

First, there was black.

Then, you opened your eyes, woken up by the sound of screaming. All of a sudden, you felt the heat from outside. The smell of sulfur flew through the windows into your nose as you rushed to look outside at the carnage taking place. You heard a deafening roar coming from above your head. You covered your ears and ducked as a fireball flew by your window. A dragon had attacked your city.

You ran to get your weapons; as a member of the English guard, it was your duty to defend the city. You skipped the suit of armor standing by the door, knowing that if the dragon was after you, no armor would be able to save you. You ran to the battlements, where you saw many guards drawing bows and loading their catapults.

As you looked down to the town, you saw the citizens of London being guided by guards through the burning buildings towards safety. As you looked up to the sky, you saw it. Around the size of a building and the color of obsidian, the dragon flew by and lit another section of the town ablaze. As you drew your bow and aim towards the dragon, she sees you with the rest of the guards and immediately flies towards you. You were shocked anything could move that fast as it crashed into the battlements, throwing people and stone all different directions. You barely hung on as the floor beneath you crumbled, holding you 15 meters above the ground. You were sure one of your legs was broken.

You heard a thud as the dragon landed beneath where you were hanging, and she was looking straight at you. You knew this would be your death as you felt your grip slipping away. As you finally lost your grip and started to fall towards the waiting

dragon's mouth, you removed your sword from its holster. When the jaws of the dragon began to close around your torso, you thrust your sword towards its head. Almost simultaneously, your sword pierced through the top of the dragon's head as its jaws closed on your body. The dragon died almost instantly, while you were left there to suffer, countless knives poking through your body. As you bled out, there wasn't much pain. Well, there was a lot of pain, but not as much as you expected. You thought about how when they find you and the dead dragon, you would be remembered as a hero. You were the one who was able to stop the terror of the dragon. These thoughts filled your head as you slowly closed your eyes and lost all feeling in your body.

And then there was black, and you took off your headset.

After a period, the black was gone, and you were in space. You had just landed your rover on the surface of Mars, and were tasked with the first human exploration of the surface. The rest of your team was still in the ship, observing you. As you drove along the red surface, you kept your eyes peeled for any abnormalities in the otherwise barren, flat plains that lay in front of you. However, through the dust storm, even with your enhancing visor, you couldn't see anything other than the red ground and bright yellow sky.

Something came through your computer into your ear. After a little bit of static you heard a voice that said, *Sergeant we have a read on a geographic anomaly to your southwest, investigate with caution*, to which you replied with a gesture in the air, knowing that the voice was observing you, and they would see you. You adjusted your

direction based on the compass that lie in front of you on the control panel and proceeded in that direction.

As you grew closer, you noticed that the anomaly wasn't a hill or a mountain, as they had traditionally been. Rather, it was a relatively thin chasm, about 5 meters across, forming almost a perfect circle. You decided to investigate, and typed out a message to those back at command which read: *Investigating the anomaly, appears to be some sort of cave, will report after exiting*, which got the reply, *Copy that, know that communications and tracking may cease if you go deep underground, be careful*. With that in mind, you proceed underground.

As soon as you entered, you noticed how clean the chasm looked. The walls were all consistently circular, as if it was bored out with a large digging machine. As you marveled at the craftsmanship of the walls, you lost your footing on the ledge you hadn't noticed in front of you and you fell down through another chasm to somewhere very, very deep. When you landed, the wind was knocked out of you, but not much else. The gravity on Mars is less than that of Earth, and your shock absorbers served their purpose effectively.

After you collected yourself, you looked around, using your handheld light as a guide for your eyes. You immediately noticed that there was a large number of chasms going different directions from where you were standing, with your location serving as a center. Then, your feet felt the ground beneath them start to rumble. Very slowly at first, but then harder and harder as the seconds went on. You didn't want to move into any

particular tunnel, for you were sure that there was something creating the shaking, and you didn't want to jump straight into whatever it was.

The shaking kept getting harder and harder until eventually it was so hard you lost your footing and fell over. Then you could tell which direction the shaking was coming from, so you promptly got up and started to run in the opposite direction. However, this was to no avail, as the large Mars desert worm swooped through and ran straight into your body, using its tremendous force to push you very quickly through the tunnels. You used your g-force stabilizer from your suit, so you could maneuver your arms effectively. When it engaged, you immediately turned on your photon blaster and set it to the highest power. You pointed it towards the front of the worm, braced yourself, and fired.

The resulting explosion of living matter was disgusting, but thanks to your suit, that explosion contained nothing originating from you. As you lay, you realized exactly what you had just done. You were tasked with the first exploration of Mars by anyone on Earth, and everyone had been excitedly watching you. And as you did that, you actually discovered alien life, something that had never been done before, and what did you do? You killed it. As you pondered this fact and began to beat yourself up inside, you started to feel an ominous presence. This didn't feel like part of the Experience. This felt fabricated, which didn't make any sense. You deliberately payed extra money to be able to get the hyper-realistic Experiences, and this is what results of that? Even this break in character to comprehend this fact upset you. As you got up to try to better understand

what exactly this presence was, a black figure shot towards you, startling you, and, through your protective suit, cut your body clean in half.

And then there was black.

Another one right off the bat. You were dressed in a suit, and were following multiple other people in suits towards a conference room. You were about to begin your presentation on your business plan for the following year. But then you realized, wait, I don't know anything about a business plan, nor did you know anything about this company. What were they selling? Who were these people around you? How did you end up with this boring of an Experience?

You and your associates walked to the end of the hallway and were met with a door, which the large man in front opened and in you walked. In front of you lie a conference table with conferencing men attending the conference which you, and you hated conferences.

You stepped behind the table, to the right of your large associate. After a very hearty, "Gentlemen," and an immediate silence from the table, your associates began the presentation. You figured that you would be able to pick up what was happening, however you couldn't decipher anything from the jargon that the large man used. And by jargon, you meant literal unintelligible gibberish. You could not understand what exactly what was coming out of the man's mouth, but it sounded almost like the sound that is made when someone whacks someone with a hand full of whipped cream, if that person was performing such an act very quickly, many times.

After a few moments of trying to comprehend just what the hell the man to the side of you was communicating, the feeling set in and you realized how truly bored you were. The break of character didn't even bother you, as you were just that bored. These Experiences are meant to be realistic, but the point is to escape your life, so why am I just going to work, you thought, before once again feeling that ominous presence. You didn't feel like you were in danger, but you did feel like something was wrong, so you looked around the room. One of the men in the middle of the left row was acting strange. It was something that you had never seen anyone do, like someone was literally using all of their power just to hold their skin onto their body. It was terrifying. Apparently, that was what the man was trying to do, because after a wrench forwards, a black figure shot out of his body and flew straight towards you.

And then it was black.

You opened your eyes and found yourself on the couch in your house. That was not very fun, you thought, as you put your handhelds down on the nearby table. You got the most boring Experience you could imagine, and you also immediately died with no chance. Ridiculous. You were willing to go for another after some refreshments. An Experience always made you tired, though that one certainly tuckered you out. You headed toward the kitchen to the refrigerator, but as you did, something seemed off. It was very subtle; perhaps the furniture was moved a centimeter to the left, or when you opened the fridge the door weighed just a little bit less than you remember, or the bottles on the door jingled at a slightly different pitch, or maybe it was all of these. This place looked like your house, but it just didn't feel like it. As you contemplated this fact,

you heard a soft knock on the door, just barely enough that it was clear there was somebody outside.

As you entered the foyer to get the door, it became very clear that there was something wrong. Everything in room looked the same except for the distinct lack of a doorknob. With this fact, it proved very difficult to open to door, which was worrying in that it meant you were trapped inside, and you wouldn't be able to admit whatever was banging on your door. You looked through the peephole, but that was no help, as all you can see through the door was black, almost like a dark sheet of paper was placed over top of the hole.

In addition, you were also worried about the fact that the knocking on the door had not stopped; rather, it had gotten much more aggressive. After about 20 seconds it seemed like whatever was on the other side was willing to knock down the door. In fact, you were sure that was what they were going to do.

After a while of particularly aggressive knocking from them and some panicking from you, there was a stop. Then suddenly, a crash, and whatever the black figure was rushed through the new hole replacing the door towards you, covering 15 meters in a fraction of a second. It ran straight into you.

And then it was black.

You were on the couch, in a cold sweat. Same situation as before; you placed your handhelds down and went towards the kitchen for some refreshments. Then there was a knock on the door. You knew that whatever it was could move fast, and it could end you fast, so fighting was not an option. You decided to try to hide, the best place

you could think of being the closet in your room, which was upstairs. You ran to the foyer and started going up the stairs, but something peculiar was taking place.

As you walked up the stairs, there wasn't any change in position. You could look down at the steps and watch yourself walk up the stairs, one at a time, but when you looked up, there were just as many stairs ahead of you, and when you turned around, there were just as many stairs behind you. Now, this situation was turning out to be quite the problem, because as before, the knocking was getting to the point of the door getting knocked down. You rushed to the kitchen to get a knife, knowing that there was no point in hiding anymore, as the only worthwhile spot seemed impossible to get to. As you removed the knife from the rack, you heard the door slam down to the floor, and you turned around to a black figure rushing towards you, who you attempted to defend against, to absolutely no avail.

And then it was black.

And there you were again, on the couch, same situation as before. You got up, put down your handhelds, and went to the kitchen for some refreshments. You were getting a little bored of the repetition, but also scared that you may never be able to do anything about this and end up stuck in a constant loop of that black figure tearing you to shreds.

Defending yourself didn't seem impossible last time, so you decided to try it again, but by taking more powerful measures. You left the kitchen and entered the foyer, and looked through the cabinet adjacent to the stairs and took out what you were



looking for. You took it, brought it to the door, which was already being bashed on, placed the tip of the long end on the door, and fired.

After one large bang, the knocking had stopped. You figured that whatever was on the other side of the door had died, or at least been incapacitated. You decided to check on the peephole to see if the situation had changed. You place your hands against the door, and lean forwards, looking through the peephole. Darkness is all you could see.

Something you noticed over this cycle was that there was a voice that was narrating everything that you were doing and thinking. It seemed familiar, but it wasn't that voice in your head that everyone hears, but rather this voice seemed real. It felt very close to your head, if not inside of it, but you were almost certain that this voice you were hearing was coming from the various vibrations of your eardrums. It was independent of you, but it certainly didn't act like it.

Well then, let's try something new to break the cycle, you thought. You ran to the foyer, searching, locating exactly what you had been looking for. This was worth a try, regardless of the result. Through the commotion taking place at your door, you pressed down the back, heard a click, pointed it toward your face, and pulled the trigger. For an instant, it felt as if your head had just been hit by a truck.

And then it was black.

And when you opened your eyes, you knew that the voice had expected this, because there you were, still on the same damn couch you seem to never be able to get away from, and that same damn voice was still there. You could shoot yourself in

the head and still you would be trapped. This time, you thought, I'll just sit on the couch and think about this. So that's what you did. You just sat on the couch and pondered your surroundings. As you did, you tried to take note of everything that seemed wrong with your house. It was difficult over the clawing and banging taking place on your door, but you persevered. Something that hadn't been clear to you before was just how this all had been happening. Sure, you'd had multiple nightmares before, but never 5 in a row, nor was it the same nightmare over and over, so you figured this probably wasn't a dream.

Then the voice narrating all of your thoughts and actions finally tipped you off. You knew you recognized this voice; this was the same one from the Experiences. This is the same voice that tells you what's going on within the Experience. And with that, you realized that you had missed a vital step in ending an Experience. You put down your handhelds, but you had missed another piece of equipment. With that in mind, as the front door crashed down and the black figure rushed towards you, you reached up towards your head and removed the headset.

And then it was black. That's the last I saw of you.

But you were the one that vanished, not me. The Virus is still here, and so is she. Maybe some time we will meet again, and perhaps you'd be so kind as to let her in, so she won't have to keep bashing on the entrance.