

The Unicorn

The simulation was programmed to be a simple cause-and-effect relationship between user and system, taking coded terms and phrases into a categorized library of scenes, events, scenarios, and modifiers. Each allowed their players to take on a role or perspective that they chose, preferably ones that aided the user in combatting or working through traumatic resonances from their past.

That was the hope, at the least. Eventually, gamers got their hands on the game system through some loophole released online by an angry, vexed programmer. Once the floodgates were opened, players began to create their own worlds, their own choices, that reflected these codes and libraries into what was argued more meaningful interactions. Sure, a lot of the players had trauma of their own; they just didn't have access to the technology because of insurance policies and, alas, finances. An hour in the system cost upwards of five-hundred quid in some places, I've been told. In my part of the world, the question isn't even a thing.

Everything started to change, however, as game companies realized the power that these systems had. While they weren't the usual holo-deck systems used in psychiatric hospitals today, they did allow the user to upload him or herself online and in a custom form through the use of modern VR headsets easily distributable. Alas, the tech never allowed, still doesn't allow, for the more kinesthetic responses of a holo-deck's setting-simulator. Can't feel your fur, scales, or youth without millions of dollars invested.

I started work on my own rig that, over time, would allow me to change this through the use of small stimulations to my—I mean a user's—brain. Gross, but the systems already in use at our local hospital did something similar, even if the hospital itself was several decades in the past.

I'm soldering my rig's graphics card when the doorbell rings, and the smell of fresh cardboard told me my latest part has arrived. My folded ears perk, and pulling the goggles free from my face, I break out into panting, tail wagging behind me, struggling out of my chair of cords, tape, and a floor covered in laundry.

"You'd make much more headway if you cleaned yourself up," my sister says, lying on her bed against the wall and probably texting someone from lecture.

"Says you. Hey, make sure nothing catches on fire." I wave her off as I dump my tools on the table, scurrying out and into the hall. Already, I can feel the soft, bubbling plastic of shipping materials beneath my fingers. I haven't even opened the door, and my tongue is a mess from the olfactory of it all.

The box is a wide, shallow thing when I find it. Big enough to hold a pair of virtual goggles (headset), it's got a few dings and bruises, nothing too disconcerting. I lift the box and peer around to see if the delivery person's still about. I mean, usually they have you sign for something this expensive. Alas, no dice; they must have driven off to their next drop-off point.

I'm back to my room, dull claws already chewing at the tape to get in as I find my littermate unplugging my soldering tool. "You really did want to set the whole place on fire, didn't you?"

"Hey, remember those days when we could hang out in the back with Jeb and Rachel, acting as though we were wolves organizing a flea market?" Retrievers don't have the best muzzle shape, and the words stumble out of my mouth like I've got cotton wedged under my lips. "How you'd be the big boss and tell us that we couldn't have five popcorn machines?"

Sam rolls her eyes, but her tail gives a wag if even for a moment. "Hardly."

I hold up the box just as I peel open the flap to get in. "It came."

At this, Sam's pupils seem to grow like a pup that's just been given a shiny new kickball.

"The headset?"

"Yeah. I mean, it'll need some work, but it's basically ready."

"Well, quit standing there and open it up."

With the soldering tool unplugged, we move everything from the covered worktable and set the headset down, visor facing us. A matte grey, it's clear that this thing wasn't made for what we have in mind; no screws or snap guides are visible above the outer plastic casing. Rather, it looks like we'd need to pop the casing off just to get in and see an inner shell waiting for us. The strap looks good. Sewn so that it makes room for even the largest of ears, it's got a couple of buckles meant for tightening any kinks out, fitted for smaller heads if needed. "It should take me a day or so to figure out how to get in, but after that I—hey!" I'm halfway close to taking the thing apart when Sam pulls it away from the desk and hefts it onto her head.

"Yeah, yeah. I have a game later, so how long do you think until you get some dating games on this thing?" she asks.

Could she see me, she'd see that I'm glaring with all the anger of the Seven Seas. "This isn't for streaming dating games. This thing can get us into the Cloud. All I need is some time, and we can be anyone or anything, finally see what it's like to be a wolf. Or, maybe a dragon."

Sam scoffs, and she pulls it off, obviously thinking differently as she feels the smooth plastic with her pads. "Do you have any idea how much trouble you could get into for that?"

"Well, it's kind of my thing," I say, obviously treading a No response.

"Sure, but what happens if you get caught? That means they'll cut our Wi-Fi, fine us, and monitor the house—and our credit—for who knows how long." *Right, there's all of that.*

I shrug. To be honest, I didn't but the game *just* to play pretend. It's no surprise that for years I've been questioning whether or not I identify as the person I really am. What if I'm not the retriever people think I am? What if I'm a bit more complicated than simply being some guy-dog? "Yeah, I did think about it."

"So are we returning this?" she says. "Or, can you download some games for me before I get back?" Sam moves to the bed and grabs her gym bag from the floor. Despite the virus going on, she's still going out to practice games of Frisbee Golf.

Sitting back and landing in my chair, I take the headset into my own large, meaty paws. "I guess. You play *Stardust Handsomes*, right?"

She nods. "Girlfriends edition. Charge my card. I'll bring home dinner." We bump our foreheads together in the old littermates-stick-together thing we have, and she leaves, wagging tail the last thing out the door.

I look down at the headset now left in my lap. Sure, she's right: we could get into a lot of trouble by modifying the headset to get us in the Cloud. The state has taken to monitoring Wi-fi access, subscriptions, and any and all impairment accommodations that could match Cloud access. I've got PTSD, a bit of Asperger's, as well, but those don't fall under the usual keys to the system.

The headset clacks onto the table heavy. Wringing my paws against my stomach, I can't help but look at my sister's bed, then mine, and think how easily I'd give up my life for hers.

What would Mom and Dad say if they were still around?

* * *

I'm halfway asleep when I feel the fan of my PC kicking on and shifting the dust around. Sniffing before unleashing a sneeze, I sit up. It's late evening, but sunlight cracks through the window, the house outside my room silent of any sign of Sam.

The PC booted on, probably knocked or restored from sleep mode by some program rebooting. I have half a mind to log in and get some game time going before Sam arrives; she's got her game downloaded onto the headset and PC, now, so I can safely assume she'll want to play her game. I glance at the headset, plugged in and waiting, and find a glowing blue light to come out of each lens, something running. "Hey..."

I'm up, tail curled beneath me as I cross the treacherous floor of used laundry to the desk. I get to my chair and take the console into my paws, and with it vibrating, the system definitely kicked on from something starting up. *Probably her game or its drivers.* I make to thumb for the system's button when one question bubbles up to my mind. *What if it is her game? Maybe I can check it out?*

Stardust Handsomes is loosely based on the Cloud system used in Restorative Healing programs, with players taking on a virtual avatar and gaining certain responses from the videogame boyfriends rendered in-game. From a fox, horse, hyena, falcon, and wolf, players choose through a range of qualities for their digital e-boy, and the algorithms get to work making a custom romance experience.

To be honest, I've never been into dating games. They're short, narrative based programs that never give anything more than a linear storyline. Yes, the new games offer more custom approaches, but they're already in the system, waiting, not like the programs in Cloud. *What's the point of living a fake life if someone's just going to tell you what direction to choose?*

"Sound's like you've got it all figured out," someone says.

I flinch, and hackles raised, ears perked, I'm frozen into a stance as I whip my head around to the door. Of course, no one's there. It's like the voice came from nowhere but everywhere, all the same. "Easy, pooch. I'm safe. Think of me as a friend," she says, whoever *she* is.

"Where are you? How did you get into my house?" I moved to the window and peer out. It opens out onto the roof, sometimes where Sam and I will go to smoke and talk history. "Are you...hacking my headset?"

"Sure," she says. Her voice comes off as knowing but kind. "Let's go with that. Pick it up. Put it on."

I hesitate, but lift the plastic console up and shift it over my head. Already fitted from trying to get Sam's game ready, I don't even need to peer to see through the concave glass frames and find myself looking at what appears to be a unicorn. Highly rendered, she sits in front of me, a café table splitting us apart. We're in a meadow somewhere, and with the sound system's speakers so close to my ears, I can practically feel the buzz of leaves tickling my neck and cheeks as they fall. "Hey," she says. "Sorry, this must be unusual for you."

"This is the game, right? *Stardust Handsomes*?" I twiddle my thumbs. Yeah, I'm a bit caught off guard, hugging my paws close against my stomach. "You're...a simulation?"

She laughs. Wearing a soft cream blouse, a bangle around her horn, and two hoop earrings, her whole energy seems to double as she laughs and tosses her large head back. She's so tall, probably three feet taller than me. "Dear, do I look like a handsome?"

True. "So who are you, then? You said you hacked into my headset? Is this...the Cloud?" I don't believe it is, and answering my question, she shrugs.

“Reality is always up to question. What is a Cloud? Who has access, and why? Or, if you’d rather, why are we given the lives we live when we could be someone else, had we the luck and opportunity to be so?”

My face burns, as she peers over the table holding her glass mug in her hand. With crystal blue eyes, she’s both intimidating and gorgeous. It’s almost as though I can reach over and...

“Touch me? I mean, sure, if you’d like. Go ahead.” She doesn’t even hesitate to respond.

I gasp. How did she know what I was thinking? I mean, how *does* she know?

She shakes her mane from out of her face—bright, pearl white fur shimmering in the cool sun. “You can ask all the questions you want later. Come on. Live a little.”

I nod, reach over the table, and find myself greeted with what looks to be the arm and paw of a softly furred grey wolf—so I recoil. Pulling my arm back, this new, alien feature hides. *Is that...me?*

“It is. Come on. You’re safe with me.”

Yeah, sure. I try again, reaching over the table. Although I don’t have the fan on—the dumb, plastic thing it is—I swear that I can feel the breeze of the game hitting my arm. Tellingly, the fur of this new, slimmer arm moves with said breeze, and using my dull claws, rough pads, I touch the bridge of my new friend’s muzzle, and feel her.

I can feel her.

My arm shoots back again, and I fall out of my chair. The headset goes crashing to the floor, and hearing the crack of plastic, my lungs empty from both a shout *and* a gasp.

“No, no. No, no, no.” I don’t even think about the unicorn hair and bone, muscle that I’ve just felt, and turn to look at the console now lying on the floor in separate pieces. Broken. How about that?

Shit. Sam is going to kill me, and after spending so much on it for me to end up breaking it. I crawl from the chair to pick the pieces up, and a laugh fills the room. *Her* laugh. From the game. “It’s okay, sweetheart. You don’t need that. I’m right here.”

“No, you’re not real. You’re just...some gamer who’s hacked my PC.” The words don’t feel right as I stumble past my large, flat tongue in panic. Oddly, my tongue feels longer, hard to hold in my square muzzle and teeth.

“Am I, though? Do you think I’d hack you, in particular, just to simulate having coffee despite how illegal this is to begin with? No, I’m not some gamer. Truth be told, I never was one for games. I’m...a friend. And I’m here to help you, despite what just happened.”

“Help me?” I ask. I slowly feel myself going insane over the fact that I’m still talking to this person...thing. “How could you ever help me? You don’t even know me, and now, you’re invading my space, my privacy.”

“You want to be different, right?” Her question has enough weight that it knocks all air from out of my chest. “As cute as you are, you’re not you. Rather, the you inside is not the you on the outside. You’ve always wanted to be different, a little bit like your sister, compassionate like your mother. I can help with that, Michael. I can help you be you.”

She knows my name. More than that, however, she knows my thoughts, my dreams, my nightmares and...God, what else does she know? “Shut up. I’m shutting you down,” I say.

And then the room’s gone. Below me is nothing but green, living grass.

My computer game was hacked by some unicorn I've never met, and now I'm in a meadow.

And she's standing before me, hand stretched out.

* * *

This isn't real. This isn't real, Michael. You're still asleep. You're hallucinating. You're not in some fantasy space with a unicorn. A unicorn, for crying out loud. Millions of thoughts seem to shoot their way around me as I stare at the gorgeous hand of this magic, mysterious unicorn. Still holding her cream-colored ceramic mug that matches her blouse, she looks down on me with what I read as both a hint of curiosity and a dash of concern. "Who are you?"

"It doesn't matter. I was someone like you, once, but someone helped me. Now, I'm like them. I can help others be who they truly want to be." Her hand rises, and like taking a swig of carbonated water, my stomach bubbles as I rise into the air and set standing, paws still bare, but now standing in grass. "Call me...Amber. I know, it doesn't fit. I'm still...working out the kinks."

"This is impossible." I say it, but I can't believe it. I'm turning, spinning, trying to find some sign of end to this meadow that I'm stuck in. Without warning, my paw raises and slaps—no, strikes—me. "I need to wake up. This isn't real."

"Again, what is reality?"

"Stop it!"

She shakes her head. Her billowing, curling mane dances against her cheek. "Whether you want it now, or later, I'm going to help you." She steps forward, silver hooves moving through the grass so realistically, so...wonderfully. "There's so much...pain inside of you. So much hurt, and so much jealous."

Stop. Stop, stop, stop it. All of it. I turn away, and I take my head into my handpaws like I've got the biggest migraine around, but then I see it. My arms are not my arms, nor are my paws the same reddish, retriever paws I've had since...forever. Instead, I gaze and gasp down at a set of grey wolf arms. Paws. Claws dull, pads large and rough, they end what look to be slim, feminine arms extending out from a floral dress.

A...dress?

“What are you doing to me?!” My voice cracks out into a scream, and tears starting flushing from my eyes and down my face. Without warning, said voice rockets up several octaves until I'm much more an alto than the masculine baritone I had hours ago. I gaze at this unicorn as she swirls her fingers at me, and as if the world was growing, my vision expands, muzzle shrinking into a much shorter, still rectangular shape. My height recedes, and I'm dwindling, becoming a gentle five feet from what was once a strong six. The ground beneath me seems to rumble as my body goes through so many changes so fast, and falling, I land onto knees and paws that barely hold me up. *There goes my muscle, if I ever had any.*

“It's okay,” Amber says. “I've got you, there, little one.”

“I'm not little,” I say. At least, I don't think I am. I *hope* I'm not.

She chokes a laugh. “No, no. You're not. At my height, everyone's little, I suppose.”

I look up at her, finally. She's standing above me, mug gone, with hands on her hips like a mother who's found her daughter in need. “Why...what have you done to me?”

“I've given you what you need,” she says. “Sure, it's a lot right now, but I know you'll find this real you all you've ever wanted.”

“I'm...not me. I'm a wolf,” I say, tongue stumbling over the mere idea of it all. “I'm...a woman.”

Amber kneels. Taking up space in the grass and flowers before me, she sets a hand on my leg, hooves glinting in the light. “And is that wrong? Is it wrong to be so beautiful after feeling the opposite, the pain, for so long?”

Yes...no. No, it's not, I suppose. “But why?”

I don't get an answer. Instead, I blink, and find myself back in the darkness of my bedroom. Around me sits everything as it was—Sam's bed, the broken headset, my flipped chair, and tools. With the sun down, I'm now sitting in darkness, and glancing, I find myself vanishing into the soft grey of our bedroom's carpet. Instead of a dress, I'm wearing a pink tank top and pair of blue sleep shorts. *At least she dressed me adorably.* I bite my tongue as the thought escapes my mind before I can even control it.

“You okay?” Sam asks.

My throat closes, and I yelp as my now even sharper teeth bite through my tongue with a pinch that stirs blood. My paws fly to my muzzle—newly wolf—and I turn to find Sam standing there.

She's a wolf, too. “Sam?”

“What? I came in and heard you screaming. Everything all right? Have another one of those panic attacks again?” she sets the bag of food down—tacos, from what it smells like. My tail starts to wag, but I quickly cut that off with a grab of my now thicker paws.

“I...the headset...It.” I can't get myself to say anything that I've just been through, but Sam steps in and flicks the light switch on to reveal the console on the floor. “Broken, it looks like. I guess that's a shame.”

Right. I turn to look at my bed, the one closest to the door, and see that instead of my plain black comforter and sheets, a floral pattern matching my dress covers the now larger

mattress. *Guess she was right. She did change me.* “Well, come down to dinner when you’re ready, I guess,” Sam says. Holding a growl beneath her collarbone, she turns back to the door.

“We’ll see if we can order a new one. Maybe get a return.”

Sure, I tell her. We’ll do that.

She’s gone, leaving me to sit there as I explore my new body. Small stomach, breasts, a dense, fluffy tail. I’m a wolf, through and through.

How is this possible? Who was this unicorn, and why me? Why did she choose *me* to be the one she helped out?

I pick myself up, body moving on autopilot. Somewhere inside of me, a panic builds. *Wait, what’s going on? What am I doing?* “Mystery for later. For now, it’s dinner,” I say without control.

And then my worries fade away. Why was I worried? The game system, right? Woke up, stumbled to the chair, knocked it to the floor. Shit happens, I think. *We’ll just order a new one.*

So much for taking a nap. Stretching my arms, I make my way to the door, tail wagging. Sometimes, without question, it’s good to be a wolf.