

When the Truth Comes Out

GRACE EXALL | short story

My dad named me Anastasia after the Russian heiress, the one who had a mysterious death. He said Anastasia was the name of someone who could face her fears with courage, someone who wasn't afraid to know the truth. He named me when I still knew my family, a time when courage and truth still seemed to matter. But ever since the day Ubel Jameson started his company, Oculoveritas, and released the first VR prototype, it seemed like the real world existed exclusively behind a screen. It's funny how fast our people found a new normal in the virtual network—how quickly the concept of truth became inconsequential. Since the VR release, humanity hadn't been the same, and I didn't think I had an ounce of courage left.

"Annie!" a high voice called from my left. I turned around to see my best friend Julia adorned in her usual jeans and a crazy sweater outfit. Today she sported a science joke: "What did one tectonic plate say when it bumped into another? Sorry, my fault." I smiled at her approaching form and felt relief flow through me. Julia and our standing coffee date was my only time away from the online world these days.

"I think I'll die if I don't get some caffeine right now," she told me once we entered the last remaining coffee shop in town, The Brew Box. "That bad, huh?" I laughed back as I ordered my usual.

"Worse," she told me. "I was up all night in the research world looking for a solution to your problem." Yesterday, I came home to an eviction notice on my door. Apparently, my dad's virtual gambling had hit an all-time high because the money I had saved for our rent was gone with him.

"And did you find anything?" I questioned softly, trying to keep my hopes down.

"Well, I did find one option that looked promising. Oculoveritas released a new challenge."

Oculoveritas first created a full-body immersive VR back in 2050. Now, almost ten years later, the world was nearly completely online and Oculoveritas continued to make money by holding competitions. Players paid ten grand for entry and tried to finish three challenges to win a million dollars. The only problem was that no one ever won. Oculoveritas had been popular when it was released, but now only the desperate still played.

"Jules, you know no one ever wins that game. It's

rigged against you, and I don't have ten grand to enter anyway."

"That's not true," she said. "I heard a kid from New York almost finished it last month. Got to level three and could see the finish line. Besides, you know I'd lend you the money, and we could enter together, form a team, you know? I think this is the only option left, Annie. A hundred thousand dollars isn't just lying around anywhere, and I would hate for you to lose your house because of your dad's bad behavior."

She was right. There was no other way to pay off the debts in time to save my house. Maybe the competition was my only option.

With a resigned sigh I told her, "Alright, we'll do it together."

II

I walked over to my VR motion simulation chair, which looked almost like the old dentist chairs from my childhood. It was four minutes to twelve, the start time of this month's challenge, and I still had to power up my system. I set my hot pink VR goggles onto my head and attached the two protruding wires to my temples.

"Three, two, one," I whispered and squeezed my eyes shut as the world around me disappeared. I always hated the sinking feeling in my stomach every time I entered a virtual environment.

Opening my eyes, I looked down to see my avatar, HappyGirl201, in her blue glory. I paid extra to make her skin aqua blue, and it's true I still felt undeniably myself in her body. I think that's what really drew people to the virtual world—you could be whomever or whatever you wanted with no consequences.

I heard my name from behind and turned to find Julia running up to me. "Looks like we are in a video game world this time," she exclaimed. I realized she was right. The virtual world looked like something out of an 8-year-old's imagination. The bright rainbow colors and animated scenery reminded me of a clash between Mario Kart and the Candy Land game I used to love. I looked out to the distance and saw the yellow brick race track I would soon traverse, extending as far as the eye could see.

The first challenge every month was an almost impossible race track. This weed-out challenge



eliminated ninety-five percent of the players. Not only was the track almost impossible to stay on, but the game makers created a big obstacle near the last two-thirds of the track. Each month the obstacle changed, which meant almost no one got through.

"C'mon, Annie," Julia urged. "We are about to start." As we jogged over to our matching yellow motorcycles, I watched as a floating timer came down over our heads to count down from three. I could feel my adrenaline start to pick up and the direness of my situation hit me so suddenly, I lost my breath. It really was my last chance to save my house, and I needed to focus.

The timer hit zero, and while everyone else raced off, Julia and I started slowly. We knew this round wasn't about speed, but survival. We came up on our first upside-down curve of the track and switched on our reverse gravity control for our bikes.

"So far so good," I yelled to Julia as we neared a section of the track that had random holes of lava instead of yellow brick. "Watch out for the lava land," I screamed over the wind.

Our bikes wove through the stretch of lava-ridden track easily, and I realized we are coming up on the two-thirds mark of the challenge, which meant the game makers would have a much bigger obstacle in store for us.

In the distance, it looked like something was disrupting the track. "Are those... musical instruments?" Julia questioned.

I realized she was right. A trumpet and set of drums a hundred times their normal size were blocking our path ahead. We slowed our speed as we approached the instruments, calculating how to continue.

"Should we just... ride through them," Julia asked. "I guess," I replied with no better ideas. But as soon as Julia's bike touched the golden trumpet's surface, a boom of sound waves pushed her back and off the track.

"Julia!" I screamed, desperately looking into the abyss that resided off the edge of the track. "Oh God, oh God, oh God," I repeated as I saw Julia falling, over and over again in my eyes. I needed to get out of this place. I pushed the exit button on my VR and gasped for air as I came back to myself and my room in the real world.

"What the heck just happened?"

III

Something wasn't right. Over the next two hours, I called Julia seven times and then went to her house, only to find it empty and cleared of belongings. I knew Julia wouldn't leave town without telling me goodbye, and the sinking feeling of dread in my stomach was only getting worse. For some reason I couldn't get her virtual death out of my mind. It just looked so... real.

I continued my pacing and a thought started to form: Could Julia's death in the virtual world have caused her death in this one too? Was our world so immersed in technology that no one noticed when our human forms went missing? Somehow I knew I was right; I knew I needed to do something.

Racing over to my VR motion simulation chair, I

logged into my video recorder application. If I could just post a video onto our virtual network, everyone would know of the risk.

"We are in danger," I told the camera. "I suspect Oculoveritas and Ubel Jameson have been lying to us for the past decade. During the last competition today my best friend Julia's avatar was killed and now all traces of her are gone from the real world. I think Jameson is using a software to keep the avatars of those who have died during a competition talking and moving as if they are alive in the virtual world, but I don't think anyone is behind the avatar. He's relying on the fact that since our world is almost completely virtual, no one will realize when actual humans go missing. Please be careful."

I stopped the recording and took a deep breath before posting it to my virtual network. The file loaded to ninety-five percent before a large "ERROR: threat to the peace" is displayed on the screen. My stomach sank as I heard pounding on my front door. Heavy boots stomped up the stairs, and I turned to see five soldiers ready to take me into custody.

I ran to the window, but was stopped before reaching it. I felt a blinding pain on the back of my head and lost consciousness.

IV

My eyes opened to a middle-aged man in a well-fitted suit standing above me. I could feel the tile beneath my body and I sat up to find I was in an all-white cell.

"Where am I?" I asked the man as my memories of Julia and my recording started to come back to me.

"You are in the Oculoveritas headquarters," Ubel Jameson told me. "You tried to expose our system, and we couldn't have that. I am impressed. Very few notice when a human goes missing. We have created a program that analyzes past behavior to make a missing person's avatar continue acting as normal even when the person behind the screen is gone. With the average human remaining in the virtual world twenty-two out of the twenty-four hours of the day, no one notices the disappearance of the actual human in the real world. You are one of only five people who have noticed a missing person."

"Where are they going?" I questioned him aggressively. "Where is Julia?"

"Julia is dead," he answered solemnly. "When a person's avatar dies in the virtual world, the sensations associated with the death feel so real that the person's human body has a heart attack from fear. Julia died after her virtual death."

"Why won't you tell people this truth?" I screamed.

"Why won't you tell them they are in danger?"

"Truth doesn't make money," he laughs. "Besides, people are happier now."

"Happier?" I questioned. "People aren't happier. They're dead."

"Death is just an unfortunate byproduct of the bigger system," he said. "And now the truth will die with you."