



Conscious

by Esteban Gallardo

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Chapter I: Party



****Chapter 1: Party****

"May I offer you, sir, a gin and tonic to your taste? We take pride in serving one of the finest Hendrick's Gin and Tonics," intoned the smooth, calibrated voice of the service robot, gesturing with mechanical grace to the gentleman who looked unsteady, tension simmering just beneath his carefully composed exterior.

"Ah... yes, sure," the gentleman murmured, hesitating before accepting the drink. His gaze flickered, the briefest flash of uncertainty, then he allowed himself a small, polite nod, masking whatever unease had momentarily surfaced.

Miles away, Daniel Green monitored the exchange from his dim, cramped apartment in the city's underbelly. Surrounded by cracked walls and flickering neon lights spilling through the window, Daniel's hands maneuvered the VR controls with a familiar, steady rhythm. He was connected through a VR headset to the humanoid service bot stationed at the lavish gathering. Nights like this—operating a robot in some upscale event for the ultra-rich—were the closest he ever came to brushing shoulders with luxury. He'd become skilled at handling such gigs, earning extra tips, reading people as easily as a script.

The gentleman with the gin and tonic was no mystery to him. Daniel had sensed something was off from the moment the man had arrived, a subtle charge in the air around him, something even the most sophisticated AI might have missed. Through countless hours spent observing humanity's quiet signals and subtext, Daniel had learned to spot these barely-there signs of unrest. He knew that tonight, this guest—the forty-something assistant to the young, newly-minted scientist being honored here—was fighting back more than nerves.



Daniel didn't know the full story behind the simmering resentment, but he understood enough to defuse it. He'd watched the scientist smugly recounting his latest triumph to an enraptured circle of guests, his smile just a bit too broad, his anecdotes a touch too polished. The assistant's forced half-smile and darting eyes betrayed an inner struggle, and Daniel knew the remedy: he'd get him drunk enough to loosen his tension and, ideally, let it dissipate harmlessly by the night's end.

Daniel's knack for reading and defusing situations like these had always set him apart. He'd been able to sidestep conflicts, both virtual and real, before they even surfaced. It was his own unassuming brand of talent—an intuition for navigating rooms, a sixth sense for knowing who might be generous and who was nursing a hidden grudge. But tonight, Daniel's talent for subtle interventions was about to pull him deeper into a world he'd never imagined.

Daniel Green was a young man in his mid-twenties, having endured a life marred by hardship since he was orphaned in a car accident as a child. Memories of his parents were faded, barely clinging to his consciousness, leaving him with only fragments of what life might have been. Life, though, was not easy—not for him, nor for nearly anyone he knew.



In the last four decades, society had devolved into an era of techno-feudalism, ominously branded as 'The New Order.' Democracy had been dismantled, and corporations seized control, reinstating archaic hierarchies with titles like Kings, Lords, and Barons. Daniel's parents had once belonged to the skilled workforce, but in the New Order, that meant little. Only a long-standing friend, Patrick Moore, kept Daniel from slipping to the lowest societal rung—the Freeloaders, a euphemism for slaves. Slavery had returned in full force, justified by an incessant stream of propaganda from the media, now entirely owned by the corporations. It wasn't long before dissent was silenced by armies loyal to corporate lords, while the people, worn down by daily survival, resigned to their fate.

Surveillance permeated every inch of the New Order's realm, with cameras everywhere. Yet it was the more insidious eyes—those of the Loyals, individuals from the old world who had eagerly embraced this one—that were feared the most. The Loyals, loyal only to their corporate masters, were a constant threat, poised to report any behavior that deviated from their lords' rules. This sense of higher purpose fueled them, anchoring them in a society where they found meaning through the omnipresent, suffocating control. Indeed, they had been the primary recruits enlisted by the insidious corporate architects to orchestrate the downfall of democracy and usher in the New Order. The powerful corporations had adeptly exploited their feelings of impotence, ignorance, and rage to shepherd society into a new system governed solely by fear.



The New Order's rigid caste system left no trace of the freedom and upward mobility people had enjoyed only decades before. The societal ladder was a one-way descent, with each class tightly bound to its place. Six distinct social classes emerged:

The Freeloaders: The lowest of the low, stripped of rights, healthcare, and even a chance at a life past 40. They labored in ceaseless, degrading jobs, essentially enslaved under a rebranded title that once referred to those seen as a drain on corporations' free services. Media had helped ease their reintroduction, painting them as leeches who should feel grateful for the corporations' 'mercy.'

The Minions: Skilled laborers in trades like waiting tables, plumbing, and construction. Most worked remotely, operating drones via VR headsets, with no real connection to the world beyond their VR headset. This layer made up the bulk of the workforce, locked into a life of repetitive tasks and unending servitude.

The Loyals: The backbone of the New Order's control. Much like the Inquisition of old, they acted as enforcers, sniffing out dissent, reporting anyone who didn't 'fit'. The majority held managerial positions that afforded ample opportunity to observe and scrutinize their subordinates' activities. They lived alongside the Minions and Freeloaders but enjoyed more comfort, fueled by a sense of righteous duty to preserve the order. They found purpose in their role, feeling vindicated by a system that valued their devotion.





The Professionals: The elite workers—scientists, engineers, doctors, and media personnel. Sharing spaces close to the New Nobility, they were permitted knowledge, though only under heavy conditioning. Any sign of moral empathy for the lower classes was quietly and swiftly silenced, ensuring they remained loyal tools rather than threats.

The New Nobility: The true rulers, corporate overlords and public icons who knew no bounds to their wealth or pleasure. Writers had no place here; knowledge was strictly rationed. Most Freeloaders and Loyals were illiterate, while the Minions learned only the minimal technical skills needed for their roles.

The King: At the very top, a figurehead king was maintained as a symbolic ruler, a savior of sorts for the Loyals to idolize. While he issued commands and played his part, his role was hollow. He remained utterly indifferent to the suffering of others, concerned solely with his own gratification. He frittered away most of his time on the golf course or indulging in the carnal pleasures offered by his concubines, while simultaneously fanning the flames of fear and hatred among the various social castes.

One other group existed, though few dared to speak of them—the 'Lost Souls'. These were outcasts, rebels who had escaped the New Order's grip and lived outside the system. Officially classified as terrorists, they faced a shoot-to-kill policy enforced by relentless surveillance. Living as a Lost Soul was a death sentence, but for some, even that was preferable to submission.



In this fractured, mechanized society, people like Daniel found solace only in survival. Freedom and hope were stories of the past, recalled only by the oldest among them, as memories became just another luxury that the New Order couldn't allow.

Daniel belonged to the Minions' class, a group consigned to serve without much freedom, relegated to labor that kept the New Order's machinery running. Yet, by a quiet stroke of fate, he had a tenuous lifeline that set him apart: Patrick Moore, a family friend and quiet benefactor, had managed to fund Daniel's basic education in secret while he was still in the orphanage. It was all Patrick could do without drawing dangerous attention. The New Order forbade any direct contact between the Professional class and those beneath them, except under strict surveillance. Risking exposure to the Loyals—ever watchful for disloyalty or even a hint of subversion—was out of the question.

Patrick knew his limits. He couldn't directly keep Daniel fed, shield him from hardship, or risk revealing himself as Daniel's supporter. To do so openly would put them both in jeopardy. Yet, periodically, Patrick found ways to stay connected to the boy, exploiting the media's appetite for feel-good stories to justify his visits. Each time he visited, cameras were everywhere, capturing the carefully staged reunion between a high-ranking Professional and the orphaned son of an old friend. For the media, it was a sentimental spectacle—like visiting a zoo to drop crumbs for a hungry creature, an acceptable show of charity from the privileged to the pitiful.



Yet Patrick endured this charade, knowing it was the only way to see Daniel. He tolerated the empty, scripted gestures and the hollow words, knowing that, in rare moments, he might speak to Daniel alone. During brief seconds snatched in the edges of their interactions, Patrick would attempt to share some genuine sentiment with Daniel, words laced with veiled advice or encouragement.

For his part, Daniel welcomed Patrick's visits. He wasn't his father, but Patrick had become a figure of respect, a connection to a life Daniel could hardly remember but instinctively valued. It didn't take long for Daniel to realize he had a hidden benefactor, and after piecing together the clues, he knew it was Patrick. By the time he was ten, they both understood the staged performance they played for the cameras was a farce. Yet, even behind the superficial exchanges, a deeper meaning ran between them, a quiet bond that needed no words. Each knew the other cared, and Daniel played his part flawlessly, maintaining the façade while reading Patrick's hidden messages with an astuteness beyond his years.

It was this secret display of intelligence—an ability to read between the lines, to understand the game beneath the surface—that marked Daniel as different. And though neither of them knew it at the time, this quiet spark of insight was the beginning of a journey that would change his life forever.



As the party wound down, Daniel's attention drifted to a young woman standing quietly at the edge of the terrace, her gaze fixed on the early night sky. She had kept to herself throughout the evening, hardly interacting with the other guests. It was the first time Daniel had noticed her, yet something about her presence held a unique allure. Though he'd observed her only briefly, he sensed that she was likely a high-level scientist, a woman of intellect and purpose. No outward sign revealed her rank, as The New Order encouraged uniformity among its Professionals, but there was an aura about her—a subtle sharpness that hinted at her status.

Yet there was more to it, an indefinable something that set her apart, like a hidden agenda woven into her shy demeanor. Daniel, skilled at reading people's intentions, sensed an undercurrent in her every move, an impression that she was quietly performing, as though playing a role in a secret, unseen play. For whom, and to what end? He couldn't say, but the intrigue was undeniable. His instincts warned him to keep his distance, yet he found himself drawn closer, curious about the mystery that enveloped her.

His shift had officially ended minutes ago, and he was free to log out, to pull himself from the tether of his remote-controlled life. But something in him resisted, anchored to the intrigue she radiated. Nearly alone now, he moved the robot closer to her, controlling its mechanical body with the same finesse he'd honed through years of remote work.



With a smooth, melodic tone embedded in the robot's voice, he spoke, "Might I offer the lady something special to complement the beautiful view?"

She turned slowly, and a smile spread across her face—a broad, knowing expression that sent a jolt through him. Then, in a voice eerily familiar, one that struck him with chilling clarity, she replied in a metallic, too-familiar tone: "Hello, Daniel. I'm glad we finally meet. We need to talk."