

Plug-In Paradise

“Have you ever suffered from...back pain? Especially while Plugged-In. Introducing RoyalWare back pain-relieving cushions!”

Swipe.

“Harland Sanders, a working-class man, is ready to defend the country from foreign powers trying to take over our country! He helped build this country and has real goals in mind. He WILL improve Eden networks, keep Eden safe and protected, and...”

Swipe.

“Three ways to purify your water of radioactive chemicals with the NEW, AMAZING AquaClean filters! First, place it in your Reservoir, and make sure it is locked in before you Plug-In. Next...”

Swipe.

“How long have you been Plugged-In? Take a break-”

Swipe.

“Top 10 best restaurants in the Olympus district! First up is Joe’s Bazaar. The fish here is so incredibly real! Make sure that your Reservoirs are full of nutrition liquid to keep yourself satiated and fed during this meal.”

Swipe.

“This is a message from Face The Truth, this war is going on too long, and we all need to wake up-”

Swipe.

“Welcome to Purelife Clinic, your number one hospital for radiation sickness. We have the best physicians of the Great Lakes Alliance...”

Swipe.

“New RoyalWare Reservoirs, now preparing a thousand more flavors than our competitors! Our nutrition liquid is full of every nutrient you need to stay connected to Eden without ever feeling hungry. We are safe, clean, and purify every single chemical going into you! Not a chance of radiation sickness! Save 15% or more with our new summer deals.”

Swipe.

“No need to Un-Plug at all when you have these seven tips and tricks to make your Eden experience the best it can be! It doesn't have to feel like virtual reality, it can be just like real life!”

—

“Tam! Tam!” A series of hurried knocks sound at the door.

Tam lets out a long yawn. They stand up and stretch their back, even though their back feels perfectly fine, as it always does. A light lavender breeze courses through the house. Tam takes a whiff of it and makes a note to change up the scent later. Today is not a lavender kind of day.

The knocking continues. “I know you're in there! Your location pin says so!”

Regretting turning the location function on, Tam groans. They check their messages quickly before heading to the door.

*44 unread messages from: Anonymous888 (NEW message from 5 seconds ago) *Marked urgent by sender.*

The unread messages glow bright red from all the urgent markers. Tam swipes to the left and Blocks the sender immediately. The sender always switches avatars to avoid Tam's Blocking. Tam makes a note to file a criminal report later.

The knocking turns into pounding. "Tam! You-"

Tam swings the door open, revealing a scowling Loki. Loki's long neon green hair is parted to the side today and entwined with bubblegum pink braids that glow fluorescently even in the middle of the day. His eyes are customized to show the color of his mood, and right now, they are light red, so he is only slightly miffed.

"You need to respond quicker! I thought maybe there was some kind of error or glitch with you." Loki says.

Tam flashes an apologetic smile. "Sorry, sorry, I was on my feed. Let's go take that walk now."

They start walking down the red cobblestone paths of Olympus. White marble columns line the pathways, each adorned with lights that twinkle gold and silver. Verdant willow trees sway in the wind. The wind is at just the right intensity, enough to freshen up the day, but not too much to disturb their perfect hairdos. Bright flowers blossom next to manicured bushes, in bygone colors of red, purple, and yellow. The sweet harmonies of a string quartet waft through the air from someone's backyard.

Another pair comes up from the cobblestone path. Diamond and Emerald, siblings by blood, or so they claim. It's so easy to fake identities in Eden these days, after all. As Tam passes

them, they wave hello, and Tam reciprocates the gesture. Tam takes note of Diamond's new outfit, a shimmering low-cut sundress that hugged every curve. Tam grits her teeth. If only Diamond could be Blocked from Tam's life too.

"Diamond changed looks again?" Loki scoffs. "You know they paid for that body modification just last week? 10,000 credits. Can you imagine?"

"Wow." They both work the same position in PR, and somehow, Diamond can afford all this glitz and glamor. Tam tells herself it's not jealousy roiling inside her stomach, but rather disdain for unhealthy spending practices.

The path winds into Olympus Park, the entrance denoted by ornate golden gates. Pink cherry blossom trees stand over glittering limestone walkways and fresh grass lawns. Petals flutter midair and catch the light just right. A gaggle of teenagers are taking selfies next to the tree, while others sit on picnic blankets clinking wine glasses. A busker plays a folk tune on the guitar near the fountain, drawing a small crowd.

Tam snorts at the sight. Most of them don't even live in Olympus. They just like to appear as if they do.

Loki brings up an interface and summons a blue picnic blanket, which appears in a flare of silver light. He sets the blanket down on the edge of a tree's shade. The two of them sit down and exhale.

"I love this time of year when the technicians bring out the cherry blossoms," Loki sighs. "They look so real, don't they?"

"It's the perfect weather for a picnic, isn't it?" Tam brings up their interface, and the light blue hologram flashes. Within a split second, a full picnic materializes at their feet. PB & Js,

apple cider, cake rolls, and two glasses of champagne. The technicians replicate every taste, scent, sound, and touch in virtual reality. Everything feels real, all the time.

Despite the pleasantries, Tam dislikes picnics. They remind them of an undesirable reality. The face of an older, mumbling man surfaces from the depths of Tam's memories. They should have paid to delete their old memories a long time ago, but that is 50,000 credits that they could not afford. It is worth it, from what they heard, to get rid of all the memories one doesn't want and be truly immersed in Eden.

Tam has always sought to live far away from the nasty and uncomfortable. They have a house in the Olympus community. They have great friends to have fun with. They have blocked the toxic and terrible people in their life.

Especially *that* old man. The one that does not stop bothering Tam, always nagging and coughing, even going as far as to switch accounts to bother them.

"Ugh, tomorrow's Monday." Loki is always complaining about something or the other, but he is happy at the end of the day. Tam knows this for a fact. Nobody could be unhappy in Eden.

"I know, right?" Tam would have to see Diamond again. Their desks are right next to each other. Diamond is just another ugly blot in their paradise. Tam will find a way to remove this imperfection soon enough.

They grab a cake roll and take a bite. The cream melts in their mouth as if it's real. Absolutely perfect.

Suddenly, the sky glistens purple, casting the verdant green grass in an unnatural light. Tam looks up. A newscaster with perfectly formed gills on their face is speaking solemnly. Each

word that leaves his mouth ripples out like soft waves. Tam wonders which clinic does mods that well, for the gills to look that realistic.

It is only after the news report ends does the news register with Tam. Ohio has just been taken out by the Caribbean Coalition. No images are shown in the news report. Nothing gruesome here in Eden; the censors would never allow it.

“Joey is from Ohio.” Tam muses. Joey lives just next door to Tam.

“He hasn’t been around lately.” Loki shrugs. “Busy moving away, I presume. The Coalition has been moving at record speeds lately, he would’ve seen it coming. And I heard they have this new kind of fast tank-”

Loki’s voice falters, as if he had just lost his train of thought. The censorship is natural as usual.

What happens in the war is only a whisper, a sliver of truth slipping through the cracks of Eden. Everyone knows that the Coalition has been creeping towards them from the south for years now, even if no one likes to talk about it. They want to escape rising sea levels.

Tam turns their attention back to the picnic. “Why aren’t you eating? These cakes are delicious.”

Loki sighs, eyes turning a somber blue. “I’ve been feeling sick lately with my Reservoir nutrition liquid. As long as I don’t eat anything, I’m not going to be ingesting any of the liquid from the Reservoir.”

Tam swipes their blue bangs to the side. They make a mental note to change their hair color before Monday, to really show up Diamond at the office. “You should get it checked out. Could be radiation. You don’t want radiation sickness keeping you Un-Plugged from Eden for

too long.” They squint into the vividly blue sky. They kind of want a rainy day for once. The technicians are making it too sunny these days, too spotless.

“Nah, just a tech issue with the tubes.” Loki waves his hand nonchalantly. “Even if it’s radiation, I won’t die.”

When Tam picks up another cake roll, a scream reverberates through the air. Tam’s head whips towards the noise. A man is writhing in the air, screaming their lungs out as their body dissipates into a shimmer of white and blue light. The park barely stirs. A couple of people stare at the spot where the person used to stand, but do not react.

“Wonder what’s that about,” Tam says absentmindedly.

Loki shrugs. “Ejected from the Eden seat, maybe. Didn’t refill their Reservoir tanks. The system failsafe works well usually before the nutrition liquid runs out. Nobody wants to starve to death while in here.”

“Being ejected isn’t half as violent. Usually, their avatar just disappears.”

The pair falls silent. They are both imagining the same scenarios.

Perhaps it was a system failure. Perhaps he has just been arrested. Perhaps the Coalition has detonated another bomb. They have just gotten to Ohio. Dying in real life could spur that reaction in virtual reality.

Tam takes a bite of their cake roll and tries to forget about what they just saw. Thinking about all this does nothing besides ruining one’s day.

“Oh my god, look!” Loki yelps. “That is outrageous. Ribbon Whiskers, in those butterfly wings?”

Tam chuckles, all their worries dissipating. “Ribbon Whiskers? Ugh, she talks too much. Blocked her last week.” To Tam, Ribbon is literally nothing. Invisible, silent, not even a breath of

air. Their avatar never appears in Tam's view. One could completely erase someone from their life with Blocking.

Loki giggles. "Really? You can't see the wings she's sporting now. Literally, so tacky."

"I bet you could rock a pair of-"

—

Rick lets out a croak as the world fizzles into view. He feels like someone was driving a knife into his brain.

His Eden goggles fade to black. He is no longer Tam anymore. He is Rick now, and only Rick. Rick with back pain, Rick with foggy eyesight, Rick with the persistent headache. The spring breeze of Eden is no more, replaced by the clammy and smoky air of reality. He pulls the feeding tube off his stomach with a squelch.

The grimy Reservoir at his feet flashes alarmingly red. There is something wrong with the internet connection, and he was almost out of nutrition liquid. He needs to refill the Reservoir before he is forcibly ejected from Eden the next time he eats a big meal in Eden and all the nutrition liquid runs out.

Groaning, Rick steps over the limp body of a two-headed bat. Its soulless red eyes are wide open, staring up at the ceiling. He wrinkles his nose at the sight and realizes he forgot to close the windows.

Outside, a hologram poster for Harland Sanders bobs in the air weakly. Harland Sanders looks the same as he does in the Eden ads, with the perfectly cropped silver hair and striking

golden eyes. But Rick knows that Harland Sanders does not look like that in real life; nobody does.

Sirens ring from somewhere in the distance. *They kind of sound like air raid sirens*, Rick muses. The noise hurts Rick's already throbbing head, so he shuts the windows tightly. He needs to get back into Eden before his head kills him.

He walks back to the seat and kneels to open a drawer. He is careful to not touch the floor with his hands. Inside the drawer, stacks of Reservoir cartridges sit neatly in colorful boxes. The new Reservoir cartridges are large enough for five full days of Plugging-In without hunger, the advertisements claim, but it is more like four days and a half in Rick's experience. He lugs the cartridge up and pushes it into his Reservoir with a click. He then sets out to fix the Wi-Fi issue.

The mess of tangled cords and wires connect the Eden seat to the wall, but one of them has been unplugged. Rick plugs the cord in, his back creaking and popping every time he moves.

As Rick sits back down, someone knocks on the door. Rick recognizes the mumbling, but he chooses to ignore it as he puts on the Eden goggles. Rick connects the Reservoir tube to his stomach port, leans into the RoyalWare back-pain relieving cushions, and lets out a sigh. His perfect world starts to fade into view. In the background, the knocks grow more and more urgent, as if wanting to bring the entire building down.

Rick doesn't need to care about the knocking. He has Blocked whoever is at the door in Eden anyway.