

YAMA

Maya gazed at the horizon, whistling softly.

A new dawn was slowly rising over the plains, brushing the fresh, fine grass with a light morning dew. A few birds could be heard in the background.

Not enough.

Maya checked her settings with a wave of her hand and increased the sound effect by 15%. There. She could hear them much better now. She took a few steps and gazed at the forest stretching out before her. Her sharp eyes traced the tops of the fir trees that spread below, and she inhaled the scent of damp wood rising from them. She increased it by 10% this time.

With a leap through the air, she went to lean over the edge of the stream and gazed at the stretches of water in the distance, then increased the mist by 5 percent to preserve that mysterious aura that rose each morning over the landscape she loved so much.

“Good morning,” said a deep voice behind her, making her jump in surprise.

“Good morning, Ayam!” she replied cheerfully, turning around. “I didn’t see you coming.”

The old man stood on the bank behind her, towering a few meters above. A long white beard, thin strands of hair falling over a simple dark jacket, like the night that had just ended. He looked like a forest sorcerer, his eyes gleaming, a warm smile resting at the corner of his lips.

“What’s the news?” he asked directly, wasting no time, as usual.

“Well,” she said, bringing up her virtual notes, “I’ve adjusted the visual and scent elements and fixed a few bugs in the ‘dawn’ session. Client satisfaction should increase by about two percent according to my analysis.”

“Very, very good,” he said thoughtfully.

“Most visitors arriving in ten minutes,” she announced.

“Perfect, as always. I’m proud of you,” he replied mechanically.

Since its opening in 2024, the YAMA system, the main public virtual reality space, had continued to attract more and more people. With nothing more than the latest generation headset, anyone could access a seemingly infinite universe. It was therefore Maya’s role, under the guidance of her mentor Ayam Eden, to design and redesign every element of her environment to always meet visitors’ expectations. In charge of the simulation’s settings, she had long lost count of how many times she had readjusted every detail of the surrounding landscapes, from the morning dew to the behavior of the animals.

Her goal? To make YAMA a true paradise on Earth, within the virtual world.

“Well, I’ll have to leave you now. I need to take care of some user issues and welcome the newcomers,” he said thoughtfully as he stood up and stretched. “Thanks again for your help, May’. I don’t know what we’d do without you.”

“You’re welcome,” she said softly. “It’s my job. Good luck!”

He gave her a small wave and disappeared as quickly as he had arrived. Old Ayam had a far more crucial role than hers. Managing all interactions between YAMA and its visitors, he was responsible for ensuring that everything went smoothly for them, and enormous responsibilities rested on his shoulders. In a way, she was glad that her work only involved rocks and butterflies, she thought. He was busy all day long and sometimes complained about being “the Mickey of the park,” as he liked to say.

Maya, on the other hand, never interacted with visitors. For reasons of confidentiality, they appeared to her only as vague, fluorescent, shapeless specters, which in a sense made her work more peaceful, while she herself remained invisible to everyone. She had access to alerts when an environment-related issue occurred and to the immense database provided to her. If a bug arose, she simply had to teleport to the exact spot and fix the problem discreetly. And she was good at it: she regularly received praise for her work. The rest of the time, she was free to wander, to play safely with the wild animals... the dream job. She was probably living the most peaceful of existences.

Suddenly, a familiar “bing” sounded at the corner of her interface. Three hundred kilometers away, in the middle of the desert, a problem had occurred. With a quick glance, she saw that it was nothing serious. She simply needed to reactivate the wind, as it was starting to get a little too hot for the visitors out there in the sun. She let out a sigh. The day had begun.

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She saw Ayam again only at the end of the day, once the events were over and the traffic on the servers had subsided. The old man looked tired and sat sipping a cup of tea while reviewing his day, watching the data projected discreetly onto a nearby rock.

“Yes, a lot of people lately. I spent my whole day fixing a few issues and helping some users who had gotten lost,” he said with a shrug.

Not much having changed on her end, she gave him a brief summary of the few bugs she had fixed... some bears coming out of hibernation at random, a few foxes wandering too far from their dens... Nothing major; she was used to that kind of small problem in the simulation.

She had crossed paths with a few silent visitors, but it did not matter; that was not her concern. The old man seemed far more preoccupied than she was, while she had felt a bit bored. He gave her no further instructions and quickly returned to his notes, preparing for the next day as the sun sank on the horizon.

She decided to go to bed early and left him there, turning off her notifications as she headed toward a valley she particularly loved. She rarely disconnected from YAMA, preferring to sleep directly within the simulation. In truth, she could no longer really remember when her last disconnection had been. She had everything here: a job, people who appreciated her, and above all, complete control over her environment. If she wanted to sleep on the moon, she could teleport there instantly.

The latest headsets, including hers, supplied her body with carbohydrates directly through the same sensors that simulated taste. People also fell asleep far more easily in YAMA, strangely enough. She always drifted off in less than a minute into a deep, dreamless sleep, lulled by the music of her playlist. She yawned and closed her eyes. Tomorrow was already waiting.

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She found old Ayam in the same place the next morning. He did not seem fully awake yet, sipping a coffee as black as ink to rouse himself.

“I’ve got a lot on my plate today,” he apologized, “I won’t be able to stay. But I’ll see you tonight.”

She nodded and got back to work. Today, she had to take care of a herd of deer coming from the north. Many visitors loved observing YAMA’s wild animals, and these creatures were always a spectacle not to be missed.

Everything was supposed to go smoothly. She spent several hours sitting among the herd, a doe occasionally licking her feet, rereading the code of the different animals and checking that everything was working properly. That the illusion was holding. That people believed in it.

Around noon, a small crowd of visitors gathered about a hundred meters away from her and the herd, forming a faint shimmer in the tall grass from their translucent halos. She wished, in a way, that she could see the faces of those safari enthusiasts behind their blurred masks to witness their passion, their awe. She caught herself sitting still, simply watching the young fawns trot nervously through the tall grass. Everything was going perfectly.

A sudden ping sounded.

With a sigh, she stood up and reconnected. “Unknown error.” That was unusual; she frowned. It was rare for YAMA’s internal system to fail to identify the type of issue on its own. In an instant, she teleported to the location from which it had originated.

A chill ran through her body immediately, and she cursed herself for not having checked the details of the coordinates first.

She was standing at the foot of a snowy mountain, the sky dark, a freezing wind sending flakes swirling all around her. The cold bit sharply before she disabled the temperature effects. It took her a few seconds to understand the source of the problem, as the light was dim. In a steep corner, a rock had collapsed. Nothing surprising for the area, which was dedicated to avalanche enthusiasts and extreme sports. No, what was strange was the behavior of the rock, which remained suspended above the ground.

As if frozen in motion, it kept spinning violently on itself, making an infernal noise. It twisted in every direction, a terrifying sight for anyone who might pass by. With a quick gesture, she muted the sound coming from the rock, then made it disappear, promising herself to fix the issue later with the team that had designed the area. She was looking around and about to leave when she heard another sound, faint, coming from below where the rock had fallen. She approached and suddenly saw the silhouette of a visitor.

What struck her immediately was his position. The visitor was lying on the ground, forming a blurry, almost indistinguishable silhouette against the snow, collapsed in on himself. White on white. She came closer and then noticed that he was moving, writhing in pain.

Her nerves froze. This was absolutely not normal. Visitors were not supposed to feel pain. Everything was virtual. She rushed toward him as fast as she could, plunging through the thick foam of snow. “What is happening?” she kept asking herself. No answer.

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When she reached the motionless silhouette, she bent down, feeling a cold sweat seize her. She blinked and sent a message to alert Ayam; he was the one who knew how to handle this kind of situation. The misshapen figure kept thrashing on the ground, violently flinging its limbs like a broken doll. She tried to touch it, but her hand passed straight through the visitor's body. Useless. She couldn't do anything.

In less than a second, she sent a message through every security channel, alerting everyone she knew, flooding the network with data: video, location, images. No one answered. She shouted for help into the snowstorm that was starting to fall. In vain. Why was no one coming? "Help! Client in danger!" she kept shouting at the top of her lungs. She then saw the silhouette slowly begin to slow down, its movements turning uneven, transforming into spasms. She sent her alerts again, faster, more frantic than before.

No response. She then saw the silhouette gradually grow still, in a stretch of time that felt like an eternity. Then it stopped moving altogether.

"No!" she cried. "No!"

And suddenly, as she remained bent over the visitor's body lying in the snow, it emitted a short "beep" and vanished. Disconnected.

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"These things happen," Ayam told her when he found her a few minutes later. "Probably a fainting spell, a cardiac arrest, maybe epilepsy... The rock bug must have caused a strong shock for the user and then... who can tell?" he said. "Don't worry, I'll take care of it."

"But..."

"There is no 'but,' Maya," he said, placing a hand on her shoulder. "This isn't your job. Go back to your deer, I handle the humans. Everything will be fine." She didn't know what to reply, still in shock. She went back to work without a word.

The day seemed to last an eternity, Maya trying vaguely to process what had just happened before her eyes. She couldn't believe her mentor's reaction, so devoid of emotion. She spent the afternoon by the side of a sand dune, as if to erase from her mind the scene the mountain had shown her. Had she really just seen a visitor die before her eyes? She could feel that something was wrong and chose to isolate herself, far from everyone.

She eventually fell asleep without a word, as night rose over the dune.

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She dreamed.

Or rather, she had a nightmare. In her sleep, she relived again and again what she had just experienced. She saw the body lying in the snow, the frantic, disjointed movements of despair, her own helplessness. She screamed, shouted herself hoarse, endlessly, alone, utterly alone. Time did not move forward, trapped in the infinite night.

At last, the day broke.

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She had been waiting for about twenty minutes by the edge of a lake when the old man finally joined her, visibly annoyed that his schedule had been disrupted.

"I wanted to talk to you about what happened yesterday..."

"Again?" he said sharply. "I told you it was just an accident. You have to move on, the field teams are handling it."

She stayed silent for a moment.

"I don't understand how you can be so indifferent to the situation," she finally said, her tone sharp.

He stared at her, eyebrows raised, irritated.

"These things happen. Period."

"I... I understand," she hesitated. "But personally, I thought about it all night. In my dreams, it kept looping," she said, feeling tears rise in her eyes.

"You... dreamed about it?" he asked, turning to look out over the water, puzzled.

"Yes, why?" she shot back.

"No. Nothing," he said abruptly, catching himself. "Listen, Maya, your role here is to manage YAMA and its environment, okay? The rest is none of your concern. Your only goal is to make sure the clients are happy, understood? Speaking of which, how are your satisfaction scores doing?"

She let out a trembling breath, taking the remark like a slap.

"They're slightly down, but that's not the most..."

"Not important?" he interrupted. "And what's more important to you then?" he burst out, now furious.

"The safety of our users, maybe? We can't let people come here if they're at risk."

"Of course we can," he replied coldly. "They sign agreements when they arrive here, don't you remember? It's not your job to talk about safety, for heaven's sake, Maya! Your job is to maximize their loyalty. To make them stay, and for as long as possible. End of story. That's your only function," he declared.

A heavy silence filled the air for several long seconds, during which she watched the old man's movements. Doubt was taking hold of her more and more; she no longer recognized the man she had once trusted.

"Ayam," she said sharply. "Tell me this is the first time you've seen something like that happen."

He remained dreadfully silent, took a few steps, crossed his arms, let out a dark, humorless chuckle, and finally said:

"Of course not. I've seen hundreds of cases like this, and I'll see hundreds more."

She froze, tense. Shock seized her, panic rising within. She took a step back. He turned and stared at her, his eyes gleaming.

"I told you it wasn't your concern."

"I'm resigning," she replied immediately.

Those words hit the old man like a blow.

"You'd do that to me? To me, after all I've given you? You'd betray *me*?" he shouted, bellowing as he moved toward her, threatening. "After everything I've done for you?"

She backed away, terrified, before striking back.

"It's not me who chose to ignore the risks for the users! You're the one bringing millions of people here every day under your responsibility, knowing full well the dangers. You're the traitor, Ayam! You're the one deceiving everyone. And people need to know what's really happening here."

He stopped, froze, then gave a wicked smile.

"And where exactly do you think you're going? Who do you plan to tell?"

Maya stepped back again, her heart pounding. Had he just threatened her physically?

"I'm going to disconnect," she said.

"Go ahead," he sneered. "Try."

She opened her interface and searched for the logout button. She couldn't find it.

"What?" she stammered.

"So you still haven't understood?" Ayam burst out laughing, his voice terrifying.

He was doubled over, wiping a tear from the corner of his eye before continuing.

"But come on, Maya... you *are* YAMA."

She couldn't reply, frozen in place.

"You're an integral part of the system. I created you for that. You don't really exist. I needed an autonomous artificial intelligence to manage the countless events that happen here. So I created you..."

"That's not possible!" she cried.

"Of course it is," he went on. "I couldn't assign you tasks that were too complex or involved dealing with visitors. So I gave you all the boring administrative stuff. The trees, the wind, the deer, and so on. I kept only the unpredictable elements for myself. The client experience."

"No, no, I refuse!" she screamed, gripped by panic. "There are people waiting for me out there, I have friends, a family, I have a life outside. I want to get out!"

He pouted slightly, as if disappointed.

"I must say, implementing all those memories wasn't so easy—it actually took me weeks," he said with a growing smile. "But tell me, if you really have a life out there, when was the last time you actually left this place?"

She searched through her memory, panicking, but the recollection would not come. Everything was blurry. As always.

“No, I... that’s not possible.”

She felt her legs give out beneath her and collapsed to her knees, stunned. He stepped behind her and patted her shoulder.

“Don’t worry. It’s normal. Deep down, you feel betrayed by everything around you... and in a way, you’re right. Everything that surrounds you, your sensations, your emotions, the people you’ve seen, the people you’ve spoken with... I built it all. In a sense, it’s your entire universe that has ‘betrayed’ you, if I can put it that way. And honestly... I’m quite proud of the result. You fell right into it, which shows that YAMA is becoming truly convincing.”

She covered her ears with her hands, as if to shut out the old man’s words.

“But honestly, I think the best part is all that ‘empathy’ you’ve shown. A beautiful simulation on your part. I think I’ll keep a good part of your code for the future. It’s very interesting.”

She lifted her head abruptly, startled.

“Don’t... don’t touch me. Don’t you—”

“Oh, no need, you know. Bye bye.”

He raised a hand and snapped his fingers. Maya suddenly felt her body grow unbearably heavy, freezing, hardening. She had no time to look around before she saw her feet turn gray and still, then her legs, then... She had no time to think before her entire body turned to stone, into an immobile mass before her horrified eyes. She cast one last look at old Ayam, who was still smiling.

Then, nothing.

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The old man waited a few minutes, then rubbed his hands together.

“What a beautiful statue!” he exclaimed.

In front of what was now Maya, frozen in her horrified expression, he summoned a flat surface on which appeared a title: *The Betrayal*.

“The visitors are sure to love it. A new attraction for the park!”

He then walked away, whistling softly, gazing at YAMA’s turquoise sky. He still had work to do.