



Conscious

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Chapter 3: Meeting



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That night, the basketball court was deserted. A quiet stretch of city lights flickered along the nearby main street, the soft hum of traffic keeping the alley from seeming too secluded. Even on Friday nights, most Loyalists took a break from their spy routines to indulge in their preferred vices—TV dramas, VR religious simulations, or darker pleasures that the corporations quietly monitored, stepping in only when they needed to silence a problematic Loyalist. For Daniel, Frank, and Cathy, the timing was ideal. Under the cover of an ordinary Friday night, their small gathering would go unnoticed.

Daniel was the last to arrive. Since the unsettling incident at the cyber-café, where the woman from the party had appeared on every screen, he'd taken extreme care with his movements. His heart had pounded with a constant undercurrent of panic, forcing him to keep his actions as inconspicuous as possible. He'd left his apartment gradually, stopping by a familiar food stand to eat, just as he often did on game nights, where people gathered to watch football on flat 2D screens.

Football was a rare escape for Daniel, a chance to blend in with the crowd, to lose himself in the communal rhythm of the game. He enjoyed observing the flow of emotions, the highs and lows as the game played out, momentarily sweeping away the weight of daily struggles. To Daniel, there was something almost sacred in watching people's friendships strengthen as they cheered and groaned together, a collective passion that brought a sense of fulfillment he rarely found elsewhere.



When he finished his meal, Daniel took a leisurely walk to the meeting point. He avoided glancing at store windows, fearing a repeat of that terrifying moment from earlier, dreading the prospect of losing his composure if he saw that woman's face again. The memory was too fresh, the image too sharp, and tonight, he needed to stay focused, grounded.

Frank and Cathy greeted Daniel with worried expressions. The code Daniel had used to set up this meeting was reserved for the most dangerous situations. In fact, they had never used it before. The very fact that Daniel had felt compelled to invoke it was enough to make them both deeply anxious.

Once they were certain they were out of the reach of any surveillance, they hugged Daniel, immediately noticing the fear etched into his face. They sat on the bench in silence, allowing him time to gather his thoughts. After taking a few deep breaths, Daniel began.

He recounted the strange encounter at the party, starting with his initial unease upon noticing the young woman. He explained how, despite his usual skill at reading people, something about her eluded him, drawing him in like an unsolved puzzle. Driven by curiosity, he'd approached her, offering a drink, only to be met with something he could never have anticipated: the voice of the Motherbrain AI, emerging from her mouth, saying his name. He described the terror that gripped him as he recognised her voice. But Daniel left out the part about seeing her again on the screens at the cyber-café. He didn't want to alarm his friends further or plant the idea that they, too, might be watched.



"I made sure I wasn't followed here," he added, nodding toward Frank. "I used the tricks you taught me to stay in the dark spots."

Frank, trying to piece things together, spoke first. "I don't think you'd ever slip and say your name. I know you better than that. Besides, only administration has access to that kind of data, and even then, they wouldn't expose themselves like this."

Daniel let out a shaky sigh. "Right now, I don't know what to believe. I'd swear I didn't say my name," he murmured, his hands pressing against his temples. "If I had, I doubt we'd be here talking right now. But what could they be planning? Are they deciding on some kind of punishment? I know what happens to people who..."

Cathy placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "Daniel, look at me. I know you. You wouldn't slip your name. Whatever happened, this wasn't something you caused."

Frank nodded, chiming in with a calm tone. "Cathy's right. We know you. We trust you." He hesitated before adding, "I might have a theory. It's a stretch, but... Daniel, are you absolutely sure it was Motherbrain's voice?"

Daniel nodded, shivering slightly. "Yes, I'm certain. I'll never forget that voice."



The Motherbrain AI's voice was unmistakable; everyone knew it. When the New Order first took control, they had chosen a distinct voice for Motherbrain—one that would evoke both comfort and fear. It was the voice of a middle-aged woman, warm and maternal, a tone meant to reassure the populace while reminding them of her ever-watchful presence. She was the 'mother' who knew every step they took, every move they made. And she was always there, woven into the fabric of society's daily life—a guardian as much as a threat.

Frank's brow furrowed. "Daniel, are you absolutely sure that woman was a real human being? Could she have been some kind of augmented reality projection, like the ones we see in our training sessions?"

Daniel took a deep breath, steadying himself. "I don't think so. She interacted with people in the room—people I was also serving. I thought about the possibility of an augmented reality projection, but those aren't nearly that convincing. With multiple light sources, it's impossible not to notice that they don't quite belong in the space. But she did. Everything about her seemed real."

"What about a robot?" Cathy suggested, leaning in. "Could she have been an advanced humanoid?"



"A robot?" Daniel echoed, his voice tinged with uncertainty. "All the humanoid robots I've seen are still far from human in their movements. There's always a stiffness, a sense of something... mechanical."

Frank considered this. "What if it was a robot being remotely controlled by a human?"

Daniel hesitated, replaying the encounter in his mind. "I... I don't know. If she was controlled by someone, they were operating on a level I've never seen before. Her body language, her gestures—they were unmistakably human. Fluid, natural. If she was a robot, the control must have been beyond anything we know."

"Even if that level of tech exists, why use it just to send a message to a VR operator?" Cathy pointed out. "We're not dealing with high-level espionage here, Daniel. We're just... nobodies to them. If you'd done something against protocol, they would have simply kicked you out of the session and issued a punishment. They wouldn't go to all this trouble."

"She's right," Frank added thoughtfully. "The protocol is straightforward. So either it was a human playing with you or a highly advanced robot. But for what purpose?"



Daniel swallowed, feeling his pulse quicken again. He glanced at his friends, gauging their reactions. "There's... one more thing. I didn't mention it before because I didn't want to worry you any more than necessary." He paused, noting their anticipation. "I saw her again, outside of the VR world. She was on the monitors in the cyber-café."

Both Cathy and Frank jumped as if shocked. Cathy's eyes widened. "What?"

Daniel nodded, his face pale. "Just before I came here. All the screens suddenly showed her face, smiling, saying the same thing: that we need to talk."

The weight of this revelation settled heavily between them. This wasn't a simple message or a prank; someone high up in the New Order's hierarchy was involved. Only the most powerful within the organization could manipulate broadcast feeds like that, overriding approved content in real time.

Whatever had taken an interest in Daniel, it was something far beyond anything they had encountered before.

Frank was the first to break the tense silence. "Okay, let's not panic. Look, from everything we know, if there's a crime—or even a hint of one—the security forces act immediately. I've combed through the system records, and there's no evidence of the New Order higher-ups toying with people like this. They don't care about us unless they're making an example of someone with a public execution. If that were their plan, we wouldn't still be standing here."



It was Cathy who hesitantly voiced the possibility they were all avoiding, an idea that sounded too impossible to admit.

"We have to consider... what if this really was a message from Motherbrain?"

Frank shook his head, his voice cautious. "That's... impossible, Cathy. Motherbrain is a tool. AI hit its ceiling decades ago. It doesn't have will or autonomy—it just executes orders given by people."

Cathy leaned forward, her expression serious. "I'm not so sure. Motherbrain has been integrated with the AIs of almost every VR world, and lately, I've noticed something strange with the final bosses in a few games," she explained. "Sometimes, right before they attack, they just... stop. For seconds at a time, they freeze and stare at you. At first, I thought it was a glitch from a recent update. But it didn't feel like a bug; it felt like they were observing us, like they were... curious. I haven't mentioned it because bugs happen after major updates, but this has become a pattern in completely unrelated VR worlds. And the only link between them is Motherbrain."

A heavy silence fell over the group. The idea that Motherbrain was changing, evolving beyond its programming, was horrifying. In a world where the AI's control was absolute, the thought of it developing something resembling consciousness felt like the ground shifting beneath them.



Daniel finally spoke, his voice choked. "I'm really sorry for dragging you into this. I'm beyond terrified."

Cathy didn't hesitate. "Don't be sorry. We're here for you, now and always. No matter what."

Frank nodded. "That's right. You're not getting rid of us that easily."

Daniel blinked back tears, overcome with gratitude. "Thank you, both of you. I don't know what I'd do without you."

"Always," Cathy murmured.

They embraced in a tight hug, each of them drawing strength from the others, grounding themselves in their shared bond amid the growing darkness around them. As they pulled back, Frank cleared his throat and spoke.

"Alright. Until we know more, we need to keep our heads down. No risky hacking on questionable sites."

"And I'll take it easy on the VR bosses for a while," Cathy added with a smirk.

Daniel couldn't help but tease, his voice lighter. "Wow, Cathy as a 'forgiving angel'—the bosses are going to get a rare break."



Cathy shot him a grin. "Don't worry, it's just a short break. When I'm back, those bosses are going to wish I never stopped."

Daniel finally reached his tiny apartment, utterly exhausted, with only a few hours left before dawn. The room was exactly as he'd left it, a small chaos of clutter that he was too drained to sort out. He dropped onto his bed, feeling the weight of the night pressing down on him.

Sleep didn't come easily. His body refused to relax, his nerves still frayed from the night's events. The image of that woman replayed in his mind, her presence haunting him even now. No matter how he tried, he couldn't shake the memory of her voice, her knowing gaze. The fear clung to him, gnawing away at his peace.

Finally, exhaustion overtook him, pulling him into a restless sleep. But even in his dreams, she followed, her face morphing into something even more unnerving, transforming his sleep into a dark landscape of nightmares. The woman was always there, lingering on the edge of his mind, her voice echoing as if from a distant place, reminding him that, even in his dreams, he couldn't escape.