

1

Jack Harigand awoke from his alcohol induced stupor to find a glass of water and a cardboard box on his desk.

“Drink me ☺” read a yellow sticky note stuck on the glass. “Open me ☺”, read a second sticky attached to the box. Jack scowled and tore open the box, cutting the tape with his long unkempt fingernails.

The box contained a headset. But not a cheap headset like the tech support farm had. No, the headset was the type that covered one’s entire head – it might be more fair to call the headset in the box Jack opened a helmet moreso than anything. In the box were wires as well, saying “plug me in ☺” and “connect me to the Medium ☺.” His head aching, Jack finally reached towards the glass of water –

And poured it all over the electronic gizmo that had manifested itself in his office. With a satisfied sigh and a grueling headache, Jack dry-heaved, then went back to sleep.

2

Jack Harigand awoke from his alcohol induced stupor to find a glass of water and a cardboard box on his desk.

“Seriously, drink me ☺.” read a yellow sticky note stuck upon the glass, which now had a ecologically friendly paper straw in it. “Open me ☺”, read a second sticky attached to the box. Jack opened the box, to find another large helmet. He reached for the glass of water once more but was unable to pour its contents upon the electronic helmet. The base of the glass was superglued to Jack’s twelve-thousand-dollar mahogany desk.

“Ughhhhh.”, Jack groaned. A sudden headache wracked his brain. Capitulating, he took a small sip of water from the paper straw in the glass. “Fine.”, he muttered, and began fiddling with the helmet in the box.

Jack didn’t know what the helmet was, but he could wager a guess. He had glanced through the windows of enough apartments to have an idea. A toy, essentially. A toy, but a toy so popular he’d see kids flailing around with it on in the middle of a school day. And from the cover of the box, this toy that had found its way to his office past several padlocks while he slumbered was apparently called the “Medium.”

Jack eyed the toy with suspicion. Perhaps the toy was called the “Medium” because it certainly wasn’t rare or well-done. The thing looked and felt like an overwrought bicycle helmet. It was cumbersome and unwieldy, not to Jack’s liking. He practically asphyxiated himself on all the wires and dongles he had to plug in.

For awhile, Jack thought the headset was well and truly busted, as it showed no reaction to its multiple sources of power. But slowly and surely, a faint red light began to glow on the front end of the Medium. Briefly, Jack contemplated walking over to the kitchen and pouring another, non-superglued-to-his-desk glass of water upon the helmet. But that would have required getting up, and the rhythmic pains pulsing through Jack's head would have none of that.

And so, still seated in his leather chair, and having a feeling he'd regret it, Jack put on the helmet.

3

Jack regretted putting on the helmet. At first, he found the total darkness that engulfed him soothing. Without visual stimuli and light to agitate his senses, his pounding headache became more like a light pitter patter of agita. But that total darkness lasted for only two to three seconds.

"WWWWWWWWWWREEEEEEEEEEN!", the helmet atop his head whirred, fans spinning and magnetic discs shifting as the soothing darkness dissipated, replaced by bright prismatic colors. The resplendence would have been inspiring had the sudden flashes and brightness not also inspired Jack's stomach to dry heave once again.

The epileptic display stopped, as two scarlet colored words forced themselves into Jack's central vision.

The Medium

"Just like Warioland.", muttered Jack. But even a Luddite like him could tell it wasn't like Warioland. Unlike the Virtual Boy, The Medium had no controller, no gloves. Just a helmet. A helmet was enough. The back of Jack's fingers began to itch. He looked down where his hands should be. "P-paws?", he stammered.

And indeed, Jack had paws. Cartoonish paws with opposable thumbs, but paws none the less. They looked like paws, and a bit more worryingly, they felt like paws. As if bidden by his observation, light blue text wrapped itself beneath the scarlet title screen.

Selected Avatar: Default Dog

Selected Outfit: Noire Nonce

The words "The Medium" faded away, and a mirror took its place. "...What?", Jack blurted, as he saw his "reflection." He looked like a Chinese Knockoff of Scruff McGruff. A brown anthropomorphic hound-dog, wearing a trenchcoat, slacks, and an exceedingly useless trilby hat. "What?", Jack repeated, only to find his "what" replaced by a stock sound of a greyhound barking.

“Oi, bad dog!”, a vaguely British sounding voice rang out. “It’s rude to bark at your master!”

“Master?”, Jack asked, his words coming out once again as a bark. “Yes, Master.”, the disembodied voice replied. “I just said that bruv, there’s no need to repeat it. Oh, and...”

The prismatic title screen shifted. Air rushed through Jack’s (simulated) fur. Suddenly, he found himself surrounded by the noise of honking horns and construction. Cartoonish skyscrapers and extra large fire hydrants erupted from the ground. Then, perhaps due to his hangover, the world started spinning. When it stopped, Jack found himself sitting at a stool on a rooftop bar, surrounded by a cavalcade of human-like animals.

An anthropomorphic wolf wearing a leather jacket (and nothing else) stepped forward and extended a paw. “Welcome to Chew York, mate!” Jack looked around again at the shaded skyscrapers and the animal avatars, then back to the wolf.

“How do I log out?”

4

“You can’t log out.”, replied the wolf. “Not until you pass the test.”

Jack scowled and reached out his paws to pull the Medium off his head. The paws grasped nothing but air.

“Nice try, but this isn’t VRchat.”, the wolf chimed. “You’re wearing a full dive headset mate. Your body is currently vegging out in that chair, while your cerebellum thinks that... *this-*” the wolf gestured, waving his paws at the rooftop bar and everything “- is all real.” The wolf paused, as if processing what he had just said. “Let me buy you a drink.”

“Oi, bartender!”, the wolf chimed, holding up a cartoony sack with \$\$\$ on it. “An Appletini for myself, and an Old Fashioned for my mate!”

Jack narrowed his eyes at the word “mate”, but let it go.

The bartender (a giraffe with human hands) took the sack of cash from the wolf’s paws, and began making the drinks. Unlike the sack of money, the drinks didn’t manifest out of thin air. The Appletini was made using (exaggerated and shaded) bottles of vodka (named Paw-ka), brandy (named Randy), and schnapps (named... schnapps). The Old Fashioned was made using a bottle of Johnny *Barker* Blue Label.

“Furries and their puns, right?”, the wolf in the leather jacket said with a grin. “Still, you’ll find few subcultures with quite as much disposable income. Which brings me to the test...”

Jack ignored the wolf, and took a sip of his old fashioned. It certainly *tasted* like whiskey.

“Bruv! Bruv!”, the wolf cried out. “The test!”

Jack shook his fur covered face and looked at the wolf. "What about the test?", he meant to ask, but his words just came out as a bark again.

"The test is why you were so generously given a copy of the Medium.", the wolf responded. "I know a fella who represents a guy who knows the roommate of someone who is ultimately speaking the boss. They need someone who is good at scrapping up dirt, and when I looked around you were the dirtiest detective I could find."

Jack scowled, and found himself literally growling at the wolf. "Whoa, whoa, relax bruv!", the wolf exclaimed. "Dirty is good! Especially for the test!"

So what's the test, Jack thought, but didn't say, out of fear of having his words warped into a bark again.

"So what's the test?", the wolf repeated, seeming to read Jack's mind. "Simple enough. Infidelity case, stuff you're used to." The wolf slid over a picture of an anthropomorphic, and very, very female panther. "This is the mark. Their boyfriend suspects an affair. Find them and see what's up."

"Is this a joke?", Jack asked, and was surprised to find his voice remained unmodified. The wolf shook his head and lapped at his appletini with an elongated tongue.

"Not a joke.", the wolf muttered. "Do this right, and you'll find what I gave Mr. Bartender here when you log out."

"So you want me to find and stalk a large breasted cat?"

"Yeah, basically.", the wolf said.

"But this is a *game*.", Jack replied. "I can't tail someone who can just disappear into thin air when mom calls them downstairs for dinner."

"Heh.", the wolf laughed. "No, you can, and you will, if you ever want to log out of here." He pushed the photo of the panther-woman into Jack's paw. To Jack's surprise, the photo disappeared, and a small version of the photo settled itself in his peripheral vision.

"I've placed the photo in your inventory.", the wolf explained. "Just pinch that little icon if you want to see it again. You can put other items in your inventory too, if you don't feel like slugging around a wardrobe."

Jack slumped his shoulders. "Where should I start?", he asked. "That's your prerogative!", the wolf replied. "You *are* a detective, aren't you bruv?"

"And what if I can't find this cat-girl?" "I'll buy you a pop.", the wolf replied sarcastically. "Growth mindset, Jackie, not a fixed mindset. Use those skills that landed you that mancave of an office. Oh, and finish your drink."

"I'm hung over.", Jack replied. "Well...", the wolf said with an obnoxious grin. "Hair of the dog, right?" The wolf downed the rest of his Appletini, and spread his arms. "C'mon, you're on a

platform used by hundreds of millions of people, how hard can it be? Oh, and no talking until you complete your task!”

And then, like vertical bars in a powerpoint presentation, the wolf was gone, leaving Jack alone at the bar.

Jack finished his drink. And to his surprise, he did feel a little better. A pumped stomach and a trip to the ER had taught him all he needed to know about day-drinking, but it was night in the world of the Medium.

Jack put the logistics of virtual alcoholism behind him, and got to work. From the rooftop, the city of Chew York looked to be the size of Manhattan. Finding the panther woman would not be easy. He decided to start right where he was, at the rooftop bar. There were about fifty animal-people there. Jack saw a cheetah-woman and a lion-girl, but no panther. He sighed and went back to the bar the old standby.

With skeptical paws, Jack pinched the photo file in his peripheral vision, and manifested the picture of the panther woman. “Bark.”, Jack said, extending the photo to the bartender. “Do you know this woman?” is what Jack *meant* to say, but the wolf wasn’t kidding when he said “No talking.”

Fortunately, the bartender got the gist of it anyways. Unfortunately, the bartender just gazed at the photo Jack handed him, and then slowly shook his head. Jack curled his paw into a fist. The rooftop bar was a bust.

With no other option, Jack made his way down the building, all thirteen flights of stairs. Half of him reasoned that he might run into the panther woman on the way down, and the other half of him reasoned that he was having an incredibly stupid dream.