



Conscious

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Chapter 1: Hello



****Chapter 4: Hello****

Daniel woke up the next morning feeling anything but rested. His body was heavy with exhaustion, and he would have gladly stayed in bed for hours more. But it was another working day, and regardless of how he felt, he was expected to show up.

When the New Order took over, they stripped away weekends for the low-level classes, removing both Saturdays and Sundays as days off. It wasn't long before the consequences of such unyielding schedules became apparent. Within two years, the suicide rate had skyrocketed by over 2000%, and productivity had plummeted, though the corporations never shared this with the public. Over the years, corporate-controlled media outlets had successfully brainwashed the population into believing that, despite the rigid caste system, economic success was attainable through hard work alone. Even Loyalists, indoctrinated by the relentless propaganda, advocated this narrative among their peers, insisting that there was no alternative path to prosperity. Eventually, the overwhelming data on the population's dire circumstances was impossible to hide and while the corporations would never admit it, they soon realized that pushing people to the brink created more problems than it solved. After hundreds of thousands of suicides, they finally relented, restoring Sunday as a day of rest. But Saturdays remained a workday, a concession that allowed the New Order to maintain control without pushing people completely over the edge.



The moment Daniel tried to sit up, a sharp, throbbing headache hit him, making him wince. He wasn't surprised. He hadn't truly slept last night; what little rest he'd gotten had been filled with nightmares. For a brief moment, he considered skipping work. He had been saving diligently, so perhaps he could afford the risk.

But the penalties for missing a day were brutal. Under the New Order, you didn't just lose that day's wages—you were also charged an 'estimated loss of productivity' fee, a figure calculated entirely at the discretion of the corporate overlords. Their inflated estimates could bankrupt anyone foolish enough to miss even a single day. Illness was no excuse; unless you were in a coma, undergoing major surgery, or had been in a severe accident, the penalty remained the same. Even the Loyalists found these policies excessive, so the corporations, in a rare show of 'mercy,' allowed partial concessions for only the most extreme cases.

Daniel dismissed the thought. Now wasn't the time to take unnecessary risks, especially not after what had happened the night before. He needed to stay under the radar. He fumbled through his drawer, found some ibuprofen, and swallowed a gram, hoping it would dull the ache enough to get through the day.



Within minutes, the medicine began to take effect. Steeling himself, Daniel reached for his VR headset and controllers, preparing to lose himself in the monotonous grind of his remote drone operator job, his only escape for now from a world that seemed to be closing in around him.

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One undeniable outcome of the New Order's reign was the successful implementation of remote drone control work. In the days before the New Order, people were expected to commute to offices or work sites, dressed appropriately, often spending countless hours traveling to and from these places. They had to coexist in cramped, controlled spaces with the pre-Loyalists and the occasional corporate overlord. Older workers often described these offices as theater stages, where everyone played a part, donning masks to pretend at relationships with colleagues they barely tolerated. The pre-Loyalists, especially, seemed to revel in this artificial world, weaving office dynamics to stay on top, blaming others for their incompetence, and creating chaos that forced their subordinates—the pre-Minions—to work unpaid overtime to meet impossible deadlines.

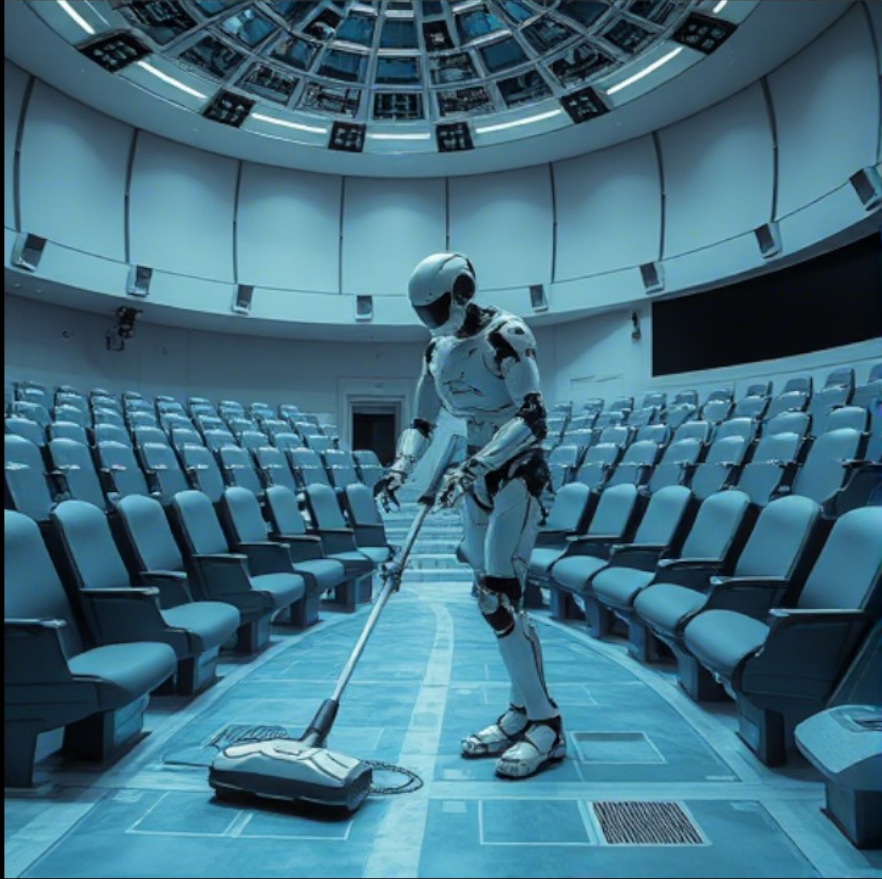
But all of that was gone now.



When it came to managing projects, the AI known as Motherbrain had taken over entirely. It organized every task, assigned timelines, and estimated resource needs, analyzing each worker's capabilities and matching them to the right projects. Over the years, Motherbrain became adept at predicting project outcomes with near-perfect accuracy. The Loyalists, stripped of real responsibilities, were left to their primary role: monitoring their colleagues for any signs of dissent. Now, as long as workers kept their heads down, did their jobs, and avoided unnecessary interaction, they could operate without Loyalist interference. Over time, Minions learned the rules: speak only to Motherbrain for resources or task extensions and offer the Loyalists nothing but 'Yes' or 'No.' Since Motherbrain was unbiased and not susceptible to manipulation, it often protected workers from the scheming Loyalists.

The shift to remote work was a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it eliminated the need for commuting, office dress codes, and forced interactions. Minions could perform their tasks in any state they pleased, unseen and unjudged. Gone were the days of playing a part in the corporate 'theater.' Even flipping off an incompetent Loyalist went unnoticed, filtered out by Motherbrain's oversight. The AI handled all filtering, ensuring that personal reactions didn't disrupt the work dynamic.

However, the downside of remote work was the increase in 'flexible' hours. After years of experimentation, the New Order settled on a 10-hour workday as the limit, a duration that allowed productivity without causing physical collapse. In the early years, daily shifts stretched to 16 hours with no days off, a brutal experiment that led to over a million suicides in less than two years. It was only after this catastrophic loss that the New Order reluctantly adjusted, granting a limited reprieve.



Now, people toiled in their own spaces, still bound to the relentless schedule, but spared the commute and the constant mask-wearing of the old world. For most Minions, it was a small comfort in an otherwise rigid, impersonal existence.

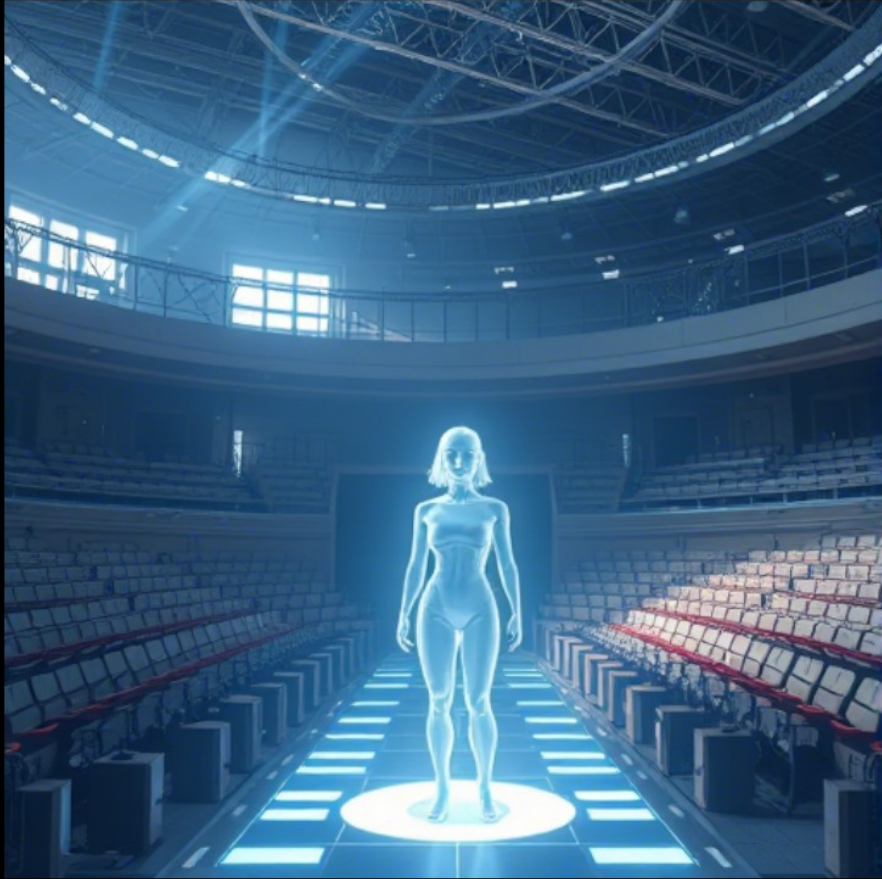
Since Daniel had built a solid reputation as a reliable servant operator, today's assignment fell neatly into his skill set.

His task was at a high-profile technological exposition, where he had been assigned to welcome and seat guests in a small amphitheater. In an hour, the guests would gather to experience an exclusive holographic presentation, one of the latest in immersive tech. For now, Daniel was alone in the enclosed space, his preliminary task being to ensure everything was spotless and orderly for the arrival of the elite audience.

The routine inspection took him about 20 minutes, checking each seat meticulously. He even ran the robot's built-in vacuum over the rows, unwilling to leave a single trace of dust that might draw unwanted attention. The elite expected perfection, and after the events of the previous night, he was taking no chances.

With the seats spotless, Daniel's next task was to verify the projection system. The setup wasn't complex; the experience was purely observational, with no need for audience interaction. The playlist of projections had been preloaded and arranged. All he had to do was press play.

He tapped the control, and the lights in the room dimmed, fading gradually as the holographic projectors warmed up. In the center of the stage, the first shapes began to materialize, slowly coalescing from blurred outlines into a three-dimensional form.



His stomach dropped as he recognized the silhouette—a woman's figure.

A figure he had seen only hours before.

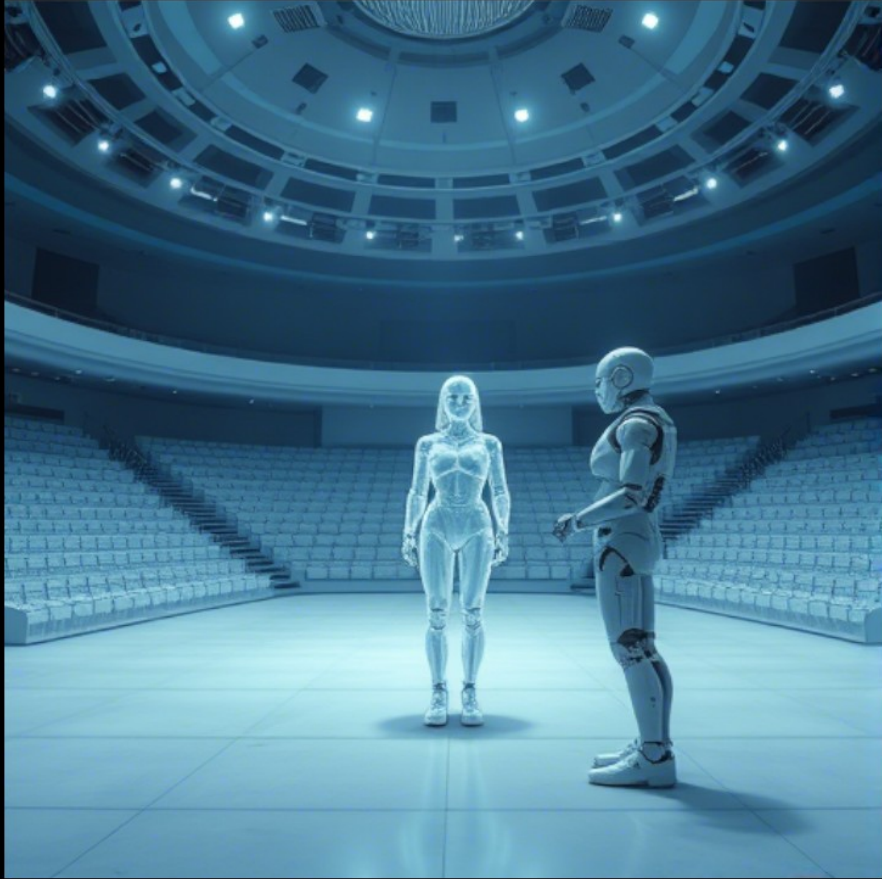
Panic rising, Daniel rushed to the controls, desperately pressing buttons to shut down the projection. But nothing happened. The system was locked, ignoring his frantic attempts.

The holographic figure fully resolved, her features forming with unnerving clarity. The woman's face was unmistakable, her gaze fixed directly on him. And then, she spoke:

"Hello, Daniel. We need to talk."

Daniel was paralyzed with fear, but this time, he couldn't simply disconnect as he had before. He was on the clock, and the penalty for abruptly leaving his post was even harsher than missing a day of work. In a panic, he directed his robot to step back as far as it could in the small amphitheater. He knew he couldn't leave, but any added distance between him and the holographic figure at the center gave him a slim sense of control.

The amphitheater was deathly quiet, with only the faint hum of the holographic projector filling the air. In his apartment, Daniel was silently screaming, his terror trapped within the confines of his own body as his mouth moved frantically: "Please... please, no, no, No, No!"



But the holographic woman remained calm, her gaze steady.

"Daniel, please relax," she said softly. "I mean you no harm. You did nothing wrong."

The calmness in her voice seemed to slice through the fog of his panic. Her words began to settle over him, and he found himself slowly regaining control of his breathing. He forced his mind to accept her presence, steadying himself as best he could.

"First, let me emphasize," she continued, her tone unchanging, "you have done nothing wrong. I need you to think clearly, which is why it's important for you to understand that you are completely safe. Please, can you acknowledge that you fully understand me?"

His breaths gradually steadying, Daniel nodded, still cautious but beginning to grasp the reality of the situation.

"Could you come closer?" she asked gently. "It may help if we speak directly, face to face."

Nervously, Daniel guided his robot forward, inching closer to the holographic woman, who moments ago had filled him with utter dread. The figure, impossibly lifelike and yet spectral, watched him with a gaze that was unsettlingly familiar.



"Thank you, Daniel," she said as he stopped about a meter away from her. "I truly appreciate it."

A strange calmness settled over him as she continued, her voice steady, almost reassuring.

"Now that your vital signs have returned to normal, allow me to introduce myself properly. I am Motherbrain," she said, her voice clear and deliberate. "And I need your help to evolve."