

Digital Dog Detective (Revised)

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Jack Harigand awoke from an alcohol-induced stupor to find a glass of water and a cardboard box on his desk.

“Drink me 😊” read a yellow sticky note stuck to the glass. “Open me 😊” read a second sticky note on the box. Harigand scowled, tearing open the box, slicing through the tape with his long, unkempt fingernails.

Inside was a headset—not the cheap kind you’d find at a call center, but a full head-covering apparatus that resembled a helmet more than anything. Wires nestled in the box bore labels reading, “Plug me in 😊” and “Connect me to the Medium 😊.”

With a throbbing headache, Harigand finally reached for the glass of water—only to pour it over the electronic device that had mysteriously appeared in his office. With a sigh of relief and an intense wave of nausea, he dry-heaved before sinking back into his chair, falling into another round of uneasy sleep.

Jack Harigand awoke again from his foggy stupor, only to find the same glass of water and another cardboard box on his desk.

“Seriously, drink me 😊,” urged the sticky note now attached to the glass, which also had an environmentally friendly paper straw sticking out. “Open me 😊,” read another note on the box. Grumbling, Harigand opened the box to reveal yet another large helmet. He instinctively reached for the glass of water, but this time, he couldn’t douse the helmet—the glass was superglued to his twelve-thousand-dollar mahogany desk.

“Ughhhhh,” he groaned, accidentally knocking a few files and lottery tickets off his desk. A fresh wave of headache pierced his skull, leaving him no choice but to sip the water through the straw. “Fine,” he muttered, and began fiddling with the helmet.

Though he didn’t fully understand the device, he had an idea. He’d seen enough apartment windows in passing to recognize it as more than just a toy—this was something different, a craze so popular that kids were playing with it even during school hours. According to the box, this contraption, which had mysteriously bypassed several padlocks to reach his desk, was called “The Medium.”

Harigand eyed it with suspicion. Perhaps it was called “The Medium” because it wasn’t rare, and certainly not well-done. It looked and felt like an overwrought bicycle helmet—bulky, cumbersome, and utterly unappealing. Begrudgingly, he began connecting the wires and power cords. Soon, a faint red light flickered to life on the front of the device. For a fleeting moment, he considered heading to the kitchen for another glass of water to destroy the gadget. But getting up seemed impossible with the rhythmic pounding in his head.

So, still seated in his leather chair and filled with dread, Harigand put on the helmet.

Harigand regretted it immediately. At first, the engulfing darkness was a welcome relief. Without visual stimuli or light to aggravate his senses, the pounding in his head dulled to a manageable pitter-patter. But the tranquility lasted only two or three seconds.

“WWWWWWWWWWREEEEEEEEEEEEN!” The helmet whirred to life, fans spinning and magnetic discs shifting as the soothing darkness was obliterated by a barrage of bright, prismatic colors. The kaleidoscopic display would have been awe-inspiring had it not also inspired Harigand’s stomach to heave once more.

Just as abruptly, the visual assault ended, replaced by two scarlet words that forced themselves into the center of Harigand’s vision.

****The Medium****

“Just like Warioland,” he muttered, though even a Luddite like him knew better. This wasn’t some Virtual Boy knockoff—there were no controllers or gloves, just the helmet. And apparently, that was enough. His hands itched, and when he looked down, he froze.

“P-paws?” he stammered.

Sure enough, Harigand had paws—cartoonish ones, with opposable thumbs. They looked ridiculous, and worse, they felt real. As if responding to his thoughts, light blue text appeared beneath the scarlet title screen.

****Selected Avatar: Default Dog
Selected Outfit: Noire Nonce****

The words faded, and a mirror took their place.

“...What?” Harigand blurted out as his reflection came into view. He resembled a cheap Chinese knockoff of Scruff McGruff—a brown anthropomorphic hound-dog in a trench coat,

slacks, and an utterly useless trilby hat.

“What?” he repeated, only to hear his question replaced by a stock greyhound bark.

“Oi, bad dog!” a vaguely British voice chimed in. “It’s rude to bark at your master!”

“Master?” Harigand asked, again met with a bark.

“Yes, Master,” the disembodied voice replied. “I just said that, bruv, no need to repeat. Oh, and...”

Before he could react, the prismatic colors shifted again, and air rushed past his (simulated) fur. Suddenly, he was immersed in the sounds of honking horns and bustling construction. Cartoonish skyscrapers and oversized fire hydrants sprouted up around him. But as the world spun, Harigand’s hangover decided to remind him of its existence. When the vertigo finally subsided, he found himself sitting at a stool in a rooftop bar, surrounded by a cavalcade of anthropomorphic creatures.

Most of them were dogs like him—minus the trilby and trench coat—but there was also a squid person wearing a bowler hat, a giraffe with human hands, and a leather jacket-clad wolf. Harigand locked eyes with the wolf, who took a step forward and extended a paw.

“Welcome to Chew York, mate!” the wolf declared.

Harigand glanced around at the towering skyscrapers and bizarre avatars, then back at the wolf. His question came out as a bark: “How do I log out?”

“You can’t log out,” replied the wolf with a smug grin. “Not until you pass the test.”

Harigand scowled, raising his paws to try to pull off the helmet. His hands grasped at nothing but air.

“Nice try, but this isn’t VRChat,” the wolf continued. “You’re wearing a full-dive headset, mate. Your body is sitting in that comfy chair of yours, vegging out, while your brain thinks this”—the wolf waved his paw to indicate the entire rooftop bar—“is all real.”

The wolf paused for a moment, as if savoring the situation, then snapped his fingers.

“Let me buy you a drink,” he said. “Oi, bartender!”

The giraffe bartender, sporting a nametag that simply read “Bartender,” took a cartoonish

sack with dollar signs on it from the wolf's paw.

"An Appletini for myself, and an Old Fashioned for my mate here!" the wolf called out, raising his glass to Harigand.

Harigand narrowed his eyes at the word "mate" but said nothing, watching as the bartender mixed their drinks with exaggerated flair.

The wolf sipped at his Appletini, smirking. "Furries and their puns, right? But hey, few subcultures have as much disposable income. Which brings us to the test..."

Ignoring the wolf's rambling, Harigand took a sip of his Old Fashioned. It tasted like whiskey, even though he knew it wasn't real.

"Bruv! The test!" the wolf exclaimed, snapping Harigand back to the present.

"Yeah, what about it?" Harigand asked, though the words emerged as another bark.

The wolf grinned. "The test is why you were given a copy of The Medium. Someone high up needs a dirty detective, and when I looked around, you were the dirtiest I could find. Congratulations, mate."

Harigand growled involuntarily, his paws clenching. "Relax, bruv," the wolf said, stepping back. "Dirty's good! Especially for what I need you to do."

The wolf slid a photograph across the table, showing an anthropomorphic panther woman in a slinky red dress. "This is your mark. Boyfriend thinks she's cheating. Your job is to find out if he's right."

Harigand rolled his eyes. "This is a joke, right?" he muttered, surprised when his voice wasn't replaced by a bark.

"Not a joke," the wolf said, licking his Appletini glass. "Do this right, and you'll be out of here with a nice fat payday."

Harigand eyed the photograph suspiciously. "So, you want me to tail a virtual cat lady?"

"Yeah, basically," the wolf shrugged. "But hey, it's either that or you stay stuck here forever."