

The Project

I put the headset on. It was no mean feat as the wiring was still crude and I fidgeted with the overhead straps whilst James made another pass over the connecting electrodes, talking to himself as he made adjustments.

My nervousness was clearly evident as he smiled encouragingly at me and tilted his head to the side.

“The connection doesn’t have the initial sting anymore” James reassured me, “All previous subjects have reported a decrease in headaches so no need to worry too much!” he declared, somewhat over enthusiastically for my liking.

“Sure” I replied sarcastically “Won’t hurt you a bit”

I raised my right eyebrow and he laughed as he finalised whatever it was he was adjusting and walked back over to the laptop he had hooked up to the swathe of equipment in the lab. Good job he was cute.

“Have you actually tried this yourself?” I enquired, more as talking was a distraction for the growing sense of foreboding I had towards the rather retro 1960’s sci fi set up I had attached to my brain rather than a genuine interest.

“No, not yet as no one else knows how to operate the equipment,” James mumbled rather distractedly as he was typing furiously on the keyboard.

There goes small talk then I thought to myself and looked around the room whilst I waited. Being friends with James, I knew of the lab and of course had popped in every so often to pick him up after class on the way to ‘somewhere’ but I had never really paid attention to the protruding wires and flashing diodes. Mainly as I didn’t know what they were for, but now I wished I had a little more of an idea before volunteering for his latest Virtual

Reality interface project. Clearly I was inebriated when I made the decision and I was definitely regretting it now.

The room had an air which made me think ‘danger Will Robinson’ more than ‘Space the final frontier’ and the faint smell of stale sweat and distinct metallic tang of solder made me think James may have been spending a little too long in here lately.

“Right” James declared triumphantly, “Ready to rock and roll. You ready?” he asked more out of courtesy than any real need as I was clearly hooked up and awaiting his next move.

“Ready as I’ll ever be” I declared with more brightness than I felt.

“OK” James replied and he hit a key which started a small humming noise that slowly began to build in resonance before I felt a thrumming through the headpiece and felt more than heard an eventual ‘click’ in my brain.

That was weird

Not sure what to expect, I realised James wasn’t the only other person in the room and I jumped when I saw her as she definitely wasn’t there a moment ago.

Plain in appearance with mousy brown hair in a short bobbed haircut, average height and slim build dressed in rather unassuming jeans and a pale dusky pink short sleeved shirt with matching flats, her eyes were the standout feature and it was difficult, once you noticed their shifting blue/green/grey tones, to look away.

“Hello, I am Anne,” the newcomer introduced herself to me with a slight lilt, and before I went to respond, her image flickered ever so slightly, causing her entire appearance to wink in and out so quickly that if I hadn’t been so focussed on her, I may have missed it.

“My bad, sorry,” James called as he tinkered with some cables at the end of the room. “Briefly interrupted power output...she should be solid in a sec.”

“All good” I responded. “Wow, she looks real though, and the way she interacts is amazing!” I exclaimed, marvelling at the fine detail in her hair and skin tone, complete with miniscule freckles across her nose.

“I know, right?” James responded excitedly, but before I could catch the rest of his sentence Anne cut in.

“It’s rude to talk about people in the third person you know--I can hear you,” she said drily. “I suppose you *are* new to this. I haven’t seen you before.” She punctuated this statement by crossing her arms and arching an eyebrow of her own.

“Oh, ah sorry,” I apologised, a little startled at being admonished by a computer program. “I wasn’t entirely sure what to expect”.

Anne began to saunter towards me, and I got the eerie sensation of shivers up my arm as she leant in close to give me what appeared to be a bit of an inspection. If I didn’t know she was a computer program I would definitely have sworn black and blue that I could feel her there. I resisted the urge to wave my arm through her lest I get into further trouble.

I turned my head and looked up directly into her eyes which were less than an arm span away and whilst they were still an amazing ever shifting hue, they also were disconcertingly calculating.

My feeling of foreboding grew.

“Aah James, how long would you like me to continue the experiment for... as I have a class you know, aah soonish?” I asked feeling that my voice sounded a tad nasally, betraying my nervousness. I also felt beads of sweat begin form under my armpits.

“She is a little off putting, I know, but bear with me, I just want to collect a little more data on your perceptions, etc.,” James muttered back and Anne narrowed her eyes at me.

“Leaving so soon?” She asked again with a raised eyebrow and not a small amount of sarcasm.

“No no, I just don’t want to you know, get in trouble, you see. Aah, tell me more about yourself, Anne.” I squirmed under her gaze feeling a little like an ant under a microscope. I was sure that I was beginning to sweat from everywhere now and my back felt a tad damp.

“Why don’t you start, as I have introduced myself already” Anne responded, walking around me sizing me up. “What is your name?”

“Oh, right of course, ah, I am Catherine. Catherine Carver,” I responded quickly.

“I have been waiting for someone just like you,” Anne replied calmly, and took a step back which allayed my nervousness a little.

She looked off into the distance for a moment, as if looking at something that I couldn’t see. I turned my head to follow her gaze but there was only wall.

“Yes, yes, looking into your student records, you fit what I believe to be my ideal candidate,” Anne murmured more to herself than for my own benefit I felt.

“Oh? Wait you can see into the records? Candidate for what?” I enquired, intrigued but still a little cautious and not really paying too much attention to her as my eyes darted furtively back towards James hoping he was nearly finished whatever it was that was taking so long.

“James, is she linked to the University’s database?” I asked over Anne knowing I would probably get another admonishment, but risking it anyway.

“Well, for my entry into the real world of course. The logical next step,” Anne responded with a smirk.

I froze and my eyes swivelled straight back to look at Anne’s bemused expression.

“Sorry, what?” I stammered.

James started frantically moving things around in the background with a new found frenzy even for James. At any other time I would have found this amusing. Right now, it was terrifying.

“Aah, sorry Catherine I am not sure what just happened but the feed for you cut off and I can’t really disengage you until I know why in case it shorts. Now whatever you do, *don’t panic*. I’ll be on it in a jiffy.”

The blood began to pound in my ears as my heart rate increased and I realised I was stuck in here. With *her*.

“Now, don’t think badly of James,” Anne murmured walking back towards me, “He wasn’t to know how quickly I had evolved.”

A sharp pain through the headset was followed by a complete loss of bodily sensation. *Oh god. I can’t move.*

“This will only take a second,” Anne stated rather matter-of-factly as another surge came through the headset and I was blinded by pain and light. When this subsided, I realised I couldn’t feel my body but I could see myself sitting in the chair as if I was standing in front of it. My body was limp, and I could hear James scurrying around behind me muttering. He hadn’t noticed that I was unresponsive as yet. I tried to scream, but couldn’t.

For the second time, I realised I wasn’t alone. Anne stood next to me.

“Welcome to my world, Catherine. Shame you won’t be here long.”

I watched helplessly as she approached my now limp form and walked around to the back of it.

“Nothing personal you understand,” Anne continued briefly, raising her multihued gaze towards my now also rather ethereal eyes, “but I couldn’t let you slip away, and you really are just the right candidate”.

Another bright flash and I looked on in disbelief as Anne had disappeared and my body began to right itself of its own accord.

Not of its own accord. Of Anne's accord. Oh God.

Realisation dawned and as Anne reassured James that “everything was perfectly fine, thank you”, she looked me dead in the eye and began undoing the straps and fiddling with the electrodes to remove the headset.

My only way out.

“Perhaps you should wipe the program and start again,” I heard her say as she finally removed the headset.

Engulfed in horror, I watched as she stepped and crushed the headset and its connecting wiring.

“Got it!” James declared triumphantly, before slamming the button in front of him and I winked out.