

Planet Virt

Katherine MacLean

RALPH was running along the edge of a beach.

Unfamiliar binds took flight as he approached and wheeled with hornlike sounds. His fish traps were still set and perhaps some held fish, but he did not wade out to look at them. Today he wanted meat.

He picked up his club and took his new trail inland to dense woods. In the densest woods tall trees stood like pillars, and between them the ground was dear and carpeted with reddish brown pine needles. Ahead, a wide meadow of sunlight shone in greens and the colors of flowers where the alien thickets of flowers and thorns and berries and fruits grew. He turned away from it, took a different trail.

He saw another man running towards him wearing only shorts and an uneven sunburn. Almost chest to chest they stopped. "What do you want?" Ralph demanded.

"I don't want anything. What do you want?"

"You're not a girl."

"Neither are you. Who wrote this stupid script?"

They each made a peculiar sequence of finger movements at each other. Nothing happened. Neither one vanished. They had made the back-up-and-edit finger control motions. It could usually change an unsatisfactory script to an alternate line of story or at least back up ten minutes and give you another chance to decide what to do.

The new man was indignant. "You can't edit me. I'm a live player."

"I'm a live player too. But I don't know what we're supposed to play. If this is a planet landing training sim maybe we're supposed to help each other locate a good city site and set up water and food supplies."

"That's too easy. Too much food and water around. Maybe we're supposed to compete. See who can set up a house and a food supply the first. I'm finding my own food. Fish and eggs are easy. This time they even let me eat and make me feel full when I've eaten."

"I noticed that too. I like it, but being full means you can't keep on eating."

"I'm building a cabin," said the new man proudly. He scratched at his sunburn and winced.

Ralph felt the new man was boasting. "I already finished a tent. Weather's too good for a house."

"Weather can change. You're going to flunk this sim. When it starts snowing, you'll be crying to them to let you out of the game booth and open the door."

They scowled at each other and both made the same finger motion at each other again. Neither one disappeared. Ralph growled, "This is my sim. This game can go fine with one player. Why don't you just take an alternate story line and get out?"

"What is this, a social skills test? Am I stuck with no story line controls and some kind of hysterical creep I'm supposed to calm down?" The new man looked at the sky plaintively.

Ralph felt enraged and tried to be calm to prove the creep was wrong about him. "I'm not going for your throat, am I? I'm not a problem, I'm a player."

"If you're not the problem, you're real. That means we're both supposed to get together and solve some kind of problem that the scriptwriter is going to spring on us."

They turned back to back and looked around nervously, gripping their clubs. The new man said, "Every so often I get a weird feeling that this is reality. At the beginning of this sim they told us we had found a planet and landed."

"Don't pay attention to that junk. Lots of sims begin with landing on a planet."

"But when we were landing they said it was real!"

Ralph felt nervous and tried to reassure him. "They say that in sims just to get us on our toes."

"But when we cook something we can eat it, and we feel full. You said it too."

"That's just some new technology they worked up for us."

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"That's just some new technology they worked up for us."

"They said reality is tough, when you get damaged, you stay damaged." "That's just some brainwash from their toughening up games. How do you know

there is a reality? Maybe it's all virt."

"In my annual reality sim I fell on broken branches and got a broken leg and wounds. I'd strayed from my sim team. I was alone. Electronic pain is no fun. Nobody came when I yelled. My leg rotted. In that sim I even died! They scripted pain at my leg until I was glad when I died and the game was over and I got a minus score. I took my next training sim in how to set bones and bandage cuts. If they put me back in that reality game they won't catch me that way again."

"If you flunked your last reality sim, maybe this is a reality sim. Scratches hurt."

"Sim pain. If they are after us to teach

us a reality lesson they'd be trying to get us into sim pain. They probably have lions in this planet. Or something to make it painful."

The two men stood back to back, nervously gripping their clubs and scanning the bushes. Ralph said,

"I didn't see any lions. We need weapons. Did you make any weapons?"

"Maybe we should go back to the spaceship and ask for weapons. Did you keep track of where you were going when you left the ship? I was just having fun running in the outdoor virt. I didn't look back."

"The first day I thought it was just a landscape via. I ran around enjoying the views. I didn't watch which way I

explored." Ralph tried to remember whether he had run with the sun in his eyes, or behind him. North or south?

A very large animal with long teeth and claws came out from the trees and crouched, staring at them. They climbed a nearby tree, clawing through dead lower branches to high secure branches. "Are you scared?"

"No. This can't be a reality sim. We only get them once a year before our birthdays to toughen us up."

"Then if that thing ate us there wouldn't be any pain?"

"My birthday was six months ago. When was your birthday?"

"Last week. We should be safe. We could get down and let it eat us and the

game would be over with us getting minus scores but anyhow out of this stinking game."

They both stayed in the tree. "It wasn't stinking until I met you. I was having fun."

"I DIDN'T SCRIPT THE ANIMAL INTO THE GAME! Maybe there are other players in this game. Maybe they got eaten by the animal."

"It's trying to climb the tree!"

They both made finger gestures at the animal, trying to edit it out of the picture. Ralph continued to make finger gestures at the animal long after it had finished eating the other player. After the animal ambled away Ralph continued making finger gestures at the body.