Confessions

By GSmith, 2003

Old Woman at Zion: Neo, please. I have a son, Jacob, aboard the Gnosis. Please, watch over him.
Neo: I'll try.
Another Old Woman at Zion: I have a daughter on the Icarus.

- From *The Matrix Reloaded*, by Larry and Andy Wachowski

Everywhere beyond the city is an unhappy realm, and never more so than today.

I can see Ice, my Captain, from here – a lifeless clutter of wires and flesh. Corrupt is dead too.

The lives that they led were incredible, from the point that they woke up and discovered that everything they'd known for their first ten years or so was a lie. I had it lucky – I was born in Zion. I had an upbringing that was *real*.

But for now all that's real in my world is that everyone around me is dead. I don't know *how* I survived.

One thing I do know – it's a long walk home.

My name is Jacob. I was born in Zion twenty-eight years ago, just ten days after my father had been killed in the Matrix. My mother was 100% hole-free, like me. Before that, I don't know. History starts for me with my mother. She always referred to herself as "the first in the family line". She's spent a lot of time trying to persuade me that I shouldn't be the last. Or, convince herself that I wouldn't be. She spends a lot of time worrying about me, and I spend a lot of time Operating the Gnosis.

Spent. Past tense.

Anyway, I'd never had much time to think about women. Until I met Ayn, that is. But that hasn't happened yet. Right now I'm walking to Zion, staying low and keeping under cover where I can, because there are Runners everywhere, and a couple of Sentinels too.

I don't know how everyone ended up dead. It all happened too quickly for me to see. All I saw was a bright light, most likely an EMP blast, and then the ship was crash landing and I had no chance to do anything. We weren't the only ship to go down. I saw the Caduceus go hurtling past us at one point,

and I thought we might collide with the Icarus. All I could see all around was the flash and charge of hot metal.

I should pass the Icarus at some point soon, if my sense of direction is correct. I'm going to meet Ayn there. We've never met before, except for that last time, in the future.

I always planned to be an Operator, because I had that youthful enthusiasm for doing The Right Thing. My mother was less certain that I was choosing the right path – she said that I should spend some time in the Zion Archive learning a bit more about the war before I made a final judgement. But I was young and I never found the time.

My mother's name is Monica. She wanted me to be a priest. She's deeply religious. She's taken in by prophecies and visions of the future, by what has gone before and what is to come. I prefer to live in the present, even if it is a less certain world than hers is. I've always lived in the present. I did so in the past and I will do so in the future.

One time, many years ago, my mother was stricken with a fever, and as I nursed her back to health she told incredible stories, wild flights of fancy that her ill mind was creating. Zion has been part of the machine's 'empire' since the creation of the Matrix, hundreds of years ago, she said. She also said that she feared for the fulfilment of the Prophecy – because her religion, though violently opposed to the Matrix, could not sustain itself without the existence of the Matrix. She cries a lot, my mother.

I've always considered Zion to be my home, to be the place that I belong. I feel an attachment to Zion that goes far beyond merely a place to sleep and eat and commune. But the Zion of my mother, the Zion of the Prophecy and the religious worship of the One, is a Zion that I have always felt detached from. I talked to Corrupt about this once. He said that the way I felt was a bit like the way he felt when he was still a part of the Matrix. A part of the world, but somehow apart from the world.

That was a tough night's sleep, after that conversation.

I'll miss Corrupt. I miss him already, in fact. Filthy mouth, short temper, but at times he could be charming, and oftentimes he was sharply philosophical in ways that surprised me and, I suspect, him sometimes. I wish I'd known him when I was younger.

I was a quiet kid, the kind that likes the idea of rebellion but prefers to experience it vicariously through others. Perfect for an Operator, I guess.

But what I was rebelling against in my youth wasn't the same as most of the other kids – when I was 11, there seemed to be a sudden influx of pod-kids a few years older than me, who all opposed 'The System' and were toying with fancy ideas that I couldn't understand. Things that they'd learnt of when they were plugged in - Socialism, Communism, anti-globalisation, all sorts of difficult concepts. I found myself detached again, from the crowd of rebels, and instinctively, but quietly, rebelling against *them* – and against the Prophecy. It got pretty confusing for a while there in my head – I was rebelling against the rebels, but also against the thing *they* were rebelling against.

So I was pretty confused, and that was when I got involved with a strange little group of Zionists – a bunch of anti-Rebel rebels who called themselves the Guerdonists. The majority of them had come from the Matrix, and were vehemently opposed to the notion of living in a society with strict disciplines – the very thing they had rebelled against in the first place, they argued.

The Guerdonists enchanted me for a time. I now understand why – it was adolescent confusion, and a fear of failure. I was scared that I would live without purpose, without clarity of thought. I believed that to be a waste of a Zion-born life. The Guerdonists taught me that Zion was a wonderful place to live on the fringes of society – refusal to follow the rules of the Council would often be seen as a natural consequence of the culture of rebellion that we grew up in, and we had a degree of security in life that only comes from a society that doesn't use currency.

However, we deviated on one issue – the machines.

There were some who believed that the machines were pure evil – Satanic, almost. I didn't believe in God – so I couldn't believe in Satan. But still the Guerdonists tried to persuade me. The schism between us widened when I discovered that they believed the opposite of pure evil – the inherent goodness of the world – was not God, or the One, but themselves. At first that seemed okay, but from there it followed that the Guerdonists could literally do no wrong in their own eyes. Which led to debauchery and wickedness the like of which Zion had never seen before.

All that changed when Morpheus rose from the crowd with his message, of course, and the Guerdonist view dissipated very quickly.

Morpheus confronted the inner circle of the Guerdonists and invited - challenged really - Titus, the Guerdonist leader, to a debate in the temple. By all accounts Morpheus was so persuasive that almost all of the Guerdonists rejected their own teachings there and then. Compared to Morpheus, it's said, the teachings and sayings of Titus seemed like little more than empty slogans and half-hearted ideas. But I wasn't there. By then I'd pretty much decided that I didn't truly believe in what either group were preaching. It was all too… vague. I didn't publicly renounce anything. I didn't do much of anything at all really.

Oh, except for one thing. I signed up for Operator training.

It had been my plan all along, as I said. But it's just that my plans got hidden in a fugue of half-baked principles and woolly philosophy. Still, now's the time, I said. Then.

I spent a year or two learning operational procedures, then another year teaching those procedures to new recruits, while I waited for a suitable vacancy on a ship. Of course, two then came along at once – the Gnosis and the Osiris. I picked the Gnosis for two reasons – first and foremost I'd got to know Corrupt a little and he seemed like the kind of guy I'd be happy spending time with. Secondly he'd told me that Ice was a good captain, and I trusted him. So that was it. I had a ship.

It wasn't an easy ship to operate. I mean, in terms of technical procedure it was fine, but it turned out that Ice wasn't as easy to get along with as I thought she might be. Her name was apt. The Gnosis was a good ship, but from a military point of view it was seen as a minor part of the fleet, and we weren't at the forefront of the action in the way that, say, the Neb or the Hammer were. Ice wasn't a

believer in taking too many risks. And she had no problem in ripping into her operator if he suggested that she take one.

But I got it in the end. She was one of these people that had to believe she had made the decision, even if she'd been manipulated into it. Corrupt and I found a decent rhythm in the end – we'd suggest ideas, make them seem like they were hers. If they worked out we let her take the kudos. If they failed, we took the blame. I like to think we freed a lot more minds that way than if we'd have sat back and waited for the captain's orders.

But that was then.

Now, I'm tired. I feel that I must be close to the Icarus, but I need to rest. It's been quite a few days.

That's what I said a few hours ago. Now, well, it's just got stranger. I was resting on a pile of rocks, under cover, and I guess it's a day since the Gnosis went down. Maybe it's the stress, or the hunger, but I just saw a sight unlike anything else I've ever witnessed.

The sky opened. All the darkness and gloom in the ether suddenly vanished. I saw stars and great light, as if the entire world was suddenly and briefly lit up by the glory of… what? Some kind of burnished, incandescent force of… goodness.

Goodness.

The sky seemed to burn. I've never seen a radiance so bright, or so comforting. It felt like, in that instant, somehow, *everything* had changed. I saw a comet, as large as all of Zion, sweep across the sky and explode in light. It was remarkable – awesome in the truest sense of the word.

The boulders that I'd been lying on moments before were now warm from the light, and genuinely comfortable to lie upon. I don't think I have ever slept so well as I am sleeping at this moment.

I'm dreaming of another moment, still to come yet long passed, when I meet Ayn.

And, in three hours time, I did.

As it turned out, she came to me.

I was re-arranging the rocks that I'd slept on so well, attempting to make a monument to a night never to be forgotten, and when I was halfway through building a pillar of sorts, Ayn said hello.

"Hello."

She was beautiful then, and she is beautiful now.

We'd never met before, at least to the best of my recollection. Ayn was first mate to Captain Ajax. She told me that her ship had gone down and that sentinels had ripped the rest of the crew of the Icarus limb from limb. She had no idea why the squiddies had neglected to do the same to her. It was a feeling we shared – complete ignorance of how we'd managed to survive what was otherwise a slaughter.

"Zion is destroyed, isn't it?" She said "All was lost yesterday. We may be the only two surviving humans on the planet."

"No" I replied, with an assertion in my voice that I'd not heard since my days as an Operational Tutor. "Zion is saved. The war is over."

"We won? How?"

"I didn't say that we've won, just that the war is over. How? I don't know."

"How do you know that the war is over? How do you know that Zion is saved?"

"I'm not sure. Did you… last night – did you see..?"

I could tell by the look on her face that she didn't see. So I decided not to say any more.

Anyway, I was saying how beautiful she was.

Is.

Ayn was that rare type of woman, of human – she has a strength in her grey-blue eyes, and a toughness of gaze, yet she exuded an extraordinary tenderness in the way she pursed her lips, in the way her ash-brown hair touched her shoulders. She had *lived* – the lines under her eyes, the almost unnoticeably but still once-broken nose, were testimony to that. But all this just added to her unique physical spirit. Sporadically damaged, but still standing, still strong. A body of tender and sensitive flesh, but a resolve like granite. Perfectly, quintessentially…. human.

It had been a long time since I'd taken the time to appreciate the aesthetic qualities of a woman.

Ayn and I walked on.

But we didn't get far before Runners spotted us.

It was a strange situation, and that's for sure.

The two runners slid toward us at alarming speed. I'd never seen one before. Ayn had read about them in the Archive. They were snake-like to my eyes, very creepy but, for some reason, I didn't think of them as a threat.

As fast as they moved toward us, though, we were hoisted, both of us, off our feet and into a small cave, and we were down inside that cave before we were even able to think.

"We're almost certainly done for now" said the voice that came from the body that was strong enough to lift and drag two of us fifty yards into a cave in a matter of moments, "they'll have dropped a tracking device and there'll be Squiddies swarming all around soon. They'll dig their way through the cave."

"They've proved to be very adept at digging recently." Commented Ayn.

"Yep, we're almost certainly done for now." Repeated the stranger. I was confused.

"So, what do we do?"

"Well, introductions seems like a good place to start." Said Ayn "I'm from the Icarus. Ayn. This is Jacob, from the Gnosis. And you?"

"My name is Revere," said the stranger "and I'm from, well. I'm from right here."

Revere wouldn't tell us his story, but we stayed with him. He somehow made us, made me, feel a little bit more protected. He had the look of a man who had experienced more bad luck and hard times than most, and coming from our world, that's saying something. He also had a.. a presence. Similar to the presence that all, well most, well *some*, of the ship Captains had. A kind of aura about him that would make a room sit up and take notice if he walked in. His mode of dress, monastic brown robes that flowed around him, added to his impressive demeanour. The negativity of his first words to us – that seemed to be an irregularity. I never heard him be so pessimistic again.

He fed us, and allowed us to use his limited wash-space, and when we were done he had his bags packed, had armed himself, and was ready to leave.

"We don't have much time. We've wasted enough already. Let's go."

We walked back out to the surface, half-expecting to see a squadron of Sentinels waiting for us.

But nothing. Nothing at all. Not even a trace device. The runners hadn't reported our proximity.

"Why would they do that? I mean, why *wouldn't* they do that?" Asked Ayn.

"Maybe they have bigger fish to fry." Commented Revere.

Like Zion, I thought and, even though I didn't say it aloud, Ayn looked at me as if she had heard. I could tell that she was thinking the same thing.

"Then we can stay." Said Revere. "We can sleep. And tomorrow you can tell me of your plans for the future."

"The future? What do you mean?" I asked.

"Tomorrow. First we sleep."

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Now it's three years later. Ayn and I have married, in a secular, somewhat unorthodox ceremony. Revere conducted the service, at a makeshift altar made from the rocks I slept on the night before I met Ayn. The pillar still stood. It was a beautiful day, a grey wind flowing forcefully through the sky, and I had never been as happy before as I was that day.

We also have a son, called Thomas.

Word had reached us a long time ago that Zion was alive and well, flourishing in fact, and expanding beyond her borders. Space was at a premium, and there was much to repair there. So we set up home for a while in Revere's flourishing, but nameless, community.

Ayn spent her time, when not tending to Thomas, making the Icarus fit for travel once more, using parts from all of the ships in the area that she could salvage. I had no idea why she did such a thing, but put it down to the need to make some sense of the demise of the fleet. She had a significant

crew of people assisting her, and at times it seemed to me that she allowed her repair work to take precedence over the raising of our child. However, I never considered it to be a serious issue, and did not raise it with my wife.

Meanwhile, once again, I was a teacher. This time, laughably, it was of History. Well, history of a sort. Revere's community had a high quotient of children with no education beyond how to run from the machines. Now, he had decided, someone needed to teach them of Zion, but also of the Matrix, and by association, the history of mankind. Revere and his small committee of friends voted me the best candidate.

I taught a little in the way of spirituality too, in a very basic way. I was aware that these children were well versed in fear, hatred and the possibility of violence, as they had no choice but to be until recently, but knew little of love or compassion. Most saw their parents, indeed, as little more than providers of food, and many had put forward the, possibly reasonable, proposition that their parents had been at best careless and at worst selfish in letting their children be born into a world of war and strife. My interest in teaching these children more than just the events of recent life came from my encounter one morning with Recusa, who changed much of everything for me, although I did not know that for many years.

He was intoxicated by something. I don't know what – something he'd grown, if such a thing is possible, or something he'd found. Scorched oil from a tow bomb, for all I know. Whatever it was, his speech was slurred, his eyes staring first straight-ahead then rapidly darting from left to right. I'd never seen him before, and haven't seen him again since.

"The things you have known. The things you have *sseen*. Yet, look at you now. You have nothing." He said, his eyes active beyond aggravation. "I have nothing, but then again, I never had anything in the firsst place. Heh. My life, yess, is better than yourss. Your wife and child asside, you know nothing but ssusspicion of others and a yearning for more than you have. Even your ssusspicions are, well, *aimed poorly*, sshall we ssay."

I was tempted to push him aside, particularly after his jibe about Ayn and Thomas, but something about him made me stay.

"You ssaw him, didn't you?" He said.

"Saw who?"

"Neo."

It was a name I hadn't heard for some long time.

"No, I never met him. I would have liked to."

"I didn't ssay that you *met* him. You met a man who met him, that iss true. You were good friendss with a man who briefly crosssed paths with him. But you ssaw him, yess, after that. After everyone else. After he brought about the peace

that had led to your frusstration. After he became the ssun."

"What are you talking about? You're making no sense to me."

"You ssaw the passsing of the One. He watched over you, and your wife, and you witnesssed his passsing."

"Are you talking of the light in the sky? All those years ago? Are you saying that was *Neo*?"

"There is an unborn, Jacob."

"How do you know my name? I've never seen you here before."

"There iss an unborn. That iss your doing. You have provided yoursself with a means of esscape. You have provided uss all with an opportunity for true freedom, in years to come. You and your wife, you have done this. You *will* do this. You who ssaw the passing of the One."

"I don't understand what you are saying! Please, be clear."

"I can be no clearer than to ssay that he is coming."

"Who? Who is coming?"

"Tathagarta."

The name meant nothing to me and, although I was curious to hear more, as Recusa had said some things that rang true, I was also frustrated with his riddles and I'm afraid my temper got the better of me. I shouted at him, and he turned on his heels and shuffled away. Before I could pursue him Revere caught my eye and signalled for me to join him. Already I was late for class, so presumed that, if what he had to say was truly important, Recusa would return and tell me more.

He never did, directly.

I was having trouble coping. So much seemed to have happened – and yet so little seemed to be happening. In my time on the Gnosis, Corrupt had often told me of the sense of under-achievement he had felt when he was still plugged into the Matrix, of the feelings of frustration he had, without knowing (at the time) what he was frustrated about, as such. I was beginning, for the first time, to truly understand how he had felt. Or so I believed.

I began to think increasingly of my mother. Still in Zion, still well, but riddled with doubt about the Prophecy that she had long held to be pure truth. Certainly, an uneasy concession between man and machines seemed to be in place, and many believed that it had been Neo who had negotiated that concession. But it wasn't what the Prophecy foretold, and news from Zion led us to believe that Morpheus himself, always the most vocal believer, had stood in the temple and spoke of the Prophecy as an untruth.

All of this would have been eating away at my mother's faith, which in turn would mean that the a large part of the foundation of her life was being taken away from her, with no replacement base.

I took my personal doubts and familial fears not to Ayn, but to Revere. It was he, finally, that put me on the path to some sort of edification.

"It's just a name, 'Jacob'. You know that, as I know that. 'I' is just a name too. 'Family', 'truth' – they're just words. You're attempting to take refuge in names. Just exist, Jacob. Just exist."

"It doesn't seem to be quite that easy, Revere."

"What's ease? Just a word. It's easy to exist. You've been doing it since you first existed."

"Surely 'existence' is just a word too?"

"That, my friend, is a sign that you're beginning to understand."

I don't know what it was about Revere. I never completely trusted him, because I never completely understood him. Yet he had the ability to take me to some place of comfort.

Things began to get a little more temperate in my mind after that conversation, and I began to understand purpose a little more. I even started to emerge before my peers on a regular basis, discussing reality and the nature of existence. It wasn't a religious meeting, just a gathering of… existences.

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Within two years I had a sharp and intellectually satisfied mind that was housed, unfortunately, in a body that was becoming inexplicably more frail by the week. It was a physical lethargy more than on a par with my mental alertness, which made it all the more mysterious. Finally Ayn suggested that a change of scenery may help. I'd long been aware that she found it very difficult to exist in this world of grey rock and smooth bone foundation, so I agreed to a trip.

Although at that point I had no idea that she wanted to visit the fields.

It seemed to be madness. Ayn proposed (in fact, she insisted) that she take a sick husband and a young son on a forty day journey to a place that is at best joyless and at worst infinitely dangerous. A place of depression and ignorance – of slavery and intravenous cannibalism.

But still we travelled, and still we arrived and there it was. Ayn walked the fields while I tended to Thomas, and we were left alone by the harvesting machines. I have no idea if this was luck, or if it was common for humans to visit the fields in these days of truce and amnesty. Even if it was the latter, I was sure that we would be pursued by the machines when Ayn finally returned from her excursion holding a small child, evidently ripped from a dreadful point of processing, and barely fully formed. I protested, naturally, my main fear was that Thomas would be a victim of some kind of machine retribution. But Ayn was focussed and confident, and not for turning.

"We're taking him home."

"We barely have provision for the three of us, Ayn. Think of what you're doing."

"There is provision for us at home."

"There is *not*, Ayn. Revere will never ag…"

"I mean, at home in Zion."

For some reason the words of Revere, from a long while earlier, returned to me - "Just exist, Jacob." We weren't setting this child free, we weren't going to show it the truth – we were simply allowing it to exist.

Then came to me the words of an inebriated stranger from even earlier.

"I have a name for this child."

"Yes. I know you do."

We made our way back to Revere's community easily enough, even with a new-born and a young child. Breaking our ties there was relatively easy, as I no longer taught nor lectured because of my physical health (which was now, as mysteriously as it arrived, leaving my body as my limbs returned to well-being – a process that had begun almost immediately that we left for the fields).

Within a week of our return, Ayn announced the Icarus, amalgamated with other ships and renamed by the Jnana, ready for travel. I had one final conversation with Revere.

"We never did speak about the future." He said.

"That's true."

"So, let's not. It arrives whether we talk of it or not. Instead, let's talk of the now. How do you feel, Jacob?"

I presumed that he wasn't asking about my physical well-being, for some reason.

"I'm contented, and feel sure that we are doing the right thing. But I can't fathom the *why*, I don't understand the purpose. It's eluding me, somehow, like it's just out of reach."

"There's a program in the Matrix that would say 'we can never see past the choices that we don't understand', if she was here to reply to you."

"A program in the Matrix? You mean the Ora… but… how do you..?"

"Good luck to you, Jacob. Things will work out the way that they will."

Revere turned to leave, and as he did so a sleeve of his robe raised in the draft. It was then that I noticed, for the first time, the holes in his arm… But it seemed inappropriate to question him further. The air of strength and authority in his movement had often prevented me from asking questions of depth that concerned his past, or present. That same air stopped me from doing so then.

And so, to Zion.

The journey home was not as easy as the trip to the fields had been. On a number of occasions we witnessed what seemed to be human military factions attacking passing Runners and the like. There seemed to be little resistance from the machines. We stayed away from the troubles we witnessed, taking no side. I had no intention of letting my family become embroiled in the violence of extremist militia or, worse still, being recruited against our will into their petty disputes.

Eventually, of course, we made it back to Zion, and the day we arrived was the day they buried my mother.

She had, I'm told, been ill for some time. As I had thought, she became confused by the way that the war had ended, but that the Prophecy had remained unfulfilled, in her view. It was a confusion that seemed to permeate the whole of Zion. Mother seemed to have been held as a symbol of this quandary, and I returned to find that, in some strange way, I was considered to be a part of the solution to their woes. As a result, and not for the first time, I found myself practically conscripted into a new kind of Zionist religion. The myth that Neo had somehow spared Ayn and I on the day the war ended spread through the city. That made believers of some, and made resentful enemies of others. I felt that I was unworthy of the first kind of attention, and undeserving of the second. I'm not ashamed to admit that,

given a quiet room and the absence of my family, I would occasionally cry. But then I remembered Tag and Ayn and Thomas, and sometimes I recalled the words of Revere or Recusa, and would find some amount of inner strength. That strength allowed me to realise that, although I had been conscripted, I was now part of an order that was permeable. The teaching would come from me.

And come from me it did. I'm told that I helped many people with my words and I whiled away the rest of my life doing the best that I could.

My pupils, over the years, had taken to calling me 'Bishop'. It was not meant to imply any particular religious denomination, just a term of affection, I thought. However, one of my students recently told me that he had a different interpretation of the name, as we all, it seems, have different interpretations of so many things. He believed I was known as the Bishop because, like the chess piece, I never moved forward, but took diagonal routes in my thinking.

One of the things I tried to instil in my students was the notion of endlessly repeating time. It had always seemed obvious to me that, regardless of how we chose to measure it, time would continue in the fashion that it wanted to. We measure it in the most basic terms – the past is behind us, the future before us, the now beneath our feet. It is my belief – my solid conviction – that everything we do has already been done, will be done again, and is being done as we speak. It is this that allows us to know everything and nothing.

The student who compared me to a chess piece made an interesting proposition, but I fear he missed my point about time. Moving diagonally still only suggests a forward and backward motion.

But, forgive me. You are not my students.

'Time' went by regardless and both of my sons grew and developed their own will. Thomas concerned me with his tireless anti-machine rhetoric. He developed an insatiable passion for railing against a particular practice that was, as far as we knew, still in place as part of the sustenance of the Matrix – the development of new 'batteries' by liquefying dead humans and feeding them to the living. He found this barbaric and talked endlessly of the day he would bring this practice to an end, by deleting the program responsible for such atrocities. Although his ideas had some merit at a basic level, those of us that believed that machines were capable of feeling also balked when we heard of the suffering he had planned for this program. I heard Thomas and his brother, who was much less animated and far more pensive, talking about this once.

"Please, Thomas, think. Some things must die. Other things must feed. It's the way of things."

But Thomas was incandescent with rage when he heard these words, and began to scream and shout.

"You yourself! Your first waking moments were spent lying in the melted flesh of others! They fed you with humanity! You're despicable!"

I feared that I may have to prevent one from strangling the other in the future. I wasn't sure that I would have the power to separate them.

My life then sped on, regardless of my own intellectual and spiritual concepts of time. In fact, in no time I had spent twenty years teaching this strange nameless philosophy of mine, and been on a seemingly endless merry-go-round of audiences with the Council and ordinary people of Zion who came

looking for some answers, or some serenity. By default I had become a steersman of the community. The rest of my stolen moments were spent in rapt awe of my wife, who had become a prominent military engineer and as much a leader in her field as I was in mine.

My children had long ago made it clear, in their own very different ways, that I had taught them all I could – or at least all that each of them wanted to know. Tag left Zion when he was in his late teenage years. He was a strong boy, in body and mind, and I felt certain that he would return someday. Thomas was somewhat different. I have to accept the fact that the attention that Ayn and I showered on his half-brother, such a miracle of the fields, left Thomas feeling alone at times. It is regrettable, but the blame lies squarely with my wife and I. I have to accept, too, that our neglect in some way may have contributed to his single-minded pursuit of the downfall of the recycling program. He speaks of nothing else, spends his time thinking of nothing else, and has recruited quite a band of followers. Leadership, it seems, runs in the family. But the ability to attract the attention of people is not the same as guiding them in the right direction. I worry for Thomas, and for his increasingly xenophobic plans.

But, Thomas aside, life had been good. Every week we would hold service in the Temple, and I would enjoy speaking there – sometimes speaking for far too long as a result.

They had been heady times, with so many wonderful men and women to listen to in the Temple over the years. Morpheus, of course, and the others who had been swept along by what he called "the force of the One". The councillors and military men who spoke of seeing a third way when hiding and fighting had failed them, and the enthusiastic and maddeningly boisterous words of the man who, despite approaching his fortieth year, was still known by all simply as "Kid".

The key to the serenity of Zion in those years was simple – despite the different paths we had all followed to arrive at the Temple, we all agreed on the fundamental notion that peace of spirit was the ultimate goal. Some of us had fought in the Matrix. Some of us had been bread makers. Some of us believed strongly in the Prophecy. Some of us were vehemently opposed to it. Many of us had been born in Zion. Others of us had been grown – fed on a diet of our ancestors. But the basic desire for inner peace kept us strong, made us a formidable social and spiritual unit.

There are, of course, always those who reject the over-riding social culture of any time. Sometimes this leads to positive change. Other times it leads to calamity.

Thomas and his band of enthusiastic young recruits were becoming more vocal and, I feared, a little too devoted to such a violent cause. I worried for my son, as what he was proposing to his followers was violent torture, even of machines. Not everyone, including Ayn, was convinced that I was right about that. But what I felt was undeniable was the issue of certain reprisal. Attacking the machines in such a direct way, and putting their power supply under threat, was sure to cause anger. It was not the first time I had worried so. But there, again, I was rebuked, and I fear that was my own fault. People who didn't believe that the machines could feel pain also did not believe that they could feel anger. How quickly we forget. My health, again, had begun to suffer. In fact, it had begun to deteriorate when Tag left Zion.

Still, the points seemed moot for some time, as Thomas and his men seemed content to lurk in corners and plot, without taking any action. I worried that the longer this plotting went on, the more detailed and intricate their plans would be, the more resolute their beliefs, and the more likely their success. Others believed that it was youthful verve, which would pass and as such should be humoured. But Thomas was no longer a teenager.

When we awoke one morning to find that our son and no less than one hundred other young men were gone, those that believed it was youthful verve quickly came around to my way of thinking. I drew no satisfaction from this. My health worsened.

It was a time of dire thoughts and great fear. On the face of it, it seemed that nothing had changed, but we all knew that if Thomas reached the fields, everything would. They had ships – including the Jnana – they had the knowledge and ability to jack in, and to inflict damage in the fields. They knew, from the Zion Archive, enough to piece together where to go, and who to see. Now that they had shown resolve and set out on their journey, everyone agreed that they had a good chance of success, and that if they didn't succeed they certainly had a 100% chance of being detected by the machines, at which point retaliation would be certain, and Zion would fall.

We sent ships after them, but heard nothing for the longest time.

And then, the day we heard the scream in the sky, we all knew that peace was shattered, perhaps forever.

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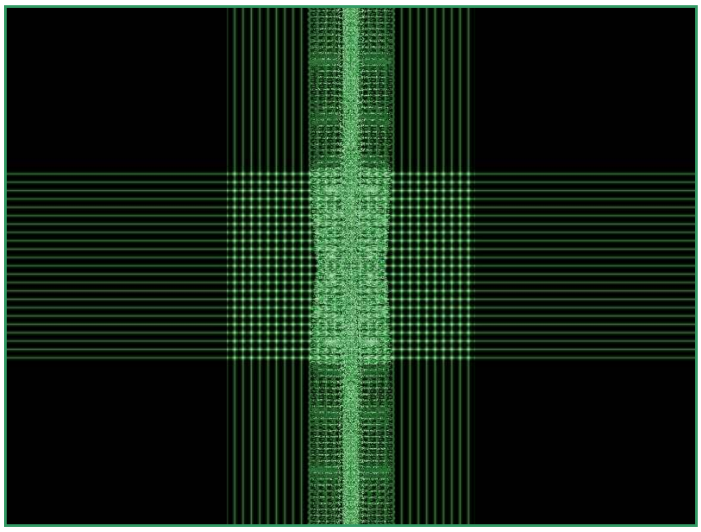
It was a scream of anger and frustration – more than that, it was an expression of the purest kind of fury, perhaps of impending wrath. All the guns of Zion, and a hundred thousand more, could not have made a louder and more frightening noise. It terrified the entire city.



Zion, the real world, had never experienced anything like it before. It was a supernatural moment, the kind of thing that we never expected in this place of dirt and rock and reality. People spoke of it in hushed tones, the thought of it made every face, without fail, drain of blood and every eye widen in fear. No one tried to rationalise it in a scientific way, no one suggested that it was the machines. Some evoked old names from mythology; some retreated to their homes and refused to move. Others looked at Morpheus and knew, utterly and unconditionally *knew*, that he was correct in his judgement of who screamed, though he never spoke of it.

Not long after, we got word that Thomas and his army of deluded followers were returning to Zion. Another decision of incredible selfishness - a demonstration of simple-mindedness that I am

disgusted to have helped create. Leaving on a quest founded on ignorance is one thing. Returning, carrying an army of machines back with you into the nest of 250,000 of your own people, is very much another.

Then, a second word, and this one from an unexpected source.

"It is good to see you again, Jacob. You look old. Very old."

"Time, Revere, waits for no man."

I did not return his good-natured jibe about age, although I could have done. He, himself, had lost much of his aura of strength, but still it was good to see a familiar face from the past. Over tea we discussed the past, the future, the now.

"You saved our lives once, Revere. Are you here to do so again?"

"I fear not, old friend. But I wanted to bring you news of an interesting development. A development that I heard from another old friend of yours – one who looks to have aged somewhat more considerably than you and I, if such a thing is possible."

"Who?"

"The beggar, Recusa."

"He's still alive?" I was not sure that I had believed before now that he was *ever* alive, except briefly in a strange dream.

"I'm not sure. It's difficult to tell just by looking." Revere smiled. I was glad of some humour, and comforted that Revere felt at ease enough to use it, but also anxious to know what Recusa had said.

"Sorry, I know that time is against us." Revere leant forward, his face now serious. "I'm not sure how much of this you began, Jacob, nor how much of this you are to end."

"What… do you mean?" I was somewhat indignant, very unlike me in times past. But, "caused"? Are the sins of the sons to be passed backward to the father? Does time work like *that*?

"Recusa told me two things. First, he said, Jacob's son is moments away from Zion. Second, he said, Jacob's son is in the machine city."

"So he's aware of my teachings and is using them to make some kind of *joke*? You came here to tell me that?" I could feel that the stress was beginning to tell on my heart. I was sweating, feeling nervous in my stomach, and shaking.

"No, Jacob. Thomas is on his way here, followed by anything up to five hundred thousand sentinels. We know this because they have been seen by surface dwellers. We also know that some kind of scourge has afflicted the people still plugged into the Matrix. A plague, they believe."

"How do we know that?"

"Because some of us still spend time there."

I remembered the holes in his arms.

"So you're saying that not only was Thomas detected by the machines, but that he might have been successful in destroying the recycling program?"

"I don't know. But he has been successful in beginning a process that will possibly lead to the utter destruction of his own kind. They're dying, in the Matrix. All of them. Billions of people. They have

no idea why, and no prospect of finding a cure for themselves, because the cause is not even of their world."

I could not believe it. My own son - he's opened the gates of Hell.

"Then all is lost?"

"No Jacob, there *is* hope." Revere placed a hand on my shoulder.

"There is?"

"Rest easy, Jacob. Recusa told me that your time is near," I could see a look of resignation, of helplessness, in his eyes "but I wanted you to know that, where one son has been a part of the cause of your downfall, the other offers hope."

"Tathagarta?"

"He's in the heart of the machine city."

It's a little while later. This is my final note.

My contrition.

I'm bed-bound. I cannot move with enthusiasm for fear of my heart exploding. The machines are besieging the city, and my wife is by my side.

The boy I sired may kill us all, and the boy I helped to rescue may save us all.

I can only hope he knows what he's doing.

END