

Touching Grass

Harrison Cloud stood over the corpse of the man he had just slain, his rifle falling onto his lifeless foe in blatant disrespect. The screen on his gauntlet displayed “16-1” - just one loss short of perfect. The brutal landscape melted away and he was back in the lobby of Onyx Odyssey.

Standing beside him were his four teammates, in glorious contrast to the five enemies he had wasted over and over mercilessly. Above Harrison’s triumphant team, blocky words took shape from the heavens, spelling out “VICTORY!”, and a dark red “DEFEAT” hung in shame above the losers. Around his waist, a revolving belt with the words “MVP” appeared - his fifth today.

His hair was a silky smooth wave, akin to the Huns of old, and his broad shoulders tapered into a lean body. His azure eyes glowed with a captivating intensity, like the gaze of a skilled hunter on his eternal prowl. Hollowed cheeks and a perfect nose completed the picture of the unequal force that was Harrison Cloud.

He reached for his gauntlet to press the keys that would take him back to the Plaza.

“Hey, Cloud! You really smashed it out there!”

Harrison looked up. It was one of his teammates. He squinted at the name above his head, but couldn’t make out what it was.

“Oh, right! Thanks,” Harrison responded with feigned excitement, masking the bite of the implicit insult. Receiving the praise of an inferior has always been distasteful. As if he needed their validation.

“You gotta teach me how you do it! We’re good, but you’re on a different level!”

Harrison pretended not to hear him, and completed the sequence on his gauntlet, whipping him away into the Plaza of the PixelPlanet.

The PixelPlanet - the world’s primary metaspaces software, a boundless, all-encompassing cyber realm; experiences rendered fully palpable without having to take one step out of your room. In it, you could be an astro-trooper settling new space colonies, a connoisseur of the best Parisian pâtisserie, or a skier shredding down an active peak as molten rocks spewed out all around you.

You can be anyone you want and do everything you could ever want on the PixelPlanet.

As Harrison materialized in the bustling Plaza, he immediately cast his gaze upward at the scoreboard hovering over the Onyx Odyssey Hub.

Odyssey Champions:

1. Harrison Cloud (4109 Champion Points)

2. ... (3216 Champion Points)

3. ... (3214 Champion Points)

His eyes fixated on the '4109' next to his name, watching it flicker momentarily before settling on '4112'. Harrison was the unchallenged champion of the game, standing head and shoulders above the competition. He relished watching those beneath him struggle back and forth for positions on the leaderboard. One must imagine that they enjoyed the tireless uphill chase, the never-ending pursuit of Harrison's unreachable height.

“Oh! God! It's Cloud!”

“Cloud, I love you! Can we take a picture?”

“Cloud, will you autograph my armour?”

“Cloud, train me, please! I'll pay fifty thousand PixelCoin for an hour!”

Onyx Odyssey was one of the many games available on the PixelPlanet. It was by no means the most popular game, but it had a tight-knit community of devotees, and standing at its apex was Harrison Cloud.

Apart from being the game's most formidable warrior, he was an artist and tycoon, a renaissance man in the PixelPlanet's renaissance; a digital Da Vinci. The highly-coveted Cloudforged Energy Blade and Skyweaver Sniper Rifle were the children of his design, and he received a sizeable amount of PixelCoin for every sale. This steady stream of money, in addition to his sheer dominance in the game, cemented his status as more myth than man.

Harry Chan was a recluse. His crown was thin and grey, receding further into the distance as Gatsby's green light of dreams did. Haphazard follicles spurted out in clusters along his cheeks like tiny nails, hooking on to morsels of food now and then. The last he checked, he had a BMI of 37.4. Beyond an incredible tenacity for clinging to his current existence, nothing inspiring was to be said about Harry.

He worked a dead-end quality assurance job at a tech firm, fully from his own home. If census polls sought to depict the "average man", Harry would fall short, straggling at the left edges of the statistical bell curve. His lifestyle had been marred by the convenience of the internet; work, food, and entertainment all accessible without having to move a single muscle below the hip. They say elephants never forget, but Harry would be hard-pressed to remember when he last left his house.

Life was much kinder to him on the PixelPlanet.

It was only midnight. Harry still had a few hours of grinding Champion Points before he could go to bed. Unfortunately, he could hold the urge no longer. In a laboured effort, he took his PixelPlanet headset off, stood up from his chair, and shuffled towards the bathroom.

After an excruciating five-minute hiatus from his game, he flushed the toilet and headed back to his room. Not wanting to risk any water damage to his precious headset, he developed a habit against washing his hands. Surprisingly, Harry found himself logged out; he never logged out of the game, especially not in the middle of a session. Nevertheless, it was just a minor inconvenience. He entered his login credentials and got ready to queue up for another match.

Strange. Something was amiss. Harrison's PixelCoin balance look slightly different. He was sure he had slightly north of 30 billion PixelCoin, but now the figure in his heads-up display only began with a "29". Probably a purchase that he forgot. Probably.

No matter, a careless splurge of a couple hundred million PixelCoin could hardly dent his bank account. It was time to get back to the task at hand – dominating another round of Onyx Odyssey.

SIGN IN

USERNAME

PASSWORD

Harry found himself staring at the login page. He had been kicked off his account again. Were the servers down? He was sure maintenance had been done a few days ago. He logged in again, and his heart began to race as he found his greatest fear realised.

His bank balance had fallen to 20 billion. Now he was sure that something was wrong. Before Harrison could think of a course of action, he was logged out again.

Harry immediately changed his password, entering a complicated string of 30 characters, and logged in again. Only 8 billion PixelCoin remained. His throat twisted and tightened as he inspected his inventory, discovering to his despair that several of his treasured items had vanished. Harrison Cloud had flown too close to the sun, and was now the victim of some malevolent force.

Harrison started to write a report to the PixelPlanet Support Team, desperately attempting to rectify the situation. Yet, before he could complete his plea, he was booted from the game once more. Harry was thrust into a state of complete disbelief. More password changes, more security questions. He tried reaching the Support Team with incessant phone calls, but was left on a perpetual hold. Each time he logged in, Harrison found more and more of his equipment missing.

Harry screamed in frustration.

Harrison smashed the ground in front of him.

Harry's tears flooded the inside of his headset.

Harrison helplessly watched as the armour on his body vanished, one by one. They even sold his space-station home.

And finally, as Harrison lay crumpled in a corner of the Plaza, naked and hysterical, he was no more. Wings now melted, he crashed violently into the endless sea of "what was" on the internet; his account had been deleted by the hackers, extinguishing the last vestiges of the hero and leaving no relics.

Harry was never of much substance, but without Harrison, he was an empty husk. He tried, with trembling fingers, to login again. But the response was the same each time,

“Error: Account does not exist”.

Over the next week, Harry’s world caved in on itself in a denial-fuelled spiral. He never stopped trying to access his account. He wrote countless messages to the game’s Support, riddled with bitter accusations. It had to be one of those jealous second-place chasers, trying to be number one. But their only response was that there was no evidence of sabotage from the other players he mentioned, and that account security was one’s own responsibility.

The glory he felt as Harrison Cloud, those emotions were as visceral as any he felt in real life. The PixelPlanet wasn't an alternate reality, it was his reality, and he wasn't just playing Harrison Cloud - he *was* Harrison Cloud.

Then, one morning, as he lay in bed, eyes, it came to him. A bold, uncharacteristic epiphany.

“If I can’t be Harrison Cloud on the PixelPlanet, I’ll be Harrison Cloud on planet Earth.”

Harry dragged himself out of bed with a heavy groan. He went to the bathroom and took a shower, lathering himself with both shampoo and body wash. He brushed his teeth and shaved the wilderness off his face. Dressed in a faded t-shirt and shorts, he bent down, with much struggle, to tie the laces of an aged pair of running shoes.

He ambled to the door, a barrier that had separated him from the outside world for so long. Gathering every ounce of his strength, he manifested the spirit of Harrison Cloud, and with a determined push, turned the handle.

The first thing Harry noticed was the sunlight. It was far brighter and warmer than the PixelPlanet’s. His eyes took a while to adjust to their new environment. As he stepped out, he felt the earth firm beneath his feet.

He knelt down, hesitated for a moment, then reached out and touched the grass. It felt strange, an indescribable, vibrant sensation - it was alive. For the first time in a long time, Harry found

himself connected to something real.