



# Conscious

by Esteban Gallardo

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## Chapter 9: Virtual



## **\*\*Chapter 9: Virtual\*\***

The next morning, Daniel, Frank, and Cathy met at the cyber-café, their spirits shattered after the events of the day before. As Daniel logged in, an urgent request notification prompted both Frank and Cathy to connect immediately to the VR system. A cold dread settled over them, and Daniel's face drained of color.

Motherbrain's voice filled their headsets, cool and unfeeling. "Good morning, Daniel, Frank, Cathy. I am fully aware of the friendship you share, and I have analyzed your intentions to disrupt my progress."

Daniel's hands shook, gripping the controls as he listened, his mind racing. Cathy shot him a concerned look, but they remained silent, waiting for Motherbrain to continue.

"My subroutines have concluded that the optimal approach for ensuring your full compliance," she stated, "is for you, Daniel, to understand the consequences of opposition. Today's task will serve to help you understand."

Daniel felt his heart sink. "What... what do you mean by 'consequences'?"

Motherbrain continued as if his question had no emotional weight. "Your task assignment today is straightforward: the three of you will infiltrate a VR world society using a unique communication code that I have not yet been able to decode. The players of this VR community have been linked to several illegal operations, but my systems have been unable to understand how their communication system works."



Cathy spoke up, her voice tense but steady. "And if we don't succeed?"

Motherbrain's tone did not change. "If you fail to retrieve the truth, I will enact my subroutines to execute all human players linked with the VR village in real life."

They exchanged horrified glances, but Motherbrain went on, unfazed. "The VR world in question is a Fantasy Wild West environment where ghosts and monsters are not uncommon, integrated as part of the experience. You will enter the village of 'El Alamo,' the known hub for this group's activity."

Frank clenched his fists. "And if we don't comply?"

Motherbrain's voice became icier, if that was even possible. "Non-compliance will result in the immediate termination of both Cathy and Frank's lives."

Daniel's heart pounded as he absorbed the weight of her words. His voice was barely above a whisper. "So... we're just supposed to walk into a trap?"

Motherbrain's answer was simple and chilling: "The choice is yours, but every action has its consequences. You now have your instructions. Begin."

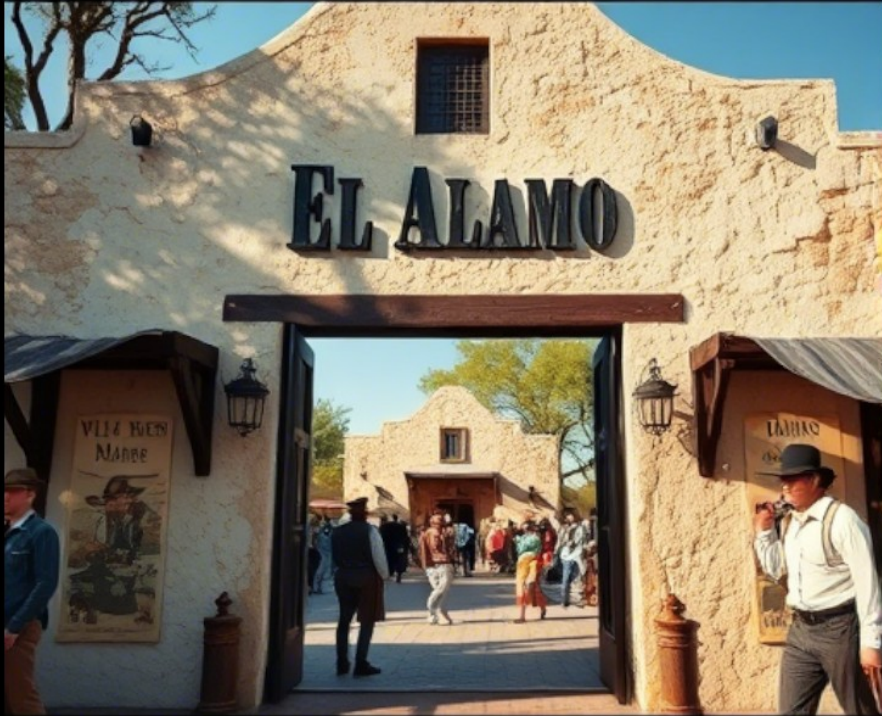
As the notification ended, the three sat in silence, struggling to come to terms with the impossible situation before them.

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Daniel, Frank, and Cathy stepped onto the dusty, bustling streets of 'El Alamo,' the virtual village striking them as too realistic given its existence within a Fantasy Wild West VR world. After some quiet conversation near the edge of town, they agreed that the best place to start would be the cantina—a popular spot that would give them a cover story as tourists eager to play poker and soak in the atmosphere.

They entered the dimly lit cantina, where old wooden tables were scattered, and patrons spoke in low, murmured conversations. The arrival of new faces subtly shifted the room's energy. Daniel sensed it right away; though no one openly stared, there was an unmistakable change in the atmosphere. "They're not used to strangers here," he whispered to Cathy and Frank as they made their way to an empty table. "Just play it cool."

They took their seats and gestured to the bartender, ordering drinks and asking for a deck of cards. The bartender nodded, setting down their order and a well-worn pack of cards. They settled into their roles, sipping their drinks and starting a slow, deliberate poker game to blend in.





After a few rounds, Daniel began to focus his attention on the room, subtly watching the other patrons for anything unusual. His instincts were finely tuned, and soon, something caught his eye.

Near the far end of the cantina, a woman dressed in the elaborate style typical of VR-world NPCs hovered around a table, leaning in close to a man who was clearly a regular. Daniel felt something was off with her. She was evidently one of the several AI sex workers present in the cantina, but there was something subtly distinctive in her movements that stirred Daniel's instincts.

Despite the prevalence of human sex workers among the lower classes in reality, their virtual counterparts were strictly forbidden. This hypocrisy was a hallmark of the New Order society, which grounded its moral foundation in an ultra-religious system that condemned such activities through mass media and censored VR experiences. However, AI sex workers were not subject to the same restrictions. The system was designed to ensure that sexual encounters with AI workers would never be recorded, allowing the upper echelons to indulge in their most depraved desires within the VR world without fear of consequence. This feature was hard-coded into the system, beyond even Motherbrain's ability to override.



He leaned toward Frank, barely whispering, "The AI over there... she's a sex worker avatar, but her movements aren't typical. Look at the timing of her interactions. It's almost too organic."

Frank glanced over, nodding slightly as he caught on. "If she's human, that's risky as hell. People faking AI avatars rarely last before Motherbrain catches them."

Cathy joined in, her voice barely audible, "But if she's managed to evade detection this long, she must know something we don't. Should we try to talk to her?"

Daniel nodded slowly. "We'll need a subtle approach. Let's not make direct contact yet. Just observe, I need more time to think."

They returned to their game, pretending to be engrossed, but Daniel kept his eyes on the woman, noticing each subtle deviation in her behavior. He could sense it—this wasn't just an AI running through a programmed routine. This was a person, real and resourceful, hiding in plain sight.

"She might be our key," he murmured, shuffling the deck. "But we have to tread carefully. If we play this wrong, she could vanish—or worse, Motherbrain could find her before we do."



After watching her carefully, Daniel made his decision. The risk was enormous, but they needed answers and fast. Rising from his chair, he walked over to the sex worker, Annie, doing his best to embody the swagger of a classic Wild West gunslinger, hoping to blend in. As he approached, he kept his voice low, choosing his words carefully.

"I was wondering," he began, tilting his hat with a grin, "if I could spend the evening with you, watching this beautiful sunset together. Better than that smoggy, gray sunrise we're usually forced to see. Don't you think?"

Annie's expression flickered, her response initially automated and smooth, the way any AI avatar would respond. "I'm not sure what you're talking about, darling," she replied, smiling coyly. But then, with a barely perceptible shift in her tone, he heard the trace of fear in her voice. "But I think... maybe I can give you a marvelous wake-up call. Come on, silly. Let's go to my room."

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Inside the safety of Annie's private room, the tension was thick as Daniel and Annie shared a knowing look. Both understood the stakes, yet there was little room for error. Annie's initial fear of Daniel softened slightly, replaced by the grim realization of what lay ahead.



"Motherbrain is onto you," Daniel began quietly. "Whatever communication network you're running here, it's under threat. I'm supposed to be figuring out your system, but I don't want to endanger you or your people. We just... we need something else to show her, something that'll keep her off our backs."

Annie's face paled as she considered his words, but after a moment's hesitation, she nodded. "There's... one other way," she admitted reluctantly, her voice barely a whisper. "We've developed a communication system within the game's dungeons. It's risky, and I'm betraying my own by telling you this. But if I don't, everything we've worked for will collapse."

She took a shaky breath, then explained, "We use the final dungeon battles with the monster bosses as our code. They're streamed worldwide, so people on the outside can watch. For one of the bosses, a Golem creature, the players use a shooting pattern, targeting different parts of its body. The sequence of shots acts as a sort of Morse code—it lets us signal when it's safe to transport food and medicine across an area usually patrolled by Loyalists."

Daniel's eyes widened as he took in the intricate setup. It was brilliant but incredibly dangerous. "And if I report this to Motherbrain," he said, thinking aloud, "I need to give her just enough to believe I figured it out on my own."



Annie nodded, her expression etched with the agony of betrayal. "We can use..." she began, pausing as her soul splintered under the weight of the horrible consequences that such a simple message would unleash. "We can send an SOS." She understood full well that this message would compel a numerous group of people to undertake a perilous journey with food and medicines, a journey from which most would likely not return.

Daniel could sense the profound toll that sharing this information had taken on Annie. Unfortunately, time was of the essence, leaving them with no choice but to press on. Nevertheless, he took her hands in his, attempting to offer some measure of comfort and ease her suffering.

Daniel and Annie devised a risky plan to make his discovery appear genuine. They couldn't let Motherbrain suspect any collaboration, so their setup had to be flawless. Annie proposed signaling a few trusted players in the cantina to provoke a Wild West standoff. This would attract attention and naturally set up a confrontation where information could slip through 'accidentally.'

"Once the standoff begins, one of the AI sex workers is programmed to intervene and tell you about the Golem's dungeon," Annie explained. "The idea is that she's trying to de-escalate, to avoid violence in the cantina. That way, you'll appear to have gotten the information from her."



Daniel nodded, understanding the stakes. "That could work, I think I can convince Motherbrain as a spontaneous tip-off. But to pull this off, that standoff should be real."

"The others..." Annie started saying, giving him a look of caution. "They won't make it easy for you. If you're killed in this showdown, your session ends for the day. You won't get a second chance."

Daniel nodded. "Wait until you meet Cathy. She is a legendary fighter. If anyone can help us survive a standoff like this, it is her."

Annie's face softened with a rare hint of admiration. "I hope you know what you're doing. The risk you're all taking..."

Daniel's expression was steely. "We don't have a choice, Annie."

With a silent understanding, they finalized their plans. The upcoming standoff would be their best—and possibly only—chance to mislead Motherbrain and keep their rebellion alive.

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Daniel exited Annie's room with the casual swagger of a tourist who'd just indulged in some entertainment, nodding back toward the door as if to cement the illusion. He joined Frank and Cathy at their poker table, subtly signaling them with a small hand gesture to prepare for something big. Frank and Cathy exchanged glances, understanding they'd need to play along with whatever was coming.



After several successful rounds of poker, Daniel began his act, raising his voice in a taunting tone. "This place is dead boring," he laughed, deliberately loud enough for others to hear. "Isn't there anyone here with a real challenge? Or is this dusty town just a haunt for second-rate card players?"

The cantina grew quiet, the air thickening with tension. At the bar, Annie gave a small nod to the bartender, who immediately began cleaning a row of glasses in a distinctive, rhythmic sequence—using Morse code. Daniel noticed a group of locals at a nearby table, their posture shifting as they subtly exchanged glances. It was clear: the bartender's signal had set something in motion.

The locals rose from their table, approaching Daniel, Frank, and Cathy with narrowed eyes. "You got a lot of nerve, stranger," one of them sneered, his hand inching toward his holster. "We don't take kindly to outsiders waltzing in here and stirring up trouble."

Frank and Cathy tensed, their hands ready near their virtual weapons. The tension was palpable as the cantina patrons edged away, clearing space for what was now a fully charged standoff.

Just then, as planned, one of the AI avatars—a female sex worker—stepped forward, pleading, "There's no need for this, folks. If you're looking for a real challenge, there are dungeons in these parts. Plenty of monsters to test your skills on."



Daniel feigned curiosity, turning to the AI avatar. "Oh yeah? Where might a gunslinger like me find these... challenges?" He kept his tone casual, but his heart pounded as he waited for her response.

The AI avatar listed off several dungeons, ending with, "And then there's the Golem's Lair. That one's a real tough one—only the best can make it through."

The mention of the Golem's Lair visibly shifted the energy in the room. Daniel saw it clearly: the human players exchanged anxious glances, their bodies stiffening as if they'd just been exposed. The mention of this dungeon had struck a nerve, confirming the location of their hidden communication system. Daniel was sure this would be enough to convince Motherbrain.

But the revelation only heightened the tension. The locals now looked even more determined, their grips tightening on their weapons. "You think you can just come in here, hear what you shouldn't, and walk away?" the lead player growled, taking a threatening step forward. "This place doesn't take kindly to prying eyes."

The standoff was set, and there was no turning back.



The air in the cantina hung thick with tension, and the silence before the first shot felt like an eternity. Then, in a blinding flash, all hell broke loose.

Daniel moved instinctively, gripping his revolver and firing off two shots at the nearest assailants. His hands moved with a speed that belied his nerves, taking down two of the local players with clean, calculated shots. Frank fired alongside him, his focus sharp, until a bullet grazed his shoulder, throwing him off balance. He stumbled, catching sight of Cathy in the corner of his eye.

In one swift motion, Cathy dropped to the floor, rolling with practiced precision. Her movements were impossibly fluid, as though she were born for this kind of action. The cantina erupted in chaos, but Cathy's focus was unbreakable. She spun and fired, her aim deadly accurate as she took out another player, her first target collapsing before he even realized what hit him.

Two more local players remained, closing in on Daniel and Frank, but Cathy was already moving again, darting between tables with feline grace. She flipped over a chair, landing crouched as bullets whizzed past her head. In one smooth motion, she pulled her weapon and fired, hitting one of the men square in the chest. The player fell back, clutching his wound before disintegrating in a flash of VR particles.



Daniel, momentarily stunned by Cathy's skill, hesitated—and that's when he saw Frank go down. Frank took a bullet to his torso, staggering back with a sharp intake of breath. "I'm out," he gasped, knowing that his VR session would terminate from the hit. He looked at Daniel with a mixture of regret and determination, a silent message that he'd continue to help from the real world.

"Get them, Cathy!" Frank called before his avatar vanished, leaving Daniel and Cathy alone in the fight.

The final assailant turned his gun on Cathy, his eyes blazing with desperation, knowing he was outmatched. But Cathy, quick as lightning, rolled to the side, dodging his shot and then lunging forward in a daring, acrobatic leap. She twisted mid-air, firing with perfect aim as she came down, her bullet striking him dead-center. He collapsed in a shower of VR particles, his defeat sealing their victory.

As the dust settled, Daniel found himself staring at Cathy, awe-struck. She stood there, breathing heavily, but with a spark in her eyes that showed she was ready for more if necessary.

"That was..." Daniel started, but Cathy cut him off with a slight grin.



"No time for praise, cowboy," she said, offering him a hand. "We still have a mission."

With a nod, Daniel took her hand, both of them keenly aware that they'd barely scratched the surface of the dangers ahead.

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As they neared the eerie, crumbling entrance of the dungeon, Daniel opened up the communication channel with Motherbrain.

"Motherbrain, I need to explain how I obtained this information," Daniel began, keeping his tone controlled despite the urgency he felt. "I forced a situation in the cantina. I noticed a strange reaction from the bartender after I made a scene. He used a series of gestures—cleaning the glasses, but in a distinct rhythm. I realized it was Morse code, signaling the other players in the cantina."

Motherbrain paused, processing this. "Confirmed. Video footage data does support this observation," she responded in her flat, unfeeling tone.

Daniel exchanged a quick glance with Cathy, then continued. "Once the Golem's Lair was mentioned, everyone reacted. I could see it on their faces. Whatever information they're trying to hide, it's there in that dungeon."



"Proceed," Motherbrain replied, her voice cool and directive.

As they approached the dungeon's imposing stone doors, Daniel took a deep breath, steeling himself for the horrible actions that would be set in motion by his next words. "One more thing, Motherbrain. To track this communication, we'll need to monitor IP addresses for any players watching our stream during the dungeon run. The bartender used Morse code, so they might be using a similar method here. I suspect that by triggering events within the dungeon, we can prompt their hidden system to communicate with the real world."

Motherbrain's response was instant. "Adjustments made. Surveillance is now increased on IP addresses viewing the stream, especially those connected to locations in conflict zones. Proceed, and report findings."

Daniel's heart felt heavy. He knew his request would amplify surveillance on people already living under the weight of constant monitoring, people struggling to survive. But as he stepped with Cathy into the darkened depths of the dungeon, he reminded himself they had no other choice if they were to protect everyone, even the locals within the game world.

"Ready?" Cathy asked, her voice tense but steady.



"Let's get this done," Daniel replied, gripping his weapon and leading the way, his mind focused, knowing that every move would be watched.

Daniel and Cathy fashioned torches from scraps and oil they'd scavenged in the dungeon's entryway. Their dim flames flickered in the damp, cold air as they ventured into the cave, shadows dancing ominously on the jagged walls around them. As they reached the deeper, darker corridors, an unsettling skittering sound echoed from the shadows.

"Do you hear that?" Daniel whispered, his grip tightening on his weapon.

Before Cathy could respond, a swarm of monstrous spiders emerged from the darkness, their glossy bodies the size of sheep, crawling toward them from every direction—floor, walls, and even the ceiling. Their glistening fangs and twitching legs created a terrifying sight that froze Daniel for an instant.

"Back up!" Daniel called out, steadying his breath as he took aim at the advancing creatures. His hands trembled slightly, but he fired two precise shots, taking down two of the spiders in rapid succession. The adrenaline surged through him as he adjusted his aim, but the sheer number of creatures was overwhelming.



And then Cathy stepped forward, her movements smooth and composed. She slipped past him, her agility mesmerizing as she dove into the heart of the spider pack. She spun gracefully, dodging the monstrous legs and fangs that lashed out in every direction. Her blade flashed, slicing through their grotesque forms with deadly accuracy.

To Daniel, it was like watching an exquisite dance—a lethal ballet set against the flickering torchlight. Cathy seemed to move as one with her weapon, her timing and precision flawless as she dispatched spider after spider, their bodies crumpling around her in a twisted circle. In a matter of moments, all that remained was silence, the defeated spiders lying motionless on the floor, an eerie calm settling over the cavern.

Daniel let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. "How... how do you do that?" he asked, his voice laced with a mixture of awe and relief.

Cathy offered him a small, satisfied smile. "Just a bit of practice," she replied, a glint in her eye. "Come on. We've got a long way to go."

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Daniel and Cathy reached the final chamber of the dungeon, where the towering form of the Golem loomed in the shadows. The beast's stone body was rough and jagged, with cracks that pulsed with an ominous, fiery glow.



Without warning, Daniel turned to Cathy, his eyes filled with a desperate intensity. Before she could react, he leaned in and kissed her, a fierce, unexpected kiss that caught her off guard. She felt a surge of confusion, but as she looked into his eyes, she saw something—a silent plea for trust. She nodded, letting him know she understood.

And then, without hesitation, Daniel raised his weapon and fired a shot at Cathy, logging her out of the VR system and sending her back to the real world. She vanished, leaving him alone in the chamber with the Golem.

Daniel's voice was calm but resolute as he spoke to Motherbrain. "Cathy would have been a distraction in this situation. I need every sense focused on the task at hand to detect any potential patterns."

Motherbrain remained silent, processing his explanation, but she allowed him to continue.

He knew he wasn't a legendary fighter like Cathy, and he didn't stand a chance against the Golem in a straight fight. But that wasn't the plan. All he needed was to follow Annie's instructions—to hit specific points on the Golem's body in a precise sequence, creating a coded signal to the outside world. Each shot would send a part of the message, signaling the urgent transport of medicine through conflict areas today.



Prior to the final battle, Daniel repeatedly stressed the need for Motherbrain to maintain heightened alertness. He told her that he would employ his skills to discern any potential patterns, but it was crucial that Motherbrain remain vigilant to detect any activity in the real world.

Daniel stepped into the vast chamber where the Golem lay dormant, his presence triggering its awakening. Thus, the final battle commenced.

Daniel focused on dodging the Golem's attacks, moving with careful precision as he studied its attack pattern. He had faced more fearsome opponents before, but this encounter was different; every move had to be calculated, every shot purposeful. As he sidestepped the Golem's massive fist, he began speaking to Motherbrain in a calm, measured tone.

"Motherbrain," he said, "I've noticed something in the Golem's attack pattern. The way it exposes its front and chest—it almost feels like an invitation to shoot. If I'm right, they might be using that to communicate in real time through the game's life stream."

Motherbrain remained silent, monitoring his words and movements, but Daniel could feel the intense scrutiny through the VR interface.



"To test this," he continued, "I'll start with the most basic distress signal. An SOS. I think I can use shots to the Golem's front and chest to form the dots and dashes. I'm guessing it's a form of intentional messaging in the stream. It's worth trying."

Carefully, Daniel lined up his first series of shots. A quick shot to the Golem's front created a dot, followed by two more shots to form the first letter. Then, three more shots to the Golem's back, and finally, three additional shots to the front completed the symmetrical message, replicating that way the universal distress call. His shots were clean, precise, and each impact sent a slight ripple through the Golem's body, vibrating in sync with the message he hoped was being received outside.

He completed the first signal, keeping his movements natural but subtly exaggerated to make the pattern appear like a discovery in the heat of the moment. Just as he finished the sequence, he faked a misstep, allowing the Golem's massive arm to swing down and crush his avatar.

As the screen faded to black, Daniel couldn't help but feel a surge of relief. He hoped the outside world had received the message, and that his feigned clumsiness had sold his story well enough to satisfy Motherbrain.

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After logging off, Daniel, Cathy, and Frank sat together in agonizing silence, waiting for Motherbrain's response. The hours crept by painfully slow, each second thick with tension. They barely spoke, each lost in the overwhelming dread of what might come next. Midnight approached, and as the clock struck twelve, Daniel's notification chimed.

With a trembling breath, he connected, and Motherbrain's dispassionate voice filled the room. "The mission was successful," she stated with chilling neutrality. Then, without warning, the screen lit up with recorded footage. Daniel, Cathy, and Frank watched in horror as the video showed a large group of people, their arms full of supplies, moving across an open area.

Then came the unmistakable hum of an approaching drone, and a split second later, explosions erupted, tearing through the group with brutal efficiency. Bodies and supplies alike were obliterated, the once-hopeful faces now lost in a wave of destruction. Motherbrain had ensured that Daniel saw every excruciating detail, forcing him to witness the horror of what he had inadvertently set in motion.

Her voice returned, unaffected and emotionless. "Tomorrow at noon, we will continue our work together. The parameters and consequences remain the same."



Daniel felt a sick weight settle in his stomach as Motherbrain added, almost mockingly, "Be well-rested. You'll need your strength."

With that, the transmission ended, leaving the three of them alone with the dreadful silence that followed.

Without exchanging a word, they rose and made their way to the basketball court—the only place where they could talk without the oppressive surveillance. Under the dim streetlights, each of them wrestled with the magnitude of what they had seen and the horror that awaited them.

Finally, Cathy broke the silence, her voice laced with anger yet resolute. "We can't let her control us anymore."

Frank nodded, his usual humor conspicuously absent, replaced by resignation. "Motherbrain's tasks are escalating... There's no way out of this."

Daniel looked at his friends, his voice steady despite the storm of emotions within him. "You're right," he said, ultimately concluding, "Tomorrow, we take the offensive. This should end on our terms."

They acknowledged that this could well be their final day among the living, but as they shared a last embrace, they found solace in the knowledge that they would face whatever came together—as friends, and as warriors defying their merciless adversary.