



Title: Underflow

Dialogue: Your personal experience means nothing in this situation.

Optional Science Idea: A person supposedly in a stasis chamber, helplessly watches time fly past.

Word Count: 1195

Underflow

“Remember. Your personal experience means nothing in this situation. This is a choice of whether five million lives are worth yours.”

Those were the last words I ever heard. I said them to myself.

I never wanted to be a hero. I was never interested in saving lives, in being an object of reverence. Sometimes I watch them as they come to see me and I wonder if any of them realise I'm still alive, still conscious. The rest of the time I wonder if they appreciate, or even understand, what I did for them.

How I hate them all.

Once upon a time I was a temporal analyst. Basically, I used to study time, the effects of time, and the control of time. During my studies I discovered an interesting side effect of temporal manipulation. I call it underflow.

Imagine a cup of water. Imagine that cup of water is overflowing. Now imagine the opposite, the water is underflowing – think of it as the air overflowing into the cup, although that's not a pure representation. Now imagine that instead of water, you have time, and instead of a cup, you have a small slice of reality.

That is, effectively, underflow.

Once I understood it, like any scientist, I wanted to control it. I succeeded, eventually, in using underflow to create a localised stasis field. I could freeze time. But then two unfortunate incidents occurred.

First, my research partner stole my ideas, sold my science and made millions, leaving me destitute and disgraced. And soon after that, interplanetary war broke out between Earth and the Mars colony.

Society regressed. Things became hard. I did things that I'm not proud of. I made quite a name for myself in certain circles. And then they made me an offer.

They were the Scoteri Brothers, Ludo, Maxi and Truck. Mean as they come. They came to me because they wanted to break into my old office building. It had been repurposed as the Centre for War Command here on Earth after the last one was destroyed. The Brothers were being paid by the Martians to break in and steal battle plans or military positioning or some other tactical nonsense. At least, that's what they told me. I didn't question it, because to me, it was a chance for revenge.

My old colleague had been working at the Centre, researching the potential military application of stasis fields. I'd been keeping tabs on his work. He had been trying to invent a remote activated stasis field that could be localised to an area without needing a physical chamber. I had, in fact, already invented such a field, but none of my old friend's attempts had yet worked, much to my great relish.

I was a fool. I wanted to teach him a lesson, and I failed to see the bigger picture. I never anticipated what would happen.

I remember it like it was this morning, which I suppose it technically was, for me. The Martians called in a fake bombing strike, which got everyone in the Centre sent down to the underground bunker. We got into the building just fine, using security cards that the Brothers had managed to acquire. With no one to stop us I led them to the archives, and they took what

they needed. I even managed to stop by my old buddy's office and... disorganise a few things.

As we were on our way out the Brothers deposited a large bag on the steps in front of the building. Truck crouched over it for a few moments, and then they made to leave. Naturally I stopped them and asked what it was. And they told me.

“A nuke?!” I said, hoping beyond hope that they were making a joke at my expense.

“That's right,” said Maxi. “Which is why we've got exactly two hours to get very, very far away.”

“But the city. Millions of people will die.”

“Gee, yeah. That's too bad. C'mon boys.”

I tried to reason with them. I tried to stop them. I even tried to fight them. In the end, they left me on the steps, alone with the nuclear bomb.

I care not to admit how long it took me to think of it, but eventually I realised I could use my remote stasis field to freeze the bomb. But when I tried, the remote failed to work. Because of course it did.

And there I was, faced with a dilemma for the ages. Do I let the bomb explode, killing myself and millions of others? Or do I manually activate the stasis field, trapping myself with the bomb for all eternity?

You might think the answer is obvious, but let me clarify one thing. All my tests had shown that in the stasis field one remained perpetually conscious. Think of that. All eternity. Trapped. Unable to move. Unable to sleep. Unable to die.

I had minutes to make my decision. And to my great shame, I couldn't. I couldn't choose.

And I left it too late.

I glanced at the bomb and saw it had just one second left. And in that split second, I made my decision. I pressed the button.

There was a great flash of light, and when my vision cleared, I couldn't move. I couldn't speak. I couldn't breathe. But I was alive, or at least, I felt alive.

It felt like I was in a dream.

Out of the corner of my eye I could see the bomb. It was a ball of fire, caught in the fraction of the moment that it had exploded, frozen in time as the force of unimaginable destruction it almost was.

And there I was, frozen beside it.

Eventually they found me, and my old friend built a proper stasis chamber around me, as much to keep other things from entering the field as to ensure its integrity should my own device ever fail. A bird flew into the open field once. It wasn't pretty. Imagine a bird flying into a pane of glass, but that pane of glass is actually a meat grinder.

But of course, all of this happened two hundred years ago. I've watched humanity rush on by, fascinated by me, the 'Unknown Saviour', for but the briefest moment, before moving on to be fascinated by the next new thing instead.

It's ironic, being trapped by my own technology; trapped in my own underflow, knowing that should I ever leave the field, it would only be to die. And horrible, knowing I long for that with all my soul.

I did have a thought, a long time ago, that terrifies me even more than the idea that I'll be trapped like this for all eternity. Is it even real? Is this my reward for activating the field in time and saving millions of lives? Or is this purgatory, my punishment for failing to act, forced to live out what should have been without ever knowing if it truly was?

That thought, that truly terrifies me. Every living moment, I long for an answer and an end. And every living moment I receive neither.