

Hemirtal-2

The world was bright.

James raised his arm to shadow his eyes.

A few things became obvious, the first one being that he was outside, on a plain of grass going up to his knees. The other was just how bright the sun was. Then that he was wearing some sort of rough fabric tan shirt instead of his finely woven suit. Looking down his pants were some sort of rough leather? There was a word for it. He remembered from one of the fantasy novels he'd read, but it wouldn't come to him. Still, it wasn't something he'd ever wear.

"Where the hell am I?" His voice sounded strange, not quite like his. He'd been in the dark, in that casket. Now it was standing in... he looked around. A tree line on one side. The extensive plain on all three others. Far in the distance, a line of smoke rose in the air, indicating civilization. The sky was such a bright blue he wasn't sure it was real, and the clouds were so detailed he knew they couldn't be real. Not even the latest model screen was so accurate as to show nearly every point at the distance those clouds were supposed to be.

He breathed in and the air was warm, crisp, unreal.

He looked at his hands, which weren't his hands. Too short, too knobby. He'd been transported to another world, to another body. That was what that casket had been. He touched his shoulder, where he'd been pricked. He'd relaxed after that, despite the guards who could discover him any moment, he'd fallen asleep.

He couldn't imagine this was what being dead was like. Which meant.

"This is VR," he said, marveling at the details on the skin of the hands he wore. He unlaced the shirt. His chest was muscular, but not overly so, with some hair. He ran a hand over it and it came with a prickling he'd never felt in his body.

They'd mastered VR tactile. How many companies had put out VR suits, claiming to recreate the sense of touch perfectly? None of those James tried came even close to feeling real. The closest was a ten thousand prototype he'd been fortunate to try when dating a software engineer. He'd been so proud to show off his work. James hadn't had the heart to tell him how less than impressive it had been. But it has still been better than anything else.

And the smells. No VR helmet even managed that. One attempt had been recalled after someone nearly choked on the powder being sprayed inside that was supposed to carry the smells. He had everything and unless someone had dressed him while he was asleep, he wasn't wearing a suit or a helmet, or... he was just wearing the suit and lab coat he had on when he hid in the casket.

If he hadn't been paid to steal the information about this technology, his client was really off the mark as to what was valuable.

How were they doing this? The graphics were almost too real. He'd tried a helmet that had real-life graphics, but the computing power needed caused a fraction of a second delay when he moved his head. He'd gotten used to it, but he'd always felt like something was off. Of course, the rest of the experience hadn't felt real either.

How come he'd never even heard of anyone working on this? He stole corporate

secrets for a living. He should have heard about this being in development. He was impressed with Armitage's dedication to security. Once he got out of this, he was going to be looking at the company again, maybe do some selling for once. There had to be a buyer for this technology.

Getting the casket out of the building would take some work.

He felt around for the latch he recalled being there.

Getting out of the casket might take some work too.

He stepped forward, and it was just like taking a step. No disorientation from lag in the response, no sense of unreality as his body was held in place on the rolling floor. Of course not. He was in a casket.

"Damn it, how are they doing this?"

They couldn't have poked through his skull, which had been the latest proclamation as the only way to achieve actual VR. Connect the brain directly to the computer. It was unethical, illegal, and not even die-hard believers in the technology were willing to volunteer.

Granted, James had broken into the company and stolen data. If he'd been captured, they might not be too concerned about how such a procedure would leave him.

The drive.

He patted himself and only felt rough materials. Right, this was VR, exquisite, but still VR.

Hmm.

He unlaced the pants and pulled them open. Loose boxers in a thinner material similar to the shirt with a respectable bulge. Curious, he tried to pull the waistband from his body, only to find it was attached to it.

"Okay, should I be disappointed my junk's nothing more than an impression in virtual fabric, or impressed that someone considered how easy this would turn into all-day porn if they had given this body the actual parts? Especially if it came with customization."

He decided on relief. Minors would use this tech once it was released.

He laced the pants closed, his curiosity satisfied.

He felt the air around him again, and it was just air. This body had no relation to his real-life one. So how did someone exit?

"Exit."

He looked around. No door appeared out of nowhere, no distortion. What was the way that movie had it? Sarah couldn't stop saying it after they'd watched it.

"Tank, I need an exit." No phone booths. No old fashion phone for him to pick up and be whisked out of the matrix on.

He reached ahead of him and tapped the air. A few of the VR helmets he'd tried had head-up displays that reacted to his motions. Of course, with those, he had gloves on, or he was within a set of sensors. The gloves had been better, more responsive.

Here the motion was perfect, but there was nothing in his field of vision to interact with. Well, not interface at least.

He ran a hand over the grass, and it tickled his palm. He plucked a strand, and it

snapped crisply. He placed it between his lips and almost spit it in surprise as he tasted grass. someone had gone to the extent of programing taste in this simulation.

“Okay, I know this makes me a pervert, but now I’m sorry this thing’s G-rated.”

He headed toward the tree line, a long strand of grass between his lips. If there was no obvious way to exit, it had to be on a timer. Or there was a fixed size to the simulation space and either the exit would be there, or he’d step beyond it and wake up in the real world.

“Or you are trapped in here until you die of thirst. Oh, I hope they’ve taken bodily function in how this casket works, otherwise I might die of air poisoning.”

Was there any sort of time dilation?

It was a question among the ‘experts’; could computers be made to speed up the brain, or, they explained, could the two be made so we could perceive things at the speed the brain functioned? He didn’t remember reading anything with a definite answer, only theories explaining how each side was the one with the correct theory.

He’d check once he was out.

The walk was pleasant. Quiet enough he heard birds, saw dots in the sky as they flew. He was even more impressed that they’d programmed some visual life, instead of just a section of land.

He wondered if this was based on somewhere real. There were plenty of protected lands it could have been based on. Or it could be fully fabricated. There were no points of reference he recognized, not that he had much experience with plains and forest. James was a city boy.

As he approached the tree line enough to make out individual trunks, the ground shifted. The grass shortened until it was more what he was used to on the estate’s yards, then it turned into dirt and a path stood before him heading from his left to this right along the trees. On the other side, the ground turned back to grass but reached the trees before it grew tall.

To his right, in the distance, was the smoke rising. To his left, the path kept on going, vanishing as he drifted toward the trees.

The path of the tree?

He crossed the path. He already walked all of this way. It should put him closer to wherever the limit was.

The canopy was dense enough the light dimmed, but he could still see, and the smells changed too. They were earthier, more humid. This was what he imagined a forest smelled like. He heard sounds; branches breaking, an animal howling. The immersion was total. He could think this was real.

The trees grew apart and opened into a clearing, where a group of rabbits hopped about and dug in the earth. James was impressed with how real they looked. He could almost make out each strand of fur on the white and brown bodies.

One raised its head, long ears up, sniffed the air, and every rabbit grew still.

James stayed as still as they were.

They went back to foraging.

He took two steps, and they froze; he froze too.

Now, why would they react to him? It was one thing to add to the immersion, but why waste processing power having them be bunnies he could interact with... unless.

He smiled.

This was a game.

This wasn't just a VR simulation. He'd stumbled into a VR game. Maybe the next sensation to sweep the world. He backed quickly. If this was a game, he needed some sort of weapon to kill a rabbit.

He found a heavy branch on the ground and swung it. It had weight to it, and James had to remind himself this was virtual. The weight felt real, the momentum, the inertia. It was all as if this thick branch was real.

He returned to the clearing, stepping in and walking toward the rabbit. They froze, sniffing the air, and he kept walking. They scattered before he reached them.

He didn't care to do any running, so he stopped and they settled halfway to the tree line. He took two steps and froze, then they stopped moving. Another, once they returned to their foraging. After close to a dozen small steps, he was nearly among them.

They looked so cute, digging at the ground, one was nibbling on a brown root of some sort, two looked to be asleep together. If he were to see this in real life, he'd melt. Here, he lunged and brought the branch down on the closest rabbit. It wasn't fast enough and James crushed its body.

He grinned and looked to his next target. A black window appeared before him.

You have killed a rabbit, you

The window shuddered, pixilated, shuddered again. Maybe there was still work needed on this game.

You have killed a rabbit; you have earned —

The window shuddered more violently.

Error. Player inventory not detected.
Re-initializing.

It disappeared, then returned.

You have killed a rabbit; you have earned —
Error. Error. Error.
Unresolvable situation.
Escalating for evaluation and resolution.

James swallowed. An escalation meant some programmer would be called. “This can’t be good.”

“You are not supposed to be here,” a deep voice boomed behind James.