

Facing the Music

Oh sweet whorish mother of god! was the first thought to pass through LostProphet's head as he heaved his eyes open a small amount. Sharp pains slashed through his brain like knives as he tried to focus on the blurry shapes around him.

"Urrrrghhh...nnnggg??" he ventured, hoping someone might hear him.

A hand grabbed his arm.

"Dude? Are you awake?"

Baku!

"Buurrrrrrr." Prophet replied, rolling his head towards the voice and trying harder to focus. The shapes were becoming a little clearer now.

"Hold on, I'll get the nurse."

Blurry Baku left rapidly, returning with another blur.

"LostProphet, can you hear me?" she asked.

"Nnyeeearh." he acknowledged.

"Okay, don't try to say anything. We're going to run some tests and try and get you more comfortable. Just squeeze my hand if you understand."

"Fleh." he said enthusiastically, squeezing the proffered digits.

"Okay, good. We're going to sedate you again for this part."

"Uhn?"

The nurse connected a blur to the mass of blur beside his bed. A few moments later he began to drift into sleep.

Agents in pink dresses cavorted recklessly across his field of vision, flailing out at each other with fluffy pillows.

As he slipped into darkness, he wondered why the Oracle was on stage doing standup.

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"Hey, he's awake!"

LostProphet focused on the figures around his bed and actually made it work. Many of his friends and comrades were there, watching over his progress.

"Hi guys," he managed with a weak smile, "Did you miss me?"

"You definately had us worried. We weren't sure if you'd ever come back." Baku said grinning.

"What was it I say? They always come back. That includes me." Prophet replied, "It's nice to see you all here."

"What do you remember?" Cel asked, leaning into his field of view.

He furrowed his brow.

"I was in the Matrix, trying to get to Abigail. There was some sort of explosion. I remember landing on a car down below ... lots of pain. Then I ... oh my god ..."

He vomited over the side of the bed.

As the gathered operatives stepped back to allow a nurse to assist, Commander Lock stepped forward from behind Baku.

"I see you remember it, soldier."

Prophet looked up and nodded balefully.

"I can assure you, I haven't stopped trying to appease the machines over this matter. You and I are going to have a little talk as soon as humanly possible."

He turned smartly and strode out of the ward.

The Children of Zion immediately huddled back around the bed asking what happened.

"It wasn't me ... well, it was a part of me. I recall opening my eyes. I walked through Tabor Park and beat the Chessman at a game. Then I hyperjumped away ... the biggest leap you've ever seen. I went hunting for an Agent. I don't know why, but I was powerful. I just knew it. And something inside me was telling me that I had to destroy the Matrix.

"I ended up Downtown, and they sent Agents after me. I punched a cop ... his head disintegrated around my fist. Then the Agents came and I ... I don't know what I did. But I hit him and .. I felt his code. And the voice inside me just told me to destroy him, and then he's on the floor as his code gets eaten away from the inside."

They stood open mouthed. Nobody said a word, so he continued.

"I knew somehow that I had to do what Neo did - get to the Source somehow. I knew the Oracle would be able to tell me how, so I went there. All this time it felt like I was outside myself ... watching myself through frosted glass. Then Abi was there, and she broke the glass and pulled me through. The voice inside me suddenly seemed wrong, but when I tried to fight it, it kicked back. They got me outside to a hardline, and thats where it goes blank."

Silence descended for a minute or two.

"Dude, no wonder Lock wants to talk to you." Baku muttered.

One month later

"Son of a bitch." LostProphet muttered as he dropped onto the metal floor. The wreck of the Cerberus had been left on Landing Bay Five when the Nagamitsu and Behemoth recovered her from the surface. They were halfway through repairs, but the ship was still totally unable to fly.

He looked back up into the landing gear, where he had just dropped from, and silently unleashed a string of expletives that would've made the most hardened operative blush.

"LP!"

He turned to see Luneran and Nehoe approaching at a brisk jog. As they got closer, their noses wrinkled and looks of disgust crossed their faces.

"Damn, better stay downwind from you!" Nehoe said, stepping backwards.

Prophet shot them both a withering smile, and looked down at himself. His tattered vest was even more tattered than usual. His clothes and skin were covered in oil, grease and sweat ... suddenly he saw their point.

"Sorry ladies. Lock has given me all the shittiest jobs on this bucket of bolts. What can I do for you?"

"Talk of the devil .." Luneran said with a grin, "The Commander wants to see you immediately."

"Now?! Can't I at least get a shower first?"

"Oh no ... he specifically said immediately."

Prophet growled, threw down the torque wrench he was still holding and marched away.

"I'm sure I could see some steam coming off him then ..." Nehoe remarked quietly.

"I heard that!" Prophet shouted back as he stormed towards the lift.

Commander Lock didn't even flinch as Prophet entered his office.

"Captain, I have come to a decision regarding your punishment for your actions in the Matrix."

"You mean reassembling the landing gear on the Cerberus ISN'T my punishment?!"

Lock stared up at him.

"No. You nearly brought an end to the truce with your actions. I've had to placate the machines over and over to persuade them NOT to reopen hostile actions against us. I don't think I have to remind you what almost happened last time. Then they wanted to take you into custody ..."

"WHAT?!"

"...shut up, captain. They wanted to take you into custody, but I managed to talk them down from that too. Trust me when I say I was this close," he held his fingers about three millimetres apart, "to ensuring you never set foot on a vessel ever again."

Prophet said nothing.

"However, I didn't take that decision. We need skilled operatives in the Matrix, and I have taken into account your version of events. Henceforth, I am withdrawing your rank of captain. Command of the Cerberus is to be handed over to another operative before she flies again - the choice of that operative I will leave up to you. Do you understand?"

He swallowed heavily, and nodded his head, staring at Lock with a burning intensity.

"Good. Now get out of here."

LostProphet turned smartly on his heel and walked slowly out of the office, slamming the door heavily as he left.