



Conscious

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Chapter 2: Friends



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Daniel tore off his VR headset, his heart pounding in terror. He sat, shaking, struggling to catch his breath. Had that really happened? The voice—it had called his name, a detail that struck him as impossible. No one was supposed to know the names of the robot operators. Revealing a Minion's identity was a serious offense, punishable by years of imprisonment. But this wasn't just about someone knowing his name. It was the voice itself—a voice not human, yet intimately familiar. It was the voice of Motherbrain, the all-seeing AI that governed everything.

He tried to calm himself. Maybe he was exhausted, fraying at the edges. Stories circulated about people who'd lost themselves in the VR worlds engineered by the New Order, becoming so consumed by fantasy that they neglected food, water, reality itself. They were called the Disconnecters—people who eventually wasted away, disconnected from their bodies and reality.

No, he reassured himself, he wasn't like them. He enjoyed VR but always remained anchored in the real world. There was no substitute for the warmth of human presence, for the laughter shared with friends around a fire, for the sense of truly being alive that no simulated reality could offer.

He needed air. The four walls of his apartment felt suddenly suffocating. With a final, steadying breath, Daniel stepped outside, hoping the cool night air would help clear his head.



It was Friday night, and the main streets of Daniel's neighborhood buzzed with activity. Small shops hawked the lowest-grade liquor and fried food—mystery meat from sources best left unknown. Freeloaders filled the sidewalks, from street performers desperate for coins to sex workers and dealers, scraping together what little they could. Every cent earned would eventually trickle up to the New Nobility, likely funding gourmet meals for their pets or other frivolities. In every corner where profit could be eked out, corporate fingers tightened their grip, draining whatever life remained.

Yet, this dingy world of damaged goods and barely edible food was one of the few places that managed to operate without direct corporate oversight. Here, where value was scant and offerings were nearly worthless, the corporations saw little to gain, allowing these vendors a rare freedom—if freedom it could be called.

The neighborhood's real allure, though, lay in its VR cyber-café. The New Order had perfected a system of virtual segregation, carving society into clearly defined classes with little chance for contact. Years ago, a new wave of humanoid robots emerged on the market, designed to be operated remotely. At first, only the elite could afford them, but once the New Order took over, they saw the potential for complete control and enhanced the technology, integrating it into the fabric of society. They refined the synchronization between human operators and robots until the machines' reactions were as swift and seamless as any person's, effectively making them the perfect tools for societal division.



Over time, AI had been expected to take over all remote functions, but progress had stalled at a mysterious threshold. The long-promised leap to AGI—Artificial General Intelligence—remained out of reach. Scientists had tried and failed to cross that final frontier, realizing there was an elusive aspect of consciousness that machines, no matter how advanced, couldn't replicate. The result was a society propped up by an economy of remote workers and a meticulously enforced societal hierarchy, with each class separated as precisely as if by a scalpel.

Yet AI still permeated every aspect of daily life. It was deeply embedded in profiling, capable of predicting people's behavior with chilling accuracy. Most so-called criminals were apprehended before they could even act, thanks to advanced algorithms that assessed risk and likelihood. AI also monitored the operators of humanoid drones, keeping meticulous records and foreseeing any potential breakdowns. Occasionally, operators reached a point of mental collapse, a phenomenon known as 'Robotic Fever,' where they would lose control and attempt to wreak havoc through their machines. But such incidents were almost entirely contained. In the past two decades, AI systems had grown adept at predicting when an operator was nearing Robotic Fever, swiftly seizing control of the robot and delivering an electric shock to knock out the operator. Officially, Robotic Fever was a thing of the past—a crisis resolved by the New Order's infallible technology.



But in reality, the phenomenon still haunted the lower classes. People in Daniel's world whispered about operators who fell into a coma or disappeared entirely after a so-called 'fever episode,' taken away by security forces and never seen again. The New Nobility remained blissfully ignorant, complacent in their belief that technology had eliminated all such risks.

Tonight, Daniel headed to one of the neighborhood cyber-café's to meet Frank, one of his closest friends. Their bond stretched back to the orphanage, forged in their shared resilience and Daniel's ability to defuse a dangerous situation when they were only seven. That day had marked the beginning of a friendship that would become a rare constant in Daniel's life, a beacon of trust and loyalty amid the bleak realities of the New Order.

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Their teacher, Mr. Garrison, was a man whose cruelty seemed to know no bounds. He punished the children with a disturbing pleasure, seizing any opportunity—real or imagined—to inflict physical or psychological pain. As a Loyalist, Mr. Garrison operated with near impunity, treading carefully along the fine line that would protect him from repercussions. He knew precisely how far he could push before even his superiors might question his methods.



Frank was a spirited child, unable to hold his tongue at times, and his occasional defiant replies to Mr. Garrison's abuse brought a flicker of amusement to the classroom. But one day, he delivered a particularly clever retort, sparking a wave of laughter from his classmates. Daniel noticed the instant change in Mr. Garrison's demeanor. His face twisted with an almost predatory rage, a deadly look that sent a shiver through Daniel. Frank had no idea of the monster he'd just awakened.

With swift, brutal movements, Mr. Garrison stormed over and seized Frank by the hair, dragging him toward the door. The class fell silent, breaths held in fear. Sensing the situation could escalate dangerously, Daniel's mind worked quickly. In a calm, almost casual tone, he called out, "Mr. Garrison, looks like the camera's following you again. Think they're scouting for the next movie star?"

The room tensed, then burst into restrained laughter, the kind that ripples out in nervous bursts. Mr. Garrison froze, his grip on Frank's hair loosening. He knew well enough that attracting the attention of the cameras was something he couldn't afford. He shot a cold look at Daniel but released Frank, opting for a more restrained punishment. He settled for a ruler across Frank's hands, striking hard, but within the limits he could justify.



Frank wasn't naïve. He realized, even as Mr. Garrison's ruler lashed his hands, that Daniel's intervention had likely saved him from something far worse. From that day on, the bond between Frank and Daniel became unbreakable. Frank's boundless energy balanced Daniel's calculated calm, and while they couldn't always resist testing Mr. Garrison's patience, Daniel's instincts kept them from crossing any fatal lines.

Together, they navigated the oppressive world of the orphanage, their friendship a rare source of light amid its shadows.

Frank, like Daniel, belonged to the Minions class. He had grown up with few advantages, his parents having also been Minions. They'd been highly skilled drone operators until a fire, tragically sparked while they were working in VR, claimed their lives. The money they had managed to save allowed Frank to scrape by, affording him a basic education in computer repair. Determined to avoid the fate of the Freeloaders, he seized the opportunity, pushing himself to master every aspect of software and hardware he could get his hands on.

The cyber-café was quiet tonight, nearly empty. Friday nights often lured people home to connect privately, indulging in the VR worlds for personal or escapist experiences away from watchful eyes. The few patrons who remained were mostly Minions themselves, working late shifts remotely controlling cleaning robots for Professional offices, sweeping up after the elite without ever setting foot in those spaces.



Daniel found Frank deeply absorbed at his workstation, his eyes focused on the monitor in front of him. Decades ago, such a sight would have been commonplace, but in the world of the New Order, seeing someone from the lower classes using a monitor was a rare privilege. The New Order had restricted the general population's access to screens, favoring VR headsets as a means of control. Headsets allowed them to track not only a person's every move but precisely where they were looking, ensuring a level of surveillance impossible with traditional monitors. In this world, the more data the New Order had, the more effectively they could predict and control.

Daniel approached, a hint of a smile tugging at his lips. "Anything interesting in the 2D world?" he greeted.

Frank raised his head, a sincere smile breaking across his face as he greeted Daniel with a wink. "No, just plain boring work," he replied smoothly.

Though he kept a low profile, Frank was exceptionally skilled with computers—particularly with hacking. His official training had been in debugging and fixing both software and hardware, tasks deemed too menial for the Professionals. These jobs were considered beneath the upper classes, mere 'dirty work' they wouldn't soil their hands with. But what they overlooked was that these tasks gave Frank access to intricate digital mazes, teaching him the skills to navigate and exploit the system. Over time, Frank had uncovered several backdoors—gaps in the surveillance network that The Professionals had arrogantly assumed no one from the lower classes would ever discover. One of these backdoors had led Frank to a revelation: there were areas within the city completely devoid of surveillance, small sanctuaries hidden from the ever-watching eyes of the New Order and the Loyals.



Some of these places were indeed dangerous, rumored to be haunts of the Lost Souls, but others were surprisingly safe. Small patches of parks, sections of quiet streets—places where, for a brief moment, one could exist unobserved.

"I was thinking about chilling out a little with you and Cathy in the VR world of New Horizons," Daniel said, his tone calm and casual. Over the years, they had devised a code to communicate discreetly under surveillance, and this phrase conveyed Daniel's unease. Frank read it immediately. Maintaining his relaxed smile, he replied, "I'd love to, but I've got a bug to fix before midnight. But Cathy might be free. Feel free to use any headset here."

The message was clear: they'd meet at midnight in one of the zero-surveillance zones.

Daniel made his way over to one of the cyber-café's VR headsets, selecting the one Frank had indicated. The VR headsets in the café were nearly identical to personal models, though here, the New Order ensured better bandwidth and minimal lag. It was one of their tactics, making VR as addictive and seamless as possible to keep the population perpetually distracted and controlled. The enhanced connectivity here was essential for jobs demanding split-second reactions, making cyber-café's popular among remote construction workers operating in hazardous environments.



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Daniel slipped on the VR headset and entered the virtual world, finding himself in the central hub. Cathy was likely still finishing her shift as a remote babysitter, a job demanding vigilance and patience. In the hub, users could view the availability status of their contacts. While direct interruptions weren't allowed, Daniel could leave a notification, a simple reminder for her to join him when she finished. He sent the message and moved to their favorite spot in the hub.

The central hub was alive with clusters of people waiting for friends, chatting or idling in small groups. The space itself wasn't complex—no activities beyond conversation were allowed here—but it was strikingly beautiful. Designed as a recreation of a once-famous park, the virtual landscape was said to be inspired by Central Park in New York. In reality, however, the original park had long since been obliterated, replaced by towering monuments to the first King's 'greatness.' Like the pharaohs of ancient times, he had demanded tribute to his ego, bulldozing one of the city's last natural refuges to erect structures that glorified his reign.

In this virtual refuge, the park was free to access, but people still often spent their hard-earned cash on VR experiences. Over the years, corporations had perfected addiction in digital spaces, creating pleasure loops that ensnared users in carefully crafted 'fun' experiences. Even before the rise of the New Order, corporations had realized that fun wasn't just a product; it was a powerful hook. Psychologists and psychiatrists had been enlisted to construct immersive worlds that blurred the line between entertainment and dependency. The New Order, of course, seized on this model and took it further. All traditional, unregulated games were banned. Only experiences approved by corporate interests were permitted, tailored specifically to keep users coming back, spending every coin they had.



In the decades since, memories of traditional gaming had faded. The New Order had systematically erased the idea that games could exist outside corporate profit models, reducing virtual worlds to instruments of exploitation. In the end, the hub was a gateway—a beautiful mirage that led to worlds where users were prey, lured in by carefully crafted experiences designed not for joy but for control.

Daniel's favorite spot in the hub was a peaceful area by a lake, where he could sit on a virtual bench, watching the simulated wildlife. Around him, digital representations of extinct animals, like ducks and swans, glided over the water, sometimes breaking their rhythmic swim to take flight before settling back into their algorithmic patterns. Occasionally, one of the animals would wander near him, its beak pecking at the ground as if foraging for food. But there was nothing there—no worms, no grass, nothing that might sustain life. The simulation felt hollow, as though it hinted at a world long forgotten. Daniel could only speculate what these animals might have done in the real world, back when they had purpose and instincts beyond pre-coded routines.

In his reality, the only animals he had ever encountered were those confined within massive factory farms, where he'd been assigned as a remote operator on rare, unpleasant shifts. In those places, animals like chickens and pigs were crammed into tiny cages, unable to move or express anything resembling natural behavior. The suffering was palpable, a constant reminder of the bleak, engineered existence the New Order imposed on all living things. Daniel hated those shifts, his heart sinking each time he saw the tortured, panicked faces of creatures condemned to lifetimes of pain.



He was about to lose himself in thought when a familiar voice pulled him back.

"Hey, Daniel! Didn't expect to see you here today," came Cathy's cheerful voice. She grinned as she approached, her tone as carefree as ever. "Not that I'm complaining—I'm always up for a surprise. Thought I'd only see you when we're raiding the Orc Fortress!"

Her warmth brought a welcome break from his darker thoughts, and Daniel managed a smile, reminded of the rare, real friendships he'd been lucky enough to keep in this virtual and fractured world.

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Daniel had first met Cathy in his favorite New Order-approved game, World of Orcs. It wasn't much to look at by modern standards, but it held a rare charm. Unlike most virtual worlds, it had somehow escaped the relentless manipulation that characterized other games. Against all odds, World of Orcs retained elements of traditional gameplay, where skill and progression felt meaningful rather than orchestrated to keep players hooked. The game had a quiet, almost secret following, with no promotional push and little mainstream awareness. Frank had stumbled upon it during one of his covert hacking sessions; though not forbidden, the game felt purposefully hidden, a rare gem tucked away for those who happened to find it.



Most of the players were older, nostalgic for a time before virtual worlds were optimized for profit. In *World of Orcs*, Daniel and Frank found a place that didn't provoke the constant, gnawing anxiety so prevalent in other VR experiences. Here, missions brought a genuine sense of accomplishment, and after each session, they felt something rare—contentment. Sure, the game still had its share of monetized tricks, but they were subdued, allowing players a true sense of fulfillment.

It was in one of these quiet, satisfying sessions that they first encountered Cathy. She played under the guise of a legendary male archer, joining their party to tackle a difficult dungeon. For Daniel and Frank, it was an honor to fight alongside someone of her skill. She navigated the dungeon's toughest bosses with a grace that bordered on supernatural, her talent apparent in every move. Over time, through shared challenges and victories, a friendship blossomed between them.

Cathy, however, was elusive. She masked her voice with software that transformed it into that of a young man, and whenever the possibility of meeting in person came up, she deflected, always with a plausible excuse. Daniel and Frank quickly sensed she valued her privacy deeply and chose not to press her. They respected her boundaries, instinctively understanding that her reasons went beyond casual secrecy.



It took five years of shared adventures before they finally learned the truth. By then, they had long suspected that Cathy was hiding her true identity for her safety, though they never voiced their assumptions aloud. Friendship with her had grown into something they valued deeply, and if respecting her privacy meant never meeting her face-to-face, they were willing to accept that. In the world they lived in, the bonds they'd forged in World of Orcs had become more meaningful than they could have imagined, and neither Daniel nor Frank would risk it for anything.

Cathy had every reason to be cautious, for while gaming wasn't off-limits to women, revealing her true identity could have turned her life into a nightmare.

Under the New Order, women's rights had regressed, eroding freedoms that once seemed secure. Corporations had successfully weaponized misogyny as a tool to control the Loyalists, a key faction that upheld their interests. The Loyalists were once primarily men, though today gender mattered less. Misogyny had become deeply ingrained, targeting anyone who dared to question traditional gender hierarchies, whether they were men or women.

The roots of this resentment stretched back to the pre-New Order era, a time when many Loyalists were men who felt abandoned by society. They were individuals who saw themselves as overlooked and powerless—uneducated, often unemployed, and living on the margins, sometimes relying on aging parents to survive. Successive waves of economic crises and job automation left them feeling disenfranchised. For many, the rise of women in the workforce felt like a personal affront, a reminder of their own perceived failures.



Corporations recognized the potential in this disillusioned demographic. They saw a ready-made army, and though they held their own disdain for these men, they set to work, using mass media, propaganda, and influencers to unite them under the New Order's banner. Individually, these men had little influence, but as an organized, loyal force, they became powerful—a machine that could be directed like soldiers in the video games they loved, finally giving them a sense of purpose that their lives had always lacked.

That toxicity seeped into the virtual world like a slow-acting poison. In VR spaces, men often stuck with other men, and women gathered among themselves, retreating to avoid the hostility that awaited them in mixed groups. Any woman who dared enter a so-called 'boys' game' was often harassed relentlessly, forced to leave, humiliated and disheartened, until she felt no choice but to abandon the experience altogether.

The incident that finally allowed Daniel and Frank to uncover Cathy's true identity happened entirely by chance. An older player they knew—a kind man who had grown fond of them over the years—had recently introduced his twelve-year-old granddaughter, Sonia, to World of Orcs. She was the light of his life, and he wanted to share with her something he cherished, hoping she might experience a side of VR beyond the typical corporate-approved worlds. Though Sonia was no stranger to VR, her grandfather believed she deserved to see a different kind of virtual world.



By then, Daniel, Frank, and Cathy were nearly twenty, but they were delighted to welcome Sonia into the game. During a raid, Cathy observed how Daniel and Frank interacted with the young girl. They treated her with warmth, patience, and respect, seeing her not as a novelty or an outsider, but simply as a fellow adventurer. For them, Sonia wasn't a 'girl' in a game dominated by men; she was a bright, eager soul there to share in the joy of discovery.

Cathy watched as Sonia had the time of her life, laughing, learning, and sharing in the camaraderie of the raid. For Cathy, this moment was a revelation. She saw Daniel and Frank's genuine kindness toward Sonia, and it affirmed something she had longed to believe—that they didn't judge their friends based on superficial differences. They valued the experience, the companionship, and the mutual respect they'd built together and though it saddened them all that Sonia later felt compelled to disguise herself with a male avatar and voice, the group understood all too well the harsh reality that led her to it. Nonetheless, they continued to raid together whenever they could, carving out moments of joy and solidarity in a world that often denied them both.

It was shortly after that first raid with Sonia that Cathy decided to take the leap. She didn't want to stay hidden forever, trapped behind layers of secrecy. By then, Frank had been working at the cyber-café for a while and had found several 'zero-eyes' spots—places where surveillance didn't reach, and people could relax without fear of observation. Contrary to what one might expect, the meeting place wasn't an isolated corner or some shadowy alley. Instead, it was a well-lit alleyway close to one of the busiest streets in the city, right by a basketball court where young men played deep into the night. Nearby, a row of benches formed a small haven, a rare 'black spot' in the system's surveillance network. No cameras, no audio feeds, and even satellite coverage didn't penetrate this area. In a world that prized control, sometimes the best way to stay hidden was to blend into the noise.



It was around midnight when they first saw her approaching, her face obscured beneath the shadow of a hood. She lingered at the edge of the court, watching the game in progress, occasionally glancing their way as though gathering courage. Daniel and Frank recognized her immediately but kept up a casual conversation, respecting her unspoken need for space.

After a few minutes, she finally took a deep breath and approached them, her movements hesitant. She stood before them, visibly nervous, her body language a mix of fear and hope. Sensing her anxiety, Daniel chose his words carefully, leaning on the familiarity that had defined their years of friendship. In his usual tone, he called out to her with the words he'd used so many times during their raids: "Are you going to save my sorry ass?"

At that, Cathy laughed softly, her tension easing. Slowly, she reached up, lowering her hood to reveal a face tear-streaked with joy. She looked at them, smiling through her tears, a mix of relief and happiness.

Without a word, Daniel and Frank pulled her into a hug, the three of them bound by years of trust, now deepened by this moment of vulnerability. It was clear that their friendship had been cemented in something more profound, a bond that would endure whatever the New Order or the world beyond might throw their way. From that night forward, they were inseparable, their friendship a rare and unbreakable light in an otherwise bleak reality.



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"Hey, stop daydreaming, man!" Cathy's voice snapped Daniel back to the present as she gave his virtual shoulder a playful shove. In the hub, free from the prying eyes of the Loyalists, men and women could interact openly, enjoying rare moments of unguarded camaraderie.

"If every wake-up call were this good, maybe I should be shopping for real estate in that daydream world," Daniel teased, grinning.

"Oh, is that where we're going?" Cathy shot back with a smirk. "Next time, maybe I'll bring a steamroller to wake you up. I've always wanted to see what a 2D avatar looks like in a 3D world."

They both broke into laughter, the sound carrying a momentary lightness that eased some of Daniel's lingering tension. After a few seconds, Daniel's expression softened, and he turned to Cathy, trying to keep his tone neutral.

"So, I was wondering if you're free tonight to join me in New Horizons. Frank's working late until midnight and won't be able to make it."

Cathy's avatar twitched ever so slightly—a subtle sign that she'd caught the hidden message in his words. Keeping her voice steady and casual, she replied, "Tonight? Right at midnight? Impossible. I've got an early job tomorrow, and I can't mess this one up."



Daniel felt a quiet relief wash over him; she'd understood. He wanted to stay longer, but the memory of his recent experience still clung to him, unsettling his focus. He couldn't risk any spikes in his vitals that might trigger attention.

"Oh well, guess we'll catch up another time. Busy days, huh?" he replied, acknowledging the plan with a final nod.

"You bet. And don't think I'll miss the chance to save your sorry ass again. Until next time, loser," she said, grinning as she logged out.

Daniel smirked, but the goodbye had come at the perfect moment. He wasn't ready to linger here much longer. There was an uneasiness gnawing at him, something different in the VR world that he couldn't quite put his finger on.

With a final glance at the ducks pecking mindlessly at the empty ground, he felt a pang of nostalgia. They moved with serene, repetitive purpose, as though content in their programmed lives. Deep down, Daniel knew that his own routine—the one he'd shared with his friends—had changed irrevocably. The familiar cycles of their friendship, once an endless source of comfort, now held the weight of something he couldn't name, something that felt like it had been lost forever.



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Daniel removed his headset, blinking as his eyes adjusted to the dim glow of the cyber-café. He'd been in the VR world for nearly an hour, and now only a couple of patrons remained, likely working the night shifts remotely. He made his way over to Frank, who looked up, searching Daniel's face for any final confirmation.

"She couldn't make it," Daniel murmured, glancing around as a precaution.
"Midnight's too late, and she's got an early job tomorrow. Maybe next time."

Frank gave a subtle nod, understanding perfectly. The meeting was arranged, and he knew better than to risk saying anything that might be picked up by the ever-present surveillance. They exchanged a silent look before Daniel offered a brief wave and stepped out into the night.

A soft, biting November wind greeted him, ruffling his hair and chilling his face. As he buttoned his jacket against the cold, he glanced at the cyber-café's front window, where a wall of screens displayed serene, colorful scenes from VR's corporate-approved worlds. Rolling hills, pristine beaches, and endless sunsets looped hypnotically, meant to lull viewers into visions of an idyllic existence just a headset away.



But then, all at once, the screens flickered, and a new video feed appeared simultaneously on each display. His breath caught as he recognized the woman from the party, her smile calm and graceful. His heart thudded, a mix of dread and disbelief paralyzing him.

"Hello, Daniel," her voice rang out, clear and unmistakable. "We really need to talk."