

## Journey of Change

“StarNinja84, enemy on your left! Engage counter-defenses,” my teammate, NoobKiller12, shouts in my earpiece. I whirl around to the vibrant trees and double-tap my visor to engage an infrared view. A shot of red is slinking among the green and yellow ferns of the forest, and my heart races with the prospect of a fight.

My inventory flashes at the corner of my eye, and I select my ace weapon; the Turbo Cannon Gun. It cost seven months of savings to get, but its power makes the cost seem like nothing. I bring the scanner up to my eye and let the AI system track the best angle to shoot. My target in sight, I slink out from behind the bush, a lioness stalking her prey.

I absently wipe sweat out of my violet eyes and tuck back my flaming red hair. My focus locked on the target, I slowly press down on the cold trigger of my gun. A deadly laser beam streaks through the trees, and I grin as my assailant crumples to the ground, their body flashing red and fading into the ground.

I wait for NoobKiller to congratulate me on the kill, but only radio static greets me. “NoobKiller, you there?” I call over a private channel.

After a few seconds, I heard his avatar’s voice. “Yeah, nice shot.” I frown briefly. NoobKiller has been more distant recently, coming to sieges late and talking less frequently. But I won’t pry. Gaming is my escape for reality, an opportunity to become someone else. I don’t want to ruin that for him with pointless questions.

I put my focus on the looming mass of stone and moss in front of me. The enemy fortress, deserted due to our earlier siege.

I run forward, the scent of gunpowder and damp stone greeting me as I enter the stronghold. I sprint towards the shining trophy, my outstretched hand closing over the handle-

A beam of light shoots toward the sky, alerting my team that we have won. Pride, triumph, and a rare intense, amazing burst of happiness rock me. I laugh as I see my team running into the stronghold, my elation almost rocking me off my feet.

The members of our party stand on a cliff overlooking a churning ocean. This is the launching portal to VRSiege, my favorite game on the Oculus 30. As we finish congratulating each other, I notice a few members blink away, messaging that they have to go to school. I frown, swiping my screen to bring up a clock.

“Shoot, I’m late,” I mutter, turning to NoobKiller12 with an annoyed expression on my avatar’s face. Only NoobKiller12 isn’t there. My foul mood only darkens, and I stomp over to a teammate to ask about his disappearance.

“He left right before we finished. Didn’t even collect his gems.” This was unusual. NoobKiller12 and I had been online friends for a few months now; we always did two sieges in the morning even on school days. I hesitantly reach up to my headset, flipping back to reality. I close my eyes as the beautiful landscape washes away, my favorite place erased in a few simple commands.

The sounds of reality trickle into my ears; blaring sirens, a sharp odor of smoke, and an angry chorus of distant yelling through the walls.

I groan and roll off my bed that's practically made of stone, plopping on the ground in front of my mirror. I don't see StarNinja84, the beautiful victor of this morning's Mega Siege, an amazing sharpshooter. Instead, I see a shattered, pale girl with all life leeches from her. The walls are blank, the only light in the room coming from my monitor. There is nothing here; this isn't where my life is.

School has become an annoying chore in my life, a task in the depressing world of Aven Clark. My grades have been plummeting due to my frequent absences, and I doubt anyone there knows my name.

After another day of stumbling through school like a zombie, I hop back into my gaming station, a corner of my room where all of my sensory machines that produce wind, alter temperatures, spray scents, and project sounds line the walls and my headsets and charging stations occupy my desk. My Oculus rests comfortably on my head and I snap to call NoobKiller. Maybe he could explain his uncharacteristic silence.

A green light flashes on my screen, and I accept the call faster than ever before. A weight I wasn't aware of lifts off of me, relieving the small bit of anxiety I had.

"Hello? Who is this," a voice comes over the monitor. But this isn't NoobKiller's voice, nor any voice filter supported on the console, and suspicion shoots through me.

"Who are you," I snap back, checking to make sure I called the right player. "Could you please pass the headset to the owner of this console?"

The person at the other end of the call gives a strangled gasp. "What is this, some kind of cruel joke? How do you know Zeph?" The voice is tainted with sorrow, and a dull horror creeps up in my spine.

"NoobKiller12 is my online friend. Could you please pass the headset to him?" Despite my efforts to remain calm, my voice still shakes with a strange fear, fear of the woman's trembling voice.

"He's dead. Zeph shot himself this morning." The woman on the other end of the call is sobbing now, and I suck in a ragged breath, the air around me suddenly very thin. I slowly pull off my headset, my room swimming in a blurry whirl of color.

A numbness crawls through me, and through the stupor I feel hot tears stream down my face. Minutes pass by in the vague quality of a nightmare, and when the tears have run their course I lift my head and stare at the dull walls. I never felt like I truly lived in them, but now it feels like they belong to a corpse. Will I just waste away, my soul slowly disintegrating until I am nothing? I glance over at my headset, laying on the floor. The instinct to put it on, join a siege and battle my emotions away is overpowering, but if I didn't have my gaming, who would I be? Just a girl in a room, with no flicker of life or happiness to ground her. Something needs to change.

### *6 Years Later*

I swipe above my head to look through the virtual items, each appearing as a 3D model in front of me. The next item is familiar; the 2060 edition of VRSiege. I pause, staring at the game that caused my best friend to be so depressed to the point where he took his own life because, like me, he had no connection to reality. And the reason I have been trying to create something to help people with virtual reality addiction for the past six years of my life. As I read the text on the game cover, an idea goes through me like an electric shock.

*A Hero's Journey of Change awaits you.* The familiar catchphrase is still ringing in my ear as I close the virtual shop and bring up a virtual whiteboard. Previous ideas still cover the surface, but I erase them and focus on my current thoughts.

Whenever I tried to come up with a way to cure virtual reality gaming addictions, I viewed it as if virtual reality was only the problem. But I just thought of how it was the solution.

The Hero's Journey was a concept I knew as a gamer; a formula for a character to go on a journey assisted by a mentor and come out changed in some way. It was even in old-timey movies like Star Wars.

My mind is a whirlwind of ideas as I fervently write on the whiteboard. A game to treat people with a gaming addiction, that focused on a hero's path. Something both exciting and helpful, where the player got a call to adventure and is mentored by an AI therapist. I haven't played a virtual reality game in six years, but I remember the joy that experiencing such a vivid reality brought. If I could help people struggling with VR addiction, maybe in some way I could help the shattered girl I used to be, and help myself to move on.