. Sisho's last word

echoed in his head. *Later*. Was it agreement or goodbye?

It could have been him that bed. Would anyone have come if it were? Eshire, maybe, but if they didn't think to call for help? Or couldn't?

Yarro's feet guided him to a familiar door. He stared at it a while, then knocked.

"You got my message." Dad looked far older than Yarro remembered.

Yarro nodded.

"You want something to eat? I have cheese. Real cheese."

Yarro salivated at the thought of real cheese. "I better not."

Dad slumped. "You OK? Need help or anything?"

Standing in his childhood home, amid the familiar smells, he remembered his parents' laughter. How it used to seem so fake, until it was absent. For most of his life, all Yarro had really wanted was to get into a gaming rig and explore other worlds, but for a moment he imagined himself as his Dad, alone day after day. Sisho had the posse waiting for him. With Mom gone, Dad had no one.

An idea bloomed. "What kind of cheese?"

Dad's face lit up. "Your favourite — brie."

"Enough to share three ways?"

Originally from the tree-swept hills of the Missouri Ozarks, **Brent** lives in London with his wife, two daughters and pet menagerie.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Brent Baldwin reveals the inspiration behind *Self from self*.

It's said that writing is the act of opening a vein and bleeding on the page. If that's true, then this story is a crime scene. It's a collection of so many things from my own life. The years I spent playing MMOs, my abiding love of cheese, my fears for what the world will be like for my children, and my sometimes fraught relationship with my parents. This is a story set in a dystopic world that feels like it could be England or America in another decade or two, but the story is about human relationships, empathy and hope. It is a story that I hope never comes to pass.

