

Danny Foster slowly began to see clearly. He blinked a couple of times then things came into focus. He was sitting in a chair. It looked and felt like a dentist chair, but it had all kinds of crazy tubes and wires coming out of it. Danny felt pale and bald. He looked around and he was surrounded by people. They were all wearing earthen-colored rags and old or hand-made clothing. He felt confused.

“Don’t get up,” said one of them, pushing back on Danny’s forehead.

“Is that him, Kazaa? Is he The One?” said a small one behind everyone. Then a large black guy with pushed forward out of the crowd to look at Danny.

“How do you feel? Do you feel hungry, angry?” The big one named Kazaa was feeling Danny’s forehead.

“Where am I?” asked Danny. One second he had been on his way to Alpha Centauri, the next second he was in this strange room with these strange people.

“You’re not in Alpha Centauri, Neo,” said Kazaa, with a big smile. “I think that’s obvious.”

“Neo? Where’s Gerald? Where’s my brother? Why do your clothes look so cheap?” cried a struggling and uncertain Danny Foster.

“I’m right here, Danny,” came a strange, but similar voice. Danny turned over and there was a body and face that approximated that of his brother’s. It kinda looked like Gerald, but something seemed off about it. It seemed too real. Danny was having a hard time figuring this all out. “And our clothes look cheap because they are cheap. We don’t have enough money for fancy clothes.”

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“Danny, you’re in the real world right now. What you see day to day is called The Matrix,” Gerald explained.

“You mean, like that movie? The Matrix?” asked Danny. He was starting to get it now. That movie, The Matrix, had been really popular, and Danny had watched it seven or eight times after it came out on VHS. “So what year is it here? I know that back in there it was 2006.”

“Oh, it’s 2006. Just a much real-er 2006,” explained Kazaa. “If you were to put 2006 in The Matrix and 2006 in The Real World together and had them fight, the 2006 in The Real World would seriously destroy the other 2006. In fact, we would have to put them in different weight classes, so they never would really get to fight. That’s how serious the difference is.”

“But,” countered Danny, “isn’t ‘The Real World’ copyrighted? You have to call it something else. Maybe, ‘The True World?’”

“No,” said Gerald. “That makes it sound like the other one is false. It’s not false, it’s just different. And fake.”

“Which is the same thing as false,” said the mousey one.

“Shut up, Ratz,” said a very good looking female one who looked a lot like Captain Caspian. She walked up to Gerald and they began to kiss passionately again.

“Hey! You’re in The Matrix, too!” deciphered Danny. “So, then is it like the movie where you guys are trying to defeat the programmers?”

“Oh, no. We’ve defeated them long ago. Didn’t you see the movies?” answered Kazaa. “We’ve now gotten to the point where we’re running The Matrix and we’re also running The ... you know ... World. We never did decide on a name, did we?”

“What about Zion? Or New Zion?” asked Ratz.

“Shut up, Ratz,” said Captain Caspian, pulling away from kissing Gerald. Then she went right back into it with Gerald, which was making everyone a little annoyed.

“I think we should have a poll. Who wants ‘Zion’, raise your hand,” said Kazaa, starting to take count of those hands which were raised (three).

“Um, shouldn’t this be up to the general public?” asked Danny.

“Shouldn’t everyone get a chance to vote?”

“That’s a good point,” agreed Ratz. He sidled up next to Danny, still sitting in the dentist chair.

“Everyone is voting. Uh, Danny, there is no one else. We’re all that’s left,” said Kazaa, tentatively. He held his hands out, and they all looked around, including Danny. What he saw was that they were in a large auditorium-type room. There were a lot of computer equipment off to their immediate vicinity, but it appeared that they were in what remained of some hollowed out earthen theatre years and years old. Danny could see for a good distance in every direction, and there was no other soul. There was no civilization to speak of. There was only quiet, still, darkness, and death. “After we won against the machines we tried living on our own out here, but most people couldn’t hack it. So, we’re all that’s left. There’s about ten of us, and we’re dropping off fast.”

“This equipment looks pretty cheap, too,” commented Danny. “Why is all your stuff from back in 1996? This is crap.”

“Well, we’re sorry we can’t cater to your fine tastes!” shouted a girl who had hitherto said nothing. She got up and ran off in the direction of the desert.

“That was Gloria. She’s our seamstress. And you basically just put down her life’s work. Good one, Neon,” replied Ratz, moving away from Danny to join the others in judging him. “We don’t have money. There are no precious metals or materials on this planet, so attempting to establish a system of currency is impossible. Right now we do a goods and barter-style of monetary value, but the only thing any of us really value is food, which is plentiful if you like slop.”

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"I love slop," smiled Gerald. "Do you love slop, baby-cakes?" He stroked Captain Caspian's hand, and she nuzzled his face. Then they started making out again.

"I'm sorry that I insulted Gloria. She does a great job with what she has," offered Danny. It was of little consolation. Most everyone was judging him with real real hateful eyes, and his brother was ignoring him to snog a floosy Danny had just met. This was weird. Is this why he was always so quiet in real life? thought Danny. What was the deal with these two? "What's the deal with you two? Is this why you're always so quiet in real life?"

"Caspian is the one who brought me out into The ... thing ... World. She outed me, so to speak. We fell in love instantly, and then in The Matrix we fell in love all over again. It's so wonderful to be so in love with someone in every sense of the world. Or word. Both."

"Both!" said Caspian. Then she giggled really loudly, and they began making out again. After a short while, Caspian explained, "We want to get married, but we don't have enough money for a ring. And, also, there's nothing to make a ring from since everything is just scrap metal from the monstrous machine wars we had."

"You're probably wondering how there are so many people inside The Matrix with so few of us out here to pull the string," lead Kazaa, changing the subject.

"Oh, yeah," said Danny. "I was wondering that. How do you guys run The Matrix? There are billions of people. How do you manage it all?"

"The short answer is: poorly," said Ratz, getting next to Danny again. That little mouse-faced boy cannot decide what part of the fence he's on. Space God bless him for that.

"The long answer is: bots. Ironically, that word is shorter than the short answer word. The truth is, we may have defeated the genius machines that kept us in slavery, but we're not smarter than they are. For one thing, math is hard. For another thing, multi-tasking is an illusion. Almost as a way to help us out, the last Machine battalion took out half of the earth's population. At first we were angry, but then we realized just how much work it is to run and

maintain an entire world without downtime. I mean, it was actually a thing of beauty to see. All those processes. And the server power! My goodness.”

“We tried extracting people,” said Ratz. “We tried really hard, but they kept dying. It was like trying to catch an egg when it’s being tossed at you. We must have buried thirty people the first day alone.”

“It was a massacre. The Machines needed to keep us alive, so they practiced as much non-violence as they could with us rebels. In the end, we were really the greatest destructor of mankind. In any case, we did find some Read-me files and read up on a very wordy, yet excellently screenshot and maintained, user’s guide and we wrote some bots to replace dead people so that those in The Matrix wouldn’t suddenly find people they love missing for no reason. Though, that does happen,” said Kazaa.

“Bots?” said Danny. “Like in Battlefield 1942?”

“Oh, yes. Except that every bot represents someone we tried to rescue but who died. The entire world is bots except for the ten of us, and now you. Well, that’s not true. We have a crop of humans on the East end that generate the power we’re using here. One of them is Bill Gates.”

“Wow.”

“I know.”

“So you’re stealing power from those human bodies?” asked Danny.

“Yes we are. Remember the poor thing?” said Ratz.

“Oh, yes. I remember,” Danny mused.

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