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CASSANDRA

Topic: Entertainment

Cassandra West closed her eyes, reached into her mind, accessed her chip and entered Cyberspace. There was a brief wave of dizziness as the real world rushed away, and data streamed past her in a myriad of infinite connections. Then she was in her default setting. A forest surrounded her, perfect in its every detail. The leaves stretched above her head in a brilliant canopy, weak sunlight filtered down to caress her face. The ground beneath her feet was soft and spongy. Even the eerie stillness of the air was, she had been assured, meticulously authentic. Although she was no longer conscious of her Real-self, a slow smile crept across her soft features. The world was now open to her.

NEWS UPDATE: The World Government regrets to inform you that another President has been assassinated. The memorial service will be available on your uplink from 0700 Real Time. Poll Predictor software is currently scanning available data and a new President will be appointed shortly. Thank you.

"Computer," she announced, her "voice" echoing in the silent forest, "search for recent updates under the description of..." She hesitated. The trouble with Cyberspace was that there was almost too much choice. "Recreational learning," she finally concluded. Early Cyberspace, she knew, had contained a vast array of games, music, virtual reality dramas and reality shows, but very few activities that challenged the mind. This has changed in recent years, however. It was now possible to learn almost any subject, in programmes created under the guidance of experts. They were not as popular as the pure entertainment programmes, but Cassandra liked to take advantage of them occasionally.

"There have been 482 updates of that description over the past hour of Real-Time," the synthesised voice informed her. Cassandra rolled her eyes.

"Okay, display them please." The words began to scroll in glowing white across her field of vision, rising from the ground like bizarre vegetation and moving upwards into the sky.

"Halt," she announced. "That one. Enter programme History-WorldWarThree-SN89990." The forest dissolved in a rush of colour. Slowly, a rugged landscape began to fill in around her. Words scrolled horizontally across the sky.

"August 2064," the accompanying voice boomed. "Battle of Los Angeles began..."

Cassandra sat back and waited for the fighting to unfold.

NEWS UPDATE: The death toll of the African Hunger Crisis has reached one million this week. However, the World Government wishes to assure citizens that there is no truth to the rumour that

the recent genetic engineering mishap in any way contributed to this disaster. The food delivered to your houses is perfectly safe. Thank you.

"Computer, freeze programme," Cassandra announced suddenly some hours later. Around her, soldiers, mechanical war machines and mud stilled.

"Engage Virtual Teacher." A man materialised before her, his pleasant face, well-pressed suit and studious demeanour almost amusingly out of place in the brutal scene surrounding them.

"Is this what the outside world is like?" Cassandra demanded of him.

"Please explain," the man replied calmly. Cassandra berated herself. However much he looked like a real man, the Teacher was only a programme and needed to be spoken to without ambiguity.

"I mean," she said patiently, "Are these the conditions that exist in the outside world today?" She waved her hand to indicate their surroundings.

"No, certainly not. The Third World War ended decades ago, shortly before Cyberspace was perfected. This is merely a virtual recreation designed to inform you."

Cassandra frowned. She knew that. What she really wanted to know was if people were still suffering outside Cyberspace, if the world had improved. But naturally this question was too abstract for the Teacher. She would have to engage the Philosopher, and he had never yet said anything she could understand.

"Okay," she tried again, "You said Cyberspace was perfected shortly after the war. How did Cyberspace change anything?" Maybe that question would illuminate something.

"In the wake of the World Alliance, a previously minor corporation announced that it had succeeded in creating the perfect virtual reality experience. The chip implanted in your head allows the wearer to access what is commonly called Cyberspace and remain there as long as the individual so desires. Within Cyberspace..."

"I know what Cyberspace is, for goodness sake, I've lived in it since I was two!" Cassandra exclaimed irritably.

There was a barely detectable pause as the Teacher processed this and skipped ahead. "Cyberspace quickly made all other forms of entertainment obsolete except among the less financially secure. More and more people began to immerse themselves in the virtual world to the exclusion of all else. At the same time, advances in technology began to render more and more jobs unnecessary. Thus it was no longer necessary for people such as yourself to emerge from Cyberspace at all." He paused, and Cassandra realised that in his opinion he had answered the question.

"But did it change anything? Is the world a better place?" What had begun as a casual inquiry was now annoying her. Was there no way she could get an answer?

"Please explain." Cassandra stared at him. His face held an expression of polite inquiry, his features as exquisitely human as her own. But there was no way he could ever explain to her what she wanted to know. He - it - dealt only in facts.

"Never mind. End Teacher programme. And return to default setting."

Around her, the scenes of war and carnage disappeared.

NEWS UPDATE: The World Government's decision to once again decrease employment rates has caused further rioting on the streets. Although the situation is under control, citizens are advised to remain indoors. Thank you.

"Have any of you ever been outside?" Cassandra asked.

Her Cyber-friends stared at her in surprise. The five of them were lounging in hammocks on a cruise ship, sailing across an expansive blue ocean. It was one of the most sophisticated Cyberspace chat rooms yet. Not only was the sky, sun and gentle breeze honed to perfection, but the boat even rocked slightly in response to the movement of the virtual waves.

"You mean, the real outside, in Realspace?" one of her friends asked in response to Cassandra's question.

"Yes."

"No, never. Why do you ask?"

Cassandra wriggled in her hammock, somewhat embarrassed. "No reason, really. I was just trying out that new uplink a few days ago, on the Third World War..."

"Oh, that's a good one, isn't it?" another friend broke in eagerly. "It shows you everything. I learned such a lot from it."

"But what's the point of learning it? What's the point of learning *anything*? Nothing we do or say in here is going to make the slightest difference to the world outside."

"Of course not," the first friend laughed. "But it doesn't matter really, does it? I mean, it can't hurt to learn things if we want to."

"So you are quite happy to stay here all your life, being entertained and artificially stimulated, your head crammed full of facts and sensations that are meaningless? And then dying, knowing the world will be no - no *different* for you ever having existed?"

Her friends stared at her blankly.

"What I mean is," she tried again. "Has the world improved since Cyberspace?"

"It must have," one pointed out. "We have the World Government now."

Cassandra sighed. "I suppose." There was an awkward silence.

"Well," someone said too brightly. "I hear there's a new update involving a fairground. Do you people want to go check it out?"

There was an eager murmur of agreement, and the figures around Cassandra vanished, exiting the programme in search of new pleasures.

Cassandra stared out at the artificial ocean.

NEWS UPDATE: The World Government would like to apologise for the slight disturbance in your Cyberspace programming as a result of the recent nuclear accident in Miami. One of the transmitters suffered damage from the explosion, but you will be receiving our new updates within a few minutes. We advise you to try our older programmes during this delay. Thank you.

Cassandra stood in her forest. There was only one way to find out the answer to her question. For once, Cyberspace could not help her.

"Computer," she said firmly. "Deactivate Cyberspace."

The computer hesitated at this unfamiliar command. "Are you sure you wish to exit? There have been several new updates over the last 2.56 seconds that fit your personal parameters."

Cassandra hesitated. She needed to visit reality, just once, needed to know that the world was a better place for Cyberspace. But after all, the world wasn't going anywhere, was it? And it was important to keep up with the latest updates, wasn't it?

"Display," she announced. From the ground, her options began to rise.

NEWS UPDATE: The World Government is pleased to announce the appointment of President Jones, as selected by you through the Poll Predictor. Measures are being taken to assure he does not meet the fate of his last seven predecessors. Thank you.