

She couldn't keep the argument from this morning from echoing in her head. She didn't understand why she had to be born into a family that was so anti-tech. Was it not bad enough to have the whole world view her choices as freakish and fringe without the judgment of her archaic family. They still used the old world systems without plugs. How could you truly experience anything online without at least connecting to a perception filter?

She had hid her perception filter growing up, and only plugged it in behind her firmly locked bedroom door. She had absolutely reveled in all of the latest tech when she moved out into her own place. She sometimes wondered if she had in fact gone overboard, but when presented with all of the wonderful options with which to enrich an environment, how could you not take advantage of them?

"Wait... turn your head again," her sister had said. That had been her mistake. If she hadn't turned her head when she picked up her tea cup, she never would have noticed anything. The suggestion of the mind, as it was commonly known, was a very powerful thing. Scientist had learned decades ago that if you convinced the mind that a pencil being pressed to the skin was actually a hot branding iron, blisters would form on the skin in reaction to the heat. As a reaction to prolonged exposure to the Pharaplex in her elf-like avatar, her ears had begun to take on a more pointed shape. And when she had turned her head this morning, her sister had seen her slightly pointed ears.

"What?" she had said, hoping to feign ignorance and change the topic.

"Turn your head again," her sister's face, peering at her through the telescreen, was suspicious and carefully studying her.

"Why? You're so weird," Dalia said. She needed to move the conversation on fast. "What were you saying about mom's new obsession with peanuts? She's going to add them the farm?"

"Turn your head again, or I'm coming over there," her sister had taken on the adamant tone that meant there would be no further argument. At least not a successful one. She reluctantly turned her head.

"Oh my god," her sister's voice sounded horrified and she didn't want to turn back to face the telescreen. She didn't want to see her sister giving her the look she had to deal with from strangers on the rare occasions she left the house.

"You're a morpher," her sisters voice came out hushed and breathless, like she was afraid to even say it. Like it meant something wrong and dirty and perverse. She finally gathered the courage to look back at the telescreen. Her sister's face was pale and solemn and scared. Dalia's apprehension was instantly replaced with anger.

"I'm your sister," she snapped, her words clipped, shortened by her anger. "I am the same person. Don't look at me like I'm some monster."

Her sister struggled and stumbled over silent words before she finally stuttered, "How long have you been a morpher?"

"How long have I, your sister, a normal human being, been a citizen of the Pharaplex?" she noticed her sister wince at her words. It had been the desired effect, but it hurt her as well. Already her sister had distanced herself, classified her as something other. She was so disappointed that this was the reaction she was getting from her sister. Although isn't this just what she had expected? Why else would she have hidden herself from her family if she wasn't expecting precisely this reaction.

"A citizen of the Pharaplex," her sister echoed, tears starting to stream from her eyes. "I have to go."

"You have to go?" she was enraged. "Where do you have to go, dear sister? You bugged me for weeks to schedule a telescreen chat with you and now you have to go? 'We're sisters' you said. 'We should talk far more often.'" She quoted her sister's words back at her.

"You are not my sister," she screamed back. "You've changed yourself into one of those filthy freaks."

"How dare you-" but her sister had disconnected. She was staring at the logo for the telescreen company.

She replayed this exchange now, over and over again. And it hurt anew every time. The ever-refreshing pain of it somehow dulled the harshness of her surroundings. She was walking, ankle deep, through the stinking muck of a manmade swamp. Technically everything in the Pharaplex was manmade, being that it was a digital world, but there was a difference between lands that were set to develop organically and places like this one, which had been built to be dank and miserable.

Every step was difficult and tiresome and loud, as she had to pull her boot out of the suctioning muck with a thwack each time. Her boots, lovely, ornamental things that were meant for firm ground and gentle grasses, had been ruined after only a few steps into this sludge. She had been expecting unpleasant surroundings, but nothing this treacherous. She had to tread carefully to not trip over rocks and tree roots, gingerly finding her footing again and again in another pile of muck. She moved as quickly as she dared, wanting to be back in one of the safe worlds as soon as possible.

She focused again, toward the bottom of her vision, looking at her username. It was a standard system issue, cold numbers. She usually kept it out of her view. People use it to keep track of which avatar they were wearing, and since she only had one avatar, she didn't need the reminder. But she kept the ugly, empty numbers in view now as a motivation to keep going. A number would never be able to represent who she was in the Pharaplex. The ability to make a custom name could be bought at a premium from the system. A premium that she couldn't afford.

Finally she stopped, coming to the spot where the transaction was to take place. She had followed the instructions precisely and traveled, on foot, exactly two miles. She wasn't accustomed to walking this far anywhere, not outside or in the Pharaplex, and she could feel the fatigue setting in to her limbs. She would need to get a refresh boost as soon as she transported off of this stinking planet. She hadn't seen the rest of the planet, but she had the impression that it's entire surface was covered in this awful muck.

She studied the trees settled into the steadily rotting muck that lay before her. She was in a clearing. A clearing that was covered in muck, but was absent of tree roots to avoid. She saw no sign that anyone was near or that anyone had been here. She turned up her ears to see if she could hear someone standing in the trees beyond her vision. Perhaps she had misjudged her pacing trudging through this mess.

She heard footsteps behind her, coming fast. She turned to see a hoarder, his black armor gleaming, quickly closing the distance between them. Her eyes came across a dense, flat dagger in his hand, and could suddenly focus on nothing else.

This was an ambush. She had been lured here by this hoarder; this psychopath. There were people who would set up things like this to kill you. Avatars, like people, were one of a kind, and if you harmed them, they could die. Someone could kill you. She was to be the latest addition to his hoard of bodies.

She cursed herself then, the gravity of her situation dropping onto her heavily. It would be worse than losing her avatar. She hadn't disabled her perception filter. The filter that made it so that her body truly experienced everything she felt here, the one slowly reshaping her ears, was still solidly connected to her body in reality. She had been so busy counting her paces and trying to keep her bearings that she had forgotten to disable it; a basic safety precaution when traveling to foreign unsafe worlds. There was no time to navigate to the menu and take it offline now. She watched the dagger as it moved, positioning to stab her upward, under her ribs. She reached out, numbly feeling her body in the real world mirror her action. She fumbled, quickly, desperately.

The dagger bit into her and she gasped and flinched away from the pain as in the same moment she grasped the plug and yanked.

She was on her back on the cold, hardwood floor, panting. The momentum of her body flinching along with her desperate yank on the plug had knocked her out of her chair. She could feel the burn of pain in the center of her abdomen with each heaving breath. She touched the place where the dagger had begun to cut in and immediately pulled her hand away from the sting of pain. Her fingers came away bloody.