

“Good morning Brianna!” Brianna’s mother said, as Brianna sat down at the dining table in the kitchen. Brianna’s curly hair bounced around her head as she ran to her seat and sat down. Brianna’s pajamas were blue, with a pattern of purple dolphins and pink seahorses. Her mother was wearing a blue t-shirt and some jeans.

"Morning Mom!" Brianna said. Then Brianna grabbed a fork, impaled her pancakes, and began to eat. Mom watched, amused. Brianna and her mother both had dark brown skin and brown eyes. Her mother’s eyes traced Brianna’s face as she ate— not that Brianna noticed. She was too busy eating her breakfast to even glance up at her mother.

“You could slow down, you know. Honestly, how do you eat so fast?” Mom asked.

“Places to go, things to do!" Brianna replied between bites. She finished off the last of her pancakes, then stood up. Her mother’s smile dulled a little.

“W-wait! Don’t you want to come and have some tea? I made sure to buy all our favorite flavors, and your sister and brother and Dad wanted to—“

“Nope, can’t, gotta run, bye mom!" Brianna said, running out of the room and up the staircase to the second level of the house. Brianna didn’t see her mother’s face crumple with disappointment— she had already left the room. Upstairs, Brianna almost tripped over her little sister, who was exiting the bathroom.

“Bri!" Her sister’s face lit up when she saw Brianna.

“Wanna play a game—“

“Sorry, can’t I’m busy!!” Brianna said, rushing past her sister. Finally, Brianna made it to her room. It was a total train wreck— but what did it matter? Bri rushed over and picked up the

only item in her room that she still cared about— The Diadem. She picked it up and traced her fingers along its smooth surface. It was a ring made of wires and smooth, shiny metal. It didn't actually look all that great— but that wasn't important. The important part was what it *did*. Everyone called the rings, "The Diadems," but that wasn't their actual name. The rings were actually Hyper-Realistic Neuro-Transmission Virtual Reality Headsets, or H.R.N.T.V.R.H— but that was a mouthful, and if you tried to say it as if it were a word, it sounded like Hurn-TIV-Urh— which did not sound cool in the slightest. So, everyone just started calling them 'Diadems—' a fancier word for crowns and headdresses.

*"Hey, Bri— snap out of it! You're gonna be late for class!"* Bri realized with a start. She grabbed the headset and laid down on her bed as she slid it onto her head. She made sure its wire was plugged into her bedroom power outlet— and then pressed the power button on the Diadem.

Six months ago, the world was still suffering in the grips of the COVID-19 pandemic— which was making a rebound due to the Delta variant. But six months ago, the geniuses of the world came together with an idea. Scientists of nearly every type and field joined together and used their collective knowledge to create the Diadem— which they believed was the answer to the pandemic. The scientists then took their Diadems to the billionaires of the world— and convinced one to pay for the diadems to be delivered to every family in every single country on planet Earth. And as the Diadems were being delivered, the scientists finished the final piece of their puzzle— the Ultranet. It was like the Internet— but it was a space that users could experience in 3D. The gaming industry had seized the opportunities created by the Ultranet, and now there were billions of games to be played in the Ultranet— but there were also billions of places to go. People could create 3D environments in the Ultranet just like they could create

websites on the Internet. For instance, where Bri was headed right then. Bri was inside her pod—a digital vehicle designed to help users get around in the Ultranet—not unlike a Home Screen on an iPad or a web browser back on the Internet. There were many different models, but the top ones were all made by Apple, Microsoft, or Amazon. Bri’s model was an Apple product.

“Hey, Siri? Take me to school.” Brianna said.

“Ok.” Siri said agreeably. There was a quiet hum inside of the pod, and a few seconds later, the entrance to her school loaded into being around her pod. Everyone was arriving at school, so there wasn’t enough space for all of the pods to travel along the ground. Bri’s pod rested among a giant cloud of pods—some of them more than three stories above the ground. But that didn’t matter. The world was digital, after all. Bri opened her door and jumped out of her pod with a whoop of joy. She fell thirty feet before landing—but as she had said, it didn’t matter. The world *was* indeed digital—and here at school, there was no fall damage. Bri landed lightly, then summoned her backpack app, which was a digital backpack that appeared on her back, containing everything she’d need for school that day. Then, she walked into the school building.

Normally, Brianna enjoyed school. The curriculums were always interesting, and she had great teachers. But that day, Brianna could hardly pay attention. As soon as her last class ended, Brianna raced back outside to her pod and jumped in. She opened the app store on her pod, and tapped “Enchantica.” Within seconds, she was hopping right back out of her pod, then using her FriendMe app to teleport to her best friend Tammy.

“Bri! You made it!” Tammy said. Tammy had pale skin and freckles. Her hair was pastel pink and looked like it was made of cotton candy while she was in the Ultranet-- but in the real world, Tammy’s hair was a reddish-brown. In the Ultranet, anyone could change their avatars to look like anyone they wanted to-- which was how Tammy’s eyes were hot pink instead of pale

blue, and she was wearing a dress that had the pattern and texture of an ice cream cone. The main differences in Brianna's appearance were her purple eyes, her hot pink (but still curly) hair, and her outfit. She was wearing high-heeled boots that came up past her knees, a skirt, and a crop top.

"Hi Tam!" Bri said to Tammy. "Is the show starting soon?"

"Yup! Let's go find a place to watch!!" Tammy said excitedly. Bri and Tammy took to the air, zooming into the impossibly vast auditorium. Most of the seats were full, so most people were just staying in the air, drifting to a spot where they could still see the stage. Luckily, Tam and Bri found some spare seats in the perfect location. Right as they slid into their seats, the lights dimmed.

"Hello, Enchantians!!" said a voice that echoed through the auditorium.

"It's starting!!" Tammy whisper-squealed. There was a giant *poof* of glitter on the stage—and when the sparkles cleared, there was a digital fairy standing on the stage, her wings shining in the light.

"How y'all doin!?" the fairy said. The audience cheered. Bri recognized her as the spokesperson for Enchantica, an upcoming game in the Ultranet. The unreleased game was famous for its next-level fantasy simulations.

"Thank you everyone for being so devoted to our game. Your support has been immensely helpful, and each and every one of us here at Enchantica thanks you for it. As to the upcoming game?" The fairy paused, and the entire auditorium held its breath.

"We're working incredibly hard to bring it to you, and we're getting closer every day." The audience groaned. They'd come for information, and they hadn't gotten it. Around the room, people began to teleport away.

“*BUT!* We’re opening a demo that will showcase some of the qualities we’ll be bringing to you in the full game!” And then, the fairy snapped her fingers— and the walls fell away. Around the entire group that was previously occupying the auditorium, was a beautiful, enchanted meadow.

“OMGOMGOMG!!” Tammy exclaimed.

“We’ll leave you to explore. As always, thank you for supporting Enchantica, and check back here soon for expansions & added content!” The fairy-spokesperson said, disappearing in a cloud of dust.

“OMG WE HAVE TO EXPLORE THIS PLACE. NOW.” Bri squealed. So Tammy and Brianna spent the next several hours exploring the meadow. They found miniature ponds, and shrunk down to the size of a blade of grass, to visit a fairy house. They were leaving that house when Tammy stopped.

“Aww, gtg. Apparently it’s 12AM in the real world?!” Tammy said. Bri rolled her eyes. “Ugh, lame. The real world always ruins everything.” Brianna said with a scoff.

“Yeah, it stinks sometimes. Well, ttyl?” Tam said.

“Ttyl!” Bri replied. Bri opened her main menu, and clicked “Exit Ultranet.” Suddenly, Bri was back in her ordinary body, in her ordinary room, in her ordinary house. She sighed, then removed her headset before laying back down on her bed— this time to go to sleep.

“*Brianna!!* Why didn’t you unplug yesterday?! It’s not healthy to stay in the Ultranet for that long, you *know* that!” Brianna’s mom exclaimed. She’d waited for Brianna to come downstairs, then started reprimanding her relentlessly.

“Mom, that is such an uninformed view.” Brianna said with an eye roll.

“Still, you can’t be in there for so long, Bri! Your siblings want to spend time with you—and I miss you, Brianna.” Mom said. She reached for Brianna’s arm, but Bri batted her arm away.

“Not now mom— I have things to do that are *so* much more important than this.” And with that, Brianna got up and left the room.

“Brianna! *Brianna!!*” Mom called after Bri— but Brianna did not stop. She just marched upstairs, put on her headset, and pressed the power button.

For days, Brianna hardly left the Ultranet. She and Tammy continued to explore Enchantica’s new demo, only pausing to eat, sleep, use the bathroom, and go to school. For hours, Bri and Tam would sit on the hillside and watch the purple skies.

“I can’t wait until the full game releases,” Bri would say.

“Me neither!” Tam would reply. And they’d talk about all of the places they’d go, and all of the things they would do— but in the end, they’d never actually *do* anything. They’d just sit and wait, for hours and hours and hours.

A week later, Bri made her way to her meeting spot with Tammy— but Tammy wasn’t there. Bri waited and waited, but Tam was nowhere to be seen. Finally, Tammy appeared from the crowd.

“Tam!” Brianna said excitedly. But then Brianna noticed the expression on Tammy’s face.

“...Tammy?” Brianna asked, this time with worry instead of joy. Something was wrong. Tammy set their conversation to whisper mode to make sure no one else could overhear them. Then she spoke.

“My dad’s been sick.” Tammy said.

“*What?!*” Brianna asked.

“He’s fine now— but he had a high fever. My entire family had been worried about him for days, and I didn’t even know about it.” Tammy said. Brianna felt everything... shatter. What was going on?

“I’m so sorry—“ Brianna said, and then stopped. They both stood there in the silence for a few long seconds. Then, Tammy spoke.

“I’d better go home.” Tammy said.

“Ok... bye Tammy.” Brianna said.

“See you.” Tammy said. Then, she opened the main menu, and left the Ultranet. Brianna stood there for a few seconds. Then, Brianna followed suit, leaving the Ultranet as well.

Brianna stared at the ceiling as she laid on her bed. She felt like she was barely breathing— like the air itself was pressing her down, down, down into her bed. She didn’t know what to do— because Tammy’s situation had made her see everything in a new light. By spending all of her time in the virtual world, trying not to miss out on her life— had she missed out on it anyway? Had she really been enjoying herself all that time? She loved hanging out with Tammy— but after the first few days, they hadn’t done... *anything*. She’d thought living in another reality would make her happier— but instead of being happy, had she just been addicted? Bri covered her face with her hands as everything crumbled around her.

“...Brianna?” Asked Bri’s mom. She sat down on the bed next to Brianna.

“Are you alright?” Bri’s mom asked. Brianna sat up and hugged her mom tightly.

“Mom, I ruined everything.” Brianna said. Bri’s mother paused for a minute.

“Well, we’re all downstairs eating dinner together. Do you want to join us?” Bri’s mom asked. Brianna thought about it— and then she realized she knew exactly what she wanted to reply with.

“More than anything.” Brianna said. Brianna loved playing with Tammy and exploring the Ultranet— but that wasn’t the only life she had to lead. It was easy to get swept up by the Ultranet, and Enchantica, and its promises of the future— but she had to live in the present too. And at that moment, that meant going downstairs and sharing a meal with her family. Brianna’s home and the Ultranet were both pieces of her life— but they were just that. Pieces. And she couldn’t live her life with just one piece of herself. As Bri put down her Diadem and left her room, she realized that she finally felt... *right*.