

Eternity Systems, Inc.

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“Ah!” sighed Martin as he reclined back in his lawn chair and weaved his fingers behind his head topped with close-cropped brown hair. “This is the life!”

“You can say that again,” stated Rocky, sitting nearby wearing a blue pin-striped suit. “I couldn’t have asked for a better retirement.”

Smiling, Martin added, “And with such a beautiful landscape to live in...”

“Where did you come up with the idea for an Italian vineyard, anyway?” Rocky interrupted.

Turning his head to gaze at the vista for a second from under the large oak tree where they sat, the man dressed in a partially-unbuttoned white shirt and khaki pants replied, “I had this postcard that I kept from a vacation I took with my wife to Italy back in my forties. I loved that scene! Loved it so much that I presented it to the administrators when I signed up for my retirement.”

Rocky shook his head in amusement and said, “Never been there. I wish I had, though. Italy sounds like a beautiful place.”

Martin outstretched his arms and announced, “Well, you’re there now, baby!”

Chuckling, the well-dressed friend with short, dark hair answered, “Indeed, I am, Martin.

“Have you found the boundaries of your property yet?” Rocky asked after a few seconds.

Martin created a circle over his head with his finger and said, “It goes for a few miles in all directions. I took out my horse from the stable and toured the countryside.”

“You have horses, too?!”

“Yep,” nodded Martin. “Well, only one horse, but it should be enough. I had it added later. Besides, it’s not like I expect it to die anytime soon.”

“True. True.”

Rocky trailed off for a moment before cautiously asking, “Do you miss your body?”

“Not at all!” Martin chuckled. “I was a frail old man with three different malignant tumors. I don’t miss that body at all! Making the transition into Eternity Systems’ database was the best decision I ever made.”

“Me, too,” Rocky grinned while shaking his head in confirmation. “I’ve spent the last fifteen years here, and I’ve loved every moment of it. My wife joined me six years ago, and we’re looking forward to spending the rest of our never-ending retirement together. It’s a shame that Julie didn’t make it long enough to get here herself.”

Martin’s shoulders fell slightly as he said, “Yeah. I wish she was here, too. But, I know she would have wanted me to do this, with or without her.”

Rocky nodded in agreement but said nothing, allowing his friend to continue.

“A small part of me wishes it was possible to go back in time and stop the accident that took her and my boys from me,” Martin added in retrospect. “Might have made the last few decades happier.”

The two men fell silent, lost in thought.

“Anyway,” Martin exclaimed, finally breaking the prolonged silence. “What do you say to a ride? I would love to show off my vineyard to you.”

Cocking an eyebrow, Rocky asked, “I thought you only have one horse?”

“I do, but I can ask the administrators to add another one. It shouldn’t take too long.”

“Doesn’t that cost extra?”

Martin waved away the concern and confidently replied, “Nah! Besides if it does, it shouldn’t be too much.”

Hesitantly, Rocky answered, “Okay. I should change clothes first. A suit really isn’t proper riding attire.”

“Good idea! I think I’ll change as well. Shall we head back up to the house?”

As they left the shade of the oak tree, Rocky stopped and said, “Excuse me a second.”

Martin stopped and turned to watch Rocky reach into his jacket and pull out an old-fashioned mobile phone. Holding up a finger, Rocky flipped it open and answered the incoming call.

“Hello...Okay...Okay...On my way...Bye.”

“I’m sorry,” Rocky apologized after closing the phone and stuffing it back inside his jacket. “My wife is calling me home. May I take a raincheck?”

Nodding with disappointment, Martin conceded, “Sure, sure. I’ll see you later.”

With a wave and a wink, Rocky derezzed into nothingness, leaving Martin standing alone in the field a few meters from the door leading inside his villa. With a sigh, he turned and slowly walked inside.

A few seconds later after passing through the foyer, the sound of a ringing telephone reached Martin’s ears. He paused for a second, cocked his head to the side as he wondered who could be calling him, and hustled to the phone setting next to the monitor and keyboard embedded in the wall next to the entrance into the dining room.

Gently, he lifted the receiver to his ear.

“Hello?”

“Mr. Morrison, this is Administrator 1745.”

Martin smiled and answered upon hearing the man’s voice, “Oh! Hello, administrator! I’ve been meaning...”

“We regret to inform you that your balance is insufficient to cover the next monthly payment. As a result...”

Pausing mid-sentence, Martin considered the statement he just heard for a few seconds before responding quizzically, “I...I don’t understand.”

“We regret to inform you that...”

“Yeah, I heard that. I don’t understand why ...”

Finally, it sank in.

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN MY BALANCE IS INSUFFICIENT?!”

“The balance on your account is currently \$450. We require at least \$500 to continue providing our monthly service to you.”

“FOUR HUNDRED AND...I HAD OVER A HUNDRED THOUSAND DOLLARS IN MY ACCOUNT! WHERE’S MY MONEY?!”

“Well, sir...”

“That balance should have kept me going for years,” Martin frantically muttered to himself.

Returning to the conversation, he screamed, “WHAT DID YOU DO WITH MY MONEY?!”

“Sir,” the administrator calmly began. *“Your balance when you started with us over six months ago was \$120,000. Fees were assessed to your account for the changes that you requested to your setting. The...”*

“Fees? WHAT FEES?!”

“Each time that you have something added to your setting, we assess a fee to cover our costs.”

“How much?!”

“It depends on what is requested. I can run down the list of requests that were made.”

“Go ahead,” Martin shot back with a huff.

“From the starting balance, we assessed a \$50 application fee...”

“Yeah, I remember that.”

“...as well as a \$200 origination fee. The basic package, which you selected, costs \$25,000, and we charged a \$300 processing fee to set up your virtual environment. We also charged \$1,000 for adding a personal photo to your setting...”

“A thousand dollars? For a picture?!”

“We have to set the picture up in such a way that it can be manipulated by you from within the setting. That requires special programming.”

“That’s highway robbery!”

“I understand your frustration, sir. May I continue?”

Martin audibly sighed and replied, “Go on!”

“A month later, you requested the farm package to be added to your account in the form of a working vineyard and hired hands. The farm package costs \$20,000, and the 10 interactive characters are \$5,000 each...”

“EACH?!”

“That is correct, Mr. Morrison.”

“UNBELIEVABLE!”

“And then three weeks ago, you asked for the basic ranch package to be added to your setting, which also costs \$20,000. Throughout the past six months, we assessed the monthly fee of \$500, which brings us to the current balance of \$450. Since the balance is insufficient to...”

“Wait a minute,” Martin interrupted. “Can’t I have one of the packages removed?”

“I’m sorry, sir. Even if we could remove one of your packages, we would not be able to refund the fees.”

“WHY NOT?!”

“Per the terms and conditions of your agreement, the fee assessed covers the costs of setting up and implementing the package you requested.”

Martin paused for a brief moment, desperate to figure a way out of his predicament. As he thought, the administrator interrupted, *“At this time, Mr. Morrison, we would need you to provide a secondary source of payment.”*

“That was my life savings,” mumbled Martin.

“I’m sorry, sir?”

“That was my life savings!” he cried into the phone. “I don’t...”

“I do apologize, Mr. Morrison. But without an additional source of payment, we will have no choice but to close your account.”

“Close my account?! You...you can’t do that!”

“Do you have another source of payment to continue covering the monthly service charge, sir?” the administrator asked sternly.

Meekly, Martin replied, “No.”

“Then per the terms and conditions of the agreement you signed, your account must be closed.”

“Surely there’s something I can do!” Martin pleaded. “I have to...”

After a second’s pause, Martin asked, “Wait. Maybe there is someone I can call.”

“Now, Mr. Morrison, who are you going to call? You indicated on your application that you have no next of kin, and you listed no emergency contacts.”

“Can you place my account on hold? Freeze the setting somehow?”

“You were offered the backup option during the application process, and you selected not to take it.”

“Can I add it now?!” he pleaded anxiously.

“Adding the backup option at this point will cost you an additional \$50,000 which you do not have.”

“THERE MUST BE SOMETHING! PLEASE!!”

“I do apologize, sir. However, at this time we have no choice but to close your account.”

“YOU CAN’T DO THAT! YOU WILL BE KILLING ME! I’M A MAN!! I HAVE RIGHTS!”

“I’m very sorry, Mr. Morrison, but you are legally no longer human. You are merely a computer file in our system.”

Martin’s eyes widened in horror, and he fell silent. His mind raced to find some form of response, but his jaw drew slack and hung open.

“Thank you for choosing Eternity Systems.”

The line went dead. Still in shock, Martin dropped the receiver to the floor. Staring out the window at the part of the vineyard which looked almost identical to the postcard that inspired it, he felt despair wash over him.

“Oh, god,” he whispered, his voice filled with fear. “What am I going...”