

Trouble in Paradise

Jacob liked keeping his eyes closed for the first few minutes. He liked to ease his way into the world. Feel the wind blow against his cheeks. Sense the hard rocky soil beneath his boot-clad feet. This time, however, he smelled the foul stench of decay and heard an angry grunt.

He opened his eyes immediately.

Directly in front of him, an ogre was getting ready to swing its mangled club. Jacob leap out of the way, somersaulting onto the ground, and reached for his broadsword. He swung it blindly, missing the ogre by inches. He was about to swing again when he heard the twang of a bow come from behind him. An arrow hit dead center of the ogre's forehead.

"Wow. That was some really *great* swordsmanship."

"Shut up, Ethan. I literally just logged on. I wasn't ready yet!"

"Uh huh," Ethan said, chuckling. The fallen Ogre's corpse faded, and in its place lay a cloth bag filled with gold coins. "I'll take these," he said with a grin.

The World was Jacob's favorite place on earth. It wasn't real, of course, but it felt real. Well, it felt more like dreaming than anything else. He could do *anything* here. Once the headset was on, and his mind connected, he was fully integrated into the program. This was where he and Ethan hung out. Sometimes they battled monsters. Other times they spent hours exploring a new corner of their world. Either way, it was limitless fun until someone had to log off.

"So, uh, what do you want to do today?" Ethan asked.

Jacob thought for a moment. "I'll race you to the ogre den? I kind of wanna redeem myself."

"Bring it."

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When Jacob logged off, he thanked fate for his wheelchair. He was always a little dizzy after an extended session in The World. It was difficult transitioning from the bright and comfortable scenery to the cold and unwelcoming environment that he called home.

His house was dull, grey, and dismally unfurnished. It was quiet save for the sounds of his younger siblings yelling and jumping in the basement. Their favorite pastime was playing virtual sports with their headsets, body suits, and omnidirectional treadmills. Jacob always thought it was a little silly that they didn't go outside and play with other children. To be fair, though, other children didn't play outside anymore either. He himself hadn't played outside since he was younger than they were.

Jacob rolled into his parents' office. They worked from home on most days. Today they were in their headsets at an international meeting. They occasionally nodded and said phrases like "understood, sir" and "as soon as possible, ma'am." Jacob sometimes thought about unplugging the nutrition tubes on which they so often relied. They might take the headsets off and talk to him then. He didn't even know what he would say to them.

Jacob's days were long and quiet. His classes were online, his meals were usually out of boxes and cans. His favorite part of the day was always plugging into The World and seeing his best friend, Ethan.

He had never actually met Ethan face to face. As far as Jacob was aware, that didn't matter. They met in a different game years ago, and since then were inseparable. It was Jacob's idea to create The World, but Ethan was the mastermind behind the programming. Jacob pitched in a few ideas, like the three-eyed carnivorous sheep that dotted the landscape.

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It seemed like Ethan was always logged on. Every time Jacob found himself in The World, he saw blinking light on his glove that indicated Ethan's whereabouts. This time it was the Serene Forest.

"*Finally,*" Ethan said when Jacob reached him. He was laying on the forest floor, looking up at the golden foliage. A giant rat scurried past his foot into the brush.

"I actually have a *life*, you know? I have *friends* and *school*."

Ethan laughed quietly and said "Uh huh, I'm sure you do."

"Yeah, I was just coming back from karate lessons," Jacob said.

"Were you breaking boards with your wheelchair?"

"You know it." Jacob laughed and collapsed onto the forest floor next to his friend. "Huh. That's cool."

"What?"

"You can see the leaves get ruffled by the wind. Your programming is sort of brilliant, you know that?"

"It's alright I guess." Ethan said. He liked to pretend he wasn't as smart as he actually was. Jacob knew better.

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"Seriously, do you ever log off?" Jacob asked, as soon as he logged on after his coursework was finished.

"Of course I do!" Ethan replied.

"Really? 'Cuz I bet if I checked the data log it will say you've been online since last year!" Jacob joked.

"Oh, ha *ha*." Ethan said.

"Seriously, I'm going to check right now." Jacob smiled and began accessing the in-game data screen.

Ethan's brow furrowed. "Let's go fishing in the lake!"

"This second?"

"Or um. Let's go hiking up the Scraggly Mountain!"

"Dude, come on," Jacob said, laughing. "I'm trying to prove a point!" He began scrolling through the data screen.

It read:

USER JACOB LOGGED IN at 15:04

USER JACOB LOGGED OUT at 01:23

USER JACOB LOGGED IN at 08:34
USER JACOB LOGGED OUT at 09:10
USER JACOB LOGGED IN at 09:46
USER JACOB LOGGED OUT at 14:56
USER JACOB LOGGED IN at 19:03

“Dude,” Jacob said, incredulously. “When was the last time you logged out?”
Jacob looked at Ethan, who quietly observed slightly pixelated blades of grass waving in the wind. Jacob stared at him, waiting for a response.

“Dude?” Jacob realized that he won’t be getting a response from Ethan any time soon. He started scrolling up through the data log, trying to find Ethan’s name. When he did, he sat down. He felt like he couldn’t breathe. This didn’t make any sense.

The last time Ethan had logged out of The World was *three months ago*. Jacob’s head was swimming. He thought of his parents plugged in to work 24/7. He thought of his siblings who rarely spoke to him. He thought of millions of people hooked into virtual reality systems, escaping from their lives as time ticked away.

“Listen man, I don’t want to tell you how to live your life, but... You have to *live your life*, you know?” Jacob felt like he was talking to himself a little bit, too. “I know things aren’t that great in the real world, but you can’t just hide here.”

“I’m not hiding from anything,” Ethan finally said.

“Yeah? So why haven’t you logged off?”

“I can’t really explain it to you.”

“You can fucking try.”

“I can’t leave, Jacob.” Ethan said, sighing.

“Yes. You can. Just hit the EXIT button.”

“This is a mistake. This wasn’t supposed to-”

“What about food, Ethan? Do you have nutrition tubes connected to your gut? What about your friends and family?”

“Jacob,” Ethan said.

“What?” Jacob yelled. He was fuming. He felt as though he couldn’t breathe.

“I have to tell you something.” Ethan said.

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Ethan spoke and Jacob listened. The more he spoke, the less Jacob understood. He spoke about his childhood illness: cancer of the blood that had left him bedridden. Ethan told him of years of surgeries and medication. He spoke of finding virtual reality where he could run and fly and climb, all while his limbs quietly atrophied in his hospital bed. He spoke of meeting Jacob, and how *happy* he had been to find a friend in his isolation. He reminded Jacob of how they came up with The World, and how he had built it from scratch. A world made of code where they both could do absolutely anything.

Ethan spoke of how Jacob’s friendship meant everything to him. He spoke of their adventures.

Ethan paused and looked at Jacob. He wasn’t sure if he should continue the story. He did. He opened his mouth and said:

“And then I died.”

“What?”

“I died, Jacob. The cancer got me.”

“I don’t get it. I don’t get the joke. You’re right here. Stop messing with me.”

“I’m sorry, Jacob.”

“Don’t be sorry, just explain the freaking—what are you talking about?”

“I, Ethan Calloway, haven’t logged off in three months because I, Ethan Calloway, have been dead. I knew I was going to die soon. I couldn’t just... I couldn’t just leave you alone, man.”

“I don’t understand. You’re here, you’re talking to me.”

“Ethan Calloway wrote himself out of code,” Ethan said. “He’s been dead for months. He didn’t want you to be alone.”

Jacob collapsed onto the rocky ground, clutching at his chest. He was suddenly hyperaware of the fakeness of the grass blades. The wind on his face was a program. Everything was a program. His best friend was dead. His best friend was a fucking program. His only friend was a program. No. No. Nothing was right.

“Jacob,” Ethan said. The program said.

“Don’t,” Jacob managed to utter before he logged off.

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Jacob didn’t wait for the dizziness to subside before he rolled his wheelchair as quickly and as far away from the console as he could manage. His arms quickly gave out. He sat, eyes blinking away tears. He could hear his heart beating.

For the first time, he was thankful for the dim gray of his home. Colors would hurt. Colors were lies. He pulled himself onto the couch in the middle of the “living room” and fell asleep.

His mind didn’t dare dream of anything.

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It took weeks for Jacob to be able to look at the console. Since he had taken a permanent break from The World, Jacob found that his grades were improving drastically. *Ethan would have loved that*, Jacob thought, before plunging into despair. He was alone. This was his reality.

One morning, Jacob groggily woke himself up. Before he could think about anything, or remember anything, he rolled into the living room, grabbed his headset and logged on to The World. Led by inertia, Jacob stood on his hill with his eyes closed. He felt the wind. He sensed the ground. He smiled at his chosen reality.

“Jacob?” Ethan’s voice said from behind him.

Jacob’s smile fell off his face like a pixelated leaf from a tree. He kept his eyes closed as he replied, “Hey, Ethan.” His voice faltered.

“So, um. What do you wanna do today?” Ethan asked.

Jacob eyes were still closed. He took a breath. *It sounds like him*, he thought. He wanted to fall to the ground again. He felt defeated.

“I guess... Do you wanna go hiking?” Jacob suggested. This world was what Ethan had left for him. This Ethan is what his Ethan had left for him.

“I don’t know, can your gimp legs keep up?” Ethan’s voice was smiling.

Jacob’s eyes shot open. He laughed and feebly swung his sword at his friend. “Shut up, man, I can run faster than you in here.”

“Is that a challenge I’m hearing?”

“Bring it,” Jacob said to his friend. “First to the top of Death Mountain wins bragging rights for a week.”

Jacob and Ethan booked it past the golden trees of the woods.