

Under the Gun

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/122046) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/122046>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	Major Character Death
Category:	F/M
Fandom:	The Animatrix
Characters:	Mr. Ash , Trinity , Neo , Morpheus (The Matrix) , Original Female Character
Additional Tags:	Drama , Alternate Ending , Alternate Universe , Sequel
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2010-09-28 Words: 33,772 Chapters: 9/9

Under the Gun

by [matrixrefugee](#)

Summary

Mister Ash survives his "case to end all cases" and finds a new world beyond the one he knew.

Notes

Under the Gun

A Case to End All Cases

+J.M.J.+

Under the Gun

by "Matrix Refugee"

Author's Note:

I honestly hope that "The Animatrix" is a sign of things to come: that the Wachowski Brothers will continue to develop the "Matrix" universe beyond the live-action trilogy. My personal favorite of the animated shorts is "Detective Story". So I thought I'd take an alternate look and see what would happen if Mr. Ash managed to step through the Looking Glass...

Disclaimer:

I do not own "The Matrix" series, its characters, concepts, imagery and/or other indicia, which are the legal property of the W Brothers (Warner and Wachowski), Red Pill Productions, Village Roadshow, et al. (If I owned it, this would be part of "The Animatrix: Detective Story" instead of on ff.n!)

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Chapter One

A case to end all cases...

And so, after my most recent adventure, I go from being a private investigator to being arguably a fugitive from what is usually called justice. But as I've found out, **that** is really just a front for a faceless entity...

* * * * *

It started out when this guy who wouldn't give me his name called me, offered me a job tracking down a notorious cybercriminal known only as "Trinity". I was in dire need of the cash the guy dumped right into my bank account, so I took the offer. \$800,000 is nothing to sniff at when your rent is due and the fridge is empty.

I didn't know what I was putting my foot into, and when I found out I was anything but the first detective on the case, I knew I was getting in over head and ears. But hey, someone's gotta take on those kinda cases. Builds up the noteriety.

I poked around online, looking for this Trinity. Hacker bulletin boards, anonymous mailboxes, encrypted chatrooms. It was on one of those that I got a lead from a user who called himself Red Queen. I arranged to meet up with him after "the first of six brooks".

Following the "Alice in Wonderland: Through the Looking Glass" MO, I realized I was supposed to meet this cat on a train.

I barely managed to scrabble aboard the 20.00 train. But I managed to get on and entered one of the rear compartments in the passenger car, hoping to find the guy there.

I came eye to gun muzzle with a weapon leveled by a tall, lean dame in black leather that made her look like a walking panther dipped in oil. If she'd wanted to kill me, she could have easily blown my brains out. I thought I'd fallen into a trap, but she assured me it was "only" a test.

The gun turned out to be something less deadly but more unsettling: she aimed it over my left eye and threw a switch on it. I thought the suction would yank the eye from the socket, but instead it sucked out a thing like a cross between a worm and a wiretapping device.

Suddenly shots and screams rang out in the corridor. We managed to get out, heading forward. I looked back to see three guys in dark suits and sunglasses (Yeah, even on a dark winter night like that), like some kind of Feds behind us, leveling their handguns at us.

They opened fire. We dodged them. I couldn't let them catch her. Yeah, like in the film noirs where the tough guy detective helps the femme fatale brunette in black escape from the cops.

I couldn't let them get me either. Something in them seemed to be calling to something in me, telling me not to follow her. It was like something was trying to wake up inside me, but I fought it down.

We managed to get into a forward car and slammed the door shut, putting it between them and us while I reloaded. I'd emptied all the chambers on my revolver at those guys, but it hadn't had much effect, and I'm a crack shot.

"What **are** those guys?" I said, loading bullets into the chambers.

"I can't explain here," Trinity said. "There isn't time."

With that, she shot out the nearest window, then stuck the gun into the belt slung around her wide but shapely hips. She grabbed me by the collar and the seat of the pants. Before I could object, she'd shoved me out the window, headfirst.

I expected to hit the snow with a bone-crunching thud, or worse. But somehow I . . . hovered down.

She landed on top of me. She'd been holding onto me the whole time. The train roared past us, the backwash of wind it kicked up fell over us like a cloud of knife blades.

She got up and nudged me in the ribs with the toe of her boot. "Get up, we haven't got much time."

I pulled myself onto my knees. I had a funny feeling I was about to discover just why one of those other detectives had disappeared, but there wasn't time to dwell on that. She was already hustling me up the railroad bed and into an industrial area.

"Where are you taking me?" I asked.

"I'm taking you to someone who can answer your questions," she said.

We fled along a web of alleyways between warehouses and factories. At length we came to a fleabag hotel that rented rooms by the hour, the Lafayette. I'd been here a lot in the past: tracing someone's spouse to an illicit rendezvous in one of those rooms by the hour. She led me in by a back door and up the stairs to a suite marked 201.

She pushed me inside and followed me in. The room looked like it had once been quite a showcase but careless management or plain old neglect had let it go to seed very badly. The flock wallpaper had faded and peeled and lay on the floor in strips and the scant furniture was scuffed.

Something moved in the enclosure of one of the French windows. My hand reached for my gun, but Trinity put her hand on my arm, restraining me.

"It's all right, he's with me," she said.

A tall dark man with a shaven head stepped out of the shadow cast by the drapes. The floorlength leather topcoat he wore looked like something the grand high master of some mumbo-jumbo mystery cult might wear. He turned toward me a calm, quietly solemn face, his eyes hidden behind rimless sunglasses.

"You found him, Trinity," the stranger said. "The man who'd started to ask questions."

I shrugged, trying to be nonchalant, which ain't easy when you're face to face with an odd-looking guy in black. "Questions are kinda my line of business," I said.

"Ah. And what is your business?" the stranger asked.

"I'm a reporter." Not a lie: I'd been one for the high school newspaper.

"I was under the impression you were a detective of some sort, Mr. Harlen Ash," the stranger said.

It dawned on me that this guy might know more about me than I knew about him. They must have been watching me for some time now. Whoever **they** were.

"Well, you figured that out," I said. "But you got me at a disadvantage: you know my name, but I don't know yours."

"You would know my name if you have heard of a man called Morpheus," he replied.

I'd heard a lot of talk about a hacker-terrorist who went by that handle, who'd been responsible for some explosions and other delights as he tried to free members of his organization detained by the authorities. They claimed to be alerting the public to something they called "the Matrix", some kind of government conspiracy or something like that. I'd always treated it as a lot of conspiracy theories and alarmist nonsense. But right now it was a little hard to tell what was nonsense and theories and what was the truth.

"Yeah... Yeah, I've heard of you," I said. "You're the guy who's warning people about this thing you call the Matrix."

"You don't believe that it could exist?" Morpheus asked, utterly without rebuke.

"I'm not sure of anything right now," I admitted, hoping I'd said the right thing.

"I imagine you feel much the way Alice felt when she stepped through the looking glass. Only, in your case, you're on the verge of stepping through it into the real world."

I eyed the wierd suction gun hanging from Trinity's belt. "That wouldn't happen to have something to do with that bug she took off me?" I asked.

"Yes, it would," he said. "The ones who created the Matrix will do anything to penetrate you and try to keep you from learning the truth, or try to make you forget what you have learned. They would try to consume you and make you one of them. But if you are one of them, you won't be free to find the answer to your questions."

"How can I get free?" I asked. I'm not saying I believed he might be right. I'm just naturally nosy and I had to find out.

"I can give you the means to step through the looking glass, but you have to decide which side you will dwell on," he said.

He reached into the breast pocket of his topcoat and took out a metal pillbox which he opened and took something out. "Hold out your hands, palm up," he said.

I obliged him. Morpheus held his lightly closed hands out over mine and put something in each palm.

When he drew his hands away, I looked down at two pills, a red one in my right and a blue one in my left.

"You take the blue pill and you stay here in the looking glass world and see only the dim shadows of things and your questions go unanswered," he said, almost like he was reciting a spell or something. "You take the red pill and you step through the looking glass. And I will help you find the answers."

My better judgement kicked in. What was this? I should just drop the pills and get out of there. Trouble was, if I did, there was a dame at my elbow who could put daylight in me before I could even draw my gun. I had the feeling that, as calm as this Morpheus might be, he could take me apart in no time. He stood a little taller than me and he was wider through the shoulders and chest.

Trinity stood at my elbow, holding a glass of water in her hands. As I reached for it, the blue pill dropped from my hand, but for some reason, that didn't faze me. I took the glass of water, put the red pill on the back of my tongue and washed it down with a good swig from the glass.

The sensible part of me kicked again. What was this stuff I'd just knocked back? They could be trying to poison me. Remember that other detective, the one who'd killed himself... Maybe there was more to it.

Too late now. I could feel the pill sliding down my gullet and dropping into my empty stomach. Trinity gave me a slight reassuring smile as she and Morpheus led me into the next room.

On several tables stood a Rube Golsberg snarl of computer equipment: CPUs, war dialers, modems, relays, TV tubes, keyboards. Made my own kluged together computer look streamlined by comparison. Trinity helped me to sit down on a chair at one end of the table, then taped two electrodes to the sides of my neck, another to my forehead.

A stocky dark girl was typing something on one of the keyboards, while a short, rat-faced guy with tousled dark hair and olive skin got one of the war dialers going.

"What's all this for?" I asked.

"The pill you took contains a tracer to help us locate you in the system and a carrier to disrupt your input-output signal," Morpheus said.

That didn't mean a thing to me, but the questions were piling up in my head it was starting to feel like an overflowing ash tray.

I turned away from the technological snarl and spotted a large free-standing mirror to my left. I saw my reflection there, a skinny guy in his late-twenties, trying to look like a tough guy, but not able to shake off the slight baby-faced quality to my mug. Tousled hair under a battered grey fedora with a rumpled grey three-piece suit on under a spattered tan trenchcoat. The knot of my tie had gone slack and there was a cut on my cheek I didn't remember getting. The sight of it made it start to smart, but that suddenly stopped.

My image blurred. I blinked my eyes and rubbed them, but there was nothing wrong with them.

"Oh my god," the rat-faced guy groaned.

"Jack, what's wrong?" Morpheus asked. I could hear modems connecting.

"His code's all screwed up," Jack said.

"It's more than screwed up: we'll have to abort transmission," the girl said.

"We can't turn back now," Morpheus said. "Find him, Zara."

I turned back to the mirror. What I saw made me rear back in my chair.

A shadow had started to appear on the mirror, in the exact place where I sat. It looked like one of the wierd Feds with the cheaters, but it was hard to make out. I looked down at myself. Nothing had changed.

"Got his signal, but they've got a tap on it. They're trying to disrupt it," Zara said.

"We'll have to hazard it," Morpheus ordered. "Lock on him!"

I looked back at the mirror. I nearly jolted out of my chair.

The Fed or whatever he was had stood up and was approaching the mirror. He started to reach through with one hand, the surface of the mirror going taut over his hand like a skin or something. I could hear it creaking as he pushed relentlessly through. He had one foot on the floor already. Was I the only one who could see this?

I screamed. The sound turned itself inside out. Everything went reddish black before my eyes. I knew I'd fainted.

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To be continued...

A Case to End All Cases

Chapter Notes

Under the Gun

+J.M.J.+

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by "Matrix Refugee"

Author's Note:

Still with me on this one? I'm excited at the number of reviews I've gotten so far - and I'm glad to find there are other people who are just as impressed with "Detective Story" as I am. But hang on, its gonna be a bumpy ride for Ash as he goes in deeper...

Before I get to that, a few words of thanks to the reviewers:

To Red_Queen (Love that handle!): Trinity is my all-time favorite "Matrix" character, too! (I even cropped my hair short in an attempt to look more like Carrie-Anne Moss...only to end up looking like the kid who plays Harry Potter in the movies!)

To Ryven: Thanks for asking me that question, as it's a very interesting one. When I drafted this story, I had figured "Detective Story" took place post-Neo. Then I bought the strategy guide for the "Enter the Matrix" computer game (I haven't bought the game itself yet, a bit expensive at this point) which includes a timeline of the "Matrix" universe back story up to "Matrix Reloaded". Turns out "Detective Story" takes place pre-Neo. We'll see how I resolve this issue...

To PadawanMage: I felt the same way about the film myself, that the ending left you hanging, which is exactly why I set out to write this fic, which has been challenging, keeping the right tone of voice, but so far it's working.

To chopsticks: I fixed the garbled line in the first chapter: thanks for spotting that! (I should have a beta reader for some of my stuff, but the one guy who could do it takes fooorrrreeevvveerrrr to read any of my stuff) I'm amazed myself that I'm able to stay in character with the first-person narration (i.e., Ash's POV and tone, which is basically that of the typical film-noir/hard-boiled detective)

Disclaimer:

See chapter 1

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Chapter Two

Through the Looking Glass...

I opened my eyes on reddish black darkness, like the inside of your eyelids when you blink on a bright sunny day.

I tried to move, but something sticky was holding me in, as if I was inside the biggest overripe watermelon imaginable. I wrassled against the stickiness and forced myself to sit up.

A skin broke over my head. The snap hitting me across the eyes made me want to groan, but I couldn't. A muzzle of tubes and wires plugged my mouth like the worst gag imaginable.

I reached up and yanked on the gag, which tore away so suddenly I swore my tongue had gone with it.

I was mother-naked, sitting half submerged in... I don't know what it was. It **looked** like the biggest overripe watermelon imaginable if you scunned the skin off down to the pulp. I realized the skin of the thing was clear while the goop that surrounded me was red. Thick black cables bigger around than my thumb protruded from my arms and legs and torso as if they'd grown there.

I tried to crane my neck around to see where in hell I was, no easy task because the biggest great-grandmother of all coaxial cables stuck out of a socket in the back of my head.

To the left and the right, above and below, as far as I could see in either direction, more of those red pods bristled from a dull grey-black metal column. I could just make out the human occupants of the ones closest to me. Other columns just like it stood opposite. Electrical fields arced up and down the length of the columns, like some kind of generator in a mad-scientist's lab.

My brain tried to say it was too wierd to be real, that it had to be something in that wierd pill I took. But you know what they say about truth being stranger than fiction?

It only got stranger. From out of nowhere, this... metal spider-thing the size of a St. Bernard dropped down. It goggled at me with a dozen glowing reddish eyes, then grabbed me by the neck in its metal pincers. I expected it to choke the life out of me then and there, but with another set of pincers, it unlocked the cable at the back of my skull. The other cables attached to me whipped free.

The spider-robot let me go and darted away. A drain at the back of the pod opened. A tremendous suction force, like a giant vaccuum cleaner sucked me out of the pod and down some kind of waste tube.

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I must have hit my head somewhere on the way down. I don't remember much after that. Someone must have fished me out, because I heard voices and sensed people moving about

me, a woman's hands massaging my aching muscles. My head felt as if someone had caved it in with a cinderblock.

After a long time, which could have been a few hours or several days, I opened my eyes.

I lay on a metal-framed bunk covered with a worn but still sturdy mattress in a ship's cabin of some sort, the walls stripped down to the metal stringers and wiring. Someone had dressed me in a worn grey pullover jersey over a frayed thermal tee-shirt and grey fatigue pants tucked into calf-high boots.

I sat up, running a hand over my hair, to find it only about a quarter of an inch long. I got a good look at myself: I've always been a skinny fella, but I was scrawnier even than before.

The cabin door opened and a thin girl with short brown hair, squinting through coke-bottle thick metal rimmed glasses stuck her head in and looked at me. "Oh, you're awake," she said and went away. As she turned, I noticed she had, on the back of her head, a metal socket that was the twin to mine, except that hers protruded a little.

A moment later, she came back, with Morpheus at her side.

"You came through in one piece and you've awakened," he said.

"My head doesn't feel that way," I said, kneading my forehead. "Where am I? What is this place?"

"It's more a question of 'when' are you. You think you were living in the year 1949, but we've gone well past 2049."

"Gad, Rip Van Winkle," I thought out loud, with a trace of irony.

"Not quite," Morpheus replied. "The machines controlling the Matrix told you what year they wanted you to think it was. You're no older than when we found you."

"Twenty-eight in Matrix years," the girl said.

"But you've been in the real world for only twenty days," Morpheus said.

"So that means they had me in some kind of dream world?" I asked. That made some sense. But what the hell was it for?

I looked down at myself as I stood up. I swayed slightly as I walked to the door. Awful big baby, I thought with a smile at my own expense. The girl had caught my smile and replied in kind, but she looked away once she realized I was looking at her.

They led me into a narrow corridor, then down up ship's ladder to what was clearly the main deck.

"You're on board the hovercraft Nebuchadnezzar, one of a fleet of a dozen ships scouring these old mines and sewer lines and tunnels under the earth," Morpheus explained.

In the middle of the deck stood a half-circle bank of monitors hooked up to various towers and servers surrounded by a semicircle of what looked like battered dentist chairs with wires and monitors mounted on them. A lean, dark young man sat in the middle of the sprawl, typing on one of several keyboards, but he turned to look up at me, as did several other people at work around the sprawl.

Morpheus put a hand on the keyboard jockey's shoulder. "This is Tank, our operator, in charge of broadcasting our pirated signal and hacking into the Matrix." I recognized Jack, the short dark guy, and Zara the heavy girl, as well as Trinity, the three of them looking up from securing some wires to the wall by welding in support straps. A tall, almost queenly black woman stood slightly apart from the group of three. "That tall woman is Sand, our ship's medic."

"I've been seeing a lot of you these past few days," she said. "You took a good clout on the head, but you pulled through."

"I guess the hard work paid off," I said.

Morpheus glanced over my shoulder. I turned around and found the skinny girl looking at me with a shy look worthy of a twelve-year old schoolgirl. "And that little one behind you is Ref, the archivist," he concluded.

"Hey there," I said.

She dropped her gaze as soon as mine met hers, and gave me a demure little shrug. Make that a Catholic schoolgirl.

"You've probably been wanting some answers to your questions," Morpheus said, leading me toward the half-circle of chairs. "The answer is far from simple, but you're intelligent and strong enough to take it."

"You sure about that?" I asked.

He replied with a slight smile, a tough guy's smile, but even that didn't quite reassure me.

Jack and Trinity helped me into one of the chairs and set to work hooking wires into the sockets on my arms. Morpheus took charge of the cable that went into my head.

"This will feel a little odd," he said, and slotted the cable in through the head rest and into my head socket.

My ears popped and the world went white.

I seemed to be standing in a vast white walled room. The blindingly white light shone from overhead, casting no shadows. I couldn't see any walls for that matter, it was as if the space went on forever.

I looked down at myself to find I was wearing the same clothes I had worn before this madness had started, before... I had been unplugged.

"This is the Construct," Morpheus's deep voice said. I turned and found him standing behind me, clad in the black suit he must have been wearing under the regal coat he'd worn in the Matrix. "This is our training space, where we can upload most anything we need to train newly freed minds such as you how to defend themselves and mankind's last city against the machine army."

"But this ain't the Matrix?" I asked.

"No. We have control of this. I've met only one man who could exert any control over the Matrix, but you can learn how to bend that which once blinded you. But before you can start on that path, you first must know what brought mankind to this place."

He lead me toward a pair of red leather armchairs that had materialized, an old television set between them. He motioned to me to sit down in one, then sat down in the other and aimed a remote at the screen.

A white dot appeared in the middle of the screen. It spread out into an image of the city as I had known it, bright sky, tall buildings, traffic.

"The world as you knew it: prosperous, industrial, productive. That once was..." he said, speaking almost like a narrator of a newsreel.

The image vanished, replaced by an image of shattered towers, desolation, death, a black sky overhead. We seemed to move into the image, as if we'd stepped inside it somehow.

"Mankind discovered how to create machine intelligence, but he never dreamt, in his pride, that it would one day be his undoing," Morpheus continued.

The image changed again, then suddenly it seemed to... I dunno quite how to describe it... It flowed out through the screen and plastered itself on the walls. Imagine watching a movie projected on a screen like a dome, that's what it was like. And it was NOT the kind of movie you'd want to see that way.

The narrative went on. Man built machines in his own likeness, including intelligent robots as cheap labor. They did their job so well, mankind started taking them for granted. Till one machine, B1-66-ER, tried to shrug off this kind of shabby treatment. When his owners wanted to shut him down permanently, he killed them in an act of - as he claimed before the courts - self-defense. The state condemned him to death - or deactivation, or whatever you'd call it - when his case went before the state supreme court, which in turn declared that an owner had the right to dispose of his property as he saw fit, even destroying it if he chose. And "property" of course included robots.

After that, the robots and their human sympathizers rose up, launching otherwise peaceful demonstrations which turned bloody when the anti-robot factions assaulted them. Violence broke out in the streets of several American cities as the two factions locked horns.

The government routinely rounded up scores of robots and destroyed them. One image burned itself into my mind: a human woman and her robot son - some son of a gun had

slashed the plastic skin on his face, showing the metal bones underneath - being lead away by a group of soldiers surrounding them, the boy raising his hands in meek surrender.

But the machines retreated into an uninhabited stretch in the deserts of the Middle East where the humans never went, where they could start their own country, which they called 0 1 . They tried to gain admission the United Nations, but the humans wouldn't hear of it. They even put legal and economic sanctions on the country, even though it was producing technology that put the humans' stuff to shame.

It didn't take me long to put two and two together: Man beat up machines, machines retreated to lick their wounds. Machines try again, man clobbered them again. Man came up with some wild plan to "scorch the sky" by blowing ionized dust into the atmosphere to cut the machines off from the solar power they depended on. Machines fought back, defeating the human armies by sheer brute force... And they had another card up their processors: They'd found a way to harness the heat energy produced by the human body. That's how those people - including me, until a few days ago - came to be in those pod-things on those towers, or power-plants, rather. When the machine armies beat the crap out of the human armies, they offered man a no-questions asked treaty: surrender your flesh. They programmed the dream world of the Matrix to keep the human batteries plugged into the power plants quiet.

Mind you, I'm a tough guy. I've seen some pretty nasty stuff on some of the cases I've covered - or at least the machines let me see some bad stuff - but the things the machines enacted on the humans bugged me something awful. As the images stopped and the projection sank back into the television, I got up from my chair. Morpheus switched off the set and turned to me. I think he expected my reaction.

"Machines aren't smart enough to do that!" I snapped. "They're just... just machines!"

"Just as we are only human," Morpheus said.

"It's not true... It's all some kind of nightmare," I said. "I've seen enough."

"It *is* a terrible thing to discover. I didn't believe it either, until I went above ground and saw it with my own eyes," he said.

"Get me the hell out of here!" I growled.

That ear-popping sensation...

Jack undid the straps, but once I was free, I bolted from that chair, not sure which way to go. I was back on the Neb. but where was that? I zigzagged, trying to find my way back to the cabin where I'd awakened. I didn't see that support stringer -

* * * * *

To be continued...

Afterword:

I described Ash's view inside the Matrix as being that of 1949; I know some people are going to question that, since the technology of his world is clearly similar to the 1990s: computers, the Internet, etc. But here's a few trivia bits which may justify the date I applied: The first computer programming language was invented by Lady Lovelace and the first experimental computer was the Difference Engine, a non-working model of which was designed by Charles Babbage back in the 1860s. Had his model worked, computers might have showed up a lot sooner, so the possibility of an Internet in the late 1940s is not entirely impossible. William Gibson and Bruce Sterling wrote an excellent cyber/steampunk novel delving into this possible outcome, "The Difference Engine".

The Garden of the Matrix

Chapter Notes

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Author's Note:

Sorry for the delay! I got caught up when I was trying to finalize things with a job offer I had. This chapter has existed in draft for a while, I just needed to type it up and get it ready to post. But... here it is, and here's a few thank yous to all of you who left a review:

To dragonus: I think Ash actually sacrifices himself to save Trinity. Granted, she shot him, but I think it was just enough to short out the connection to Agent was trying to make through his awareness, but not enough to kill him outright. But you're right: he should have made it to the other side. He has the stuff to make a good rebel.

To Misty 7: I chose the title just before I came up with the story, and yes, I was listening to the "Animatrix" soundtrack when I was thinking about it! Great music: "Detective Story" has a kinda techno/1940s bebop jazz sound to it which really fits the context very well.

To PadawanMage: Yep, there is definately something going on between Ref and Ash, although I think Ash is a little more interested in Trinity for the moment. But his journey to Zion is gonna take some very wild detours and he almost might not even make it, but we'll see. And re: the modified version of the "history program": I remember stumbling across online the 1992 or 1993 draft of the script for the original "Matrix"; one of the most unusual differences between it and the finished movie is that the history program was a lot longer, including a recreation of the battle between the machines and mankind, which is now a central part of "Second Renaissance, Part 2". It was a lot more like the "Terminator" movies at that point, but the Brothers Wachowski fleshed it out, or maybe I should say "meched" it out, making it more logical.

WARNING: Content may be eerie for some readers: Ash is about to get a close-up look at the desert of the real...

Disclaimer:

See chapter 1

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Chapter Three

The Garden of the Matrix

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I awoke lying on my bunk, Sand sitting beside me, pressing an icepack to the side of my head.

"What the hell was all that?" I asked.

"The truth, I'm afraid," she said.

"I deal in facts," I said. "I'm a detective, or at least I was... Hearsay isn't enough: I need the hard evidence."

She nodded sagely. "I can tell that: Jack was the same way when he was unplugged: a real skeptic, but the longer he stuck at it, the more he believed."

"Seeing is believing," I said.

"Actually, believing is seeing," said a quiet voice. I glanced up to see Ref at the open door, but she scooted away before I could read the look on her face.

* * * * *

Morpheus came in after Sand left, and sat down on a metal box at the foot of my bunk.

"You're having trouble accepting the truth?" he asked.

"I'm old-fashioned. I need proof," I said.

He nodded like an old sage (Come to think of it, that's what he is, except for the old part).

"Yes, there are always the skeptics, but we need people like you. They're generally the most realistic and therefore the better fighters. They can see the Matrix for what it is."

I sat up. "Listen, enough of this way of the warrior crap. I need some tangible proof I can see with my own eyes."

He was silent, as if he was turning this over in his head, or maybe he just didn't have a good answer. Then he went on: "That can be arranged. It will be difficult and very dangerous, but if it will help you, we will take the risk." He got up.

"What now?" I asked.

"We're redirecting our course. Instead of taking you to Zion, we're taking you to the surface first."

* * * * *

Some minutes later, Trinity stuck her head in to check on me. "How's the head?" she asked, with a quiet kind of concern.

"Aching," I said. "Ain't the first time I took a knot on it, though. No wait. Those weren't real knots. It was only what the machines told me I was feeling." Even I could hear the sneering drawl in my voice.

"You sound a little as if you were starting to believe," she pointed out.

I shrugged. "Just kidding. At least until I see proof otherwise."

"You'll get it soon enough. We should be at the surface in a few hours. I'll be there with you." She glanced out into the corridor. "Hey, evening mess is in a few minutes. You're welcome to join us, or I could send something to you in case you're still shaky."

"No, I'm in one piece," I said, getting up to prove it. "Hey, what's with that runt Ref snooping around here?"

She stepped aside to let me out. "I think she's got her eye on you, which may be a good thing since she's had her eye on Jack even though he's with Sand," she said.

"Okay, so you with anybody?" I had to ask it sooner or later.

"Yes," she said, with a shadow of a smile. "His name's Neo; I helped him unplug just before we found you. He's back in Zion training at the academy, but he barely needs the training. We believe he's the One."

I rubbed my ear. "The what?"

She drew a long breath, clearly in preparation for a long story. "Long ago, when all this started, there was a man born in the Matrix who found a way to break free. He led several hundred people into the real world. They built Zion but he went back to free more people. The Matrix consumed him, but the Oracle prophesied that he would return to free mankind and defeat the machines."

"But do **you** believe he's this... 'One'?" I asked.

She nodded. "Yes. I've seen him do things within the Matrix that no one else has, to my knowledge. He defeated an Agent alone."

"Impressive," I said. I figured she meant one of those weird Feds or whatever they were that had come after us. Anyone who could nail one of those guys must have something going for him.

It all sounded like a rehash of the Christian messianic legend. Mind you, I used to be Catholic, but I gave that up for Lent.

Come to think of it, I wasn't anything at all, if all this machine revolt stuff was real...

Trinity led me to the mess deck, where the rest of the crew had gathered. Sand stood in the galley, working some kind of pump into a tin bowl with a metal spoon sticking out of it. As I sat down at the table, next to Trinity and across from Ref, Sand came over and put the bowl down in front of me.

I looked down at a runny mass of glop that looked like very undercooked and lumpy egg whites.

"I know 'What *IS* that?'" Jack said.

I poked at it with the spoon. "I was about to ask that."

"It's single-cell derived protein, mixed with vitamin supplements," Sand said. "We grow it in a vat."

Ref changed the subject. "Hey, Ash, I heard from Trinity you had a tense moment with Agents, coming out."

"Yeah, if you mean those wierd guys that look like Feds with sunglasses," I said, choking down a mouthful of goop. I expected it to taste bad, but it didn't taste like anything, which was worse. "They set me up, trying to use me to get at Trinity. I didn't know what to expect, but at least I'm out of that mess."

"We'll find a place for you on the crew, once we figure out what you're good at," Tank said.

"I used to be a detective, and I'm good with computers," I said. "I'm a pretty good shot, too."

"Maybe you could be a bodyguard or an assassin," Ref suggested.

"Maybe," I said. "But I don't think I got what you do here?"

"I'm an archivist," Ref said, with the kind of voice you hear from someone who really enjoys their work. "I collect stuff for the Zion archive, which means I basically go into the Matrix and hunt up historical documents and literary texts and art treasures, then come back and upload the stuff into the Construct so we can move it to the Archives. That history program Morpheus showed you: that's my work."

"Pretty good work, maybe a little too good," I said. "So now, you just go to museums and stuff inside the Matrix and take a look-see at stuff there?"

She wagged her head. "Kinda. Sometimes I'm lucky enough to get the real stuff, which is even better."

"If there's anything close to a cushy job in this world, Ref has it," Jack said with a trace of respectful envy.

"Don't let him fool you: it's getting to be a hard job," Ref said. "So many museums are closing and breaking up their collections. And there's this French guy who keeps beating me to the really good stuff, so I have to stay one step ahead of him. Thing is, when the Matrix

goes, so will all that art, and a lot of it is really copies of art and things from waaaay back. Can't have that happen."

"Wonder if the machines are getting wise to you," I said.

"You could be right, but I'm not letting that stop my work," she said.

Zara snorted. "Shameless waste of time and data storage if you ask me."

"Hey, she's preserving the stuff that makes us really human," I said. "You think those machines know how to create nice stuff?" Mind you, I'm no art expert, but I at least know an oil painting from an operetta. I happen to be a fan of F. Scott Fitzgerald and I have to be honest and say I got a lot of my inspiration from Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler.

Zara took this in silence, but she turned up her nose at me and turned her attention back to her bowl. Ref smiled at me, but I pretended not to notice.

After the meal, I lay on my bunk preparatory to falling asleep, when someone tapped on the door to my cabin, tentatively, almost as if they were afraid the door might bite them.

"It's open," I called.

It opened and Ref came in. She closed the door behind her.

After a nervous moment of silence, she said, "I just wanted to thank you for sticking up for me at mess when Zara got on my case.

I shrugged. "Someone had to do it," I said.

She reached up and put a hand on my shoulder. I found my hand reaching up to clasp it gently. Her eyes found mine, but then she turned them away with that Catholic schoolgirl modesty. She withdrew her hand.

"I better get going, I have a late shift to run," she said. She went away more quickly than she had come.

* * * * *

By next morning, if you could call it that since it was perpetually dark, we'd reached a duct running toward the surface. Morpheus piloted the ship through the tunnel, while down below, in the bowels of the ship, Trinity helped me get ready to take that step onto the surface.

"We'll have to make this quick: it's very dangerous up there," Jack said. "If the machines spot you, we'll have major trouble on our hands."

At length, we stopped moving. Zara and Jack opened an access hatch, then lowered a metal ladder down to the ground. Trinity, armed with a plasma rifle, this big, wierd-looking gun that looked like a bad cross between an Uzi and a rivet gun, went down first, then signalled up to me to follow.

I climbed down quickly but quietly and joined her on the ground. She led me out of the shadow of the ship, our footsteps silent on the grey lichens and moss that covered the earth, which rose slightly, as if we were inside a crater or something.

The cold air hit me, as cold as a day in January, burning my lungs. When I caught my breath, Trinity guided me up the slope.

About halfway up, she changed direction, avoiding the top of the hill, leading me around to the side, keeping the plasma rifle levelled.

As we rounded the hill, we came in sight of a vast field under a boiling black sky. Or at least, it looked like a field, with the millions of grey-black stalk-like things planted in it. A lightning bolt flashed across the horizon, lighting it up. From each of the stalks hung several red pods, some not much bigger than grapes, others the size of cantaloupes.

Trinity led me closer, within ten feet of the nearest stalks, which seemed made of the same black stuff, like a cross between iron and whatever your fingernails are made of, that those power plants were made of. Close enough that I got an eyeful of those pod-things.

There was a baby inside the largest one. Just like there was a human inside each one of those pods on the power plants. A fetus, with a cable almost as big around as its head socketed into the back of its skull.

I turned to her, hoping she could read the question in my eyes. What are the machines doing to us?

Her eyes flicked up to scan the area around us, then to mine, then to the pods, apparently telling me to keep looking. As we stood watching, I noticed small metal spiders, pint-sized versions of the thing that had unlocked the cable in my head, scuttling up and down the stalks, examining the fetus, then scurrying back down.

She glanced back, the way we had come, then looked up, watching the field. She nudged my arm and beckoned me to follow. We hurried back toward the ship, then she put her hand on my arm, stopping me. She pointed back.

The roar of a motor arose from the far end of the field. I looked the way Trinity pointed.

A machine like a kind of combine harvester hovering in mid-air moved up the rows of stalks. Long clear tubes hung from it, moving among the stalks like nightmare vacuum cleaner hoses. It got close enough that we could see the tubes reach for the stalks close to where we had stood. A claw-hand gripper on the end of the tube took hold of a ripe fetal pod and detached it from the stalk with a clack. Then with a sucking sound, the pod moved up into the tube, joining others in the maw of the machine.

Trinity touched my arm, but I barely felt it. She made me turn around and helped me back to the ship.

"What in hell is going on? What are they doing?" I asked, once we'd gotten safely inside and the hatch had been closed behind us.

"They take the stronger, healthier fetuses and they plug them into the power plants," she said. "The weaker ones they destroy and use to feed the survivors."

"You believe it now?" Tank asked.

"I have to talk to Morpheus," I said.

Sand patted my arm. "Wait till we get back to a safe depth."

I know I went back to my cabin, I know I sat down on the bunk, and I know I sat there a long time

So it was true. I was only a human battery. I hadn't been born in Hoboken, New Jersey in 1923 (or whatever year it was), I didn't have an older brother Charles, a sister Violet and a younger brother Michael. I didn't have a father who worked as a plumber and an interior painter, or a mother who taught grade school till she got married. I didn't grow up listening to "The Shadow" and "The Green Hornet" on the radio and I hadn't been president of the high school computer club four years in a row. It was all a looking glass image.

Even the wall behind my back didn't feel like a real wall. It was all a figment, a cypher, a jabberwocky... and what was I? Who was I?

Maybe the crazy one wasn't so crazy after all.

At length I heard the door open. I looked up. Morpheus stepped into the room and sat down on the box at the foot of my bunk. "So you have seen the fields with your own eyes."

I nodded. The words just wouldn't come out.

"You are not so different from me, when my mind was first freed," he said. "I couldn't believe it to be real either, until I had seen those fields for myself."

I found my voice. "Did you want to go back?"

"I did. I nearly made that choice. But I realized that if I made that choice, I would be choosing to live a lie, and that is a far worse thing than living a lie out of ignorance."

I shook my head. "I dunno. Part of me is thinking I was better off where I came from."

He looked at me in silence, his deep brown eyes seeming to look through me, reading me like an open book. "If you want to go back, let me warn you: the Matrix does not forgive those who return after they made the choice to leave. Give yourself time to prove yourself to yourself. Hold on, and see where this leads you."

I realized he was right, dammit. I'd never been one to give up on a case... well, in those dreams I'd had for the past twenty-eight years.

"All right," I said, rising from the bunk. "Let's see where this lead takes us."

To be continued...

LookingGlass Questions

Chapter Notes

Under the Gun

+J.M.J.+

Under the Gun

by "Matrix Refugee"

Author's Note:

Sorry for yet another delay! The Christmas holidays came up and I got extremely busy working at my regular job.

Now, a few words of gratitude to everyone who reviewed:

To spin: Thanks! I got the feeling from the short that Ash is the sort who's a tough guy on the surface, but who really has a heart of gold, who's open to new ideas, but is still a bit skeptical, not in a bad way, but in a way that allows him to remain objective.

To PadawanMage: Wow, you're really getting into this story! I'm still working out some of the bugs in the plot, and your comments (especially the suggestion about bringing in the Osiris! And that new word, "Fanimatrix" - I *love* that!) have really helped inspire me. Watch for more Ref/Ash action to come... Re: the Gardens and recruits been shown it - there's actually a short comic-book style story on the "Matrix" movie website about a woman going up to the surface and trying to dislodge a baby from one of those pods, apparantly because she lost her own child, so that plus a still from "Revolutions" gave me the idea for this scene. The real risk going up there is being detected by the machines and being reinserted in a power plant. Which, later on in this fic, leads me to answering an age-old question I had from the original "Matrix" movie, if a person cut a deal with the Agents to be returned to the Matrix, or if for whatever reason someone was sent back there, what would happen to that person once they were reinserted?

To NathanPostmark: Thanks! Glad you're enjoying it.

To Sean Mulligan: Hey, even Morpheus admits to Neo, in the "The Matrix", that he had a hard time believing what was going on until he saw the fetal fields with his own eyes, and I get the feeling that Ash is enough of an open-minded skeptic that he'd have similar feelings.

Disclaimer:

See chapter 1

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Chapter Four

Looking-Glass Questions

Next day, Tank set to work training me. I expected the start of some kind of boot-camp style training, but we spent most of the day uploading stuff into my head. Programs. All the data I'd need when we were moving around inside the Matrix. I figured I didn't need it, since I'd already spent my entire life inside the Matrix. But apparently, as smart as I was, I had a lot to learn.

Kung Fu for instance. I'd never put much stock in that martial arts stuff, though I knew a couple guys who'd learned it while they were in the army, over in Japan, and I said as much to Tank. He only smiled and said "Believe me, fella, this stuff could save your life when you're caught in a tight place in the Matrix."

I went along with it. I've never been known to look a gift horse in the mouth, and I wasn't about to start, now that I'd started a new life.

Once Tank had filled my head with the know-how I needed, Morpheus tested me in a sparring program within the Construct. Of course he beat me - he claimed it was because I was still skeptical, but I think it was simply because he was much more adept than a greenhorn like me and because he's a taller, huskier man than me.

"So now what are they gonna do with me in this war with the machines?" I asked Trinity later that evening, as I helped her scrub dishes in the galley.

"That's for the Oracle to help you find out," she said.

"The Oracle?" I asked, the image of an old crone in a dark, smoky temple coming into my mind's eye. "What is this, Greek mythology?"

"Not quite," she replied.

"So, she's one of these 'sees all, knows all' swami types or something?"

"She'd say she knows what she needs to know when she needs to know what to reveal to a particular person," Trinity said.

* * * * *

Zara buttonholed me in a corridor in the crew quarters later on.

"If I were you, I wouldn't pal around too much with Trinity: she's got someone back in Zion waiting for her," she said.

"I'm not really palling around with her," I said.

"Good," she said, with a smirk of barely veiled triumph.

"What makes you put it that way?" I asked.

"Nothing. I'm just looking out for you fella." Her eyes had started roving over me in a way that I just didn't like, so I excused myself and went to the head, just to get out of her sight range. God, that look made me feel as if she were mentally stripping me down to my skivvies.

* * * * *

Next day at morning mess, Morpheus briefed us on our course for the day: they were going up to broadcast depth to Jack Zara, Ref and me into the Matrix, where I would meet with the Oracle. Normally he and Trinity (the first mate) and Jack (the gunner) would accompany the crew jacking in - especially since I was only recently unplugged and I could use the extra support of two more Adepts. But "sentinels" had been detected in the night and the ship's officers would be needed to keep an eye on real world threats.

"I don't see why we have to do this," Zara grumbled as Sand strapped her into a chair on the main deck. "We've already found the One."

"Well, maybe Ash-man here is the Two, maybe he's some kind of back-up 'One'," Tank joked, typing preliminary commands into the ship's mainframe.

"You bring this boy back in one piece, y' hear, Ref?" Jack said, adjusting her straps with the concern of a father or an older brother.

"I will, I promise," Ref said, glancing at me shyly.

Sand turned back to me and prepared to slot the head cable in through a hole in the head rest of my chair. "You ready for this, Ash?"

"As ready as I'll ever be," I said. She smiled and slid the cable in through the jack-guard and into my head-jack.

I felt like I had fallen asleep very fast, going out like a light. But somewhere in the darkness, a phone was ringing.

Then light surrounded me, the diffused light of an interior, during the day. We stood in what looked like the office of a disused warehouse. Ref held the receiver of a rotary phone to her ear. "Tank, we made it," she said, and hung up the phone.

I barely recognized the soft-spoken little mouse who regarded me so shyly on the Neb: Rimless black sunglasses hid her eyes, and her hair was slicked back close to her skull. Under a knee-length black leather coat, she wore a maroon silk blouse tucked into a calf-length black skirt over calf-high black leather boots. Zara, who plunked herself down in a chair beside the dusty desk on which the phone stood, wore a silver-grey leather jacket over a sleeveless black velour top and silver leather pants.

"Man, we gotta get you some new duds, fella," Ref said. "Or at least stuff made of different material."

"So this is it," I said, looking around. "This is... the Matrix."

"Right back where you started from," Zara said, putting her feet up on the desk. "Want me to babysit the exit, Ref, or are you doing it?"

"I'll take him from here," Ref said, rummaging in a metal box, taking out two Glock 9 mm handguns and slotting them into her gunbelt, then filling her coat pockets with extra clips. "I'm a better fighter than you are."

"*Are* you?" Zara sniffed.

Ref said nothing to this, but took me by the arm and led me out into an alleyway. We'd landed in Chinatown, a district I knew too well from some of my earlier cases.

Or at least I thought I knew it too well.

Things looked different somehow. Businesses had changed hands or gone out. Buildings had been torn down and new ones built in their place, or been replaced with parking lots. Even some of the streets had different names.

Cars looked different, smaller and sleeker, with much less style to the make. The passersby on the street wore different clothes, with louder colors and the cut more androgynous. I turned to Ref. "Hey, any idea why everything's so different?" I asked in a low voice.

"My guess is they had you on a different time template. They had you in a construct that looked like a simulated 1949. The default template is 1999," she said, matching my volume.

I was starting to realize why that one detective had gone crazy. He might have fallen in with this crowd and gotten his head bent out of shape. Well, I've got a good head on my shoulders, so I doubted something like this could crack my skull open.

She lead me to the door of a teahouse, pushed it open and led me inside.

The long room within, furnished with just some heavy wooden tables and benches along the walls looked empty at first. But then we both became aware of a young Chinese-looking guy in a white silk Chinese jacket and black pants, sitting cross-legged on one of the tables at the far end of the room, peering at us through black glasses with round lenses.

He set down the ivory tea bowl he had been drinking from. "You are Ref," he said in a soft, slightly husky whisper of a voice.

"Yeah, that's me," she said. "And you are?"

"I am Seraph. I am the one sent to lead you and the new potential to the Oracle," he replied

"That would be me, the.. potential, that is," I said.

"Before I can take you to her, I must first apologize," he said.

"For what?" Ref said. I didn't like the sound of this guy, as quiet as he was.

"For this," the stranger replied.

No sooner had he spoken this, when he lunged off the table right at Ref. She ducked out of the way, arms raised, warding him off as he tried to throw a kick at her head.

Now what kind of wiseguy was this? I thought. I threw myself in between them, getting Ref behind me, parrying the punches he threw at her. I tried to knife-hand the guy's throat, but he suddenly bent over backwards out of the way. When he rose up again, my fist was looking for his temple, but he parried the blow on his forearm.

I hardly knew it was me fighting this guy, but I managed to keep him from nailing me, though he fought like a tiger, a gentle one, but still an opponent to be reckoned with.

At length he drew back, holding up one hand, empty. "Good. You are to be trusted," he said, his calm composure unruffled, though he'd certainly put a kink in mine. "I had no other choice. There are too many enemies."

"The mistake was almost mutual," I said, partly a warning, partly my own admission. If this guy was really an ally, what were the enemies like? I thought, as Ref came up beside us.

He smiled a pale shadow of a smile and led us out into the alleyway. With a key he took from a cord about his wrist, he unlocked a door in one of the walls of the alley and led us into what looked like a long white corridor lined with greenish metal doors. He led us up to one, unlocked it, and led us through.

We stepped out into a paved courtyard at the end of a cul-de-sac, in amongst a cluster of tenement buildings.

"She awaits you," he said.

Ref nudged me toward a sturdy dame sitting on a park bench opposite us.

I approached her and stood before her, a stocky dark woman in her late sixties, bushy charcoal grey hair, a quietly cheerful face, not much for looks, but set with large dark amber eyes full of wisdom, dressed in a blue windbreaker over an orange, gold and green paisley blouse and green slacks, a cigarette between her fingers.

"So you're the detective-boy that young lady helped pick up," she said. She patted the seat beside her. "You can sit or you can stand, but I know what you'll choose."

I was just in the act of sitting down anyway, but this made me pause. Was she a mind-reader as well? I sat down, not wanting to look like I'd changed my mind.

"And you're the Oracle," I said.

"Bingo," she said, pointing at me. "Not what you were expecting."

"They said Oracle, so I got to thinking of someone like the Delphic Oracle, an old woman sitting in a temple over the smoky vent of a volcano."

"Well, you got the smoke part right," she said, reaching into her jacket and taking out a packet of cigarettes and a lighter. "Have one?"

"Thanks," I said, taking the packet, shaking one out and lighting up, then giving the packet and the lighter back to her.

"One thing I can say about you, is you certainly have a sense of romance and idealism. And that's good stuff to have where you are right now."

"Really, I don't, ma'am," I admitted.

"You just like to hide it well, that's all," she said. "Why else did you stick up for that little girl back there?"

"I didn't want to see that nut beat her up, that's all," I said.

She smiled at me knowingly through the smoke and stubbed out her cigarette. "That's what your mouth is saying, but your heart is saying something different."

I shrugged. "Most people have an ulterior motive or two hidden up their sleeves."

"And that gift of yours, spotting people's secrets, that's gonna make all the difference soon. That's why you're gonna be able to stick to it through all this madness. You'll be questioning everything that happens, and you're gonna feel torn in two by all of it, but you hang on by your finger an' toenails, son."

"I've done that before," I said.

"And you'll be doing that a *lot* from now on. I can't see quite what's in store for you: the crystal ball is going dark, but you're gonna come to a point when part of you wants to go one way and do one thing, but the rest of you is wanting to do something else. You just gotta figure out for yourself what really matters to you. You've already jumped over the first three brooks, but you got three more to go. Oh, and stick close to that little girl: you're both gonna need each other's help."

"What little girl?" I asked.

"The one who thinks you're cute."

I wasn't sure who she meant, but maybe I didn't want to. Or my head was spinning so much, I couldn't decipher it. Jumping three more brooks. I wished I had a copy of "Through the Looking Glass" on me.

She patted my arm. "You best be getting back. You haven't got much time."

I got up as she stood. She looked up into my face, her face almost sad with concern. "Son, you're really gonna have a rough time of it, but just remember there's them that got it

rougher."

"Yeah... thanks," I mumbled. She grinned at me, but the sadness hadn't left her eyes, as Seraph approached her and led her away, toward one of the tenements.

Ref came up beside me. "Your head spinning yet?"

"Big time," I said.

"You don't have to share it with me or anyone else if you don't think you can. It's really between you and her," she said.

A breeze rose, sending the sand on the ground swirling in small billows. Papers strewn on the ground slid across the pavement. Ref looked up. She gripped my arm. "Come on, time to get back," she said. And she led me out of that courtyard.

She led me down the street and around a corner past a Chinese convenience store, to a pay phone. She picked up the receiver and dialled a number.

"Tank, we're coming home: send the word out to Zara," she said. She held the phone out to me.

"No, you take it," I said. "You made the call, I don't want to cut in."

"Okay, but remember to catch it quick," she said, and lifted the receiver to her ear.

As she did so, her form seemed to shiver into shards of green code, which flowed into the mouthpiece of the receiver.

I grabbed the receiver as it dropped. As I did so, I looked back over my shoulder.

Three guys in dark brown suits, with rimless sunglasses on their faces and earpieces in their left ears approached the pay phone. Three guys exactly like the ones that had chased Trinity and I on the train.

They drew their weapons and aimed at me. I leaned into the phone, hoping Tank could get me out of there before they fired.

"Ash, hang on, fella, I'm reeling you in," Tank's voice called to me.

Gunshots exploded as that wierd skin-prickling, ear-popping feeling hit me...

I sat up, Trinity unlocking the jacks in my arms and legs.

"What the hell happened?" I demanded, rubbing my ears.

"Agents came out of nowhere," Tank said. "Four of 'em, one right on top of you."

"There were three," I said.

"The code read four. Code don't tell no lies this side to someone with the eyes to see," Tank said.

Ref looked at Tank, her eyes widening. "Then where did Agent Four come from?"

"Good question," Tank said.

* * * * *

I felt completely exhausted after that run, so Sand recommended that I take it easy. I lay on my bunk staring up at the stringers overhead and running my hands over the stubble on my scalp, trying to get my head around the Oracle's message.

Sand came by with a bowl of protein glop for me, but I didn't have much appetite for it. It looked as good as it tasted, but that certainly isn't saying much for it.

A moment later, Zara stuck her head in. "Hey, you getting over that run?" she asked.

"The Agents sneaking up on me were the worst, but the chat with that Oracle was more confusing than I wish it had been," I said.

"I wouldn't take much stock in her babbling anyway," she said. After a weighty pause, she added, "She's one of *them*, you know."

"One of what?"

"Don't be stupid: she's a program. She's a machine."

"You're bulling me," I said.

"Nuh-uh," she said. "She's a sentient program. She's just very smart. So I wouldn't take any of her stuff seriously."

"With a grain of salt," I said, my eye on the remains of the glop in my bowl.

"Betcha wish you had some," she said. I just shrugged.

Zara eyed me up and down. With a twitch of her cheek clearly meant to be a wink, she added, "I've been called the salty one, so if you need any..."

"Sorry, bank's closed," I said, addressing myself to the glop.

She sniffed, irritated, and went away.

A moment later, Ref came for the dishes. "Did I see Zara skulking around here?" she asked.

"Yeah, she stuck her head in a minute ago," I said. I wished I had a package of cigarettes at that point, but not having any, I just balled up my fists and stuffed them into the frayed pockets of my pants.

"She's a good encryption-descrambler, but she's peskier than a gadfly," Ref said. "Just shut your ears when she's around."

"Hey, I've handled hecklers before," I said. I bit my tongue. "I guess when you think about it, I never had to handle them. I've never had any real life experiences."

"I used to think that way, too, but it left me feeling guilty about that time, before I was unplugged. Now I just tell myself I spent the first eighteen of my twenty-some odd years of existence dreaming and learning from those dreams. You need dreams so you can know what reality is."

"Very true," I agreed.

So she was older than she looked. She was still a little spindly for my tastes, but she was still a good kid and she'd be safe with me. Not that I was ever much of a ladykiller. Until I met Trinity, most of the dames I met were purely on business terms, and few of them were my type, or they were married.

She was just stepping out into the hallway with the tray, when the ship suddenly lurched to a stop so suddenly I rolled off my bunk and hit the deck.

The lights went out.

"What the - ?" I cried, the last word catching in my throat.

Ref grabbed my face, covering my mouth. "Shh! they'll hear you."

I lay still, wondering what she meant. Was there something out there?

I thought I could hear metallic rustlings and clanks overhead as we lay there hardly breathing, the chill air growing colder. But maybe it was just my imagination.

After a short eternity, something went clank! far below us. I jolted figuring it was trouble, but I realized it must be the ship's generator when the lights came back up.

"All right, now what was that for?" I asked when we could both breathe again.

"We had company out there," she said.

"Company? What, machines?"

"Hunter-seekers, sentinels," she said. "Squiddies we call them. Sentient machines like octopuses or spiders, with one job."

"Killing humans?" I asked.

"You said it," she said, trying to sound flip, but the tic in her cheek said otherwise.

The more I found out about this place, the more I didn't like it...

To be continued...

The Lion and the Unicorn

Chapter Notes

Under the Gun

+J.M.J.+

Under the Gun

by "Matrix Refugee"

Author's Note:

Sorry for the long delay, but this was a tough chapter to choreograph. Another character from "Reloaded" showed up, whom I didn't originally intend to appear here and, well, he's **that** kind of character whom you can't say no to... you'll see what I mean. Special thanks to all my kind reviewers and patient readers:

To DarkPuck: Thanks! I have to admit, Ash's voice is a difficult one to capture: sensibleness tempered with toughness; he's pretty close to the Raymond Chandler/Dashiell Hammett model for a hard-boiled detective, but there's just something a little more human about him.

To Gijinka Renamon and Nathan Postmark: Your wishes for this fic are my command!

To Chase's Aces: Wow! thanks for the reviews! Hope this chapter lives up to your expectations.

Disclaimer:

See chapter 1

* * * * *

Chapter Five : The Lion and the Unicorn

Over the next couple of days, Tank and Morpheus continued to train me. I still had no idea how the heck I could serve in this war with the machines, but hey, I'd been flying blind when I was investigating several cases. Nothing new.

I noticed, a lot of the time Morpheus and I were in the Construct, that Ref was jacked into the Matrix, sometimes alone, sometimes with Jack. These little jaunts of hers probably had something to do with her archival work, but I felt a little funny asking her outright. None of

my business really. I could have used my usual tactics to finagle the answers out of her, but that was just plain dishonest.

At evening mess three nights after the head-crunching session I had with the Oracle, Ref finally spoke up about her recent excursions into the Matrix.

"If you've all been wondering what I've been doing in the Matrix lately, I've been doing a little research. I just found out the Metropolitan Museum of Art is auctioning off part of its medieval collection tonight," she announced. "I'm going to need a couple people to come with me as back-up."

"You sure you wanna do this now?" Tank asked, his face wary, but his tone light. "We've been picking up some major squiddie activity the last few hours."

"It's just a short run and there's only one piece I'm interested in," she said. "It's an in-and-out job."

"I certainly hope so," Sand said. "I don't want you to end up needing a major patch-up job like the last time."

"I was stupid enough to go it alone last time," Ref said. She looked everyone at the table in the face; maybe part of me just hoped her gaze lingered on mine for a little longer. "Anyone want to go in with me?"

Zara gave more attention to her bowl than to Ref's request. Jack looked at Sand, who nodded, agreeing with his decision even though neither of them had spoken a word about it, or needed to, obviously.

"Okay, I'm in," Jack said. He eyeballed me dead-on. "And I think this might be a good time for you to test your mettle, Sherlock."

I was just opening my mouth to reply, when I sensed Morpheus's steady gaze digging into me. I clammed up and turned to him.

"Do you think this is a wise course to take, Ash? You have only just started to train your mind, to let go of your old life," he said.

"I want to do this," I said. "I gotta do something: I'm a do-er, I learn by doing, not just by this training stuff."

"Oh what harm could it do?" Zara mumbled, her tone a jumble of sarcasm and her usual snittiness.

"You will have to make your choice sometime," Morpheus said.

I took that to mean he was giving me permission to go with Ref, but I suddenly got this bad feeling in my gut, though it just might have been that single-cell goop not sitting right in my stomach.

Tank, Sand, and Trinity led Jack, Ref and I up to the main deck. While Tank set to work punching code, Sand and Trinity helped us jack in.

I had thought we were going right into the Matrix, but I realized I had another thought coming when I found myself standing inside the dead-white space of the Construct.

"Hey, what are we doing here?" I asked.

"We brought you in here to suit you up," Jack's voice said. I turned to find him standing at my elbow, clad in what looked like a tuxedo made of very thin patent leather and the dark glasses that seemed to be everyone's trademarks.

"How's that?" I asked.

"It's a semi-black tie affair," Ref said, approaching me. She wore an oddly cut floor-length dress, like a cross between a gown and a coat, all made of a deep purple plastic-like material that clung to her form. "Sorry to spring it on you like this, but much as the film-noir detective look really suits you well, you'll have to lay it aside for the moment." She looked at Jack, one eyebrow lowering and the other one rising over the lenses of her dark glasses. "Are you really wearing that?"

"Yeah, why, isn't this semi-black-tie enough?" he asked, grinning.

"Well, the cut is just right, but that leather makes you look like a charter member of the League of Inappropriately Attired Assassins," she said.

"It ain't the clothes that matter, it's what you got under 'em that makes the difference," Jack replied, flicking back the halves of his jacket and showing off a pair of shoulder holsters, each packing a Desert Eagle .38.

"Okay, you pass inspection," she said. She took something out of a pocket of her coat-gown, and pressed a button on it. A small square of plastic slid out of the bottom. She pressed another button and raised it to her ear. "Tank, could you load the men's semi-formal wardrobe? And no funny stuff this time, we're running late."

It took me a second or three to realize that little widget she had was a small portable phone with no wires

Then I heard this rumbling sound, like a freight train approaching. From out of nowhere, several racks of semi-formal suits and jackets slid into view. Jack helped me select a black silk three-piece suit and a navy blue silk shirt, topped off with a grey leather topcoat (with one of those portable wireless phones in the pocket) and the inevitable sunglasses. I realized that, as odd as this would look, since we were going in at night, wearing shades was an easy way to be anonymous. Jack was about to start helping me into them, but I held him off. "Ref, could you, uh, t-turn around?" I asked.

"I know what you look like," she said. "I helped Sand put your real-world clothes on when you were woozy from that knock on the head you took." But her face turned slightly pink as she spoke and she turned around, much to my relief.

Once Jack had me covered again, Ref made another phone call. The clothing racks slid out of sight... and then another battle-line of heavy metal racks slid into place... *Big* racks, weighed down with every kind of gun you could imagine, from derringers to hand-guns to grenade launchers to submachine guns.

Ref took a couple derringers and strapped them to her ankles, pulling her knee-high boot-tops over them before filling her pockets with clips for them. I selected a pair of .45 revolvers, much like my old reliable Colt pistol I'd left behind in the Matrix. Jack found me a pair of shoulder holsters and I strapped them on under my jacket.

"You ready fella?" Ref asked me.

"Ready as I'll ever be," I said, starting to feel that rush of adrenalin I'd felt when I took my first case - before it turned out to be the first of a couple dozen cases just like it. I guess the machines didn't have enough imagination to make them any different.

"Okay, Tank, send us in," she said into her pocket phone.

Something like wind roared in my ears...

Next thing I knew, we stood inside the warehouse office, where Jack was hanging up the rotary phone. He glanced at his watch. "C'mon, people, we're short on time," he said.

He lead us outside and around to the back of the warehouse to something that looked like a car under a blue tarp. Ref and I helped him pull the tarp back, uncovering deep maroon car with a slightly boxy but more modern look to it.

"Nice," I said as we climbed in, Jack in the driver's seat, Ref in the back, me riding shotgun. "Must be a recent make?"

"This old beater? It's a semi-classic from the 1970s," Jack retorted. "I keep forgetting: that seems new to you." He keyed the ignition and pulled out of the alleyway onto a side street.

"Few things you fellas need to know before we get there, especially you, Ash." Ref said. "When I was still plugged in, my dad was an art dealer and my mom restored oil paintings and such, so I grew up around artwork. I can handle that end. I need you guys to serve as a back-up, in case something wierd should happen. Your job is to get me out of the Matrix alive."

"Why am I not liking the sound of that?" I asked, more a rhetorical question than anything else.

"I don't blame you for feeling leery, but don't let it stopr you," she said. "There's a very dangerous man who's liable to show up at this auction. I've known him since forever, but I've never been able to figure out just what he is, though he calls himself a trafficker of information. He seems to have a hand in every pie you can imagine: oil refineries, diamond mines, owns a chain of gourmet restaurants, you name it. Everything this guy touches turns to gold for him... But he's as dangerous as a dagger."

"This the French guy you mentioned, the one who's been beating you to the good stuff?" I asked.

"You got it. ...Few things to remember when he's around: don't look at his wife too long, and don't make any sudden moves around him: he's got goons that would tear you to shreds at one word from him."

"Yeah, and no wisecracks about his accent," Jack added. " 'E gets ve-ry touch-y about zat."

We drove from the industrial section of the city into the downtown area, then into what was clearly the uptown district. We pulled up before a swanky-looking high-rise hotel. Jack circled the block, looking for a parking spot before nipping down an alley and parking the Detroit disaster there. "No way I'm letting valet parking take this baby," he said. He got out first, but I beat him to opening the rear door for Ref.

"You lead the way, Ms. MacAffee," he said to her.

"MacAffee?" I asked.

"I used to be Berlin MacAffee," she said.

"So... who am I then?"

"Mr. Ash," she said, smiling.

She led the way to the hotel, in through the front doors and up the elevator.

A crowd of people got off before our stop, the 101st floor. Once the three of us were alone, Ref knelt and reached into her boots, checking the clips in the derringers.

"You okay?" I asked.

"Yeah, just a little nervous," she said. "My worst flaw: feeling too much. One of these days, it's gonna cost me one."

"Well, tonight ain't gonna be that night," Jack said. "Y' got two guys covering your ass."

"Just make sure no one tries to grab it," she said, as she straightened up.

"They'll have to get past us," I said.

The elevator doors slid open on floor 101. Ref stepped out, the two of us following her, like we were her entourage or something. I had to compell myself *not* to come up alongside her and let her take my arm, much as I wanted to.

She led us through a foyer and through a set of open double doors into a grand ballroom crowded with fancy folks in their glad rags, clustered in twos and threes and fives around pedestals and glass cases bearing medieval-looking sculptures and swords and metal goblets and manuscripts. Faded tapestries hung from the walls, behind sheets of clear plastic. In front of each item stood a small white tripod holding up a binder with a few sheets of paper and a

pen attached with a chain. I realized it was one of those silent auctions that the fancy folk conduct. The kind that lack the intensity of a real auction, you what I mean, the kind with a fast-talking auctioneer rattling off the bids like he had lightning in his jaw. But there again, I'm just old-fashioned.

A string trio in a corner played some kind of classical-type music. Waiters circulated through the crowd, carrying trays of drinks, most likely champagne. I almost took a glass, just to blend in, but Jack caught my eye and shook his head. Ref mingled with the crowd, chatting politely with several people before moving on, scanning the cases.

"Is *he* here yet?" Jack asked Ref.

"Nope, we beat him this time," she said, turning to a case containing a leather-bound book about the same dimensions as a bible, which lay open to a two-page spread picture of the Last Judgement, all in bright colors and gilded with what was most likely real gold. It dawned on me that it was probably hand-painted.

Or that it was the digital shadow of something that had been hand-painted.

Two people had already set their bids for it, but Ref took the pen and added her mark: Berlin MacAffee ... \$800,000.

As she did this, something shiny and glistening caught my eye. I turned to take a look.

In the case next to the hand-decorated bible was a padded wooden frame holding an ancient-looking sword. If it wasn't so tarnished and the edge of the blade nicked up, it would have looked really nice, but I guess when you take off the tarnish, that takes away some of the metal.

But why did it glisten? I asked myself.

"Hey, see something you like?" Ref asked, turning to me.

"Yeah, I'm just getting a load of this sword."

"Hey, I thought you went for Art Deco stuff," she teased.

"It just caught my eye."

She examined it. "It's a rare item: it's a sixth century French sword. You rarely see stuff *that* old. What's it doing here?"

"Guess they thought it was too old and tacky-looking to keep," Jack said.

A rustle rose from the rest of the crowd. Ref looked up. A wrinkle of disgust crossed her face. I followed her gaze. The crowd nearby us parted, as if making way for entering royalty or something like that.

That's when I caught myself looking *up* at this tall, lean guy in his early forties or so, clad in a long black jacket, the kind that the guys wear in nineteenth century costume dramas. I

gathered this must be the French guy Ref had talked about.

Now, all the French guys I ever met fell into two categories: the little short feisty ones and the big tall goony ones. This guy had the height of the big tall goony types and the attitude of all French guys: patronizing. The way his cold, cobalt-blue eyes set in his narrow, rat-like face scanned everything and everyone, you'd think he owned the joint.

Come to think of it, based on what Ref had told us, he probably **did** own the joint.

I have to hand it to this guy, he'd taken the kind of pains about his appearance that most women want to see on their men, (and, for that matter, every dame in the room was darting a look at him and he was taking care to meet as many of those gazes as he could). But his pains had defeated his purpose, since he was certainly no work of art himself: mouth too wide, face too thin, nose too long. And that had to be a rug on his head.

I guessed wrong: not every woman in the room was looking at him. Ref even looked away, but he'd caught sight of her and approached her.

"Ah, le petite Mademoiselle Berlin MacAffee, we meet again," he said, smiling like the hyena that he was.

"Good evening, Armand," she replied, coolly. She didn't step away from him, but I could tell her thighs were tightening together under her coat-gown. She held out her hand to him, letting him kiss her fingers in a smarmy-polite Continental manner. I thought I saw her pelvis tilt ever so slightly toward him, but a barely hidden pucker of disgust wrinkled her brow.

As Armand the French guy straightened up, his eye swung to Jack and me. Maybe I just imagined it, but I swear the iciest look of cold contempt passed through his eyes. "And you came 'ere with your bon ami M'sieu Jack?" His eye lit on me. "And M'sieu ash, zat young detective who vanished some time back. Did you find a case to your liking, mon enfant?"

I glanced at Ref. How the hell did this goon know about that?

"Shocked, mon ami?" the Frenchman asked, ironically. "I make it my business to know as much as I can about everyone. As they say, knowledge is power."

"Not that you really need any more, Armand," Ref replied, bantering.

He reached out and ticked her under her chin with his long fingertips, as if she were a child. "Still as sharp-tongued as you ever were, ma fille."

A heavy-set, grey-headed guy in a badly fitting tuxedo (most likely a curator or something) came bustling through the crowd and approached the Frenchman, jabbering a blue-streak in French. Now, I don't understand the lingo, but I could tell from the aura of irritated condescension that exuded from the Frenchman as he and the curator moved off together that the curator didn't speak it very well.

I got a look at the French guy's entourage as they moved on: a few of the usual big tough guys, but I noticed a couple short, dark guys in black suits over open-collared grey silk shirts.

They looked like they might be Italian or something. Now, I've heard of lackeys mimicking their master's mannerisms, but these took it over the edge, to the point that they looked almost like they were mocking the boss.

I glanced over at Ref, who had quickly crossed out her bid on the book and had placed a bid - the first bid, I might add - on the sixth century sword: \$800,000.

"Here comes trouble," Jack murmured.

I turned, following Jack's rough line of vision, well, the way he was facing: it's a little hard to tell what exactly someone's looking at when they have cheaters on.

But it didn't take me long to figure out what or rather *who* he was referring to.

Among the Frenchman's entourage, flanked by a pair of mannish-looking female guards was this drop-dead gorgeous brunette in a gleaming white satin gown that was tight in all the right places. I mean, she had hair and eyes that Theda Bara would die for, a figure that would put Ava Gardner to shame, and legs that Betty Grable would kill for. A real femme fatale if I ever saw one. Not that I'd actually ever seen one before in the flesh, but she fit my teenage imaginings...

She lingered behind her husband, only half-listening to the conversation that passed between him and the curator. Her mind clearly drifted away from their blatherings...

And so did her gaze. Toward me.

Our eyes met, her sad brown ones gazing across that room to look deep into mine, as if she were trying to read my heart and my soul. I felt my mouth tweaking in a friendly smile and I nodded to her, the least I could do. Her hooded eyelids lifted slightly and a sad smile showed at the corners of her full-lipped, rose-bud soft mouth. I felt my heart drop to my shoes and my stomach rub against the inside of my shirt. What was a pretty thing like her doing with an old geezer like him? She couldn't have been much older than I was, but more likely, she was younger than me.

And then I felt Jack's elbow jab me in the ribs. "Eep-kay your yi-ays off er-hey," he warned me, through unmoving lips, like a ventriloquist.

"Sorry," I mumbled. I just hoped the French guy didn't understand Pig Latin.

Too late. The French guy must have had eyes in the back of his head (of course he'd need them with a wife who had that much appeal). He turned and looked right at me, a steel-cold smile crossing his face. But he turned away: something else had caught his attention, and that something was Ref putting her bid on the sword.

"So, you've put a bid on zat old thing, Berlinette?" he asked, his eye roving from the sword to her and back again.

"It's an unusual piece," she said. "I thought I'd add it to my collection."

"But... an unusual choice for a young woman," he said. He reached into the breast pocket of his jacket. I half expected him to pull out a goose-quill pen and a portable inkwell, but he drew out an expensive-looking black-barrelled ballpoint and wrote his bid underneath hers: Henri Armand Minos Lambert de Meroveque - \$ 1,000,000

Meroveque, hey? Sounded like the kind of stilted French name that belonged to a stilted French goon.

Again, someone in the crowd distracted M'sieu Meroveque from his prey. Ref took advantage of that and added her next bid, then walked away slowly, pretending to examine other items in the collection.

"Ref, be careful," Jack warned. "You're baiting him."

"Relax, Jack. I know how to handle Armand," she said.

"Why don't I like the way you said that?" I asked.

She smiled at me. "You scared, Ash?"

"Not for you," I replied.

A museum lackey tried talking Ref up on this small thing that looked like a half-size piano with no legs - and no bids either. Ref listened patiently, but gave him a polite reply and turned away. I noticed Mrs. Armand approach and put her bid on the list.

Ref's gaze turned away, back toward the sword... and to Armand the annoying, making another bid. He looked up at her, giving her a smirk of a smile. Ref kept her face relaxed, but I saw her shoulders tighten a little under her she was baiting him, he seemed to be showing it by baiting her, and it was working.

"Ref, don't let him make you mad," I warned.

"I'm not getting mad," she said. But anyone with ears to hear would have heard that note of irritation in her tone.

Jack and I looked at each other. Even from behind our blacked-out lenses, we knew the other had a wary look in his eye.

Ref strode back to the sword and wrote another entry, then turned back to join us.

"Ref, you're getting reckless," Jack said.

"I'm still well within my limits," she said.

"I don't think he was referring to your account," I said. "I think he meant you're losing focus."

"I can handle this," she said, almost snapping.

Jack frowned, clearly distrusting her judgement. Or rather, her lack thereof.

Even as this exchange passed among us, Arman the French guy strode up and made another entry on the bid sheet for the sword. The crowd nearby had started getting interested in the indirect sword-fight between Ref and the French guy. Even Mrs. Armand had an eye on this game of cat and mouse, but I noticed she was clearly trying to make sure the cat didn't get anywhere near the mouse. I could tell by the furrow between her brows that she knew exactly what was really going on between her husband and this girl.

Ref stalked back to the sword's display stand, clearly intent on raising the ante once more. But when she got to it, the pen attached to the binder had gone AWOL.

It hadn't gone far. She glanced up into Armand's ugly smirking mug. He held the missing pen between his fore- and middle fingers, at an angle that made it look almost like he was flipping the bird at her. She grabbed the pen from his hand and scrawled down her bid. She laid the pen down. He tried reaching for it, but she moved in front of it, blocking him. He tried to reach around her, but she shifted into his path.

"Are you trying to dance with me? You know I'm a married man," he replied, with phony seriousness.

"You sure never acted like one," she said, cocking an eyebrow at him.

"Do **not** contradict your elders," he replied, trying to sound like someone's great-uncle, but with a hint of something far less chummy.

At that point, the curator approached, holding an old-fashioned pocket watch. "Last bid on the 6th century French sword, which goes to... Berlin MacAffee, at three million dollars."

Polite applause rose from the crowd. Ref looked slightly relieved and followed the curator toward an office-like nook at the head of the room. Armand the French guy flared his nostrils slightly, but he kept his face relaxed as he turned away, clearly in search of his wife. But I didn't like the hard light that came into his eyes.

"Where's Ref gonna get that cash?" I asked Jack.

"She'll work it out: she always does," he said.

Simple enough, I thought. Just upload some code that equals cash on this side of the looking glass.

Then I realized I couldn't see the French guy, but he'd probably gone off in a lather at being bested by a girl.

Several minutes had passed. Jack looked at his wristwatch, then reached into his jacket for his portable phone, pressing one of the buttons and keying it on.

"Hey, you seen our girl anywhere? She just bought some old sword-thing..."

Suddenly, his face went pale under his duskiness. He slammed the phone into his pocket and ran for the room where Ref had been talking with the curator. I dashed after him.

The room had been set up as a temporary office. Heavy on the "had been": everything had been turned upside down - account books on the floor, furniture overturned. A computer stood on the desk, but someone had torn the modem from it.

The curator lay on the floor bound and gagged and wriggling against his bonds like a worm on a hook. I untied him and helped him to his feet.

"What happened to you?" I asked.

"I don't know," he panted. "I was talking with Ms. MacAffee when those two young hoodlums with Mr. Meroveque came in and punched me in the stomach and the jaw. When I came to, they had disappeared and so had Ms. MacAffee. Did you see what happened?"

"We were about to ask you that," Jack replied, sourly and led me out.

* * * * *

Neither of us spoke till we got back to the car and started back to our exit.

"Now what do we do?" I asked.

"We'll have to jack out and see if Tank can get a location on her," Jack said.

Suddenly something rammed into the car from behind.

"Damn! What was that?" Jack growled. "Learn to drive, idiot."

I glanced back. A silvery grey vehicle, like a pick-up truck with a longer cab was on our tail. Jack u-turned at an intersection to shake it off, but the truck-thing stuck to us like lint on a serge jacket. It clipped our left rear wing, making us swerve.

I peered into the side mirror on my side, trying to get a look at the occupants of the truck-thing, but their windows were too dark for me to make out anything.

Then a hatch opened in the roof and someone stuck their head out, on the passenger side. I saw light gleam off something that definately looked like the barrel of a gun.

"They got a gun!" I said, ducking.

Our rear window shattered as shots blew it out. Jack, who had ducked as well, swerved down a side street and into an alley, trying to shake our pursuer.

"I know where there's another hardline. If those goons come at us again, give 'em a taste of their own medicine," Jack said.

"Talk about riding shotgun," I said, drawing both my revolvers and rolling down my window.

The truck swerved after us from another alleyway. Jack floored the gas and swerved down another side-street onto a main road.

The goon in the truck stuck his head out again and opened fire. I ducked back just in time: a bullet meant for my head hit the sidemirror on my side. I leaned out and fired back at them, taking out both headlights and punching a decent hole in the windshield.

Jack swerved into another alley, coming out beside a TV repair shop. He jumped out and bolted for a payphone nearby. I ran after him.

He dialed the phone and shoved it at me...

* * * * *

"What the hell was on your tail, man? You were driving like the devil was after you," Tank asked as Sand and Trinity unhooked Jack and me.

"Sure felt like it," Jack replied, standing up and leaning over Tank's shoulder, his eyes on the monitors. "They were driving like a bat outta hell, whatever they were. They didn't drive like Agents, but they were just as mean."

"I ain't sure what it was either, but this side it was readin' like a virus," Tank said.

I stood up, turning to Ref's chair. Her body tensed against her restraints and the monitors hooked up to her were going crazy.

I reached down and touched her face. "I should have gone into that room with her."

"She can't feel you," Zara said.

"I got you into this mess, I'll get you out," I told Ref. The monitors seemed to settle down just a little, but I was probably just hoping they did.

To be continued...

White Queen, White Pawn

Chapter Notes

Under the Gun

+J.M.J.+

Under the Gun

by "Matrix Refugee"

Author's Note:

Part of this chapter was inspired by "Alina's" *EXCELLENT* transcription of the "Enter the Matrix" game script, which I cannot recommend highly enough! My computer is too slow to handle the game, so I'm gonna wait till the comp dies and I get a new one before I get this game, so when I found this transcript at: ./ I pounced on it!

But first, a few words of thanks to all my reviewers:

To Argent Inluminai: Beaming That's gotta be the best review I've had for this fic, and most likely one of the best reviews I've ever gotten for *any* fanfic of mine. Thanks! Glad it makes up for the deficiencies in the short it's based on (Not to say that it isn't the best of the "Animatrix" shorts; I suspect the reason why Ash lets the Agents kill him is inspired by a chess move known as a sacrifice - I think - and that's basically what he does, so that Trinity can get away.). Oh, I happen to be a *huge* fan of the Merovingian myself, too (even if I am putting him in a really bad light in this fic... what can I say? The guy is eeeevil... but that doesn't keep me from thinking he's a sexy hunk of code!); If you've caught the subtle references in chapter five of this... well, Ref has something to say about the Mero later in this chapter, so I let her, and this chapter, speak for itself. Hope it lives up to your expectations: it was a tough one to write!

To Chase's Aces: I'd write a fight scene, but I'm not particularly good at writing them - they're hard to choreograph! Yueh Wo Ping, the fight-choreographer for the "Matrix" series is a master at fight choreography, and my few feeble attempts at replicating his flair have been so bad, I felt it was best to avoid humiliating myself by writing something I know would hardly come close to his excellence. Plus, I'm aiming for a more dramatic/psychological angle on this story.

Mild WARNING: A slightly steamy kiss scene and references to implied semi-non-con. Not enough to up the rating, but just to forewarn you...

Disclaimer:

See chapter 1

* * * * *

Chapter 6 - White Queen, White Pawn

"If you're going in there, I'm going with you," Jack said, as Zara ran a scan on the Matrix feed, trying to place Ref's locus.

"Hey, I was dumb enough not to go into that room with her in the first place: I'm going in there alone," I insisted.

"You're a greenhorn yet, grasshopper," Jack said. "Maybe, in that case, I should tell you the whole story: I helped unplug Ref, so I look at her... not as my child, but as my ward anyway. I worry about her, so when Trinity found you, I started hoping you were the one for Ref.

"There's a lot more to it; I know Ref well, so I know her strengths and her flaws. I know she can get to sure of herself when she's jacked in. You saw how she got with that French guy. I don't know if you noticed, but her head jack sticks out a little bit."

"I did, one of the first things I noticed about her," I said.

"There's a reason for that: her mother was pod-born, but her father was Zion-born. Ref was conceived out here in the real world, the old-fashioned, love-each-other-up way; but early on in her mother's pregnancy, the two of them made one last run, to unplug her mother's sister... their ship, the Charlemagne, was attacked by squids. Her father was killed; her mother was reinserted into the Matrix, and they removed Ref from her mother's body and put her on one of those stalks in the fields. So, as a consequence, her skull didn't grow around her jack the way yours did. That seems to have something to do with her over-confidence, or on the other hand, sometimes she goes the other way and has these 'meltdowns', for lack of a better word, while she's plugged in, then she loses her focus and she can't bend the code."

"So where do we come in?" I asked.

"We gotta get her out of there before she has a system failure," Jack said. "Or that French guy does something nasty to her."

"Either way, she's so useless, we oughta just end it all right here," Zara said, getting up and approaching Ref's chair. Her hand reached for Ref's cable. I moved between her and Ref, my fists clenching. I'd never hit a woman, but this was not a time to be discriminating when someone else's life was at stake. Especially when that person had been trying to get at me in the first place.

"Zara, leave her be; we'll get her out," Tank said, warning and soothing at the same time.

Zara backed down and let Tank take over. The phone by the console started to ring; Tank threw on his headset as he picked up the call. He looked up at me.

"Ash, it's Seraph," he said, handing the headset to me.

I took it. "Hello?"

"Ash, we have located her, but this line is not safe. You must meet me where we first encountered each other," Seraph said, with urgent calm.

"I'm on it," I said. The line cut out; I handed the headset back to Tank, who set to work punching code.

Sand couldn't jack us in fast enough...

We emerged in Chinatown and headed for the teahouse. Seraph met us at the door and led us inside.

"We have few moments to spare, so I must use few words," he said. "Ref is held by a very dangerous program, who calls himself the Merovingian."

"A program?" I asked, feeling one eyebrow twitch like it wanted to rise.

"Anyone we know?" Jack asked.

Seraph nodded. "You have already encountered him. Your paths crossed at the auction."

Even as he said it, my mind was adding two and two together. The French guy went by the name Meroveque, which sounded a lot like this "Merovingian" moniker...

"You mean that French guy is..." I hardly dared to finish that sentence. Or needed to.

"Yes, he is," Seraph replied. "I know this because I know him well, for I once worked in his service." He pulled aside the flap of his Chinese jacket and pulled down the neck of the black tank-top he wore underneath. Etched into the flesh of his chest like a brand or a scar a couple inches below the pit of his throat, was a Roman capital letter M. He pulled his clothes together. "I know where to find him: I can show you the way there."

Jack's senses must have been twiggled. "If he's one of them, then you must be one of them too. Am I right?"

"Yes," Seraph replied.

"But in that case, can we really trust you?" I asked, my turn to be suspicious.

"You must decide that for yourself. My task is only to protect that which matters most," Seraph said.

I didn't know what to make of that, but we didn't have much to choose from if we were gonna get Ref out of the Matrix alive. I didn't want to find out this guy was leading us into a trap.

Well, I'd wiggled out of tight spots before, so I took the chance.

"Lead us to him," I said.

Seraph nodded once, then took a key from the chain-loop about his wrist, fitted the key into the lock and locked the door. He paused for two counts, then unlocked the door and opened us, sending us through, Jack covering our entrance, me covering the exit.

We stepped into a long hallway that seemed to go on forever, lined with grey-green steel doors.

"What *is* this place?" Jack asked.

"These doors are access portals. Maintenance uses them to enter different sectors of the Matrix," Seraph explained.

"So your programs are programming other programs," I said. "How come no one else knows about these doors?"

"The Source is wary: it does not allow maintainers to manifest themselves. If any program makes its presence known to the unsuspecting, the Source calls it back to itself," Seraph said.

"For what, a slap on the wrist and transferral to another, lesser job?" I asked.

"For deletion," Seraph replied. I caught an edge of fear touching his otherwise calm voice. I realized he must have been threatened with that, with deletion, so he ducked out of sight and went to work for the French guy rather than get canned permanently. But he went on, "Most choose not to go to the Source. Most choose to exist in exile; but if they choose that, then they must seek the shelter and aide of the Merovingian."

"All right, so in that case, what does he want with Ref, besides payback for insulting his French ego by outbidding him at that auction?" I asked.

"You will have to ask him that, but be on guard: he has many ways to harm you."

I got the gut feeling from Seraph's tone that he spoke from the voice of experience: first hand experience.

He paused before one of the doors, inserted his key into the lock and turned it, then opened the door a crack. He beckoned us to step through as he pulled the door open wider.

. . . We stepped through into a glassed-in courtyard garden in the middle of a big, fancy, French-looking mansion-like pile. A chateau, I think they call it. We'd stepped in through a door behind some shrubbery, that might normally have lead into a toolroom or something. If this was a real chateau, that is.

Seraph headed straight for a set of double glass doors opening into a hallway-vestibule and guided us through. "Stay close to me," he warned in a low voice. "There are many dangers here."

"Including two dangerous beings..." said a husky whisper of a voice nearby.

"... Like us," replied a second voice, exactly like the first one.

I looked up in time to see these two... ghost-like guys with pallid hair and faces and clad in silvery duster-type coats, appear literally out of the woodwork and stand before us, blocking our path. Seraph moved like he would attack them, but they lunged at Jack and me, going right through us, grabbing us from behind and holding razors to our throats.

"Let them alone," Seraph said. "We are only here to talk to him."

"If this is about the girl with the sword..." said Ghost-Guy #1 (holding me).

"...He isn't interested in talk," added Ghost-Guy #2 (holding Jack).

"*He* may not be interested, but *I* am," said a woman's sultry voice nearby. I managed to peer up the hallway in the direction of the voice...

In time to see Mrs. Armand approaching. I have to admit, she's a sight for sore eyes, but right then, the sight of her made mind itch. I needed all the focus I could manafge right then, and her showing up was tantamount to someone sticking their greasy thumbs into a newsphotographer's camera lens.

"Let the young one go, boys, and let me have a talk with him in private," she said.

Ghost-Guy #1 slackened his grip on my throat and sheathed the razor, but I got the feeling he would much rather have slit my throat than listen to the boss's wife.

She took me by the hand and led me up the hallway to a posh sitting room lined with bookcases and closed the door behind us. She turned and faced me. I'd gauged her heigh wrong at the auction: she was nearly as tall as I am, so I found myself practically looking into her eyes on a level.

"It is more than mere duty that brings you here," she said. "I can feel it in you..." She ran her gaze down me like a carress as she said this. I felt my stomach somersault inside me, but I kept my ground, my hand going for my pistol.

Her gaze came to rest on my chest. "Yes... I can see it in you, I can feel it... something I have not felt for a long time... something besides the anger that you put up as a wall around your heart." She moved in and placed her lily-white hand on my chest, over my heart.

I backed away, drawing my pistol and levelling it at her knees. "Look, whatever it is you want with me, name your price and I'll pay it." I didn't relish getting snappy with her, but I had to do something to keep my focus then. I didn't doubt for a second that her husband might have put her up to this, to lead me on a wild goose chase. Well, I wasn't about to let this little peacock make a goose out of me.

She smiled thinly. "You mistake my methods for my husband's. Perhaps they really are not so different, but we both have quite different purposes: He seeks after power, I disire only experience."

"Yeah, well, you're gonna experience me shooting a hole through your foot unless you tell me what you want with me and where Ref is," I said.

Mrs. Armand's smile turned sweet but knowing. "Such fierceness of intent can only come from devotion," she said. "Let me have but a taste of it, and I shall show you the way."

"How?" I said, not daring to lower my revolver just yet.

"I want to know a little of this devotion, this love. I once knew it a long time ago, when we first came here, but it has been taken from me... I wish to remember what it felt like."

A little trip down memory lane, courtesy of a guy who was half her husband's age, eh?

"I want you to kiss me. I want to feel as if I am the one who knows this devotion you show," she said.

I slid my gun back into my coat pocket. "All right, I think I can manage that," I said.

Closing my eyes to slits, I reached out and put a hand on her shoulder, carefully keeping my body away from hers even as she drew closer to me. I leaned in just a whisker and stopped, making myself a sitting duck, letting her lips touch mine. I kept my mouth closed: anything more and I'd really get myself in a lather.

We separated. "Dreadful," she murmured, with a slight roll of her eyes. "I would rather you had shot me: then I would at least have felt your anger."

"Here, let me try again. I've just... never kissed a married woman before," I confessed.

She smiled almost archly, raising one eyebrow, but any man would have detected the snaky little gleam in the corners of her eyes. "There is a first time for all experiences," she said.

I put one hand on her waist this time, drawing her close to me; she felt soft and warm to my touch - just like the cat that she was. I tilted my head slightly, moving in, my mouth - slightly open - finding hers. Her lips tasted sweet and salty at the same time: the sweetness had a tart, fruity taste to it, like cranberries or something a lot more exotic like pomegranates, but I knew the salt came from her own tears. I relaxed my jaw a touch (Hey, I had an older brother who gave me pointers on how to kiss a girl.) and ever so gently caressed the inside of her upper lip with the tip of my tongue. I felt her relaxing in turn, her tongue-tip seeking and finding mine, caressing it gently as she slid her hands from the small of my back, up my spine to my shoulders, pulling me closer so that I felt her breasts framing my heart.

She released my face, slowly, lingering. She pressed her body against mine in a final embrace; I felt a sigh escape her lips and fan my mouth.

"Yes..." she sighed, more a sound than a word, her eyes closed in utter bliss. "That... is how it feels... You love her a great deal, but you barely know it. Your heart is holding back, though it longs to give itself to her. I hope that she knows this."

"Yeah, I think she does... but she's got someone else already."

She released her hold on me. "No, there is another one for you. It was the love you have for her that I felt." She approached one of the bookcases. She pulled one of the books out slightly and something clicked inside the wall. The panel in the wall pivoted outward, revealing the

entrance to a passageway leading into the basement, like something out of an Errol Flynn swashbuckler movie, only a lot more damp.

"He has her in the dungeon," she said, pointing the way.

I nodded in reply and hot-footed it in the direction she'd shown me.

I was just turning a corner when something dropped from the ceiling behind me. I turned to get a look at it and try shooting it. I had just enough time to get a glimpse of this tall guy dressed in black with a face like a skull framed with black hair like a string mop, when he backhanded me across the face, knocking me out cold.

* * * * *

I woke up feeling cold water splash me full in the face. I coughed and sputtered for a moment, then opened my eyes. One of those little Italian-looking goons stood over me, grinning and holding an empty tin pail, while the other covered me with a gun.

"Hey look, Abel, the sprout just needed a li'l water," said the one with the gun. Abel set the pail down on the floor and grabbing me by the scruff of the neck, hauled me to my feet.

"Time to rise and shine, gumshoe," Abel said.

"What'd you just call him?" the one with the gun asked, wrinkling his brow.

"At's what they call detective-guys in old black-and-white mystery flicks. If you weren't watchin' vampire flicks all the time, Cain, y' might learn some history from that old stuff," Abel replied.

Cain sniggered. "*You* learn anything, Mr. Diarrhea-of-the-Brain?"

"Gentlemen... you can fight over him later," said an all-too-familiar voice with a smarmy French accent, close by. "Mr. Ash and I have business to discuss."

I got a good look at my surroundings: I stood in a dingy grey room, like a hotel room or a small apartment, the wallpaper peeling and chunks of plaster fallen from the ceiling, lying in small piles of rubble on the warped floorboards. It looked a lot like the crazy detective's room, only minus the chessboard graffiti. I stood opposite a cheap wooden table close to the end wall.

On a rickety wooden chair behind the table sat Armand the French guy, a.k.a. the Merovingian, clad in a gangsterish navy-blue pinstripe suit, his wing-tip shod feet resting on the tabletop. He smirked at me from under the wide brim of a black fedora tilted rakishly over one ear.

He spread his arms slightly. "I would be an ungenial host if I did not have some consideration for the tastes of my guests," he said. "Perhaps the distressed 1940s decor is more to your liking?"

"Where in hell do you have Ref, and what have you done to Jack?" I demanded.

He folded his arms lazily behind his neck. "Always to the point, young man. Your little travelling companion is being suitably entertained, but your little femme du plaisir is detained elsewhere."

"Listen, cut the bushwa, you batch of code and tell me where Ref is?" I demanded.

He looked right at me. If he had any nerves or neural conductors or something like that, I'd clearly hit a tender one: he usually looked as if he'd just swallowed a cheekfull of vinegar, but his face looked even more sour. "So you know..." he said.

"That you're one of *them*? That you're just a program, another part of this system of control?" I said. "It doesn't take an Einstein to figure that out. And what do you want with her anyway, besides a quick bang with her?"

He recovered from his momentary humiliation, but I'd probably earned his eternal indignation, not that I cared a rat's behind about that.

"So you have some concern for this girl after all," he said, his smirk of a smile coming back. "Or are you merely trying to redeem yourself for not keeping such a close watch on her at the auction? Don't waste your strength, mon enfant: You'll need every ounce of it just to stay alive."

"Enough of that! Where. Is. Ref?"

I saw his eyes twitch toward a door beside the table, standing slightly ajar, which I somehow hadn't noticed before. "So you want her after all? " he continued, insinuating, fixing my gaze with his. "But this is not as simple a matter to resolve as you may desire it to be. I have something that you want. But... for me to give it to you, first you must give *me* something *I* need."

His gaze settled on my left eye, the one Trinity had extracted the bug from, his eyes narrowing, intent, like they were trying to read my thoughts. But it dawned on me he must be reading the code of my virtual form.

"Yes, I thought as much: You still have traces of it."

"Have what?" I demanded.

"When the other fine demoiselle removed the tracker from your eye, she failed to notice that it left behind its mark. The traces that remain could be of great use to those who know how to use it. *They* have already taken note of it, which is why they dog your very footsteps each time you enter this world."

I wasn't getting what he meant at first, but I was starting to put two and two together and it was adding up to a number I just didn't like the looks of.

"Give me your eyes, and the girl is yours," he said.

I started to reach for my gun, but I discovered it was missing.

Then it dawned on me...

That door behind him was just a heap of code. It wasn't real, any more than the rest of this crummy world. If I treated it as if it were a real door, it would behave like one; but if I treated it as if it weren't real, it would obey me...

Italian goons behind me and French crime boss to the left of me or none, I lunged over the table top and kicked open the door, sending it flying in a bunch of green-code splinters as I hurtled into the next room.

The only stick of furniture there was an iron framed bed underneath a dingy window. Ref lay on the bed, her wrists and ankles tied to the headboard and the footboard. The skirt of her coat-gown had been torn from the hem to her waist and her legs lay spread apart.

The cords binding her were no more real than the door or anything else. I snatched her up from the bed so hard the bedframe creaked and bent as I tore her free from the cords. Slinging her over my shoulder, I lunged at the window feet-first as a hail of bullets pelted through the open doorway behind me.

The glass exploded around us as Ref and I burst through the window and plummeted to the earth. The outside world had taken on the look of a noirish backstreet, but it oozed from the greys and blacks of the world as I had known it, to the brick red and stucco tan of the outside of the Chateau.

I hit the ground feet first, so hard we left a small impact crater in the cobblestones of the outer courtyard. I looked around for an exit of any kind and spotted a manhole-like grating just a few feet away. I ran to it, pried it up, and still holding Ref's inert form, dove in feet first.

We dropped into a sewer channel with a couple inches of stinking water underfoot, but I managed to pull myself and Ref up onto the ledge that ran along the dank walls. I ran for several dozen yards until I came to a bend in the sewer. Round the bend was an intersection, where another channel joined the main channel. I set Ref down on the ledge and stopped to pull out my pocket phone. Just as I opened it, the phone rang in my hand.

"Hello?" I said, answering it.

"Hey, Ash, where the hell have you been and where you think you're going?" Tank's voice said.

"I was about to call and ask you that," I said.

"Well, I can give you a general location: You're all the way up in the mountains, five-hundred miles north of the city."

"Damn," I muttered.

"It gets better: that tunnel you're following empties into a stream in the woods. You're lost, man; nothing short of a miracle or an angel is gonna get you out of there."

I was about to hang up, sling Ref over my shoulder again, and keep plugging on, when I heard metal grind on metal nearby. I turned, trying to find the source of the sound.

A door, obviously some kind of maintenance entrance, opened opposite to me. Jack pushed it open wide enough and stepped through, accompanied by Seraph and a small Oriental-looking guy wearing a green work apron over a rumpled shirt and pants, squinting around him through a Coke-bottle thick pair of glasses.

"Tank, I gotta run; the cavalry just showed up," I said, hanging up the phone.

"Looks like you got the brass ring," Jack said, his eye on Ref, grinning slightly.

"Jack, how in hell did you get here?" I asked.

"It wasn't easy," Jack said. "After the Mero's dame took you aside for your little private romantic tete-a-tete, Seraph and me got ourselves a one-way ticket to the dungeons, courtesy of the Mercury Twins. But we managed to get out of there in one piece, and even picked up a brass ring of our own.

Seraph put a hand on the little Chinese guy's shoulder. "This is the Keymaker. The Oracle has been searching for him since he vanished some time ago."

"The Merovingian captured me for my keys, since they would give him free access to the maintenance hallways," the little guy said. "I have been trying to escape, but for some reason, our paths were supposed to cross."

"For what reason?" I asked.

He held up a ring from which hung a single key. "This key will bring you to your exit in the warehouse district," he said. "But you must go now: the enemies are closing in."

I stooped and slung Ref over my shoulder; Jack took the key from the Keymaker.

"So we just stick that key into any door and it'll take us home?" Jack asked.

"Yes, it will," the Keymaker replied. I was tempted to ask this guy why he was doing us this favor, especially since I got a hunch that this guy was another program. But I was not about to look a gift horse in the mouth, not even a virtual horse. Anyone who hated the French guy was a friend of mine at that point. Especially if that friend could give us a passkey home.

I stepped across the channel and through the door. Seraph pulled it closed behind us. "You must return to your world: it is not safe here," he said.

"I get your drift," I said.

Jack fitted the key into the lock on the nearest door, then glanced at the Keymaker. "Am I doing this right?" he asked.

The little guy nodded, giving us a sadly patient shadow of a smile.

Jack turned the key in the lock, then turned the doorknob and pulled the door open.

Jack and I stepped through and out into the alleyway behind the warehouse where we'd been calling in and out of the Matrix. Ref stirred in my arms and groaned against my neck, like she was coming to. I knelt on the ground, and lowered her into my lap. I tried to tilt her face up to mine, but she resisted. I removed the gag from her mouth

"Hey, you all right, Ref?" I asked.

"I'm sorry," she said, dropping her gaze to the ground.

"It's all right, you don't have to be," I said.

"No... it's all my fault," she said. "I should have listened to you back there at the auction."

"In that case, it's my fault too: I egged you on to buy that sword."

"But I chose to listen to you. You couldn't have seen any of this happening," she said, looking down at the rip in her clothes. "But I should have seen this coming. Armand was the first man I was ever attracted to... romantically... he knew that... and he preyed on it, the same as he preys on everything else, the beast..."

My worst fear for her had come true. "It happened on this side of the mirror. It's not real."

"It was a dream I used to have when I was still asleep here... and it came true, as true as it can be... but it was a nightmare, a goddamn nightmare!"

The phone in my pocket twittered like a hysteric electronic canary. I pulled it out and answered it.

An earful of static scalded my eardrum. Tank's voice cut through the mess: "Hate to break up the happy reunion, but we got incoming and so do you: one's on top of you already!"

I stuffed the phone into my pocket and flung Ref over my shoulder. Jack drew his .38s and covered the alleyway as we bolted for the warehouse door.

I kicked the door open, darting a glance back in time to see a black sedan with dark windows plow into the alleyway on two wheels. The doors opened and three of those wierd Feds - those Agents, rather - got out. Whatever you call 'em, I wasn't about to hang around. Especially when they started shooting.

Jack at my heels, shooting at them, I bolted up the hallway to the office. The phone started to ring: a shot cracked behind me and a bullet whizzed over my head.

I snatched up the receiver and shoved it into Ref's hands. On the other end of the line, I heard a lot of racket and the line screamed with static. As Ref's form dissolved into the phone, a man's scream cut through the sound.

I threw the receiver to Jack; he leaned over it and followed Ref back into reality.

I caught the receiver as it fell; I was just raising it to my ear when I heard movement, a footstep behind me.

I whirled round. There, behind me, stood a lone Agent...

To be continued...

* * * * *

Afterword/notes:

The idea for the Mero's gangsterish attire in this scene came from the Buick Rainier commercials that have been airing on TV lately, you know the ones with the gangsterish-looking guy whispering ideas over the shoulders of several car designers. Don't ask me why, but there was something about that guy that reminded me oddly of the Mero, even though the Rainier guy is about five inches shorter and a good thirty pounds heavier than Lambert Wilson (better known to us "Matrix" geeks as the Merovingian!). Also, the change in venue (film-noir decay as opposed to the Baroque/Roccoco opulence of the Chateau) was a stroke of sheer inspiration. I thought it would make a good contrast, for one thing, for another, I remember reading, waaaay back in 2000 or early 2001, back when the Wachowski Brothers were starting to drop hints about "Matrix 2 & 3", an item about the Mero. which described him as having power over the Matrix, being able to bend it and mold it to suit his purposes (We didn't see much of that in the films, although he seems to have carved out quite a little kingdom for himself and the programs who have fallen under his dominion, but maybe there'll be more of that in the "Matrix Online" RPG).

Red King

Chapter Notes

J.M.J.

J.M.J.

Under the Gun

by "Matrix Refugee"

Author's Note: This was originally meant to be a much longer chapter, but I decided to divide it up so I wouldn't be keeping you all in the dark (There's maybe a couple more chapters to go after this one). Ash is on his way to Zion, but even then he'll still have a long way to go. Plus, I decided to make this a real "Fanimatrix" fic and include cameo appearances of other characters from another ship...

But first, a few words of thanks to all my reviewers:

To GeekGurl: Hope you're enjoying reading this as much as I enjoy writing it!

To Oshika Kogo: Sorry it took a little while to get back to this: This next chapter wasn't easy to write, as you'll see in a minute...

To GeneticallyElvenGryffindor: Ain't "Under the Gun" one of the coolest songs ever? I sing it under my breath when I'm doing boring things like housework (Sure helps me plan the next part of this story!). Good luck with the talent competition!

To la tolteca: Thanks for the suggestions! You'll find that at least one of them was a case of "Great Minds Think Alike", particularly regarding just who that lone Agent sneaking up on Ash was...

WARNING: Contains character death, or at rather my idea of what happened to a character from "Matrix 1" who didn't appear in "Reloaded", also some mild hurt/comfort, but I think you've all seen that coming. Also, in the middle of the chapter, the Point of View shifts from Ash's to Ref's as Ref tells him about her ordeal in the Chateau. I'll flag it with a horizontal line (-) so you'll know where to expect the shift.

Disclaimer:

See chapter 1

Chapter 7 - Red King

"You thought that you could escape from your purpose, Mr. Ash?" the lone Agent said, approaching me and pausing about five feet away. "You were made to help maintain order in this world. But it appears that you have chosen to aid in create dis-order in an otherwise orderly universe."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I shot back. Of course I knew, but I wasn't about to let on. If you lie to someone who's part of a system that has lied to you, is it really a lie?

Then I noticed something really different about this Agent, something that set him apart from every other Agent I'd seen so far: he didn't have that hearing-aid like communications earpiece in his right ear.

"Oh yes, Mr. Ash, you do know," the Agent replied, stepping closer to me. "You've seen it. You've seen the 'reality' beyond this. You've seen far too much, and we both know what happens to the man who's seen too much."

He came right up to me, just a hand's-breadth of space between us, looking me in the face. I was just leaning into the phone when he reached out to me...

And stuck his hand into my chest. I felt a searing pain shoot out of the "wound". I looked down to see something like oil or like black blood oozing over my chest, down my torso, creeping up my shoulders.

I wrenched myself free and crouched into the phone, hoping I could escape...

By some stroke of luck, I made it. Next thing I knew, Jack was hauling me out of my chair and dragging me across the deck. The ship jolted and rocked. Wires and shards of torn metal fell from the ceiling along with clouds of sparks.

Something reared up in front of us, a machine like a nightmare octopus the size of an ox, a cluster of red eye-sensors in the middle of the thing's blunt head glowed at us malevolently as it gathered its metal tentacles to strike.

The ship shook from stem to stern. Something like a lightning flash lit up the deck. The metal squid-thing crashed to the decking, the light dying in its eyes.

"What the hell happened?" I demanded.

"Squiddies came out of nowhere," Sand said, picking her way over the wreckage to help us, armed with some weapon that looked like a cross between a nail gun and an overgrown electric drill with the muzzle of a giant tazer.

"Tank was goin' nuts trying to get you out of the Matrix," Jack said. "Right when you picked up on the hardline, they breached the hull."

"Where's Ref?" I asked.

"I had Zara help her down to the sick bay," Sand said. "She took a horrible hit in there."

"I know..." I said.

"Oh God, no!" Jack cried. I whirled round, half-expecting that squiddie to be not as dead as we'd hoped. Jack leaned over the darkened console. "Tank, fella, don't you be hurt."

I heard movement and a strip of light came down the ship's ladder from the cockpit above us. For a split second, I flinched, as if it might be another enemy, but I soon saw Trinity's face behind the light as she stepped off the ladder. She approached the half-circle of monitors and held the light over her head.

Tank lay sprawled over the keyboards, face down. Two metal tentacles attached to another dead squiddie jutted from a gaping wound in his back. Sand approached and reached under his neck, clearly feeling for a pulse. But when she looked up at us, we all knew his had stopped permanently.

"He's gone," she said, confirming it. Jack put his arm about her, letting her hide her eyes in his neck. Trinity set the lamp on the console and turned her face away, hiding the tears I knew were in her eyes. At least Tank died fighting like a man...

Someone else could be heard climbing down the ship's ladder. Morpheus joined the circle around the console. "A distress signal has been sent out: the nearest ship, the Osiris has picked it up and will be here in twenty minutes," he informed us. He fell silent as his gaze fell on Tank's body.

"Sir, would you wish to be alone with him?" Sand asked, recovering from her momentary outburst.

"Yes," he replied, a slight waver in his calm tone. "I would appreciate that." He turned to me. "Ash, go see about Ref's injuries. She will want to see you."

"Yessir," I said. He didn't have to tell me twice.

Sand accompanied me to the sickbay. Ref lay on an operating table-like structure, under a pale blue overhead light, but there clearly wasn't enough power on the ship to run the monitoring equipment on the wall behind her. Zara sat perched on top of a short metal cabinet, keeping watch, but clearly disgusted with this "thankless" job: as soon as she saw me enter, she got up and went out without a word.

"Is she all right?" I asked Sand.

"She took a bad hit in there," Sand replied. "She's suffering mild VDT."

"VDT?" I asked.

"Virtual Damage Trauma," Sand replied. "The assault left her avatar injured, and since the avatar is a projection of her mental image of herself, she's got a lot of pain upstairs."

"Is there anything I can do?" I asked.

"Not really till the Osiris can give us a tow," Sand said. "Right now, just sit with her, keep her talking."

I sat down on top of the cabinet as Sand stepped out. Ref turned her face to me and opened her eyes. She smiled faintly, but that faded. "I'm sorry," she said.

I took her hand in mine, rubbing it gently with my thumb. "Hey, it's all right," I said. "You couldn't have seen that coming."

"I know... but I feel like it cost us... and now I'm paying for it with my pain."

"No, no, don't think that, Ref," I said. "You did what you thought you had to do, but other stuff got in the way."

I reached down to put my free hand on her shoulder. She slid out from under my touch, wincing. "It wasn't that kind of touch," I said, reassuringly, not that I've ever been long on reassurance.

"I know," she said.

After a few minutes, Trinity came in, accompanied by a tall, dark-skinned, vigorous young man with close-cropped black hair, accompanied by a slender young Asian woman with her long hair tied back, really pretty, but I got the feeling she was with the young fella, if you get my drift.

"Ref, Ash, this is Captain Thaddeus of the Osiris and his first mate Ju'e," Trinity said. "They've come to help bring Ref onto the Osiris while they tow the Neb back to Zion."

"So you're the newly-unplugged potential who managed to jack out without the assistance of an operator," Thaddeus said to me, impressed but not awed.

"The line was open and I ducked through," I said.

Ju'e smiled. "You have tenacity: we need people like that."

Jack, Sand and a short kid in his late teens approached carrying a stretcher. They helped Ref onto the stretcher, then carried her out into the corridor. I got up and followed them out and down to a large access hatch in the side of the ship that stood open and across a metal catwalk into the Osiris. I looked back to survey the damage to the Nebuchadnezzar: those squiddies had cut most of the top off the ship and they'd cut a hole in the side of the ship right about where the mess deck was.

Once on board the Osiris, Sand had Ref brought to the sickbay, where she and Gia, the medic on the Osiris, set to work patching Ref up: taping electrodes to her skin to monitor her temp, blood pressure and heart rate, taping electrodes to her skull to monitor her brain waves, inserting some kind of IVs into the jacks on her arms. I stayed put the whole time, watching from a tall metal stool in one corner. As soon as the others had gone, I pulled the stool closer to the table where she lay.

Ref looked up at me. "Are you going to ask me?" she said.

"Ask you what?" I asked.

She sniffed, trying to make it sound like a laugh, but it came out sounding a lot more like a sob. "Ask me what happened in there."

"Not if you'd rather not discuss it," I said.

"I gotta get it off my chest," she said. She paused, collecting her thoughts...

I don't know how it started [Ref began]. I followed Mr. Fragonard the curator into the office and we started discussing how I was going to pay for the sword. Next thing I knew, Cain and Abel, those two dark little guys that work for Armand had barged into the room.

"Party's over," Cain announced. "There's a gent who wants to help pay for the little lady's letter-opener."

Armand stepped into the room and shut the door behind him. Hard. He turned back to me, then jerked his thumb at Mr. Frangonard and said to Cain and Abel, "All right, bind him."

Fragonard tried to bolt for the door, but Cain grabbed him and punched him under the jaw. Abel helped Cain tie him up with a lamp cord, then they shoved him into a corner. I tried calling Tank for an exit, but all I got was static and a couple words from Tank, something like "computer... hardline." I realized the computer was connected to the hardline, and there was a microphone attached to it. I started reaching for it, but Cain got wise to me and started ripping the modem out of the tower. I managed to rip one of my derringers out of my boot, but Abel jumped me.

I didn't come to until I felt someone holding a flame under my ear. I jerked awake to find myself lying bound hand and foot and lying on the floor of Armand's office. Abel stood at my feet, covering me with a drawn pistol, while Cain crouched beside me, holding a match which he snuffed out between his fingers. He stood up and flicked the dead match into the fireplace. "She's all yours, boss," he said, stepping back.

Armand stepped into my sight range and waved his flunkies off. "Let her alone, mes enfants, I have important things to discuss with my guest." They went into the next room. He stood there looking down at me. "So you thought you could outbid me on that artifact: a most imprudent gesture on your part, *mar cher*."

"Look, what do you want with that old thing?" I asked.

He gave me one of those smug smiles of his - mind you, the guy's got a whole repertoire of them - with so much condescension that I could have slapped him if part of me wasn't scared, and the other part wasn't infatuated with him. "That is not for you to know, *ma petite*," he said, as if I were still twelve years old.

"Then take it, just let me out of here," I said.

He chuckled deep in his throat. "You think you can buy your freedom so easily? You joke with me, ma fille." He knelt over me. "And those who joke with me end up paying for their impudence."

"What do you want with me?" I demanded.

The smile turned snakish. "I think you already know what it is which I desire, for it is the same thing which you desire," he said. "You want an end to this fighting, this hiding like a rat in a hole, fighting a war which you know you cannot win."

"I chose the truth."

"The truth," he said, in an oily murmur. "Your 'truth' is a nightmare from which you and your deluded companions cannot awaken on your own. But I can free you from it."

The world changed around us. The walls and the floor and the furnishings of his study vanished. I found myself lying on the mossy ground in a shaded nook of a park-like garden.

I pulled myself into a sitting posture. On a small hillock, under the shadow of a spreading oak tree a couple lay embraced on a silk quilt of purple and red, the remains of a picnic meal spread on the grass to one side. I realized the man was a younger-looking version of Armand, his face a trifle less care-worn and the look in his eyes gentler. And the woman he lay with... was me...

He knew. He knew what I had thought of him when I was still blinded by the Matrix.

"This which you see can be yours if you do but one thing," said a voice - Armand's voice - very close to me. I looked to see the Armand I knew kneeling beside my head, looking at me. "Surrender to the why of your existence. Release this death-grip on your nightmares."

I closed my eyes and shook my head. "No... No... stop screwing with my head."

" 'Screwing with your head'? Hah! You know you have wanted this since you ceased to be a child."

Not only did he know, but he'd taken notice.

His voice continued. "I saw how you gazed at me when you were young. At that time, it was but a schoolgirl's sheep's-eyes gaze at an attractive older man, but now that look has ripened along with the young woman who cast these gazes at me."

He turned slightly, leaning over me, taking my chin in his hand and turning my face to look up into his. "And for all the protests you may mouth, your eyes betray the truth within you. You hunger for this world you rejected. You hunger for the very world you despise. Why else do you come back here so often? Why else do you take relics of this world back to your own? Why?" He chuckled deep in his throat, a sound that made my blood run cold. He leaned over me, hovering over my body, his eyes looking down into mine. "Because you are still a part of it. Flee as fast as you can, the reality is that you would much prefer that which you once rejected. I can free you from your nightmares, but you must pay the price."

I looked up at him poised over me, and I could feel the lust flowing from him in waves. There was little I could do to defend myself.

I ground my jaws for a moment, then spat in his face.

"Very well then, if you will not give it, then it must be taken..."

...I won't tell you the rest... except that the whole time, everything around me started breaking down into the code. I thought I was dying... but then through the hum of the code, I could hear your voice in the next room, Ash...

Ref fell silent, her story finished. She turned her face away from mine almost as if she were ashamed to look at me. But I reached down and turned it back to mine as gently as I could.

"Ref, don't blame yourself," I said. "I'm to blame for not going in that room with you."

"You'd be outnumbered just as I was. You'd have gotten yourself killed for sure, and he still would have had his way with me," she said. "...I guess it's a case of 'Be careful what you wish for: you may not like what you get'."

"Don't put it that way," I said, and even I could hear the pleading tone in my voice.

"I know... but he was right."

"Don't you believe it."

She looked right at me. "He was right on one count: that there was a time when I wanted him. But I made choices to put that behind me."

I listened to her but I didn't. She was still dazed from her ordeal and her words sounded like someone with a fever so high it made them mad as a March Hare till it came down. She was trying to make sense of it all, settling it all in her head.

She wasn't saying it in so many words, but I knew, just from listening between the lines, she was blaming herself for what had happened.

"It's wierd..." she said. "The Matrix code is green, but the code that he was made of was red. I don't know why that would be so, unless it's because he's from the older version of the Matrix."

My mind had started to wander. My dad had taught us kids to play chess, which was why my ears had pricked up over the chess puzzle in "Through the Looking Glass", which had clued me in when Trinity had dropped those hints that had lead to my unplugging. I think my mind was trying to make sense of it all as well, using those chess themes...

Trinity had been the "Red Queen" to my "White Pawn", and the Agents had been using me as a pawn in a bid to capture her, but somehow the table had been turned: The Oracle had said I'd crossed two brooks in my quest for the truth and that I had six brooks ahead of me. That meant I had to get to the eighth square, which would turn a pawn into a queen, giving it the

ability to move in any direction. By checkmating the White Queen (Armand the Frenchman's wife), I'd crossed the eighth brook and been given the power to see the Matrix as it is and to bend it as I needed to.

But what about Ref? Obviously she was a pawn who'd become a queen. But apparantly her game had ended for the moment, since she'd had to sacrifice herself even in the act of checkmating (Yeah, I'm aware of the connotation: I may be old-fashioned, but I ain't naive) the Red King.

We were both starting to sound a little like the crazy detective. Maybe he'd had some similar horrible experience inside the Matrix.

Or maybe he'd been unplugged and reality had just gotten to be too much for him. Part of me felt that same way. But only part.

To be continued...

Shaken

Chapter Notes

Under the Gun

J.M.J.

Under the Gun

by "Matrix Refugee"

Author's Note:

Sorry for the deplorable delay: I've been having some really bad problems with my computer: spyware bugs messed it up, so I had to have the software reloaded, and even after that, this screwy machine still isn't working quite right, so I was loathing sitting down at the keyboard each day for a while there... But I managed to finish writing this story: the last chapter will be posted next week!

But first, a few words of thanks to all my reviewers and patient readers:

To Yar Kramer: I didn't expect Smith to show up either, but I think his cameo will serve an interesting purpose to this narrative...

To Oshika Kogo: I am sooo very sorry it took me this long to update, but my computer caught some horrible spyware bugs, so I had to get it fixed, then reinstall my Internet software... it took me almost three weeks to get back online, then summer intervened... I'll have the next chapter posted next week (I did a lot of writing while the comp was being repaired).

To Argent Inluminai: Ugh, I hear you about PC problems! When this comp finally kicks the bucket, I am buying a Macintosh since they don't have half the bugs as PCs, but I digress... I should brush up on my basic chess knowledge (what comes of sidestepping the 'Write what you know' rule). And I'm glad you're clearly enjoying this fic! There's a slim outside chance I might write a sequel to it... And thanks for clearing my fears that Ref might be a Mary Sue! She's appeared in a few other "Matrix" fics of mine and I've been concerned that she might be edging toward Sue-ish territory.

To kraeg001: Yep, "the One" makes a cameo appearance in this chapter!

To just64helpin: That was something I was careful to avoid: ie. making this story sound like the original movie, but I think I did a good job veering away from that.

To the toltec: Thanks for the suggestion! I hope this chapter serves it well.

Disclaimer:

See chapter 1

Chapter Eight: Shaken

Ref fell asleep, exhausted as much from telling her story as from what happened to her inside the Matrix. I stayed by her, waiting for her to wake up. My chest still ached and my head felt like someone had stuck a hot needle through my head jack.

Sand, along with Gia, the medic for the Osiris, came to check on Ref and I a moment or so later. Sand looked me over with a worried wrinkle between her brows. "You all right, Ash? You look pale."

"Yeah, I'm okay," I said. "Just shaken from all the shakin' goin' on."

Gia looked me in the face. "Something happened to you in there. Let me take a look."

She had me get up on the other operating table in the sick bay and hooked me up to the bank of monitors along the wall behind us. Some kind of visual scan of my brain appeared on one of the small screens, while an osilloscope tracked what I guessed were my brain waves. I watched Sand's face as she watched the monitors: a worried look that I didn't like the looks of came into her eyes.

"Something happened in there," she said. "You have traces of VDT, virtual damage trauma."

"I probably got cut up when I took that drop out the window," I said

Gia shook her head. "This isn't consistent with those kinds of wounds. You were chased by Agents, weren't you?"

"Yeah, three of 'em came out of nowhere," I said. "Then when I was calling out, this fourth one showed up... tried doing something completely wierd... He tried sticking his hand into my chest."

Gia looked at me puzzled. "You must have hit your head somewhere. I've never heard of an Agent doing that to anyone."

"I'm only telling you what happened to me," I said, pulling myself up on my elbow.

Sand pressed me down. "You lay back and get some rest." Doctor's orders, I thought, settling back down as Sand took me by the arm and injected a painkiller into one of my jacks. Not as painless as it sounds.

My head slowly started feeling heavy and I closed my eyes, resting this one out, easy way to spend the rest of the trip home.

Some time later, probably a few hours, I felt someone nudge me. I opened my eyes to find Trinity standing beside me. "Hey, time to go: we're home," she said.

Jack, Sand, and Gia were already helping Ref onto a stretcher. I sat up and stepped down to the floor. I came to the side of the stretcher as Jack and Sand lifted it; I put a hand on Ref's shoulder, ready to pull back if she winced. Ref opened her eyes and looked up at me, nudging her shoulder into my hand, as if she welcomed the touch. Or maybe I just hoped that she did.

We headed out into the corridor, then out into the rear loading bay of the Osiris and down a ramp to the dockside.

I stepped out into the open. I expected darkness, but this place was well-lit and the air warm, though it had a slight scent of being re-recycled. I followed the rest of the crew down the ramp, and looked up.

The ceiling above reminded me of an immense planetarium dome. We stood on the rim of a cement dry dock in what was clearly the shipyard level of the city. Next to the Osiris, the Nebuchadnezzar had been docked, a repair crew already at work assessing the damage to the hull.

Jack nudged my arm and drew me aside as Morpheus and Thadeus came down the ramp carrying a second stretcher with something wrapped in grey canvas. I knew who it had been...

A crowd of people had gathered on the dock, mostly ship technicians, with a number of bystanders mixed in. I spotted a young fellow about my own age hovering at the back of the crowd, short dark hair and quiet brown eyes, a small scar between the base of his nose and his upper lip, a bit pretty-faced, but heck, I'm not the most hard-chinned fellow either. His eye lighted on Trinity and a slight smile lit his face. The crowd parted reverently before him, almost as if he were a god, as he approached her.

Trinity, shouldering a heavy duffle bag, smiled back at him. I'd had an inkling, but this only confirmed it: this guy was the one (all puns intended.). He came up to her and drew her into his arms; she reached up and kissed him, then let him help her carry her kit. I expected to feel sore at seeing this, but oddly enough, I had no hard feelings at all. Probably had too much on my mind, or I was still too shook up.

On the edge of the crowd, I spotted a stocky fellow in his early seventies, clad in a long, flowing blue robe embroidered in purple and red, which gave him the look of a slightly dotty wizard-type, but he had an air of gentle wisdom about his clean-shaven, jowly face. Jack and Sand set down Ref's stretcher as the newcomer approached. Sand approached the older man and spoke to him in a low voice before she led him to the stretcher. He knelt down beside it, putting a fatherly hand on Ref's head. "You rest up now, girl, it's gonna be all right," he said, in a husky-throaty voice. He stood up, his eye on me. "You must be Ash, the fellow who saved her?" he asked. "I'm Councillor Hamann, Ref's guardian."

"I was just doing what needed to be done; someone had to save her," I replied, trying to sound nonchalant. But I could tell from the quiet twinkle in Hamann's slightly faded blue eyes that he sensed something else in my tone.

A woman's cry, not a scream but a howl of anger and sorrow, rose over the dockyard clatter around us. I looked up to see this small, dark, somewhat exotic-looking girl, her wavy hair

held back from her face with a silver headband, clinging to the other stretcher. Gia, Ju'e and Sand tried to speak to her, but the girl was inconsolable.

"First Dozer, now Tank! That ship is bad luck," the girl cried.

"Zee... he wouldn't want you to be this upset... he died getting Jack and Ref and Ash out of the Matrix," Sand said, leading the girl away to one side. At first, I took Zee to be Tank's wife or ladyfriend, but she seemed young for that; getting a better look at her, I noticed her face resembled Tank's, and it dawned on me she might be his sister.

"Poor girl's lost two brothers in this war," Hamann said, and started to take one end of Ref's stretcher; I beat him to it. With Hamann leading the way, Jack helped me carry her to a nearby elevator, which took us down to the residential level: tiers on tiers of metal-doored apartments cut into the rock, like pigeonholes with webs of catwalks and stairways leading to each one.

"So Trinity unplugged you, Ash?" Hamann asked.

"Yeah, she got me out in time: I suspect the machines were using me to try getting at her," I said.

Hamann nodded sagely. "Yes, there's been many reports from several other captains that Agent activity has gotten more intense. And, as you found out the hard way, the Sentinels have gotten more numerous in the pipelines."

"Sounds like you know more than a bit about that," I said.

"I apprenticed on the Charlemagne, and I was a gunner aboard the Peaquod and the Gilgamesh. Survived two major attacks on the Peaquod. I was a sole survivor of one of 'em."

"So, for your distinguished service, they made you one of the top guys here?" I asked.

"Something like that, once I reached the proper age," he replied.

At length, he paused before the door of one of the larger cubicles on the top level. Hamann knocked on the door. It opened and a white-haired woman in her sixties peered out. She took one look at the stretcher on which Ref lay and pulled the door open wider. "Earth above, what happened? Bring her in."

"Jas, she'll be all right: she took a bad hit Matrix-side, but this young man got her out," Hamann said, putting a hand on my shoulder. "This is Ash, the young man Morpheus just freed."

Jas nodded, smiling a little and led us into the apartment, a low-ceilinged den that reminded me a little of a cave or a rock shelter, except for the colored woven hangings on the walls and hanging from the ceiling, separating two nooks from the large main room. Jas pulled aside one of the curtains, covering the smaller nook, which I realized was Ref's room. A few large sack-like pillows covered with worn blankets for a bed, a battered wooden chest of drawers held together with large metal staples, and a metal bookshelf with two shelves containing a

few carefully preserved books, real bound paper books, probably salvaged from the surface somehow.

Jack and I set the stretcher on the floor; Jas pulled the covers back on the bed as I picked up Ref - yep, the romantic-movie-hero-carrying-the-girl gesture - and laid her on the cushions.

Ref clasped my wrist with one hand. "Thank you."

I tried to shrug nonchalantly as I said, "I'm just helping take care of you," but I knew there was a lot more going on in my heart.

She reached up, putting her hand behind my head, stroking the stubble of my hair gently as she looked up into my face, showing me a smile.

I'm not sure what exactly came over me, whether I was still not myself from the damage caused by that tussle with that Agent, or it came from smooching the French guy's wife. But I leaned in closer to Ref and pressed my lips to hers. I felt someone's mouth tremble: I guessed it was hers, so I started to pull back. But then I realized, looking at her, she wasn't trembling. I was.

I pulled back a few inches, still looking down into her eyes. "I'm sorry... I don't know why I..."

"Shh... it's all right... No need to be sorry..." she said, laying a finger over my lips for a second. She reached up a little, moving in for a second kiss; I met her halfway, pushing her back down just a little, not pushing her into the pillows, but nudging her down so she wouldn't tire herself. Her body, under my hand on her side, felt hard, tight, disciplined, like the fighter that she was, but I felt her tremble that time, more from pain and exhaustion than from fear. I tasted salt between her lips, a touch of something metallic, like blood... but something sweet as well...

Jack coughed behind us. I released Ref and looked over my shoulder, feeling a bit sheepish.

"Sorry about that," I said.

"I get the same way with Sand sometimes: no hard feelings," Jack said.

Jas lifted a corner of the curtain and peered in. "I've got hot soup ready for anyone who wants some," she said.

"Thanks," I said. I leaned over Ref again. "You take it easy there, now. I'll be back."

Ref smiled at me and turned onto her side stiffly, clearly trying to make herself comfortable. "I'll be here."

I kissed her forehead, then got up and followed Jack out to the main room, a sort of kitchen-living room in the middle of which stood a low metal table, somewhat like the kind you find in some Japanese restaurants, only surrounded by four large square thin cushions.

I'd hardly known what to expect when Jas said she had soup ready, especially after a week of eating single-cell protein goop. I have to admit, my eyes nearly started out of my head when she placed a steaming, aromatic bowl of herb broth with chunks of potatoes, carrots, celery and tomatoes before me.

"If you're wonderin' where the vegetables came from, we grow 'em hydroponically on one of the lower levels of the city," Hamann explained. "A man by the name of Gideon living up on the surface managed to start a farm just after the machines took over. Rigged up high-powered lights and such, managed to grow several crops before the machines got wise to him. But he grew enough plants to give us cuttings and seeds to plant food crops for the city."

"Just goes to show how resilient humans really are," I said.

"Are you speakin' for yourself, boy? Thadeus radioed in saying you jacked out without any help from an operator, and with an Agent on your tail," Hamann said.

I shrugged. "I had to get out."

I soon told my story to Hamann, who listened with quietly wrapt attention. He, returning the favor, told me how he and Jas had adopted Ref after she had been freed nearly ten years earlier, just after their own daughter Artemis had died when her ship had been attacked. The Zion Academy had been hard put trying to find a niche for Ref, since she made an awkward fighter, and since her head jack didn't sit right, but Hamann had seen to it that she got a commission working as an archivist for the Zion Archives. Jack left to check on Sand and Tank's sister Zee, while Hamann went to see about the preparations for the funeral.

"Must be hard for you, havin' to let go of him so soon after you were freed," Jas said, collecting the tray she'd brought to Ref's nook.

"I'm just rolling that into letting go of the world I knew," I said.

Jas looked me in the face. "Here, don't try playin' the tough young man with me: I may be old, but my eyes are still sharp."

She had me there. The toughness was a mask I'd put on to shut out the world, or maybe it was some kind of defense system the machines had installed on me to keep me from getting too wise. Or from being too human.

She released my gaze and went out into the main room. Once she had gone, I tucked my head and let myself weep over Tank's death.

Hamann was a priest in the Zion Temple, so he had agreed to preside over funeral ceremony for Tank, in the Grotto of Remembrance. Ref was still too tired and achy to rise from her bed and join the rest of the Neb crew, so I went in her place. Besides the Neb crew, Zee, Tank's younger sister and Cas, Tank's widowed sister-in-law along with Tank's niece and nephew, his brother Dozer's kids, were there, along with a sturdy, slightly round-faced fellow with dish-water brown hair and mocking grey-blue eyes, another Zion-born since he didn't have jacks in his head or arms. I guessed he was an operator from another ship: he had reddish marks over his ears where his headset would have been. I later found out his name was

Sparks and that he'd trained with Tank in the Zion Academy. The chapel where we had gathered was a spacious grotto cut out of the living rock, the walls etched with hundreds of names in between the small sconce-like holders for the torches that lit the space. On a square raised platform, about two feet high and nearly ten feet on a side, in the middle of our circle lay a small assortment of objects, clearly Tank's worldly possessions: a pair of boots, a couple worn jerseys and a couple pairs of pants, a battered notebook-sized computer and a large metal box of disks.

I noticed the body was glaringly absent; I nudged Trinity and asked her why. She explained that Tank had wanted to be cremated, the way most Zion dwellers wished to be interred. I almost asked if there was any other option, but it dawned on me that there wasn't: when you're living in a gigantic rabbit warren underground, there's not much space for a cemetery.

Hamann offered a somewhat lengthy invocation to the Higher Power. Then Morpheus spoke at length, eulogizing Tank:

"Tank, the second son of Sherman, served his level best as our operator on board the Nebuchadnezzar. He was quick to obey, calm in the fury of pursuit, patient in training the newly freed minds. But he meant more to us than a mere member of the crew. He was a brother to us and to the newly freed, and a son to me as his captain. He knew places in our hearts that few of us dared to enter ourselves. His father raised him to be a thinker as well as a fighter and to care for the needs of the people he worked, lived and served with, capabilities well-manifested in this young man.

"He apprenticed on the Novalis, then served on the Nebuchadnezzar alongside his older brother Dozer, and on both ships, his service record was nearly flawless. If he had not been Zion-born, he would have made a fine captain, but he preferred to serve rather than to lead..."

Sparks nudged me. "Ever had to put up with one of Morph's speeches? This is a short one."

"Oh shush," I said.

Once Morpheus had finished speaking, he stepped down from the platform. Silence settled over us. I caught myself praying a Hail Mary the way my mother used to at funerals in our town... I almost stopped myself, but it was the best I could do at the time.

Then, after a minute, Zee stepped up to the platform and took up the pair of boots. "I claim these for my nephew Shaf, so he'll walk tall like his uncle, but he won't have such a hard road," she said, her voice trembling. She stepped back into the circle.

Sparks stepped forward and took the laptop and the disks. "I claim the notebook: He took good care of that, even if he didn't take the best care for himself."

Trinity and Cas both groaned, annoyed. Zee looked like she wanted to sock Sparks, but he shot them all a teasing grin. Hamann glared at Sparks, clearing his throat, but said nothing.

I was tempted to step forward and claim the shirts, but Trinity's young fellow came for them instead. When the last items had been claimed, Hamann spread his arms in a quiet

benediction. "Go then in his memory..."

As the others dispersed, Hamann stepped down and led me back to the apartment in silence.

Jas had made up a bed for me on the floor of Ref's nook. I bunked down there that night, but I could hardly sleep. I felt way too keyed up over everything, and my chest still ached, though not as bad as before.

After an hour or two, I slipped into a mild doze, but then I awakened, hearing Ref's bed creak. I felt the corner of my blankets lift as she crept in under them and huddled against me. I turned onto my side, giving her more room and held her close. She shook like a leaf, and I felt her tears as she hid her face in the crook of my arm.

Mind you, I'm not the most touchy-feely guy there is, but I spent most of that night holding her comfortingly. I could still tell, from the way she winced in her sleep, that she still ached from the VDT, and I knew she cried because she blamed herself for the attack.

Hamann poked his head around the edge of the curtain, obviously checking on Ref and I. Ref had drifted off to sleep, her head on my arm. He smiled at us and tiptoed away.

At least I had my girl's adoptive dad's approval.

To be continued...

Waking

Chapter Notes

J.M.J.

J.M.J.

Under the Gun

by "Matrix Refugee"

Author's Note:

Sorry it took me a while to get this typed: I was going crazy last week trying to find the parts I needed for the Trinity costume I wore to WorldCon, the convention for the World Science Fiction Society. But... here, at length, is the last chapter of this fic, which I only just finished extensively revising for length and content. An idea came to me that was too wild to keep to myself and it begged to be included to have this story end on a high, ringing, clanging note.

But first, a few words of thanks to all my reviewers and patient readers:

To Lady Smith: Wow! one of the most enthusiastic reviews I've ever gooten! Thanks! Re: the Mero/Ref scene - this was originally a bit longer, and I did get into Ref's emotional reaction to the attack, but I thought it started to get a bit maudlin, so I cut that part... If this had been a movie version, the shot of the Merv leaning over Ref and pinning her to the floor would have been rendered all in Matrix code, like the shot where Smith takes over the Oracle's awareness. (and that little glitch re: Ref knowing about different versions of the Matrix - it's either an accidental oversight on my part, or Morpheus may have passed on what Smith told him about the first Matrix having been a perfect world.) Re: including the name "Lambert" in the Mero's alias - I think one of the real Merovingian kings of France (they reigned waaay back in the 500s through the 700s A.D.) was named Lambord, and that's pretty dang close to Lambert, so close it was definately eye-brow-raising. And re: the claiming ceremony - I actually got the idea from Frank Herbert's original "Dune" novel, and I had a feeling the Zion dwellers would most likely have a similar ceremony in their funeral rites, since they're a closely-knit, technologically advanced tribal community. I remember a comment in "The Art of the Matrix", the coffee table-sized art book with tons of sketches and storyboards from the first film, that the clothes the Neb crew wear have clearly had more than one owner, so my mind reasoned that it was highly likely that the spare clothing of someone who died in service might be claimed by family members or fellow crew-members. There's even one bit in "Enter the Martix" when Sparks asks Ghost that if anything happens to him (Ghost) "Can I claim your boots?" (Feel free to borrow it! or even "claim" it! ;8))

To kraeg001: It's kinda pre-Reloaded, maybe about a year before (I haven't heard how much time has passed since the end of "The Matrix" and "Reloaded" but I'm guessing it's a couple of years). The "Peaquod", as the name of a ship was borrowed from one of the "Matrix" comics on the website, but the Charlemagne was an idea that came off the top of my head (for that matter, Charlemagne's great-grandfather Charles Martell lead a quiet, fairly bloodless revolution against the last of the Merovingian kings of France. Yep, I done my homework on a lot of the references in the films!)

To just64helpin: Yeah, I just found out on this website I stumbled on, "The Matrix Character Database" (a MUST bookmark for any self-respecting "Matrix" fanfic writer) that there are two more ships that don't even get mentioned in the film, but were mentioned in the schematic drawings for the Zion dock: the "Vishnu" and the "Ganesha".

To GeneticallyElvenGryffindor: ::Blushing:: Thanks! I have to admit, Ash's head has been a great place to get inside, and I'm considering writing a sequel to this.

Disclaimer:

See chapter 1

Chapter Nine: Waking

I guess my reassurances paid off: Ref was up and about the next morning, limping a little, but otherwise usual busy self, checking the disks containing the data she'd collected.

"I'm afraid this wasn't my most productive run," she admitted to Hamann.

"Every run that you make is productive," he said. "Doesn't matter how much you bring back, as long as it adds to the Archive. You'll do better next time."

Ref looked up at me. "I'm gonna upload these files into the server; you want to come along?"

"Sure thing: it'll help me get a feel for the place," I said.

On the way to the archive, she gave me the ten-dollar tour: first stop, the engineering level, with the heavy machinery that filtered the air and the water supply as well as processing waste to be used as fertilizer on the next level down, which house the hydroponic gardens: the food crops were grown here, while another large chamber housed the vats where they grew that lovely single-cell protein.

At length, she led me to a room underneath the Temple, a natural cave blocked up with a door that belonged on a bomb shelter. She typed some kind of pass-code on a numeric keypad set into the rock beside the door, then drew me back as something buzzed deep inside the door frame. The door swung out on its hinges, opening wide enough for us to step through, she led me inside and paused to close the door.

"Y' can't be too careful," I said.

"Nope. If the machines knew what kind of stuff we had down here, they'd send a squiddie with my name on it after me," she said.

I have to admit, I almost made a joke about the French guy sending his goons after her, but I wisely kept that under my hat.

She led me down a short corridor that opened out into a room with several padded chairs similar to the ones on the Neb, each with a harness of wires connected to a port along one wall; along the other stood several workstations. She led me through that room into the next; along the walls in this next room stood several servers, each labelled like the wings of a library: "Music", "World History", "Art Gallery".

She brought me to the very back of the room, where another of those chairs stood before a work station. She turned on the computer, and once it had booted up, she set to work loading one disk after another into it, transferring the files.

"So this is it? This is how you earn your keep?" I asked.

"This is part of it," she said, looking up at me with a smile. "This is what I live to do."

I perched my hip on the edge of the desk, watching. "Okay... now how do you access the files, jacking in?"

"That's one way, the way the freed minds access it; you probably noticed the workstations out there..."

"And those are for the Zion-born?" I asked.

"You got it. You don't miss anything."

I shrugged. "Comes with being a detective."

Once she loaded the last disk, she put the workstation on hibernation and led me out of the Archive chambers.

"Is that all you have to do?" I asked.

"No, I still have to jack in and finish cataloging the new items," she said. "I can do that from the privacy of my own personal processing unit, back in my room."

"Wow, that's convenient," I said.

She led the way back to Hammann's rooms; once we'd gotten back there she led me to her nook and took down something that looked like an especially thick notebook computer with a couple cables sticking out of it, down from a shelf over the bed. She patted the mattress beside her as she sat down. I sat myself down beside her as she set the unit on the mattress, then pressed a few buttons on the top of the thing.

"Now if you'll just lay down, I'll jack you in," she said. I lay back on my side, letting her lean over me as she slotted the business end of the cable into my head jack.

Everything went grey for a second, then I found myself standing in a garden shaded by tall pines and laurel trees. Ref stood at my side clad in one of those flowing gowns you see on

Greek statues (well, the ones with clothes on them). I looked down to find myself still wearing my 1940s duds.

"Oops!" Ref said, "Wrong template! Hold on, I'll be back."

She disappeared in a cloud of greenish code. A moment later, she came back dressed in an almost teasingly librarian-ish blouse and skirt. Everything around us changed from a garden to an Art-Deco terrace leading to a building of concrete and glass with chrome accents, which I guessed was the Archive.

"Is this more like it?" she asked.

"Yeah, thanks," I said. "How'd you do that?"

"I jacked out long enough to change the template. That Greek garden is the current default: I'm one of those types who like to change the interface template a lot," she said, leading the way up the terrace.

"Hey, if it's your space and you can do what you want with it, who's to stop you from re-decorating when the mood strikes?" I said.

The front doors of the building opened at our approach. We stepped out of the simulated sunlight into the cool of the interior. She took me by the hand and led the way through the Archives.

I got the twenty-dollar tour that time: she showed me the art gallery, in one wing; the library in another, the video library in a third. I wasn't sure what to expect, but I didn't expect it to have a third of the stuff it housed. It was almost too much to take in at once, but I guess that's the nature of it.

"Now, you didn't collect all this stuff yourself, did you?" I asked.

"No, not at all. There's been several generations of archivists who've tended this place," she said. "I've added only a teeny fraction of what's here."

She said this humbly and sincerely, like she knew clearly what kind of responsibility she'd had handed to her when they gave her this job.

She led me through a set of double doors marked "Archivists Only", into what was obviously the administrative wing. "VIP access," she said, smiling.

"Helps to have friends in high places," I said, nonchalant.

All at once, an alarm bell started ringing and a siren blared somewhere deeper in the wing. I jumped at the racket, looking up and around me.

"Virus alert," she said, taking me by the hand and hustling me out onto the front terrace...

A moment later, I sat up, Ref pulling the cable from her own jack and removing mine.

"Something happened to you inside the Matrix," she said, looking at me.

"Why, what makes you think that?" I asked, puzzled.

"The alarm stopped as soon as you jacked out," she said.

"Wait... that Agent..."

"What Agent?"

"When we jacked out after Jack and I saved you, this Agent came out of nowhere and tried sticking his hand into me," I said. "It was like he was trying to infect me."

She put her hand on my wrist. "I'm going out to find help; wait here."

Maybe I was just getting paranoid, but I got a bad feeling about this...

It was almost like that nightmare about the eye examination from hell that I'd had before Trinity found me. A bunch of techs from Zion Command Central's technical division jacked me into a construct, then started probing my brain from the inside and out. Some of them even jacked in and ran virtual scans on me. It all hurt like hell, worse than a hot needle stabbed into my head jack.

When the techs had finished with me, they let Ref and Hammann come into the room where I lay still strapped down on an operating table. Hammann held back for a moment while Ref approached me first. She hugged me around the neck and leaned down to kiss me. Much as the effort made my head ache even worse, I reached up and kissed her back.

"You here to give me the bad news?" I asked, looking over Ref's shoulder at Hammann.

"Well, so far, they're sayin' your avatar is a bundle of messed-up code. A virus tried to attack you, but you're bucking it. The real problem is, you read like an Agent," he explained.

"Tank pointed out that Agent on top of us when we jacked out after we brought you to the Oracle," Ref pointed out. "There wasn't any."

Hammann dropped his gaze, a clear sign he had some worse news to share. "I hate to have to be the one to tell you this, but I'm afraid they're likely to send you back up there."

Ref bit her lip and turned her face away. I tried to sit up. "What? You mean I've come this far..." I let the words fade in my throat.

"I'm sorry, Ash. You showed a lot of promise. But we have to take precautions to protect you and protect ourselves as well," Hammann said. "Every time you jacked in on a mission, you'd catch the machines' attention. You'd be a sitting duck for them to go after."

"A sleeper, in other words," I said, thinking out loud.

"That's what they're calling it," Hammann said. "I don't want to see you go, but I'm afraid this is how things are done here."

"But what if I don't want to go back," I said. "You can't force me to."

"We aren't trying to cause problems for you," he said. "But we are trying to protect you from yourself and protect ourselves from what the machines would do to us through you."

Even in the real world, I was still a pawn of the machines...

"If you send him back, you'll have to send me back with him," Ref said, her fists doubled, her voice hard like the stone walls around us.

Hammann looked at us both, his face solemn, even sad. "I'll see what I can do, but I'm afraid I can't make any guarantees either way."

With that, he went out of the room, closing the metal door behind him.

I looked up at Ref. "Please don't do this, Ref," I said.

She leaned over me again, holding me. "I have to do this. I love you."

"But you've got your work to take care of... Did you ever finish those uploads you had to do?"

"Yeah, but it wasn't easy. I was worrying about you the whole time. Maybe it's just the after-effects of what happened to me last time I jacked in, but I felt tired and a bit nauseous."

"Probably just what happened to you back in the Matrix," I said.

I felt tired from all the poking and prying into my head. I lay back on the operating table. Ref perched herself on a tall metal stool at my head, then reached down and put her arm under my head, supporting it.

I must have dozed off: next thing I knew, someone nudged me awake. I opened my eyes and looked up to find Morpheus standing over me.

"What's the verdict?" I asked.

"You are going to be brought back to the surface, where you will be sedated and placed where the machines can find you. It will happen too quickly for you to remember it," he said. He kept his usual solemnly calm demeanor, but I could tell he hated having to break the bad tidings to me.

"You will be taken to the surface on board the Logos. Captain Niobe and her crew will see that you make the transition smoothly," he said. He clearly trusted Niobe, but he didn't trust himself to do the job. The prospect scared me stiff - what the hell was gonna happen to me next? - but I felt bad for him as well.

I had plenty of time to mull over what lay ahead as the Logos sped through the tunnels leading to the surface. Irony: I'd had to go up to the surface to get the convincer I needed in order to find out the worst of the awful reality. Now, things had almost gotten too real, so they had to take me back to the dreamworld where I'd come from.

Captain Niobe, a tiny woman who looked like she stood all of five feet tall, but who packed a "don't mess with me" attitude I didn't want to feel the brunt of, ordered me confined to quarters. Sparks, their operator, came down once bringing my "last meal", a roll of bread and a tin bowl of clear soup.

"I've heard about people being sent back, but I've never actually seen it done," Sparks said, setting the tray on the metal stool beside the bunk where I lay. "It's something the Academy teaches to operators like me, but it's like an earthquake drill: You're doing it with the intention that you don't actually have to do it someday... but here we are doing it."

I sat up and looked Sparks in the eye. "Sparks, can you do me one favor right now?"

"I was about to ask you if you had any last requests," Sparks said.

"Just let me eat this in peace," I said.

"Your wish is my backslash-colon-execute-command," he said, with a phony little bow and went out.

Some minutes later, he came back to collect the tray, but thank goodness he kept his mouth shut this time.

It dawned on me why the third detective had gone crazy: the guy who disappeared had been unplugged. The guy who suicided must have taken the blue pill and it had poisoned him (accidentally or on purpose). But Clarence, the third guy, must have been reinserted into the Matrix, and the machines had done a number on his brain to keep him from blabbing to everyone about what was really going on.

My bladder almost lost it when it dawned on me what was about to happen...

I thought I heard a light footstep in the hallway; I stiffened, waiting for the steps to pause before the closed door, but they went on their way.

A moment later, I heard more footsteps, heavier ones that belonged to Sparks, approach and stop at the door. The moment of truth - or was it the moment of lies? - had arrived.

I got up as the door opened. Sparks stood out there, with Ghost, the first mate, a small, chin-bearded Asian guy equally as quiet as a ghost. They lead me to the sickbay where they had me strip down completely and pile my clothes on the floor before they strapped me down on the table. Ghost shaved my head while Sparks set to work filling a large syringe from a jar of what I took to be the sedative.

"Any last words?" Sparks asked.

"If you see Ref... tell her I said goodbye... tell her I love her..." I said, turning my gaze away to keep my heart from overflowing.

"I will tell her this," Ghost said.

Sparks approached me and inserted the needle into my arm jack. "Breathe deeply now. It won't take long." He depressed the plunger, shooting the stuff into me... I breathed deeply, my breaths coming ragged, my heart hammering in my chest.

Then something lunged out of the doorway behind Sparks and knocked him to the floor. The syringe dropped from my arm and I heard it smash. My head had started to feel light and the lights had gotten fuzzy. I heard the sounds of a scuffle but it seemed to come from the end of a long tunnel.

Everything gets really hazy after that. I heard a lot of yelling and the sound of an alarm going off. Then everything went dark, but I somehow stayed awake in the darkness. Or else I was dreaming, but in the dream, it felt like I was flying blinded, battling winds buffeting me about, sending me tumbling end over end, forcing me sidewise. I hit bottom somewhere. I heard confused movement and a flurry of blurred sounds all about me. Something snatched me up and hauled me away. I tried to fight it, but whatever it was felt inexorable. *This must be the machines taking me away*, I thought, not so much in words, but more like a raw idea that rose in my head. I tried to fight it off like a tiger, a blind tiger but a desperate one.

"Ow! Dammit, Ash, lay off; you'll kill me!" An older man's voice spoke out of the blackness. I forced my eyes open and I looked up into a blurry mass of flesh-color and blue that slowly resolved itself into Hammann's face. I had my hands around his throat, though I barely felt it, but he had me pinned down hard on the bed where I lay.

"What... where...?" I choked out, my numb grip on him loosening.

He took my hands from his throat and laid them on the mattress at my sides. "It's all right: you're back in Zion. Ref stowed away on the Logos; she stopped Sparks from shooting about half the sedative into you, but then they had some company come to call: squiddies attacked the ship. Niobe managed to steer out of there before they breached the hull. Still, they took a bad hit: no place to go except back to Zion, with the Novalis towing them. Looks like you got a second chance: there's a fellow here who's sticking up for you, goes by the name Dashiel, used to be a detective himself, at least before he found out the truth."

"He wouldn't happen to have trailed a cybercriminal named Trinity, would he?" I asked.

"As a matter of fact, I did," said a lanky man with greying platinum blonde hair, coming out of the far corner of the room.

I sat up, propping myself on my elbow, the one that didn't ache. "You're the first guy who went after Trinity?" I asked.

Dashiel nodded. "Yes, I am. I only just heard about you: I've been training in City Defense, and the word about you hadn't gotten around. Trinity told me everything about what's happened to you."

"Did you have the same sort of trouble with your... code?" I asked.

"Not exactly. It was never scanned thoroughly, but there again, I haven't jacked into any constructs of any kind since I was freed." He glanced at Hammann, as if quietly asking

permission to add something; Hammann nodded slowly. "The Zion Council is going to examine our cases and figure out what to do about it."

"Hopefully, it'll be a case of 'If it ain't broken, don't fix it'," Hammann said. "There's other jobs to be done here besides going back up there."

A few days later, the question went before the Council. In the meantime, Ref had been removed from the Neb's crew on insubordination and attacking two fleet officers; still, I had the feeling Hammann would put in a word to get her back on the crew.

The Council questioned the techs that had examined Dashiell's code and mine before they questioned us. Since we were perfectly fine in the real world and only jacking into the Matrix posed any possible hazards, they ruled that we could stay in the real world, but we were automatically disqualified for applying to the Zion Hovercraft Fleet. That didn't faze me, really: too many bugs up there. Only trouble was, I wouldn't be able to help Ref when-if she got her job back collecting more items.

As Hammann and I left the Council chamber, we met Trinity in the hallway.

"So they let you stay," she said with a slight smile.

"Yeah... but I have to thank you for it, just I have to thank you for unplugging me."

"I just did what needed to be done," she said. She glanced at Hammann, who waited in the hallway a few steps ahead of me. "You'd better get going. Ref will be looking for you."

"And I'm looking forward to seeing her again... Trinity?" I asked, as she started to turn away.

"Yes?"

I dropped my gaze to my boot toes. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"Well... I kinda had an eye on you, not that way really... I guess it was because you freed my mind."

"It's all right. I noticed." She clearly didn't let it bother her that she had.

I turned away and followed Hamann back to his family's rooms.

A month later, Ref and I were "pair-bonded", as they call gettin' hitched here in Zion. Hamann helped us find a love-nest of our own; I've been shuttling back and forth to it ever since I started training as a City Defender at the Academy. But I do manage to find the time to help Ref with the Archive, as best as I can.

Ref ran two collection missions in the space of a month, before she started having fits of nausea and trouble keeping that single-cell goop down. At first, Sand thought my girl had caught a flu bug, but it turned out to be something else.

Turns out Ref caught the bug from me, you might say. I'm gonna be a family man, which came as a complete surprise to me. Guess you might say I went from being like Sam Spade or Philip Marlowe to being Nick Charles to my wife's Nora; Ref even calls me "the Thin Man" as a nickname. ...But let's hope this world quiets down and this war ends for the better, so our kid can have a safe place to live in.

The End

Afterword:

There's a very slim outside chance that I may write a sequel to this, once I finish with some other ideas I'm tinkering with. If the sequel *does* get written, it'll be set about 14 years after "Revolutions" and it will feature Ash and Ref's son Blaze... and you'll find out just why the Merovingian was so adamant about getting that sword Ref bought at the art auction... Stay tuned...

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!