

Ground Zero  
by  
Richard Stanley

draft 25th January 2007

Shadow Theatre  
269 Portobello Rd.  
London W11

Darkness; Wind; Dry; Relentless.

A rhythmic throbbing like a quickening pulse. There is a flash and a searchlight splits the gloom. The turbid waters of the Rio Grande ripple in the downdraft of a circling jetcopter, kicking back the light onto the stars and bars on it's blackened fuselage. The craft hovers like a locust over the north shore, sensors tasting the air. Then the drone of its turbines changes pitch and it banks away into the night.

A nervous man with a greying moustache raises his dripping head from the shadow of a makeshift raft, motioning to his wife and son to resume their paddling. An eight year old girl clings to the raft, peering from beneath a damp tarpaulin as her parents struggle ashore.

MARIA:

Now, Carla, we have to walk a little more.

CARLA:

Estoy cansado, Mama.

MARIA:

I know. Mama is tired too.

She lifts Carla from the raft and for the first time the child feels the barren silt of the United States beneath her worn out sneakers.

CARLA:

Tengo hambre.

Up ahead is a sagging fence and a bullet scarred sign bearing the legend: "MARTIAL LAW AREA. ILLEGAL ALIENS LIABLE TO BE SHOT BY ORDER U.S. SUPREME COURT."

Carla's father, Abel, sets to work with a pair of bolt cutters, the rusted links giving way with surprising ease. His wife, Maria, watches as their first born son, Rafael, follows his father into the wasteland. Then Abel freezes, seeing a dark shape in his flashlight beam.

RAFAEL:

Que le pasa?

ABEL:

Nada. Dead horse. Coyotes must have been at it.

The horse's blackened tongue protrudes from between teeth that have been laid bare, blistered face peeling from the bone as if burned or melted from within, a hole bored with almost surgical precision in the base of it's skull. The beast's remaining eye is milky and cast as a devilled egg and there is no reflection in it and no world.

(CONTINUED)

CARLA:

Tengo miedo...

Abel turns, short hairs rising on the back of his neck. There is a sharp, metallic pop followed by a blinding flash and he realizes too late he has put his foot down on an anti-personnel mine.

White light fills the night, breaking up into sparks, a corona of superheated splinters racing out into the dark. Carla sits up not remembering having sat down. A secondary concussion follows an instant later and she winces as a parachute flare bursts above them like an evil red star from the book of Revelations, tainting everything with its glow.

Abel is still alive, staring dazedly past Maria as she struggles to improvise a tourniquet, doing what she can to tie off his stumps with the hem of her dress. His lips work incoherently, trying to draw his wife's attention to the line of figures that have appeared from the gloom behind her, moving so silently at first he thinks they might not be men at all but angels come down to fetch him. Then he hears the purr of servo motors and realizes they are neither.

\*

RAFAEL:

Hey...

Rafael stiffens, firelight glinting on body-armor as a platoon of hunter killer drone soldiers fan out around the stricken family, drawn by the heat of their bodies. The Mark 13 cyborgs move swiftly and efficiently on jointed, crab like legs, executing a precision pincer movement, already picking out individual targets, their steel skulls equipped with the latest wetware, artificially cultured brain tissue that allows them to be fully auto-independent while still functioning as a tightly coordinated group with a single, voracious purpose. They are cutting edge technology, hot off the assembly line yet their body-armor is already tagged with gaudy, swirling graffiti, only half legible in the firelight. Day-glo flags and the names of units, what Reader's Digest magazine used to call humour in uniform. 'Freedom is Our Responsibility'- 'Death2Life' -'Hasta La Vista, baby!'

\*

MARIA

Rafael !

ABEL trembles, losing too much blood, too fast. The hem of her dress can't hold it. Rafael raises his hands, his three dimensional heatshape locked in the drone soldier's crosshairs.

-RAFAEL:

We surrender... okay ?

(CONTINUED)

The steel death's heads are impassive, pinprick laser trackers sparking in their sockets, seeing right into him, into his heart, into his blood, into the light at Rafael's core.

RAFAEL:(cont.)

Por favor...

He takes a half step back, the air seeming to thicken about him, rippling as if it were quicksilver. He opens his mouth to shout something, a warning perhaps but all that emerges from Rafael's lips is a thickening wisp of blue grey smoke and a painful belch of hot gas. His hands fly to his scalp and Carla starts towards him, catching the acrid smell of burning hair. For an instant a tongue of fire dances like the holy ghost above her brother's head. Then he explodes as if he had a bomb in his guts, a hot rain dewing Carla's upturned face.

\*  
\*  
\*

The child spins, whimpering as the Mark 13 Stormtroopers turn their microwave cannons towards her, tightening the bandwidth. The anti-personnel weapons are totally silent, hot enough to hurt at a distance but gruesomely effective at close range.

Carla stumbles, the ground undulating beneath her feet as a steel claw erupts from the dirt, razored talons reaching for her ankles, microwaves scissoring above her, close enough to tan her shoulderblades. Yelping she propels herself on all fours back across the minefield towards her stricken parents but then a flailing, multi-limbed drone bursts like a trapdoor spider from the fallow soil between them, cutting off any hope of escape. Carla turns, wiping the blood from her eyes as the beast looms over her, twin hypodermics sliding from the underside of its painted skull, gleaming tips dripping with psychoactive neurotoxins.

MARIA:

Dejala. Jodido bicho!!!

Carla dimly hears her mother's cries as Maria tries to draw the cyborg away and the whine of servo-motors as the beast considers its options. Then its telescopic neck snakes aside, the air seething about Maria as she tries to flee, clawing at her dress and hair, blistering hands utterly failing to shield her from the tiny, invisible particles that are cooking her from the inside out.

\*  
\*  
\*

The stormtrooper hops over her husband's cooling body, playing with her for a beat as if excited by her jerky, pain wracked movements. Then tiring of its sport it deploys its cutting tools, deftly catching Maria by one ankle and forcing her legs apart, flesh and tortured muscle no match for piston driven polymer. Carla hears a titanium tipped drill whine into life and her mother's shrieks rise at least an octave, high and shrill as a bird in the dark.

\*  
\*  
\*

(CONTINUED)

There is a terrible, obscene smell. Like frying bacon. Carla wants to look away but instead draws herself to her feet, forcing herself to see what happens next, to see it all. She no longer makes any effort to run yet the drones seem to be having trouble locking on to her. She is so small and cold, still wet from the river that her thermal profile is barely recognizable as human.

One of the steel beasts pauses, inclining its armored head towards her, microfilament feelers probing the air, purring quietly as it conducts a fuller analysis.

Carla catches her breath, biting the back of her hand, seeing the words 'Hi Mom!' daubed jauntily across the drone's forehead and her own reflection hanging inverted in the dark lenses of its artificial eyes. For a moment it holds the child's violet heatshape in its crosshairs, watching the fear bleeding visibly out of her in clotted adrenal tendrils. It can't tell if her tiny, shivering form is human and a potential threat or just another desert creature but to be on the safe side it decides to cauterize her anyway, recalibrating its microwave cannons accordingly.

Then deep within the cyborg's brain something sparks. A tiny wire fails and a new circuit meets, a stream of mutant data disabling the override and countermanding the stormtrooper's programming. The Mark 13 cyborg emits a low barely audible trilling sound as it disengages its weapons, gazing mutely at the terrified child as if somewhere deep within the bio-mechanical matrix of its wetware the tin soldier has felt the first faint flickering of self awareness.

2 INTERIOR. NIGHT. OP CENTRE.

2

Banked monitors line the armored train compartment giving the mobile operation centre the appearance of a television station conducting a particularly savage outside broadcast. Each screen displays the point of view of one of the drone soldiers, each one a distinct mechanical consciousness, an autonomous unit monitored at a safe distance by a trained operator.

Jay Schneider, private first class, is one such operator, less than a year out of high school and already a skilled technician, an expert in his chosen field.

SCHNEIDER:

Fuck you little cocksucker!  
I'm fuckin' done...

Schneider snaps the neck off an ampule of pseudo-endorphins and designer R.N.A, snorting its contents as he switches to manual.

(CONTINUED)

SCHNEIDER: (CONT'D)  
Software's fucked up, dude.  
Doesn't want to track...

A young woman with buzz-cut hair and a silicon stud in her nose glances up from the neighbouring station. Her flash identifies her as Rudnick K. Private, first class.

RUDNICK:  
Barlowe ain't gonna like this.

She double clicks on her mouse, alerting the systems analyst slouched in his soft plastic chair towards the back of the open plan compartment, listening to the vaguely feminine machine voice on his headphones as he waits for his long distance call to be connected. Matt Barlowe is in his early forties, jaded former whizz-kid and principal software designer to the Mark 13 project, pointman for Fairisle, the civilian contractors behind one of the largest technological projects in American history.

OPERATOR: (O.S)  
Ringing for you.

Matt's eyes fall to his screensaver. A hologram of a horsey looking redhead hugging two kids with expensive dental work. He reaches for his coffee but as he raises the sticky plastic cup a verdigris colored fire ant climbs his forearm, biting him below the elbow.

BARLOWE:  
Jesus fuckin' Christ!

He swats the tiny insect, rubbing the reddening welt it leaves behind.

RECORDING (V.O):  
You're talking to a machine.

BARLOWE:  
Hey, Charmian. Matt. Look if the balance hasn't cleared there's gotta be something wrong at your end. Machine error. I dunno. Happens all the time with that branch. Just hang tough and you know I'll be home for thanksgiving. For real this time! Finally got the whole shebang up n' running down here. All systems installed okay...

His coffee has gone cold but he swigs another mouthful, expression darkening as he notices the blinking light in Schneider's in-box....

BARLOWE: (CONT'D )  
Picked out something for Josie on i-mart but don't go telling her.  
(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

BARLOWE: (CONT'D)

L'il birthday offering from me and the rough riders here in South Tex. Honest to God teddy-bear like the one on that show she watches all the time?. Vintage fuckin' Americana. You'll love it. Or she'll love it...

The line goes dead as the voice mail runs out of memory.

BARLOWE: (CONT'D)

Or something...

The maimed ant lies twitching on his desktop, legs working furiously.

BARLOWE: (CONT'D)

This is a sterile environment, fucker.

He crushes the bug with the tip of his pen before crossing to Schneider's console, clutching his Dixie cup like a talisman.

SCHNEIDER:

Software's fucked up, dude. Refusing to engage target...

BARLOWE:

There's nothing wrong with the fuckin' software. You're the one who always comes in here fucked up.

Schneider pushes back his chair to allow Barlowe access.

SCHNEIDER:

Won't let me switch to manual. Keeps overriding the override...

BARLOWE:

That's ridiculous! It can't do that.

SCHNEIDER:

Just did. Gonna have to haul 'er in and look under the bonnet, dude. Thing like this could turn nasty...

BARLOWE:

Maybe the target was too cold to read. Probably still wet...

SCHNEIDER:

I mean, you've read Asimov, right?

\*

RUDNICK:

Probably a kid...

SCHNEIDER:

Either that or a midget. Didn't look much bigger than a fuckin' jackrabbit...

\*

\*

\*

(CONTINUED)

BARLOWE:

The hell do people want to bring kids  
into the zone for? \*

SCHNEIDER:

Hey, sometimes the bambinos are more  
dangerous than the parents. I heard  
Davalos's boys train 'em up for  
suicide jobs. They can't tell the  
difference between right and wrong  
like the rest of us. \*

Balowe shakes his head.

BARLOWE:

How was it for you, Kiara?

RUDNICK:

Piece of cake. Like shooting fish in  
a bucket. I think we got three of  
them. Hard to tell when the heat  
shapes are bunched up like that.

SCHNEIDER:

What about the kid?

BARLOWE:

Scramble an E.V.A. crew. And have 'em  
send out for more coffee... \*

Schneider switches on his headset, radioing in the  
child's co-ordinates.

3 EXTERIOR. NIGHT. THE ZONE. 3

Carla watches as a star falls to earth.

SCHNEIDER: (V.O)

This is Prairie Dawn Omega calling  
Charlie Lima. Tracking target at  
0.933;23.8.

E.V.A. OFFICER/SGT:TRIGG (V.O)

Roger Prairie Dawn...  
We have eyeball contact.

A searchlight finds her and beyond the beam she sees  
something moving, an armoured stealth craft coming in low  
to hover a few feet above the desert floor, rotors  
kicking up the dust, tiled hull almost indistinguishable  
against the darkness. Carla squints into the downdraft as  
a lighted hatchway opens to disgorge a phalanx of  
uniformed figures in blast helmets and kevlar exo-  
skeletons. The E.V.A.(Extra-Vehicular Activity) crew's  
gleaming night viewing goggles and snub nosed respirators  
lend them an oddly bestial quality.

CARLA:

Oh Dios, dador de todo bien...

(CONTINUED)

3 CONTINUED:

3

A hand swathed in latex grips her shoulder and the child begins to struggle, kicking and bucking. Then one of the faceless men slides a hypodermic needle into Carla's neck and the strength goes out of her. The last thing she hears is a strange, high pitched chattering as the E.V.A. Officer bends closer, running a geiger counter over her blackened, blood streaked hair.

4 INTERIOR. DAWN. OP CENTRE.

4

Barlowe hovers behind Private Rudnick's station, watching her work, a fresh cup steaming in his hand.

BARLOWE:

I love this bit. If you haven't seen this before you're in for a treat.

He gives her shoulder an affectionate squeeze.

SCHNEIDER:

Sunrise in fifteen seconds...

5 EXTERIOR. FIRST LIGHT. THE ZONE.

5

A steel claw flexes, rising from the dust, first one and then another and another, the dune-scape quivering with motion as a platoon of drone soldiers dig themselves from the shallow trenches in which they have lain hidden, turning as one towards the east, micro-filament feelers whirring and twitching in the pre-dawn air.

A band of orange light appears along the horizon.

6 INTERIOR. DAWN. THE OP CENTRE.

6

One by one the monitors lock onto the same image. The disc of the rising sun, viewed at once through a dozen remote infra-red sensors.

RUDNICK:

Why do they do that?

BARLOWE:

Desert's cold before dawn. The sun's the only thing they can lock on to. They'd kill it if they could. It's the closest they get to knowing god...

7 EXTERIOR. DAWN. THE ZONE.

7

An eerie mechanical wailing rises from the Mark 13 stormtroopers, their pincers reaching towards the light. Through their artificial eyes the sun's corona is dazzlingly, ecstatically bright.

(CONTINUED)

7 CONTINUED:

7

In our ears we hear the throbbing of an engine, ominously off balance, revving up and up and up.

Main Title: "GROUND ZERO"

CUT TO:

8 EXTERIOR. DAWN. SPACE.

8

The U.S.S. "Mayflower", a wedge shaped X-33 registered to the TRANSAT Corporation hangs in geostationery orbit high above the Pacific rim, cargo doors open as a crew member manoeuvres a communication satellite into place.

A crack of white light widens above the curve of the earth.

9 INTERIOR. DAWN. U.S.S. "MAYFLOWER".

9

The first rays of the rising sun stream through the cabin window, falling like a blessing on the face of one of the flight technicians, a gaunt, unshaven figure in his late thirties, sallow skin and bloodshot eyes displaying the physical stigmata of too many wasted off-world years.

SHADES:

God...

Shades pops the lid from a bottle of pills, sending a capsule spinning towards his lips as his i-pod changes tracks, launching into a thrash and burn snuff metal single. There is a hiss of static and the pilot's face appears on a monitor to the right of his head.

COOPER:

Shades, will you turn that crap down and close the cargo bay doors already?

Shades dry swallows, flipping his trademark glasses into place, shielding his watery eyes from the glare.

SHADES:

The hell d'you want to go home for? Earth sucks.

COOPER:

What goes up must come down, man. Got a message from Commander Schweik. Says he wants to see you in debriefing.

SHADES:

So? I haven't done anything?

COOPER:

Maybe they're gonna replace you with a machine.

(CONTINUED)

9 CONTINUED:

9

SHADES:

How d'you know I haven't been  
replaced already?

There is a burst of feedback and he winces, turning down  
his headset.

RADIO: (V.O)

This is mission control. We are one  
minute away from de-orbit ignition.

10 EXTERIOR. DAWN. SPACE.

10

The spacecraft shudders as it's boosters flare into life.

RADIO:

You are now passing over Queensland,  
Australia. Landing is expected at  
the Hillary Roddam Clinton Space  
Centre at about 7.10am Central Time.  
Weather in the area is reported to be  
good. Skies clear. No cross winds.

11 INTERIOR. DAWN. U.S.S."MAYFLOWER".

11

Shades is on auto-pilot, mechanically pressing sequences  
of buttons, the voices of mission control and the other  
astronauts running through his head like some tremendous  
music. He is at home here. Part of the machine.

SHADES:

Four...two...five...five...five...  
four...three...three...two...one...

The drugs kick in, the cabin walls stretching around him  
like silly putty. He hits the wrong button, getting his  
sequence in a tangle but no-one notices. He wipes his  
forehead, trying to straighten up before restarting the  
count down.

There is a dull pain in his left side and when he raises  
his hand to feel for his heartbeat, he finds his  
fingertips almost completely numb.

\*

12 INTERIOR. DAWN. THE COCKPIT.

12

Space junk rattles off the craft's hull as it dips out of  
orbit, a dead Labrador, probably jettisoned experimental  
debris, bouncing across the windscreen.  
Cooper eases back the joy stick as earth swims up towards  
them, snuff metal ringing in his ears.

13      EXTERIOR.    DAWN.    THE RUNWAY.      13

A sonic boom ripples through the morning sky as the tail and leading edge of the "Mayflower's" wings break the sound barrier. A second later the craft touches down, gliding like a bird of prey through the heat haze.

SHADES: (V.O)

It's the same every time. The minute I'm back on earth I start wishing I was out in space again...

14      INTERIOR.    DAY.    DEBRIEFING ROOM.      14

Shades has his back to Commander Schweik, watching as an X-33 taxis into position on the runway. The Commander sits with his ass propped against an ancient, steel desk, the only item of furniture too heavy not to have already been stolen or requisitioned by another department. \*

SHADES:

Of course there's a kind of euphoria when you touch down but it's bittersweet. The moment the engines cut off you realise the big experience is over and you're a hostage to gravity again like everyone else.

Schweik is only a few years older than him and there is a baffled, world weary look about the personnel officer that Shades mistakes for sympathy.

COMMANDER SCHWEIK:

Says on your manifest you haven't taken shore leave in over a year. In fact in the last seven years you've only taken twelve days in toto...

SHADES:

So, I prefer being in orbit. It's cleaner. Besides, I'm a good chip monkey, aren't I?

Schweik lowers his eyes, teasing a smudgy document from the maw of a malfunctioning printer unit.

COMMANDER SCHWEIK:

The best but lately your in-suit telemetry's been telling a tale of woe. You've got anaemia, arhythmia, heart palpitations, the whole bit...

SHADES:

Palpitations? It says that?

He cranes his neck, trying to get a look at the printout.

(CONTINUED)

COMMANDER SCHWEIK:  
Nobody surfs forever, Shades. Not in zero-g. Health and safety says so.

SHADES:  
But you don't know what it's like out there!

COMMANDER SCHWEIK: (CONT'D) \*  
You've gotta have a home someplace.

SHADES:  
There's the apartment on Southside but I don't go there much. It's got bad plumbing and rats.

COMMANDER SCHWEIK:  
How 'bout family? Got any of them?

SHADES:  
Nope.

COMMANDER SCHWEIK:  
Girl maybe?

Shades shakes his head dazedly. The white bird of the X-33 parked out on the runway seems hopelessly distant.

COMMANDER SCHWEIK: (CONT'D)  
Maybe it's time you found one.  
I'm putting you on six months paid leave whether you like it or not.

15 INTERIOR. DAY. THE LOCKER ROOM.

15

Shades shovels his effects into a kit bag. Cooper huddles beside the extractor fan, a reefer trailing from his lip.

COOPER:  
Why not go to Antarctica? Book yourself into one of those beach resorts? Heard all the babes go topless down there...

SHADES:  
I'm just not the Club Arktos type, Coop. I mean, can you imagine me playing volleyball?

Shades shrugs as the snuff metal track playing in the background comes to an end, the i-jay cutting in as he peels a photograph of a woman in paint splattered overalls from his locker door, a tousled redhead posed in front of a jet turbine, an oxy-acetyline torch in one hand.

COOPER:  
So? You got time to learn. Six months on Earth? How bad can that be?

16 EXTERIOR. DAY. THE CITY. 16

A concrete reef of tower blocks rises from a sea of nicotine coloured smog, the wail of sirens drifting up from the streets below.

ANGRY BOB: (O.S.)  
This is Angry Bob on Station W.A.R.  
Comin' at you with the good news and  
the bad news...

17 INTERIOR. DAY. GRAND UNION STATION. 17

A stone angel stares out over the tide of humanity streaming through the flume-like concourse, sightless eyes turned towards an electronic notice board displaying a hundred destinations all across America.

ANGRY BOB:  
Holiday traffic is stacking up over  
the CBD and all outlying areas but if  
all you guys in the cockpits just  
stay cool and stick to your  
registered flightpaths Aerospace  
Control promise to get you home in  
time for thanksgiving. And as for the  
good news... Well, whadd'ya know?  
There is still no fuckin' good news!

An avalanche of sound rages out of a blastbox propped in the ticket office window, nearly drowning out the itinerant preacher addressing the winding queue. The preacher's collar is frayed and there is a bandage around his right hand which seems dirtier each time he gestures with it, which is often.

PREACHER:  
There will be wars and rumours of  
wars. The masses will go hungry,  
their bellies bloat for these are the  
birth pains, the beginning of the  
sorrows...

Shades listens disinterestedly. Most of his fellow travellers are migrant workers but the tall, thin lipped individual behind him is some sort of war veteran, his scarred hands thrust into the pockets of a ragged greatcoat, a tangle of lucky charms glinting at his throat.

PREACHER: (CONT'D)  
Woe unto them who are with child in  
those times and pray that your flight  
be not in winter...

(CONTINUED)

Shades raps on the glass, trying to focus the man behind the counter who is either too stoned to care or just naturally insane and off on some strange trip of his own, nodding dazedly in time to the pulsing music.

SHADES:

I'm trying to get to a place named Splendor? Splendor, Texas?

CLERK:

You're gonna need clearance for that area.

Shades presses his plastic to the bulletproof window. The clerk nods, picking up a rubber stamp and breathing on it before making an invisible mark on the glass.

PREACHER:

No flesh shall be spared save that of the elect for they shall see him coming, the son of man, and he shall send his angels to earth on a mission to gather together his flock...

Shades pushes past the aging preacher, eyes going to the electronic clock, its dial flanked by huge plasma screens bearing the grinning face of President Milton, warming up the electorate for the coming primaries.

PREACHER: (CONT'D)

The book of Mark, Sir.  
Chapter thirteen...

The clock's hands lurch forward as Shades picks his way through the vandalized ticket barrier. He doesn't look back, nor does he see the steel tipped boot that comes from nowhere, kicking his legs from under him.

TEDDY:

Get him, Hube! Get his fuckin' ticket!

Shades scrabbles to retrieve his glasses. Without them he can barely focus on his attackers or the blurred figures of the other travellers who hurry by, uncaring.

PREACHER: (V.O.):

You are like stones! All of you!  
And you will be cast down like stones  
into a lake of fire!

The burlier of the two youths grabs Shades by the collar of his flight jacket, ramming him up against a malfunctioning advertising hoarding as his companion, a scrawny kid with an eightball haircut and septic looking face tattoos takes charge.

TEDDY:

I.D, man. Breast pocket.

(CONTINUED)

Shades squirms as Hube reaches into his jacket.

HUBE:

Fuckin' Buck Rogers, man. Who knew ?

He tosses the card to his beaming companion.

TEDDY:

See the way he fuckin' walks?  
Body language, dude. You can tell a  
spacecase every time

HUBE:

Welcome to the 21st century, Buck.  
Got any plastic?

SHADES:

You guys take Transcard ?

TEDDY:

We're gonna send you back into orbit,  
spaceman. Where you belong.  
Ready with the countdown, Hube?

Hube slides a screwdriver from his pocket. \*

HUBE:

Ten....nine...

He pauses, trying to remember what comes next.

TEDDY:

Just do it, man! Ain't got all day. \*

HUBE:

Seven...

Hube starts to bring the screwdriver forward but then another hand grasps his by the wrist. He starts to turn with a bewildered grunt only to have his nose shattered by a single, clean blow, head snapping to one side with a sharp pop of breaking bone.

TEDDY:

The fuck?

The veteran in the ragged greatcoat is standing before them, face still as a mask.

LYLE:

What's your name, boy?

TEDDY:

Teddy...

LYLE:

How old are you?

TEDDY:

Fourteen...

(CONTINUED)

The veteran grins, touching the bridge of his nose.

LYLE:

Well, let me tell you somethin',  
Teddy. I'll be brief. See this bone?  
This here's your septum. It's pretty  
hard but the outer edge of my hand is  
like concrete and unless you return  
this gent's property pretty damn  
pronto I'm gonna crack your septum in  
half, real neat, so you'll never take  
a clean breath of air again in your  
life, savvy?

Teddy wordlessly drops Shade's I.D, making himself  
scarce.

SHADES:

Jesus...

LYLE:

Jesus been a long time gone, buddy.  
Can't count on Him to save your fat  
these days.

Shades retrieves his glasses, polishing them on his  
sleeve. \*

LYLE: (CONT'D)

How long you been on earth?

SHADES:

'Bout five hours...

LYLE:

Better get yourself grounded fast,  
pilgrim. L'il fucks would've cut you  
good if I hadn't come along.

He crouches, propping up Hube. The kid's head lolls, eyes  
rolled up to their whites. \*

SHADES:

Is he okay? \*

LYLE:

He'll be fine. I just tapped him.

A streamer of blood slides from Hube's nose as the  
veteran relieves him of his small change and a polythene  
baggy filled with blue powder.

LYLE: (CONT'D)

Want some ?

SHADES:

Uh-uh. Shit'll fry your nerve  
endings. Vegetable city by the time  
you're forty.

(CONTINUED)

Lyle shrugs, pocketing the baggy.

LYLE:

That's cool. Not plannin' on stickin' around. Where you heading?

SHADES:

West. South west. Texas. New Mexico... I dunno...

LYLE:

We're on the same train then.

An incoherent announcement booms over the PA system.

SHADES:

You headed home ?

LYLE:

Hell, no. Do I look like a redneck ? I'm from Moorehead, Kentucky. Heard there's work goin' in Texas is all. Thought I'd find myself a hippie girl and learn to grow soy beans. They've got all those freaks down there now, call themselves "destructuralists". Don't believe in no social structure beyond the family. No laws or taxes or nothin'. Don't sound too bad.

Armed officers are checking tickets, forcing passengers to place their palms against a glowing scanner.

SHADES:

The hell do they want our prints for?

LYLE:

To make sure we don't come back.

The gaunt, unshaven veteran steps forward, smiling graciously as he presses his hand to the screen. Clearing the checkpoint they join the mob of migrants scrambling to board an armoured train that will carry them to new lives in the zone.

EXT. TWILIGHT. THE LINE SOUTH.

Getting out of Illinois is a nightmare. The sky is purple and up ahead a blue aurora has begun to spread across the horizon. Dust falls heavily on the tracks, gusting through the headlights, rocks and bits of ice the size of baseballs clanging against the engine's armor plating.

Lyle gazes out at the storm through an open ventilation hatch, eyes expressionless as marbles.

(CONTINUED)

After a while he lies back in his berth, not moving, staring at the roof a few feet above his face. Beneath him Shades rests with his kitbag behind his head and a book on his chest.

LYLE:

What you readin'?

SHADES:

This book teaches the pronunciation of our good neighbours in Spanish America. Thought it might come in handy.

LYLE:

Yeah. Our good neighbours who the President and General Buckley want to drive right into the fuckin' sea. I was with Buckley at Allamogordo. I saw what was comin' down.

SHADES:

Cuanto cuesta la canisa?  
Cuanto cuesta el vestido?

There is a loud clang as a piece of ice strikes the outside of the car and Lyle glances uneasily at the roof.

LYLE:

I hate being cooped up in this thing. It's like those boxes they send your folks when they can't find enough of you for an open casket funeral.

Shades shivers.

SHADES:

Are these trains always so cold?

LYLE:

Yeah. 'Cept in the summer. This'll keep you warm...

He tosses Shades a battered silver hipflask.

SHADES:

How come you haven't asked my name?

LYLE:

What's your name?

SHADES:

My friends call me Shades...

LYLE:

Hey, Shades. I'm Lyle. Private Lyle Maddox, first class until a few days ago.

SHADES:

Pleased to meet you, man.

(CONTINUED)

He takes a swig and then begins to cough.

SHADES: (CONT'D)  
Jesus... what is this?

LYLE:  
Woodgrain. Sixty percent proof. Kicks a bit. Used to spread boot polish on our bread back in the Corps to draw out the hooch. Ever try that for laughs?

Shades shakes his head.

LYLE: (CONT'D)  
What you goin' to the zone for anyhow? You don't look the type. \*

SHADES:  
I got a friend on a project down in Splendora.

LYLE:  
Girlfriend?

SHADES:  
Just a friend. Used to go out with one of my buddies.

LYLE:  
Figured it had to be a lady.

SHADES:  
My buddy was in the corps like you. Until he got himself greased.

LYLE:  
What happened then?  
You make a move on her?

SHADES:  
She didn't want to know about me, man. She took off into the zone. Didn't write for ten years. For a while I thought she was dead too. \*

LYLE:  
So what makes you think she wants to be found?

Shades focusses on the postcard he's using for a bookmark, a tinted photograph of a cactus flower. \*

SHADES:  
Who knows what she wants?  
Who knows what anyone really wants?

DISSOLVE  
THROUGH:

(CONTINUED)

18 CONTINUED: (3)

18

White light. Then flame.

A thermal image of Carla's face as she turns in the grip of R.E.M. sleep, cold sweat registering as turquoise patches on her three dimensional heatshape.

CUT TO:

19 INTERIOR. NIGHT. THE ROOM.

19

Carla sits up, staring into the gloom.

CARLA:

Papa?

She reaches out to turn on the light, revealing a commonplace albeit wholly unfamiliar bedroom. There is a coffee table, divan, a half filled bookcase and even a bowl of flowers but something is missing. It takes her a moment to realize what it is. The room has no windows.

20 INTERIOR. NIGHT. BATHROOM.

20

The fluorescent strip above the mirror is unnaturally bright. Carla's reflection hovers like a ghost before her, the face of some other child entirely, a child grown old beyond her years.

Beneath her reflection, deep within the glass, something glimmers, an unblinking electronic eye watching her implacably from the other side of the two-way mirror

21 INTERIOR. NIGHT. ISOLATION BAY.

21

Matt Barlowe glances at the screen as Carla urinates, heatshape registering the accompanying temperature loss.

DR SIMON:

I'm afraid she's perfectly normal. Nothing wrong with that kid's thermal profile! If the drone couldn't lock on then there's probably something wrong with your software.

BARLOWE:

There's nothing wrong with my fuckin' software.

The dormant cyborg purrs, feedback murmuring through its telemetry, plating peeled from its skull to reveal its wetware, eyes staring helplessly as its creator probes its brain with the tip of his screwdriver, noticing what look like a tiny scorch mark on one of the chipboards.

\*  
\*  
\*

BARLOWE:(CONT.)

(CONTINUED)

Probably some kind of environmental contamination...

DR SIMON:

Either that or a virus. I dunno.  
I just do organics.

BARLOWE:

It's behaving like a virus. That was the third unit to go down this week. But how did it upload itself without an interface?

Carla fetches a glass of water before going back to bed. \*

DR SIMON: \*

Maybe the 'droid was a soft touch.  
I mean she's a cute kid. \*

BARLOWE:

Unlock the door.  
I want to talk to her.

DR SIMON:

And say what? you're sorry about her mom and dad? \*

BARLOWE:

I never wanted this. I never wanted any of it. All I wanted was to make the big machine work...

DR SIMON:

What big machine?

Matt shakes his head, his heatshape floating in the disabled cyborg's **crosshairs**. The drone's combat systems may be disabled but it still registers the software designer's presence, recording and analysing his voice and vital signs, filing the data for future reference \*

BARLOWE:

When I was her age I used to think there was a machine that ran the world and if someone could fix it then maybe the weather would clear up, maybe people would finally have enough to fuckin' eat, maybe we'd all **get to live happily ever after.** Maybe... \*

The door opens with a click and Carla sees a bespectacled man in a coffee stained shirt standing nervously on the threshold, a teddy bear under one arm.

BARLOWE:

How you doin', kiddo? \*

(CONTINUED)

Carla blinks, scarcely registering his presence.

BARLOWE: (CONT'D)

I'm Matt.

CARLA:

Donde estan mis padres?

BARLOWE:

You're in a U.S. iso-facility.  
I don't know anything about your  
parents.

Carla starts to cry and he crouches, thrusting the teddy bear towards her.

BARLOWE: (CONT'D)

Hey ! Hey, it's alright!  
Look, here's Mr.Teddles...

The light flickers, a tremor running through the walls.  
Carla whimpers, pulling away. \*

BARLOWE: (CONT'D)

It's alright. Just the storm.

CARLA:

Que tormenta?

BARLOWE:

Big storm brewing up out there.  
Big old thunderheads.

CARLA:

Como el sueño. Like in the dream...

BARLOWE:

What dream?

CARLA:

The dream I'm having. A big fire in a  
dry lake... \*

BARLOWE:

There's nothing to burn in a dry  
lake. \*

CARLA:

There were people burning. The lake  
was on fire and they were burning up.  
It was so bright... \*

BARLOWE:

People have dreams all the time. It  
doesn't mean anything. \*

Carla closes her eyes, hearing the cyborg purring softly  
to itself in the dark, its machine consciousness caught  
in some weird game loop all of its own. \*

(CONTINUED)

CARLA:

Then what do they have them for?

\*

DISSOLVE  
THROUGH:

White light. Then flame.  
A firestorm burning between worlds.  
A dry wind wailing like a chorus of the damned.

DISSOLVE  
TO:

23 INTERIOR. DAWN. CATTLE CAR.

23

Lyle comes awake in semi-darkness, a scream rising from his lips. He reaches out, hands meeting a concave, unyielding surface. His panic as he lunges from the bunk is all consuming. Shades sits up in the lower berth to find Lyle already struggling with the carriage doors.

SHADES:

Lyle! Hey, man! Take it easy!  
You're dreaming.

Lyle tugs at the bolts, grey sweat beading his forehead.

LYLE:

Can't fuckin' breathe ...

SHADES:

Snap out of it, buddy. War's over.

Bright light falls through the sliding door and Shades catches his breath as he glimpses a landscape almost as barren as the moon or Mars, a horizon of stubby ruins and corroded pylons opposing the thunderous, coppery sky.

LYLE:

Looks like it was a a big railhead  
back in the twentieth. Guess it was  
important to someone then.

SHADES:

Still important to someone now. Look!

24 EXTERIOR. DAY. SPLENDORA.

24

Two flatbeds daubed in gaudy psychedelic camouflage have come to meet the train. The long hair and rainbow coloured clothing of the vehicle's occupants immediately identifies them as deconstructuralists. One of their number, a gaunt white Rasta in a patchwork coat is waiting on the platform, leaning on a bitch staff, a loud hailer in one hand. His name is Melchizidek.

(CONTINUED)

People begin to clamber from the boxcars as the train slows and Lyle throws down his pack, swinging himself after it. Shades follows, letting Lyle do the talking.

MELCHIZIDEK:

We're taking in the soy bean harvest and need hands in the paddies. We can't pay cash but you if work like a horse you'll eat like one.

LYLE:

I did a tour on a hydro project back in Kentucky.

MELCHIZIDEK:

Get on!

He motions towards the flatbed with his staff.

25 EXTERIOR. DAY. THE PROJECT.

25

The road is lined with wrecked vehicles positioned like marker stones, planted bonnet first into the prairie, ushering the convoy up into the farming project itself. They cross a great, water filled dyke, passing through the car-henge and a ring of totem poles strung with brightly painted banners bearing vaguely Celtic insignia.

The project has been constructed around a ruined twentieth century industrial installation, once the hub of the railhead though now the only network it commands is a web of irrigation canals and patchwork rice paddies. Most of the buildings are simple, mud walled adobe dwellings but at their centre Shades sees two huge geodistic green houses and a line of aluminium windmills. A fountain sparkles in a forecourt between the greenhouses and someone is playing a didgeridoo.

LYLE:

Will you look at that!

A topless girl in her mid-twenties is walking along the side of the track, a sarong tied about her hips, a sheath of corn over one shoulder, naked children jibing at her heels. More kids spill from the adobe buildings, something of the formal beatitude of hippie greeting in their smiles, mindless acceptance soul to soul. It bewilders Shades to see such things in faces so young. A deputation of women bearing buckets of water follow, simple cotton clothing dyed in rainbow colours, bright voices a litany of cheerful introduction.

\*

A dark haired girl barely out of her teens approaches them, proffering a dripping ladle, a freckled child clinging nervously to her dress.

LYLE: (CONT'D)

And this is?

(CONTINUED)

SKY:

Her name's Moon Rabbit. I'm Sky.

The grizzled war veteran takes the ladle, drinking deep.

SKY: (CONT'D)

You come a long way ?

LYLE:

Further than you know, ma'm.

SKY:

Lyle, I want you to meet Joti, Faun  
and Aspen. Joti, this is Lyle...

Lyle grins, not knowing which hand to take first. For a moment he is in hog heaven. He barely notices that Shades has slipped away, making for the project's machine shop, drawn by the sound of the screeching angle grinder.

26 INTERIOR. DAY. MACHINE SHOP.

26

The cavernous garage is a graveyard for obsolete farming equipment, their skeletal remains hanging everywhere in the gloom. Snuff metal blasts from a radio propped on the bonnet of a dismembered tractor but even at full volume it is almost drowned by the song of the angle grinder wielded by the figure in welding mask and threadbare overalls who is busy slicing into the vehicle's axle.

\*

Shades steps closer, sparks skipping about his feet, watching the mechanic sway to the rhythm, wielding the tool with the ease of a born natural. Then she sees him haloed in the light from the sliding doors and raises her mask, pale eyes widening as she shuts off the power.

\*

JILL:

Shades?

He smiles.

SHADES:

In the flesh.

JILL:

My God, what are you doing here?

SHADES:

I'm on vacation. Thought I'd drop by  
and see how you were getting on.  
You sent me that postcard, remember?

He steps closer but the angle grinder comes between them.

JILL:

Yeah. I Guess.

(CONTINUED)

SHADES:  
You're looking great.  
I can't believe how good you look.

JILL:  
You haven't changed a bit have you?

He realizes she's not going to hug him and his fantasies crumble and blow away like dust.

JILL: (CONT'D)  
And who's this?

He turns to see Lyle silhouetted in the doorway.

SHADES:  
Oh yeah... Jill, this is Lyle.

LYLE:  
Been hearing a lot about you, ma'am.

SHADES:  
Lyle pulled me out of some trouble  
back east.

The war veteran steps forward to take her hand.

JILL:  
You on vacation too ?

LYLE:  
No, ma'am. I aim to settle.

JILL:  
Well, it ain't Disneyland, that's for  
sure. But if you're fixing on putting  
down roots you've come to the right  
place. We can use just about all the  
help we can get. \*

27 She lays down the mask, starting towards the forecourt. 27

JILL: (CONT'D)  
We still got three tractors as well  
as the flatbeds. Takes all I have to  
keep 'em going.

SHADES:  
Jill's an artist. You should see what  
she can do with scrap metal.

JILL:  
Used to do some installation work  
back in the smoke, mostly interior  
decor for the up-towners. Not much  
call for it around here though.

SHADES:  
I saw the car-henge on the way in.

(CONTINUED)

JILL:

Yeah, that was mine. I twisted J.C.'s arm into letting me do it. I think the idea amused him.

LYLE:

Who's J.C.?

JILL:

The guy who got this place going. Built it up from scratch. You'll meet him.

SHADES:

I can't wait.

JILL:

He's working on new energy sources, new food supplies, the whole bit. You want to save the world you gotta start with the roots, with the basics...

SHADES:

I'm not sure the world wants to be saved.

JILL:

That's what I used to think but people can change. People can learn. That's what this place is about.

She watches from the doorway as the white Rasta oversees the billeting of the migrants in their new quarters.

\*

JILL: (CONT'D)

The tall guy's J.C.'s second in command. His name's Melchizidek. He looks a bit rough but he's an old softy underneath it all.

LYLE:

Yeah. We met.

SHADES:

And her ?

He gestures at a girl with a hardening baby face who crouches sullenly in the shadows, wordlessly draining the sump oil from a dismembered engine block.

JILL:

Oh, Ginny. Yeah. I'm trying to show her the ropes. She doesn't like being left alone. Lost her family in the Roswell uprising, poor baby...

Ginny averts her eyes, taking refuge in her work, deliberately closing them out.

(CONTINUED)

JILL: (CONT'D)  
We've all lost people.  
That's why we've come together.  
This is a family.

28 INTERIOR. DAY. THE GREENHOUSE.

28

The domes are constructed from a fine web of aluminium insulated with perspex. Inside the air is almost moist enough to be drink and Shades finds his shirt sticking uncomfortably to his skin.

JILL:  
The sewage runs through the troughs to get rid of organics, then out to the fountain and the sand filters to cleanse and aerate it...

She plucks a fat tomato from one of the trellises.

JILL: (CONT'D)  
You are what you eat. It all starts with the soil...

Shades looks reticent so she passes the glossy hydroponic vegetable to Lyle.

JILL: (CONT'D)  
Our life essence depends on the essence of the plant which depends on the soil. The earth is a living organism and the farm a single cell of that organism, the earth in microcosm...

Lyle takes a bite then gags. A glistening fire ant scuttles from a puckered hole in the tomato's skin.

JILL: (CONT'D)  
Oh, Christ. I'm sorry. Those bastards get into everything. They're the one thing J.C. hasn't figured out.

Lyle spits, mouth bitter with formic acid.

LYLE:  
There's but one way to deal with 'em. A simple way 'cept it calls for some chemistry. Learned it in Moorhead. You gotta use a slow poison with a syrup base, that way they got time to carry it down to their nest and you kill 'em all. Not just two or three.

JILL:  
Yeah. 'Cept it calls for killing and there's no killing here.  
We're pacifists. Strictly organic.

(CONTINUED)

LYLE:

That's beautiful. But if you extend the cosmic brotherhood to include Bre'r Ant here you're gonna wind up mighty hungry. If mankind hadn't fought the bugs they would've taken this world away from us a long time ago. Still would if we gave 'em half a chance.

JILL:

I suppose killing's something you know a lot about ?

LYLE:

I was in the corps. I did what I had to but that's over now. People can change. You said so yourself.

JILL:

You remind me of someone. Someone I used to know way back. In fact you're a lot like him 'cept for one thing.

LYLE:

What's that?

She turns away, shaking her head at the hopelessness of it all, at the futility of trying to put it into words.

JILL:

He's dead...

29 EXTERIOR. NIGHT. THE MARTIALING YARD.

29

Rain ghosts across the tracks as a team of soldiers unload supplies for the coming campaign. A platoon of cyborgs stands as if drawn up to attention, motionless carapaces cocooned in transparent rain shrouds.

The sight of his children lining up to be born only adds to Barlowe's nagging sense of paternity. He flashes his I.D. at the sentries, making for the armoured train that waits at the far end of the yard, engines idling.

30 INTERIOR. NIGHT. DINING CAR.

30

Colonel McCarthy opens the door, frowning as he notes the software designer's bedraggled state.

COLONEL MCCARTHY:

You're late Barlowe.

The colonel steps aside, ushering him into a lavishly appointed dining car where the main course has already been served at a long table surrounded by army brass and some men in civilian clothing whom Barlowe takes to be either politicians or federal agents.

(CONTINUED)

A uniformed man with receding flaxen hair and carefully trimmed moustache sits at the head of the table, a glass in one hand.

GENERAL BUCKLEY:

Better help yourself, Matt. Eat n' run! The oysters are particularly good. Flown in fresh from Corpus Christi, I think...

BARLOWE:

Thanks. But I kind of lost my appetite. I could do with a shot, though. Red if we've got it.

The lights flicker as he takes his chair.

GENERAL BUCKLEY:

I hope you enjoy a good storm. Down here in Texas the storms really do get sort of... Biblical...

A girl in a low cut gown serves Barlowe his drink and the General glances disinterestedly at her cleavage.

GENERAL BUCKLEY: (CONT'D)

More cognac, please. Matt, I'd like to introduce you to Senator Paul Fugate. Senator, this is Mr Barlowe, the Mark 13 project's principal software designer.

SENATOR FUGATE:

I've been hearing a lot about your work, Barlowe. All of it good.

BARLOWE:

Thank you, Sir.

GENERAL BUCKLEY:

I'd also like you to meet Mr Moch, our Guild liaison.

Moch, a vaguely Slavic looking individual in a grey suit, smiles thinly but does not offer his hand.

BARLOWE:

I didn't know the Guild were involved in this, Sir.

GENERAL BUCKLEY:

We have an area of mutual interest.

A sharp clatter of pool balls comes from the next compartment and Barlowe glances up, mistaking it for gunfire. The door at the end of the carriage hangs ajar allowing a partial view of a tall man with braided hair bending over a pool table, a cue clutched surely in his knotted hands.

(CONTINUED)

Complicated, swirling tattoos climb his forearms and as he glances up Barlowe notices his eyes are a penetrating cat-like yellow.

BARLOWE:

Who's that?

GENERAL BUCKLEY:

Oh, him...Yeah...Well, you might say that's the man who squats behind the man who works the soft machine, Matt.

The man with the pale animal eyes meets his gaze and even at this distance Barlowe is forced to look away.

GENERAL BUCKLEY: (CONT'D)

The senator and I are concerned about rumours we've been hearing of a glitch in the Mark 13 software.

BARLOWE:

In all honesty, Sir, the rumours are unfounded.

GENERAL BUCKLEY:

If you could put the senator's mind at ease...

BARLOWE:

We're bound to have a few teething problems, sir, a few growing pains but the Mark 13's a tough baby. In theory they're designed to be self repairing. They were built by machines so it follows the machine should be able to repair itself. If there was a glitch it would have already rectified itself. I mean, there's a lot of variables out there.

Buckley guffaws .

GENERAL BUCKLEY:

A lot of variables, indeed! Let me put you in the picture, Matt. Our friends here have an issue.

SENATOR FUGATE:

Just over twenty-four hours ago it was brought to President Milton's attention that an undisclosed amount of fissionable material may have fallen into the hands of the militants.

MOCH:

We've no evidence they've tried to arrange it into an explosive configuration. Not yet.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

MOCH: (CONT'D)

We've got a man on the ground. What you'd call a sleeper...

GENERAL BUCKLEY:

The combat readiness of the Mark 13 makes it possible to neutralise the situation without endangering a single enlisted life. We could have it all sewn up in time for the primaries.

SENATOR FUGATE:

I don't have to tell you how much is riding on your software, Mr Barlowe.

BARLOWE:

I need another drink.

GENERAL BUCKLEY:

I need to go to full deployment. Every 'borg we've got up and running. Whadd'ya think?

\*

BARLOWE:

That doesn't give me enough time...

GENERAL BUCKLEY:

Time for what?

BARLOWE:

To run down that bug you mentioned. Make sure it doesn't go bad.

GENERAL BUCKLEY:

So? Lose a few and you can always open 'em up later. It's not like they're flesh and blood soldiers.

BARLOWE:

I guess...

GENERAL BUCKLEY:

I need you and the board at Fairisle to back me on this. What do you say, Matt?

Barlowe turns towards the dining car windows and the rain lashed dark beyond.

BARLOWE:

Why not ?

The Mexican girl refills his glass.

GENERAL BUCKLEY:

Gentlemen, let me propose a toast. To Matt Barlowe and his brain child, the combat soldier of tomorrow, the Mark 13!

(CONTINUED)

And the thunder comes again, louder and nearer,  
lightening flickering as Barlowe returns the toast.

CHORUS:

The Mark 13!

31 EXTERIOR. NIGHT. THE MARTIALING YARD. 31

One of the cyborgs twitches, hand spasming as lightning arcs overhead, razor tipped talons slicing through it's vinyl cocoon, reaching mindlessly out as if trying to touch the rain.

32 EXTERIOR. NIGHT. THE PROJECT. 32

The wind is rising, the moon turning the colour of blood as the project's inhabitants line up before a big steel pot, eating utensils in their hands. Somewhere close by somebody begins to pick out a hymn on a guitar.

LYLE:

Want me to grab you a plate ?

SHADES:

Thanks but no thanks, man.  
I'm on a diet.

He produces a plastic container from his flight jacket, dispensing two capsules, dry swallowing as Lyle takes his place in the queue.

JILL:

He's a piece of work, ain't he?

SHADES:

He's got nice legs.

JILL:

You feel jealous of every man I look at, don't you?

SHADES:

I can't help missing you. It's cold in space. Didn't you miss me too, once in a while ?

JILL:

I try not to think about the past.  
It only gets me down.

SHADES:

I still dream about you. All the good ones have you in them.

JILL:

What did you come here for?  
I'm not going back with you if that's what you want.

(CONTINUED)

SHADES:

I had some of the best times of my life with you.

JILL:

And the worst.

SHADES:

Them too.

JILL:

Look, I'm really glad to see you and everything but you've got to let it go. You're part of something I don't belong to anymore. Cities, technology, the space programme, the whole frigging system. I'm out of it now and happier for it.

SHADES:

Maybe we could go to the coast. Find a clean current someplace where you can still eat the fish.

JILL:

Get real, Shades. My life's here now. I'm not running from it. I've got work to do changing people's heads, changing people like you before they kill off mother Earth once and for all.

SHADES:

And I thought I was the dreamer.

JILL:

Who's dreaming? We've got plans to retrofit entire cities with solar technology, teach people how to plant new cash crops...

SHADES:

You're kidding yourself. Folks ain't gonna tear down their city blocks and start living in fuckin' greenhouses. Things are just going to go on the way they've always been.

JILL:

Shades, listen, I'm thirty-eight years old. I'm single, no kids, no house, no pension apart from what's left from the settlement with the electronics company. I appreciate your feelings but it's time for me to start believing in something.

SHADES:

Jill...

(CONTINUED)

JILL:

No. Maybe we can't change everything over night but we can get started. When the cities fall down we can put up something better. Even just trying would be something. It would be something.

Ginny comes wandering over, passing Jill a tin plate.

GINNY:

You're the space jockey, aren't you ?

SHADES:

I'm just a chip monkey.  
Strictly in-flight maintenance.

GINNY:

Well, aren't you a little far off course? I mean I heard what you were saying to Turbo here and it really got my back up.

SHADES:

Turbo?

Jill smiles and shrugs.

GINNY:

She told me how things were in the smoke but times have changed and you'd better change with 'em, either that or get back to wherever the hell it is you belong.

SHADES:

I can't. They won't have me.

The onlookers have started to form a rough circle and the vibe is turning ugly.

GINNY:

You're part of a death system involved in a death style and we don't want it down here, space boy. We've evolved beyond that.

Jill reaches out, touching her arm.

JILL:

Take is easy, Ginny. He didn't mean no harm.

Ginny inclines her head, brushing Jill's hand with her lips, betraying an uneasy intimacy between them.

GINNY:

Just let me if he bothers you, okay?

(CONTINUED)

Shades backs away, almost stumbling into Melchizidek who silently looks on.

MELCHIZIDEK:

J.C. wants to have a word with you.

SHADES:

Nice to be wanted by someone, I guess.

He turns, following Melchizidek into the night as Lyle reappears plate in hand.

LYLE:

Where's he going?

GINNY:

Gone to have a word with the management.

LYLE:

I hope he mentions the cooking. I ate better than this during the famine.

GINNY:

You work for your food here. Prove your worth and you'll see a difference in your rations.

JILL:

The only things absolutely forbidden are meat and chocolate.

LYLE:

Don't you miss 'em?

JILL:

Not any more. They're just an addiction like anything else. In a few weeks you won't miss them either.

He glances at the meagre portion of rice and greyish soy beans resting in the middle of his plate.

LYLE:

I dunno. My body's got a pretty long memory.

In the background a male voice begins to sing along with the guitar as if crooning a lullaby.

VOICE: (V.O)

I saw the light. I saw the light. No more darkness. No more night...

Shades gathers his jacket against the rising storm, following Melchizidek towards the project's hub where the adobe buildings give way to the mottled concrete walls of the abandoned industrial complex.

(CONTINUED)

MELCHIZIDEK:

How come you always wear those glasses? You on the run from something?

SHADES:

I can take them off if it bothers you. My night vision's twenty:twenty.

MELCHIZIDEK:

Your business if you want to hide behind those things. Just watch your step though. We're not insured...

SHADES:

It's the light that gives me a headache.

Melchizidek leads him up a ramp towards a sliding door. The portal is open a crack and he sees firelight glinting within.

VOICE:

Praise the Lord. I found the light...

33 INTERIOR. NIGHT. FINAL ASSEMBLY PLANT. LEVEL ONE.

33

The entrance reminds Shades of an airlock, cancerous white tiling overlaid in a riot of psychedelic graffiti. There is a row of disused shower cubicles on their left and two mop haired children are playing in a mound of discarded overalls piled beside a blind security console, laughter filling the gloomy ante-chamber. Along the top of the screens sputter a greasy row of votive candles.

SHADES:

The hell is this place?

MELCHIZIDEK:

You're standing on the ground floor of the Pan-Tex final assembly plant, the reason Splendor existed back in the twentieth, back when they had electric power and air conditioning and heavy industry and shit.

Shades follows him out onto the shop floor.

MELCHIZIDEK: (CONT'D)

Now it's ours.

The place reeks of cheap incense and bad acid. The stalled conveyor belts are draped in swathes of tie dyed cloth and strewn with threadbare cushions, turning them into impromptu pews lining a musty space the size of an aircraft hanger.

(CONTINUED)

Gigantic murals flare up in the candle light, grey faced beings with lamp like eyes arrayed like disciples around a painted Christ who wears the feathered head-dress of a Mayan cacique.

A bearded Roshi crouches at the feet of the messiah, hard at work on a labyrinthine sand painting that covers most of the available floor space. As they watch the last of the coloured dust runs out between his bony fingers.

J.C:

Mind your step. I've just finished.

Shades delicately negotiates the spiral path, strange soft noises filling the gloom. Tinklings and faint bells.

J.C: (CONT'D)

Want to get high?

The ageing guru plucks a reefer from behind his ear, kindling it with his zippo and in the light of the flame Shades notices his almost fleshless hands are cruelly disfigured by psoriasis, his greasy hair thinning tuft by tuft. The classic physical stigmata of long term radiation poisoning.

SHADES:

Uh-uh. I'm high enough, man.

J.C:

Melchizidek tells me you've come to take our Jill away. Izzat so ?

SHADES:

That's what I was hoping but it's not what she wants.

J.C:

She's a very beautiful woman.  
Very headstrong.

SHADES:

Always was.

J.C:

You love her? Or you think you do?

SHADES:

I dunno. What difference does it make? She'll never go with me.

A figure stirs in the gloom.

SKY:

You've got to learn to share,  
spaceman.

He notices the raven haired woman kneeling on a mattress. In the dark he must have walked right past her.

(CONTINUED)

SKY: (CONT'D)

You smokin' that or nursin' it?

Moon Rabbit is sprawled beside her, surrounded by a confusion of electronic equipment making up the beginnings of a p.a. system. A copy of "Treasure Island" lies face down in her lap.

SHADES:

Sorry. Didn't see you there.

SKY:

You're a funny little fucker.  
J.C. was telling me about you.

SHADES:

What do you mean? He didn't even know I existed half an hour ago.

SKY:

Oh, it's all part of the plan.

SHADES:

What plan?

SKY:

His plan. You know. God's plan.

SHADES:

I don't think there is one. I've orbited round and round this mudball and I've never seen anyone.

J.C.:

You're looking in the wrong place.  
Try some of this. Then talk.

The bearded man proffers a hubcap filled with shrivelled brown buttons. Shades takes one, sniffing it warily. Sky eases herself up beside him but he does not move away. She is warm, firm and comfortable and right now he is in need of comfort.

J.C. (CONT'D)

It's good. It's peyote. Grows just south of here. It's because of the ground, you see. Sacred ground...

SKY:

The gringos and ladinós that eat 'em go crazy but J.C. gets through about a bag a day. Don't you, J.C.?

She reaches to take one of the buttons and he catches a glimpse of Sky's breasts swelling beneath their halter.

SHADES:

I dunno. I mean, what's with you guys anyway?

(CONTINUED)

He focusses on one of the murals, a naked Eve with florid pubes and preposterous breasts confronting a huge, coiling rattlesnake.

J.C:

Do I look like the devil to you?

Shades glances down at the peyote button.

J.C: (CONT'D)

Go on. Take it.

SHADES:

I suppose I've nothing to lose.

He puts the button in his mouth and bites down.

J.C:

The Huichol Indians say that when you taste peyote you taste yourself.

Shades wrinkles his face, trying not to gag.

J.C: (CONT'D)

Yeah, bitter, ain't it?  
Bitter as sin.

Shades tries to relax, Sky's warmth against him.

SKY:

You horny?

SHADES:

Just going with the flow.

He swallows, eyes turning to the ceiling, inwardly cursing himself for being so feckless and disorderly, so much at the mercy of events.

SHADES: (CONT'D)

What's with the murals?

J.C:

You mean the ascended masters?  
The great White Brotherhood? I mean,  
not "white" like some fascist shit,  
"White" as in white light. Cosmic  
dust-off. End of the world as we know  
it, man...

The peyote is working it's way into Shades. His skull feels like a balloon inflated from within. The eyes of the grey beings in the painting seem to glow as if their faces are just masks hiding heads that are really eyes all over.

J.C: (CONT'D)

I've been waiting for it all my life.  
For the Kali Yuga to give it up.  
(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

J.C: (CONT'D)

For the Aquarian age to finally drop the other fuckin' shoe, y'know? And then I realized that it was down to us to bring it on...The Mayas, they believed the same thing. Egyptians got the same calendar too.

SHADES:

That's, uh, really heavy.

J.C:

Even the end of the world's gotta get started someplace. Either we transcend now or go back to the trenches for another two thousand years...

\*

Shades begins to feel afraid. He starts forward, hearing Sky giggle as he falls to his knees, trying to bring up the remains of the peyote button.

SKY:

Oh, man. That's gross.

Melchizidek lifts the weakly struggling flight technician by the scruff of his jacket.

J.C:

I was like you when I first got here, man. I'd just gotten out of the pen and hadn't eaten in three days. I'd been running all night, making time, trying myself out against the desert to see what I was made of...

Melchizidek manhandles Shades towards the service elevator and Sky closes the cage door, giggling as she reaches into the exposed circuitry to hotwire the system.

Blurred faces stare back at Shades, huddled figures watching the cage's descent from a labyrinth of maintenance ducts running between the floors. He hears laughter and the sound of a baby crying.

J.C:

On the third day I met this dude who'd been there and back. Told me someday a miracle would happen here...

The shaft opens into a subterranean vault lined with bricks and spread with wire netting soaked in pitch, forming what Shades recognises as a "Faraday cage" designed to suppress electro-magnetic interference.

J.C: (CONT'D)

He wore a preacher's hat but his eyes were yeller like a cat's and when he said there were a storm comin' I knew it were true. He said I'd find shelter here so I stayed put and built it up with my bare hands. That's how the miracle got started.

An eerie luminescence spills across his face as the cage doors open.

J.C: (CONT'D)

And you were part of that dream too! Right from the beginning, I always knew you'd be coming here, spaceman. There's a harvest coming and we're here to do the reaping...

Shades reaches out to the shining metallic shape that rises before him, lightly tracing it's familiar insignia. The star. The disc. The bar. The ballistic missile's fuselage is smooth and warm to the touch, much as he imagines a woman's skin might be.

J.C: (CONT'D)

Together we shall bring about a great becoming...

35 EXTERIOR. DAWN. THE ZONE

35

A forest of mud spires oppose the sky like the spires of a vast, lightless metropolis.

ANGRY BOB: (V.O)

Good morning campers! Rise and Shine! This is Angry Bob and I'm here to wake you up!

A steel tipped boot descends from the heavens to strike at the sleeping city, kicking it's walls to pieces the i-jay's voice giving way to a revving snuff track. The boot belongs to Juan Cordero, a full blood Mescalero Apache clad in tattered U.S. army surplice who is kicking frustratedly at a row of ant hills.

SGT. CORDERO:

Blasted bugs! I'm sick of getting bit by these things.

The rest of his unit are seated nearby in a sandbagged lookout post, passing around a reefer and listening to the radio. One of them, a kid in a stolen helmet and a Micky Mouse tee-shirt is playing with a pair of binoculars, idily scanning the horizon. Out on the flatlands the air is rippling like quicksilver. Then something within that haze catches his eye. A wriggling iota in the curtain of heat.

(CONTINUED)

FRITO:  
There's someone coming.

RAMOS:  
Gimme that!

Ramos has a good ten years on the kid and a full, luxuriant moustache to show for it. He snatches the binoculars from Frito, adjusting focus, a dark shape swimming towards him through the mirror glaze, coalescing into a solitary figure in a ragged coat.

RAMOS: (CONT'D)  
Juan! Get over here!

They scuffle for their guns as the figure approaches to within hailing distance, lowering it's respirator.

SGT. CORDERO:  
Que quieres, gabacho?

NOMAD:  
I've come to see sub-commandant Davalos.

FRITO:  
You got the password?

Cordero slaps Frito on the top of his helmet.

SGT. CORDERO:  
Callate, pendejo! There isn't no fuckin' password!

FRITO:  
Quit hitting me!

SGT. CORDERO:  
Shit, you're such a baby.

Frito's hand goes to the Saturday Night Special tucked into his jeans.

FRITO:  
I'm not a fucking baby!

SGT. CORDERO:  
Okay, okay. You're not a baby.  
You're a fuckin' pendejo, but not a baby.

He motions to the nomad with his automatic.

SGT. CORDERO: (CONT'D)  
This way. You too, pendejo.

The Apache leads him around the edge of the advance position, Frito following at a distance, gun drawn.

(CONTINUED)

SGT. CORDERO: (CONT'D)

Got a name?

NOMAD:

The sub-commandant knows who I am.

The main camp is pitched further back amidst a jumble of volcanic boulders, a chaos of tents, sleeping bags and army blankets slung over poles. A stolen jetcopter bearing U.S. markings rests beneath a web of cammo-netting. Beside it a hard bitten Indian woman in a flat Cuban cap is trying to get six teenage girls to run up to a line, drop prone and fire. They have to mime their rifles and keep giggling. The exasperated instructor offers Cordero a laconic salute but he ignores her. The Apache knows 'Juanita' ( a nom de guerre like the others ) has her eye on him, when she isn't fending off young Ramos's advances but right now isn't the time for it. Pausing outside the largest tent he casts a sullen, murderous glance at his charge before ducking through the flap.

SGT. CORDERO:

You stay here while I ask or Frito,  
he'll shoot your ass.

FRITO:

That's right!

The boy sizes up the nomad, seeing his reflection hanging inverted in the tall man's blast goggles, the sun coming up behind him in a bloodstained sky.

NOMAD:

How old are you?

FRITO:

Nine...

NOMAD:

Old enough, I guess.

The nomad smiles. Raising a battered Polaroid camera he takes the kid's picture.

There is a flash of white light.

SGT. CORDERO:

The boss says to bring him in.

The tent is compulsively neat. On the rear wall three prints are pinned at eye level. On the left a traditional Christ with light suntan, curly hair and a full beard while on the right hangs a gaudy depiction of the virgin of Guadalupe. Between them and directly behind the Sub-Commandant's camp chair is a portrait of Emilio Zapata, arranged as if in a shrine.

Sub-Commandant Javier Davalos sits with his feet up reading a paperback copy of ex-president Marcos's novel "Quetzalcoatl", a loaded magnum resting on the tabletop beside him. He wears neatly pressed khakis without insignia, moustache trimmed like the wings of a stealth bomber, hair cut short. His tan has an undeniably reddish cast and he has the long nose and high forehead of his Mayan ancestors.

DAVALOS:

Didn't think you were coming.  
It's been nine weeks since I sent  
that correo.

NOMAD:

Had trouble getting across the glass  
flats. The correo didn't make it.

The nomad raises his goggles.  
His eyes are a vivid yellow flecked with gold.

NOMAD: (CONT'D)

I've been running before the storm  
all night. The Yanquis are serious  
this time...

DAVALOS:

Stand with us if you like and we'll  
meet 'em head on like we did at  
Allamogordo.

NOMAD:

Time you got out, sir. Back to old  
Mex 'til the dust settles...

DAVALOS:

Already been there. I promised the  
virgin I'd not cross the Rio Grande  
again until I washed my boots at  
Venice beach.

NOMAD:

General Nathan Buckley has raised and  
deployed a column of Mark 13 cyborgs.  
He's gonna eat your boys for  
breakfast before moving on to  
Splendor for the main course.

DAVALOS:

I have nothing to fear from him.  
I'm a patriot, not a criminal!

NOMAD:

In Roswell, New Mexico, your  
irregulars hanged men, women and  
children. Children, sir.

(CONTINUED)

DAVALOS:

When we took Roswell we went to the Mescalero but not all the Mescalero came to us. The media blew the incident up out of all proportion. The civilian casualties were no more than half or two thirds of the numbers claimed. And there were trials, you understand. The whole process took months.

NOMAD:

You're a man after my own heart, sir. We do the same work, you and I.

The nomad's eyes seem to shine in the gloom, a low whirring rising in the Sub-Commandant's ears.

DAVALOS:

What work is that?

His hand goes to his rosary.

NOMAD:

I like to think of us as midwives...

A spark of static jumps in the nomad's hair, the whirring swelling to a roar, filling the whole spectrum of sound.

DAVALOS:

Madre dios...

There is a chatter of gunfire and the ground shakes. The long, shrill scream of an incoming rocket. The nomad raises his Polaroid camera.

NOMAD:

Midwives in a great becoming.

Davalos drops the rosary and dives for his magnum. There is a flash.

White light.

Davalos staggers, buffeted by the impact of another shell, almost a direct hit, the tent coming apart in blazing shreds. Behind him Christ and the virgin rise in flames.

Frito stands, shells shrieking over his head, binoculars trembling in his hands. A curtain of dust is rolling towards him, a churning cloud driven up by the marching war machines, their infra-red eyes dancing in the haze. He crosses himself, drawing his Saturday Night Special.

37 CONTINUED:

37

38 A chain of explosions ripple through the camp, the shrieks of the dying and the mutilated falling like familiar music on the nomad's ears as he starts towards Splendor, his pack over one shoulder and hell following steadily at his heels. 38

EXTERIOR. DAWN. THE PROJECT.

The sound of artillery is muted at this distance, far off thunder rolling along the horizon's rim. Jill stares into the haze, tracer fire flickering at the limits of her vision. Then she closes her eyes, placing her palms together at her forehead.

JILL:

Ommm....

She draws out the syllable until it hums, sitting cross legged at the edge of the fire ant's territory, a field of mud spires rising before her. The far bank of the canal seethes with motion as if the ants have sensed something in the air this morning.

JILL: (CONT'D)

Mani....

She moves her steeped hands to her throat, then to the centre of her chest. Lyle watches silently from the shade of the car-henge, surprised to find her here. At this hour most of the migrants are already at work in the fields and greenhouses.

JILL: (CONT'D)

Padme...

Performing a morning ritual of his own Lyle slips a Geiger counter from his pocket, raising the chattering instrument to the seething sky, noticing its needle is well into the red. Then another hand grasps his wrist.

GINNY:

What are you doing here? You should be at work with the others.

LYLE:

Background radiation's about five times above normal, you realize that?

He allows her to check the reading.

GINNY:

Where did you get this?

LYLE:

Standard issue in the corps. Never know what you're strolling through out here...

GINNY:

Well, it doesn't work for shit.

(CONTINUED)

She taps the screen but the needle refuses to budge.

JILL:

Hum hrii...

Jill makes a motion like two OK signs, palms out.

LYLE:

What's she doing?

GINNY:

The mudras, you mean? Sealing her light. There's something in the air this morning. The kind of vibe you get before a storm moves in. Gives me the willies.

Another tremor comes rippling out of the south.

LYLE:

That's no storm.

Jill brings the heels of her hands together before getting to her feet and dusting off her pants.

JILL:

What's that smell?

LYLE:

Cordite. Someone's catchin' hell out there.

GINNY:

That's not our problem. We have to tend the garden today. Its our turn to...

LYLE:

Tomorrow there might not be a garden. Something's wrong and you know it.

Ginny opens her mouth. Then she closes it as a figure emerges from the carhenge, lurching towards them.

JILL:

Shades?

The space jockey's face is grey and streaked with sweat. He stammers, grasping at Lyle's sleeve, the sky filling with the drone of approaching turbines.

SHADES:

I...

JILL:

Oh, Christ. I told J.C. not to let him get into the peyote. God knows what sort of half-life that shit has...

(CONTINUED)

LYLE:

Its not the peyote.

The Geiger counter is chattering too loudly to be ignored now. He glances up, a winged shadow coming in low out of the sun.

JILL:

The fuck is happening?

Ginny takes her hand as a jetcopter soars over their heads, the pitch of it's engines dangerously off balance.

LYLE:

Look like government markings...

The craft throttles back as if trying to come in to land but then it's motors cut out sending it freefalling towards the assembly plant. It clears the crest of the dome, the tip of one wing glancing the nearest windmill as it whirls earthward.

JILL:

Ay chingado...

The sight makes Shades lose his balance and he falls to his knees in the dirt, lips working, trying in vain to warn his friends of something too big, too absurd, too off the scale to be readily coherent.

39 EXTERIOR. DAY. RICE PADDY.

39

The jetcopter is cooling off, turbines still ticking as Melchizidek approaches, the other migrants watching from a safe distance. He tightens his grip on his birch staff as a pressurised hatch slides open in the hull and a figure in a reflective helmet clambers out onto the wing.

SGT.CORDERO:

Joder...

Cordero pushes back his visor, staring at the scythe bearing mob. A kid in a blood stained Micky Mouse tee-shirt appears in the hatchway behind him flanked by a militia man with a droopy moustache and an ashen faced woman in a blackened Cuban cap.

SGT.CORDERO: (CONT'D)

Who's in charge here?

MELCHIZIDEK:

This is a destructuralist commune.  
No-one's in charge.

SGT. CORDERO:

Great. A bunch of fuckin' wackos.  
Ramos, Frito, round 'em up!

(CONTINUED)

The ten year old levels his Saturday Night Special at Melchizidek who slowly raises his hands, the other zoneheads dazedly taking their cue from him.

Shades lies on a cot, a saline drip in his forearm.

SKY:

I've hit him with some vitamins and a little St John's wort.

LYLE:

What he needs is a goddamn doctor.

SKY:

A doctor would only screw him up worse than he is already.

JILL:

Sky's a witch. She can do anything with her medicants a doctor could do.

Lyle glances at the bottled potions and herbal remedies lining the shelves. Dried rattlesnakes, roots and pickled prairie dog embryos. He shakes his head.

SKY:

I studied at Ohio State and have an M.S. in clinical psychology if you want to know...

Shades moans, opening his eyes.

JILL:

Easy now. We've got you on a drip.

SHADES:

Jill?

He stares dazedly at the needle in his arm.

JILL:

You should never have come. You weren't meant to be involved in any of this...

SHADES:

Then why did you tell me where you were?

She turns, avoiding his eyes.

SHADES: (CONT'D)

I bet J.C. made you send that card, didn't he?

JILL:

What difference does it make?

(CONTINUED)

SHADES:

That's fucking great. God's will or what? He set us up, Jill.

JILL:

And why do you always have to make such a big deal out of everything?

Shades tries to rise but Sky restrains him.

SKY:

Just chill now, okay. I'll give you something to help you sleep.

SHADES:

No. Not yet...

He splutters as she forces a bowl to his lips.

LYLE:

You're tripping, buddy.  
It's gonna be alright.

SHADES:

No. It's not alright.  
Don't you know where we are ?

He meets the veteran's gaze and for an eerie instant it is as if Lyle really does understand. Then there is a metallic click as a figure in combat fatigues appears in the doorway, a snub-nosed infantry rifle in his hands.

SHADES: (CONT'D)

This is ground zero....

RAMOS:

Everyone out! Nice and slow.

Sky lowers the bowl, raising her hands.

SKY:

Better do as he says.  
I think we're busted...

41 EXTERIOR. DAY. THE PROJECT.

41

Shades blinks, draping his flight jacket around his shoulders as they escort him out into the sun.

JILL:

You sure you can walk?

SHADES:

Yeah. I feel good.

But he doesn't look good. His hair sticks out oddly and his skin seems pale and bloodless.

(CONTINUED)

GINNY:

This is just like fuckin' Roswell all over again.

The militia are herding the project's inhabitants into the forecourt where their leader sits propped up in a chair liberated from one of the bunkhouses, his legs stretched out before him, bound in makeshift splints and blackened bandages.

LYLE:

You know who that is?

Jill shakes her head.

LYLE: (CONT'D)

That's Davalos. Used to manage a Mac Donald's franchise back in San Antonio, back when there was still something like central authority in this friggin' state! Next thing you know he's channelling the spirit of Zapata and got himself a following. The army's been trying to peel his potatoes ever since Roswell and now it looks like they've damn near done it...

\*  
\*  
\*

Davalos raises one hand, weakly swatting at the flies settling on his charred, broken limbs. Wounded and on the run it is obvious even from a distance that the sub-commandant is starting to lose control of his militia. There are too many guns in the forecourt and just too many people shouting for it to be good karma.

SHADES:

Let me handle this...

He reaches for his phrase book.  
Davalos glances up, eyes glazed with pain.

DAVALOS:

Que?

SHADES:

Buenas tardes, señor. Donde esta el campo de golf mas cercano?

Davalos's second in command spins, chambering a round.

SGT. CORDERO:

Bajale!

Shades gestures at his copy of 'Spanish Made Simple'.

SHADES:

No comprendo.

(CONTINUED)

Cordero forces the bewildered space jockey to his knees, levelling the automatic at his head, realizing its high time he set some sort of example around here.

LYLE:

Cuidada, por favor! Esta enfermo!

SGT. CORDERO:

Callate!

Shades closes his eyes, wincing as Ramos fires a warning shot, trying to focus the crowd.

DAVALOS:

Listen to me! This concerns all of you! There's a column of Mark 13 cyborgs preparing to storm this project!

A murmur of apprehension ripples across the forecourt. Ginny turns to whisper something to J.C. but Melchizidek silences her.

DAVALOS: (CONT'D)

If you don't stand with us they'll kill you, all of you and your president will sanction those killings.

Lyle crouches beside Jill, touching her hand.

LYLE:

You okay?

She nods, closing her fingers around his.

GINNY:

Go fight your war someplace else! There are women and children here, for fuck's sake!

DAVALOS:

This place was already targeted. If our flight computer hadn't gone down we'd have been a hundred clicks away by now. There are only six of us left but if we stand together we can still make a difference.

GINNY:

Fuck you! I'm not going to be your human shield! I had a family once! I had a husband and little girl and they were taken away from me and killed by people like you because they thought we no longer belonged in Roswell, New Mexico! Apaches! Murderers!

Jill turns to Lyle.

(CONTINUED)

LYLE:  
It'll be alright.  
We're gonna come through.

They stare at one another as if seeing each other for the first time, kneeling hand in hand in the dust.

JILL:  
It's been a long time since I trusted anybody...

LYLE:  
Trust me now.

DAVALOS:  
Together we can beat them!

J.C. turns wordlessly away and Jill disengages her hand sensing Ginny's eyes upon her. The entire assembly is following their guru's example, gathering their children and turning their backs on the militia.

SGT. CORDERO:  
Looks we'll have to fight this one alone, sir.

DAVALOS:  
At least the ground favours us.

He turns his eyes towards the heat risers.

DAVALOS: (CONT'D)  
It's holy ground...

SGT. CORDERO:  
What's that sir?

DAVALOS:  
Holy ground. The Anglos stole it from us with the treaty of San Jacinto. Ten generations it's been in their hands and look at it. Now their world's coming to an end and we've come to pick up the tab...

There is a bird turning on one of the thermals, heading someplace else.

DAVALOS: (CONT'D)  
It that a hawk?

SGT. CORDERO:  
I think it's a buzzard, sir.

The sub-commandant sighs, the pain coming in waves.

DAVALOS:  
From the air it looks like the outer dyke encloses three sides of this place.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

41 CONTINUED: (4)

41

DAVALOS: (CONT'D)

I think the ends of the horseshoe run into a creek about half a mile north-east of here. That'll be the first line...

\*

Cordero nods slowly.

DAVALOS: (CONT'D)

They'll be coming from the south so we'll concentrate our effort at that end. The inner dyke is lined with concrete. If we drain it we can use the fuel tanks to draw a ring of fire around the hub. That'll be the second line. After that we'll have to fall back into the complex itself.

SGT. CORDERO:

I don't like it. If they get us boxed in we're fucked.

DAVALOS:

Got any better ideas?

He glances skyward, looking for the buzzard, seeing only light and empty space.

SGT.CORDERO:

Maybe we can figure out what went wrong with the flight computer and get that bird back in the air...

The Apache nods towards the grounded jetcopter.

SGT.CORDERO: (CONT'D)

Fly our asses out of here. Live to fight another day?

DAVALOS:

Oh, Madre.....

His eyes glaze over.

SGT.CORDERO:

Sir?

DAVALOS:

The air is that light thing that moves about my head...

The sub-commandant's head tilts slowly forward as if he is falling asleep.

SGT. CORDERO:

Mierda!

Cordero turns, barking a slew of commands.

SGT. CORDERO: (CONT'D)

Carlos! Juanita! To the infirmary! Ramos...

(CONTINUED)

Juanita helps lift the sub-commandant's body from the chair, wordlessly following orders despite the tears in her eyes.

SGT. CORDERO: (CONT'D)  
Get some few hands to plant out the frag mines! I want a twelve foot exclusion zone along that dyke's inner rim! And round up any weapons you can find...

JILL:  
We don't have any weapons, godammit!

SGT. CORDERO:  
We are not playing games, lady. I want to see everything you have hidden from us! The U.S. army didn't target this place for nothin'.

Ramos takes a closer look at Lyle, sizing the veteran up.

RAMOS:  
Know how to plant potatoes, Country Boy?

Lyle nods, getting to his feet.

JILL:  
We're not criminals like you guys. We don't kill people.

The Apache gestures at the geodesic dome with his automatic.

SGT. CORDERO:  
What's in there then ?

JILL:  
It's a fuckin' greenhouse.

SGT. CORDERO:  
I want to see inside.

JILL:  
The hell for?

SGT. CORDERO:  
What better place to hide weapons?

JILL:  
Oh Christ. Go ahead. Make yourself at home.

SGT. CORDERO:  
You come with... and you, hombre.

He waves the gun at Shades who is one of the few individuals not to have followed J.C. into the bunkhouse.

42 INTERIOR. DAY. THE GREENHOUSE.

42

The Apache pushes open the door and then hesitates, wrinkling his nose.

SHADES:

I'm with you but these folk don't seem to mind the smell of their own shit. All part of living in harmony with the planet, I guess.

SGT. CORDERO:

These folk? You are not one of them?

JILL:

Being part of anything's not something he's good at.

SHADES:

I'm a flight technician, alright? I work for the commercial space programme. Wading around in fuckin' sewage just never appealed.

The Apache pretends not to be bothered by the smell, making a show of poking at the rubbery plants and bending to check the bracing under the troughs.

SGT. CORDERO:

Think you can get that bird back in the air?

Shades looks at him in confusion.

SGT. CORDERO: (CONT'D)

You are a flight technician, no?

SHADES:

It only seats eight people. Nine at a stretch. If I could fly it who the hell would choose the passengers?

SGT. CORDERO:

What does it matter? Make it fly and you'll be one of them.

SHDES:

And let some bambino die in my place? No way, man. No fuckin' deal.

There is a sharp click as Cordero cocks his automatic.

SGT. CORDERO:

I could kill you right here.

SHADES:

Think I care?

(CONTINUED)

Shade's glasses have misted up from the humidity. He takes them off, wiping them on his sleeve.

SGT. CORDERO:

That's the best deal you're getting, cabron.

JILL:

For Christ's sake, Shades, stop crapping around with fate! This place never meant anything to you before.

SHADES:

No, but you do.

JILL:

If you've got the chance to split then go for it and take these macho fuckin' retards with you!

SHADES:

Not without you.  
I'm not leaving you here.

Jill slaps him through the face.

JILL:

Don't you dare use me as a bargaining counter! I'm not negotiable.

Cordero blinks, swinging his automatic from one to the other.

SGT.CORDERO:

Mande?

JILL

You can shoot me if you want but you can't use me! I will not be used by you or him or anyone else!

Her voice is high and shrill, almost a scream. She pushes the gun to one side and storms out of the greenhouse, taking off at a direction perpendicular to Cordero's universe. He reholsters his automatic, shaking his head.

SGT. CORDERO:

Fuckin' chicks, man! I thought the gender wars were supposed to be over?

Shades rubs his jaw, still feeling the slap.

SHADES:

They're never over, dude.

43 EXTERIOR. DAY. THE PROJECT

43

Frito is standing at the door of the bunkhouse, kicking his heels. As Jill approaches he straightens, fingering his Saturday Night Special.

JILL:

Hola. Donde esta Davalos?

Something is going on inside and she cranes her neck to get a better view.

JILL: (CONT'D)

Davalos? Donde esta?

Frito flaps his hands, rattling off a stream of words she doesn't understand.

JILL: (CONT'D)

I have important news for him!  
We can fix his goddamn jetcopter!  
You guys can go now. Comprende?  
Just get up and...

Her voice tails off as the smell of blood hits her, then the sound of it dripping and splattering on the mud floor within.

JILL:(CONT')

Fuckin' go...

44 INTERIOR. DAY. THE INFIRMARY.

44

Sky and three junior members of her coven are ringed around a metal cot. One holds a bag of yellowish liquid with a tube coming out of the bottom.

Jill's stomach heaves.

There is a rasping noise and the sound of more blood hitting the ground. It is very quiet around the cot. Then there is yelling that sounds like swearing and more yelling that sounds like orders.

Somebody moans.

Juanita turns, pushing past Jill. She's lost her cap and the front of her fatigues are sprayed with blood.

The crowd parts and Frito crosses himself as Sky emerges to stand blinking on the threshold, the sub-commandant's freshly amputated legs cradled in her arms.

45 INTERIOR. DAY. THE BUNK HOUSE.

45

Jill picks her way dazedly around the people seated on the floor. Ginny and Moon Rabbit are chopping up vegetables while J.C. plays one of his songs on a guitar, a halo of marijuana smoke filling the air.

(CONTINUED)

J.C:

Are your friends staying for dinner?  
We were thinking of doing Mexican but  
we've made up some Avocado sandwiches  
to be getting on with.

JILL:

Just leave me alone, alright?

She seats herself on a mattress, curling into a ball.

46 EXTERIOR. DAY. THE PROJECT

46

Lyle primes another frag-mine, stealing a furtive glance  
at the jetcopter. The craft has been righted and dug free  
of the sludge. Shades has the cowling open and is  
draining the fuel pump. Lyle feels the sentry's eyes on  
him and looks away, placing the frag-mine in a shallow  
depression scooped in the levee and covering it with  
dirt, working his way in a crouch around the outer dyke.

Shades wipes his hands, holding out an oil smeared palm  
to his dreadlocked minder.

SHADES:

I need the key.

SGT. CORDERO:

Why?

SHADES:

I have to see if it's gonna run.  
I ain't going nowhere.  
There's nowhere to go.

SGT. CORDERO

Quien lleva los panalones?, spaceman!  
Holdin' out for a puta like that?

SHADES: (CONT'D)

And you? Tying yourself to a leader  
without a leg to stand on?

The Apache thinks it over. Then he shakes his head,  
tugging the key from a thong about his neck.

SGT. CORDERO:

Cabron...

47 INTERIOR/EXTERIOR. DAY. THE BUNK HOUSE.

47

Jill watches from the doorway, the wind rising as the day  
starts to cool. The militia are sandbagging the plant  
with sacks of grain, collecting fence posts, farming  
equipment and anything else that can be made into  
barricades. Ginny appears beside her, giving Jill's arm a  
squeeze but she pulls away, tying back her hair.

\*  
\*  
\*  
\*

(CONTINUED)

GINNY:  
What are you doin'?

JILL:  
I'm going to help. I can't just sit around getting off my tits while everything we've worked for goes up in smoke.

GINNY turns to J.C. who sits in the shadows behind her, cleaning out his chillum.

J.C:  
She may have a point. Machines ain't exactly living organisms. Making a stand against them might be futile but it's as much in keeping with our way as anything else...

GINNY:  
If we help them we could be helping the same people who killed my family... .

Sky avoids her eyes, gathering up Moon Rabbit, feeling too drained after the ordeal in the infirmary to go through this right now.

GINNY: (CONT'D)  
If we help them we're making ourselves part of it! Don't you see?

J.C:  
We're part of it already.  
It's all just manifestation.

He pats her on the shoulder, offering Frito his sandwich.

J.C: (CONT'D)  
Go on. It's good. We'd only have to throw it away otherwise.

Frito samples a mouthful, watching as the bearded gringo rallies his followers, leading them out into the mazy afternoon light to make their half-assed stand.

Shades is lying between the seats, head beneath the dash. He slides out one of the chipboards, searching for the break in the circuit that brought the craft down.

SHADES:  
I'll be damned!

There is a carbonised fire ant clinging to the wiring, its body randomly redirecting the current. He scratches it free with his screwdriver, cleaning off the points with a jet of compressed air.

(CONTINUED)

Then something catches his eye. Turning his head he notices the butt of a gun wedged beneath the seat. One of the snub-nosed assault rifles carried by Davalos's militia. He reaches out, exhaling softly. The gun feels good in his hands like putting on a really well made suit for the first time. He sits up, suddenly queasy. Dry swallowing a handful of pills the in-flight maintenance man self-medicates to hold off his radiation sickness, praying the pseudoendorphins keep his body chemistry in check long enough to do what he has to, to see this mess through.

SHADES: (CONT'D)

This is it, man.

Only chance you're gonna get...

Clipping the rifle onto full auto he opens the hatch.

A snuff metal track crashes in jagged waves from the stereo, drowning out the world, narrowing Jill's attention to the stream of gas whistling from her welding rod. She feels her anger rising from her muladhara chakra like an animal that has been lying dormant all these years, feeding off her hurt, expressing itself now in the singing flame, bending and reforging everything it touches into the shape of her rage.

The track burns itself out and she raises her visor to admire her handiwork. The tractors grin back at her with shiny teeth, metal beasts with gun emplacement eyes, scythe blades sprouting from their flanks. The vehicles seem happier this way as if in her final custom job she has at last given manifestation to their true, inherently belligerent nature.

LYLE:

Here's to it...

She turns to notice Lyle standing silently behind her, hip flask glinting in his hand.

JILL:

I don't drink.

LYLE:

It's just water. Fresh spring water.  
Swear to God.

Jill takes the flask, raising it to her lips.

LYLE: (CONT'D)

No, I don't. I don't swear to God but  
it'll help

She feels a little dizzy. Laying down the mask she crosses to the garage door.

(CONTINUED)

JILL:

Figures. Never had you pegged as the religious type...

50 EXTERIOR. LATE AFTERNOON. THE PROJECT.

50

Shades starts towards the tractor sheds, feeling like a kid playing at cowboys and Indians. A figure appears on the skyline and he flings himself into a ditch, crawling on all fours towards the safety of the corn field. The rifle trembles in his hands as one of the irregulars, Carlos, a teenager with a smudgy learner's moustache, passes within a hundred feet, eyes trained in the opposite direction, presenting a pathetically easy target.

\*  
\*  
\*  
\*

The soil between the rows is covered in chaff and Shades knows each time he takes a step he is killing things, unseen bugs, snails and spiders perishing beneath his boots, their delicate webs torn pointlessly asunder as he works his way deeper into the field, still knowing if he has the strength to kill another man, even for love. Then he freezes hearing a familiar voice.

\*  
\*  
\*  
\*

LYLE:

My old lady was really big on religion. She was crazy, y'know. Like certifiable...

\*

JILL:

So, what happened to her?

Jill and Lyle emerge from the back of the sheds, picking their way along a parallel row, so close Shades can almost touch them. He knows he should draw attention to himself but seeing them together gives him a knotted-up feeling inside and he wants to see what happens next.

LYLE:

My fault, I guess. She quit going to church. I thought it was her choice but she always resented it. Putting her soul on the line for me when I didn't even believe in the fuckin' thing! Anyway she started hangin' with the Adventists and ended up blowin' some charismatic pastor dude old enough to be her dad. I mean, for Christ's sake, she goes back to church, a god-damned fundamentalist church, to get laid! She was completely schizo but wouldn't admit it...

Jill pokes him in the stomach.

(CONTINUED)

JILL:

Don't sound so wistful.  
You're over it now, right?

LYLE:

That's why I joined the corps.  
It was an easy way to get over a lot  
of things. I mean I still believe in  
love and all. I just can't see one  
man and one woman together forever.  
Not anymore...

JILL:

I don't know what to believe. I know  
relationships don't work out by  
themselves. Love especially.  
It's just too god-damned hard

Shades hears someone giggle and working his way to the  
edge of the field notices Sky kneeling on the bank of an  
irrigation canal, washing Moon Rabbit's hair.

It is a scene of weird serenity, the heavens aglow with  
that eerie orange light so common in this part of the  
zone, transmuting the water into metal, burnishing the  
bathers in liquid bronze.

Jill **drains** the flask, **staring** out over the canal and  
fallow fields at the anthills marching away to the ends  
of the earth and a horizon **already** lost in the  
thunderous, coppery haze. \*

JILL: (CONT'D)

I think if I could pray I'd pray God  
would cause the bomb to fall on us  
right now...

She crosses to the water's edge, reaching for the zipper  
of her overalls. It's like watching a car accident.  
Shades knows it's going to hurt but can't stop himself  
looking anyway.

JILL: (CONT'D)

On us and on our children and on the  
fuckin' ants and wipe us out. So we  
could stop needing love and needing  
dope and needing each other's dirty  
asses and stupid, fucked up riffs...

She steps out of her underwear, hopping drunkenly on one  
leg, a pretence of shyness in the way she keeps her back  
to Lyle but Shades isn't buying it.

JILL: (CONT'D)

That's the answer. \*

The final fuckin' solution...

She dives into the canal, streamlined and perfect as a  
picture in a magazine.

(CONTINUED)

JILL: (CONT'D)  
Come on. What are you afraid of ?

Lyle shucks off his vest, revealing a torso criss-crossed with scar tissue. A tattoo on his right bicep reads "FIGHTING 666TH". A flaming skull with a snake coiling through it's sockets bears the motto: "DEATH TO LIFE". He kicks off his trousers, diving after her. Jill's arms encircle him and he holds on to her, squeezing until she thinks she's going to faint. The next thing she knows she's half out of the water and on her back, just out of Sky and Moon Rabbit's view. Lyle is kissing her and she feels the emptiness of the world between her legs.

LYLE:  
And Shades? I thought...

JILL:  
Shades is just a little boy.

Shades sits down in the corn. He makes some noise doing so but it hardly matters. The only thing he can feel anymore is the tip of his finger on the trigger.

JILL: (CONT'D)  
God. It's been so long....

Lyle enters her and it's like getting back a piece of herself that was missing. She holds his face, running her tongue around the inside of his lips, hungry for flesh. The stubble of his beard scratches her lips and chin and his hips grind into her pelvis. The little pains make her even crazier. She lunges against him, pumping hard, ripples widening across the surface of the canal. There is an almost inaudible whirring and Lyle stiffens.

LYLE:  
They're comin'.

JILL:  
I'm cumming....

Lyle tries to pull out but she clamps herself around him. The water whitens as a phalanx of Mark 13 cyborgs rise from the canal like dripping, armor plated dinosaurs, heat sensitive eyes focusing on the coupling lovers.

Private Rudnick grins, framing Lyle's heaving buttocks in her targeting grid.

RUDNICK:  
Kiss your ass goodbye, fucker!



55 INTERIOR. LATE AFTERNOON. OP CENTER. 55

Schneider's monitor fuzzes out in a burst of noise.

SCHNEIDER:  
Sniper at two o'clock!

56 EXTERIOR. LATE AFTERNOON. THE PROJECT. 56

The drone soldiers level their microwave cannons as Sky scoops up Moon Rabbit, trying to make a run for it while Shades covers her. Then a round ricochets off the chestplate of the nearest drone, catching the fleeing woman in the back and passing like a hot knife through Sky's heart, driving the life from her in a single blow.

JILL:  
No way! No fuckin' way !

She finds Lyle's eyes and he releases her with a yelp, nails leaving crimson tracks across his cheeks.

LYLE:  
Jill!

57 INTERIOR. DUSK. THE OP-CENTRE. 57

The instant Jill's heatshape disengages from Lyle's signal she presents herself as a legitimate target, a naked, glowing bundle of fear and indignation.

RUDNICK:  
Got this one dead bang.

58 EXT. DUSK. THE PROJECT. 58

The blind war machine lumbers past Jill, a ten ton chicken without a head deflecting a volley of titanium tipped ordinance. Lyle flings himself down, stray rounds ricocheting everywhere. Ignoring the incoming the drones calmly take aim, training their microwave weapons on Jill, the air seething as she catches her breath, diving into the deepest past of the canal.

EXT. DUSK. THE CANAL.

The water bursts about her in a shower of sparks and Jill kicks her way downward, realizing she is not alone in this silent crystalline world. A platoon of Mark 13 cyborgs are advancing like armoured crabs along the canal bed, eyes glinting in the silt, their steel pincers reaching for her flailing legs as she struggles helplessly against the current.

EXT. DUSK. THE PROJECT.

Everything is rising in flame, microwave beams cutting through the withering crop, kindling the chaff. Shades coughs, the ears of corn closest to him dancing in a non-existent wind. He narrows his streaming eyes, catching a fleeting glimpse of the drone soldiers advancing through the whirling ash, like a ghastly nightmare from out of the past. A bullet he was always meant to eat.

The air is too hot to breathe now.

His clothes are starting to burn. The skin on his knuckles tightens as he grips the trigger and cracks.

59 INTERIOR. DUSK. OP-CENTER. 59

Rudnick frames Shades in her cross-hairs, his outline pale and ghost-like, almost lost in the radiant energy of the fire.

RUDNICK:

Gonna cook your ass good,  
motherfucker!

60 EXTERIOR. DUSK. THE PROJECT. 60

The burning spaceman turns.  
Screaming, he charges headlong into the flames.

61 INTERIOR. DUSK. OP-CENTER. 61

Rudnick blinks as his outline vanishes from her screen.

RUDNICK:

You see that? Crazy l'il fuck ran  
straight into the fire!

SCHNEIDER:

Wish I had some of what he's on...

GENERAL BUCKLEY:

Continue your advance. Primary  
target will be in range once you  
clear the field.

62 EXTERIOR. DUSK. THE PROJECT. 62

Lyle wades through the shallows. Clipping the transmitter to his belt he turns Sky over, her head tilting lifelessly, a gaping hole where her heart should be. Gathering Moon Rabbit into his arms he starts towards the outer dyke, the child still and warm against his chest.

EXT. CANAL. DUSK.

Jill's head spins.  
All she is aware of are varying shades of green beautifully graduated from light to dark.  
She goes towards the palest color, although it seems to be to one side of her, rather than above, seeing the sun's corona, liquid and transformed. Then it explodes in her face and she struggles, gasping to the far bank.

EXT. THE PROJECT. DUSK.

Carlos and Cordero are already charging towards the blazing field when the curtain parts to emit a stumbling figure, wisps of fire rising from its flight jacket.

SHADES:

They're here...

The strength goes out of his legs and Shades crumples at Cordero's feet, swatting at his hair.  
Behind him the Stormtroopers appear through the flames, a steel noose tightening around the project's hub.

CARLOS:

They've breached the perimeter!

The Apache throws back his head, an ululating war cry rising from his lips, automatic rifle kicking in his hands. The other irregulars take up the cry, racing to meet the Mark 13 regiment head on, a phalanx of armoured tractors rumbling behind them.

J.C. clings to the flatbed's running board, a scythe in one hand and a peyote button clenched in the back of his mouth like a wad of psychedellic chewing tobacco.

J.C.:

Hold together! Hold together!  
For me, for you, for earth, for every  
goddamn thing!

63 INTERIOR. DUSK. OP-CENTER.

63

Private Rudnick shakes her head in disbelief.

RUDNICK:

There's so many of them...

The remote cameras rove across a mob of long haired zoneheads, women, children, Rastafarians, Buddhists, Vegans, Latino freedom-fighters and migrant laborers, their heat-shapes bleeding into each other as if they are a single animal howling with one voice.

(CONTINUED)

63 CONTINUED:

63

GENERAL BUCKLEY:

Choose your targets.  
Fire at will.

64 EXTERIOR. DUSK. THE PROJECT. 64

The regiment levels its microwave cannons, the setting sun at their backs, dying rays slanting through the smoke, staining the field a deep, arterial crimson.

J.C:

For the air! For the water!  
For the wildlife!

65 EXTERIOR. DUSK. THE EXCLUSION ZONE. 65

Jill lies face down on the canal's outer bank, gasping for breath, the ground alive with scurrying ants. Behind her a steel skull breaks surface, rising on its long neck from the canal like a macabre periscope.

66 INTERIOR. DUSK. THE OP-CENTER. 66

Something at the edge of the field of ant hills catches Schneider's attention and he enhances the image.

SCHNEIDER:

I see you...

Jill's huddled outline is pale and cold, barely distinguishable from the dirt.

67 EXTERIOR. DUSK. THE EXCLUSION ZONE. 67

A sharp pain in Jill's hand brings her back to full consciousness and she opens her eyes to find a glistening fire-ant clinging to the soft web of skin between her thumb and forefinger. She sits up with a yelp, swatting at the stinging creature, the embankment steaming as a concentrated burst of microwave energy rakes the spot where her head was resting only instants earlier.

Jill turns, eyes meeting the machine's emotionless gaze as it comes rushing up the bank towards her, steel torso wobbling on its jointed limbs. She frantically scrabbles to regain her footing, hearing a drill whir into life as the beast gains on her, microwaves raking the mud spires, tanning the skin from the back of her legs and driving the bugs into a frenzy, her bare feet crunching across a teeming, living carpet of scurrying insects as she tries in vain to flee.

68 EXTERIOR. DUSK. THE PROJECT. 68

Cordero whoops, bowling a grenade overarm into the oncoming horde.

SERGEANT CORDERO:

Agachate !

He ducks, an explosion lighting up the night, a high pitched mewling rising from the silicon soldiers as the gas slick erupts in flame.

69 INTERIOR. DUSK. THE OP-CENTER. 69

The image on Rudnick's screen blips out, the world shrinking to a dot of light in the darkening monitor.

BARLOWE:

You okay, Kiara?

Matt's hand trails lightly against her shoulder.

RUDNICK:

Just give me a few seconds to reboot.

70 EXTERIOR. DUSK. THE PROJECT 70

The destructuralists and surviving irregulars applaud, yelling and stamping like children at a pantomime. The flatbed pulls to a halt at the edge of the trench, J.C. offering Cordero a gleeful clenched fist salute. But the Apache isn't smiling. He's busy reloading his rifle as the first of their besiegers comes wading through the blazing slick towards them.

The adrenalized grin fades from J.C.'s face as he realizes that other than temporarily blinding them the moat has failed to even slow the cyborgs down.

J.C.:

Oh, man...

71 INTERIOR. DUSK. THE OP-CENTER. 71

Carla stands at the software designer's side, tiny hand squeezing his, dark eyes roving across the monitors, her freshly laundered p-j's failing to entirely hide the track marks on her arms.

BARLOWE:

It's a lot easier than it looks.  
You've played gameboy games right?

Carla nods. She's starting to get her color back and if not happy appears at least engaged.

(CONTINUED)

-BARLOWE:

Then you know it's just reflexes.  
My team were recruited from arcades  
right across the country...

SCHNEIDER:

I notched up the top score for  
Milwaukee and Uncle Matt drafted me  
right in to the Rough Riders at full  
pay. That's what we call ourselves.  
The unit, I mean...

BARLOWE:

After Roosevelt but I guess you  
wouldn't know who that was...

He straightens the teddybear propped beside the plasma  
screen, keeping a paternal eye on Carla as she  
experiments with the controls.

BARLOWE:(CONT.)

It's the first fully operational,  
fully battlefield responsive mobile  
unit of it's kind. May look a li'l  
rough n' ready but you don't need a  
p.h.d. to tell it's the future!

72 EXTERIOR. DUSK. THE EXCLUSION ZONE. 72

74 Jill races between the mud spires, the cyborg hopping 74  
after her in a series of blurred, jerky movements.  
The steel beast is heavier and slower than her allowing  
the fire ants time to scale its pumping legs, mandibles  
working against its body armor, searching methodically  
for cracks in its carapace.

Jill swats at the bugs as she runs, skin smarting from  
their sawing, piercing bites. Then one sinks its  
mandibles into the corner of her right eye and she cries  
out, formic acid etching into her optic nerves. She  
stumbles, skidding to her hands and knees, the voracious  
carpet of insects flowing over her outstretched palms.

75 INTERIOR. DUSK. OP-CENTER. 75

Carla sees Jill fall.

SCHNEIDER:

A non-commissioned officer can earn  
up to thirteen fifty an hour in the  
private sector, dude! Three times  
what I'd have got if I stuck around  
to graduate. Issued me with a sidearm  
and everything just like a regular  
soldier...

(CONTINUED)

SCHNEIDER taps the butt of a gun hanging in a fancy monogrammed holster over the back of his chair but Carla's attention is still on the screen and Jill's feebly moving outline.

SCHNEIDER: (CONT'D)

Pretty cool, huh?

My folks always had me pegged for a loser but now... fuck.

RUDNICK:

You are a loser, Schneider.

Firelight falls on the sweating faces of the defenders and the smoking body armor of their oppressors as they rise in a black, undulating wave from the trench.

SERGEANT CORDERO:

Fall back!

Frito dashes a Molotov cocktail into the face of the nearest Stormtrooper and the creature reels blindly into the path of the oncoming vehicles, chassis crumpling as a tractor grinds it into the dust.

SERGEANT CORDERO: (CONT'D)

Fall back and regroup!

The tractor backs up, the mangled cyborg still clinging to its underside, body twitching and sparking. There is a hiss of hydraulics as the creature's neck snakes forward, lunging around the engine mount to bury its hypodermics in the driver's head, punching through his skull into the grey matter within. The bearded dirt farmer goes into a terminal seizure, legs flapping against the accelerator, sending his vehicle lurching erratically forward.

SERGEANT CORDERO: (CONT'D)

I said fall back, goddammit!

J.C. flings himself clear as the tractor slams headlong into the flatbed, strewing debris everywhere. Within seconds there is nothing sane or sensible left of either vehicle, the momentum carrying both wrecks forward into the trench, ploughing into the midst of their attackers.

Melchizidek pulls the surviving vehicle to a halt, casting about himself with his birch staff as he starts selflessly to his master's aid. J.C. tries to get to his feet only to stumble on the hem of his gown as the flatbed's tank explodes behind him, sending what looks like part of the engine cowling pinwheeling through the air. Ramos, Shades and Melchizidek all duck at once, the blazing shard whirling above them, close enough to singe the white Rasta's dreadlocks.

EXTERIOR. DUSK THE EXCLUSION ZONE.

Jill struggles to wipe the bugs from her face and body but only succeeds in coating herself more thickly with the tiny creatures, their twitching antennae seeking out her most sensitive, scented parts, trying to gain access to her mouth and anus. Her hands are already slick with blood and she realizes dimly that she is being eaten alive. Then a shadow falls across her and she sees the writhing ant-hulled carapace of the Mark 13 rearing up on its back legs, blotting out the purple sky.

EXT. DUSK. THE PROJECT.

Shades rolls aside, Melchizidek instinctively bringing up his staff as another one of the war machines bursts from the maw of the trench, arms flailing as it bears down on them, body a twisting column of living fire. Juanita turns, kindling a Molotov cocktail but the drones find her range before she can throw it, smoke coiling from her scalp, the air clinging like glue to her blistering skin.

RAMOS:

Juanita!

Ramos and Cordero both start towards her and the superheated cocktail explodes full in their faces.

77 EXTERIOR. DUSK THE EXCLUSION ZONE.

77

Jill looks up, almost blind, staring through circles of fire into a milky mist beyond which the cyborg's infra-red eyes blaze with an intensity fiercer than life.

JILL:

C'mon, then...

EXT. DUSK. THE PROJECT.

Ramos beats at Juanita's smouldering body, tears coming to his eyes. The moustache has been scorched clean off his face, making him look years younger. He bends to touch her blackened cheek but before he can say a word he finds himself grasped from behind and borne upwards. There is a fleeting sensation of intense pressure as one of the war machines tears him in half, flinging the pieces in opposite directions before turning its attention towards Cordero who is still rolling in the dust, cursing a string of incomprehensible expletives as he struggles to extricate himself from his burning flak jacket, flames licking hungrily at the grenades buttoned into its flaps.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Everywhere the Stormtroopers are reaping a bloody harvest, cutting a swathe through the destructuralists, the battle becoming a rout, the rout becoming a massacre.

EXT. DUSK. THE EXCLUSION ZONE.

The cyborg's mouthparts unfold from the base of its skull, glinting hypodermics descending towards Jill's staring eyes. She winces, not wanting to see any more.

JILL:

Get it over with...

INT. DUSK. MARK 13 CYBORG CEREBELLUM.

A fire ant finds its way through a chink in the Stormtrooper's cranium. It works its way along the spinal cord into the base of the brain. Sampling a little of the insulation wax along the way and finding it good, the ant sinks its mandibles deeper, grazing the wire.

A massive jolt of electricity fuses the tiny insect into a carbonized lump, shorting out an entire circuit.

INT. DUSK. THE EXCLUSION ZONE.

A high pitched whining fills the air and Jill opens her eyes staring dazedly at the stricken war machine as it shakes its head from side to side.

INT. DUSK. OP-CENTRE.

Carla wiggles her joystick frustratedly.

SCHNEIDER:

Got a glitch, Sir.  
Same thing as before.

Matt pushes the child roughly aside.

BARLOWE:

Hold on. Let me get in there.

INT. DUSK. MARK 13 CYBORG CEREBELLUM.

A column of ants follow the scent trail laid by their dead comrade, jaws working hungrily as they fan out into the cyborg's medulla and cerebral cortex, severing its visual circuits as they pass.

INT. DUSK. THE OP-CENTRE.

Schneider shakes his head in disgust.

SCHNEIDER:  
It's gone. Just like that.  
Whole damn system's crashed...

EXT. DUSK. THE EXCLUSION ZONE.

Jill rolls aside as the Cyborg spasms, flailing at its own body armor. She flattens herself into a gaping rent cut in one of the mounds, drawing her aching, ant furred body deeper into the nest in the hope of finding shelter.

EXT. DUSK. THE PROJECT.

Shades stares up at the steel beast towering over him, not understanding why it doesn't kill him. Then Cordero pushes him aside, flinging his smouldering flak-jacket into the creature's path and he bites the dirt, covering his head as the world explodes around him.

INT. DUSK. OP-CENTRE.

Private Rudnick sighs, her visual feed disappearing down an electron plughole.

GENERAL BUCKLEY:  
You better have an explanation  
coming, Barlowe...

EXT. DUSK. THE PROJECT.

Cordero clambers to his feet, face badly blistered, one eye swollen almost shut, making him appear even more piratical than before. Everywhere the Stormtroopers are running amok, steel frames shuddering as if gripped en masse by some form of electronic epilepsy.

Shades and J.C. appear nervously beside him as the Apache takes advantage of the lull in the fighting to conduct a partial headcount. Their ranks have been decimated but with luck and the grace of God the tide seems to finally be on the turn.

INT. DUSK. OP-CENTRE.

Barlow is hunched over his console, keying in digits, Carla hovering at his side like an unwilling shadow.

GENERAL BUCKLEY:  
The hell's that kid doing in here?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

BARLOWE:

Thought it was time this unit had a mascot, Sir.

GENERAL BUCKLEY:

Are you out of your fucking mind, Barlowe?

BARLOWE:

Just back off, okay! I'm trying to run a cross-check here!

He restarts the sequence. Everyone in the room is looking at him. None of them look happy.

EXT. NIGHT. THE ZONE.

The sound of battle dwindles as Lyle runs, Moon Rabbit cradled in his arms. He hears radio static and slows, seeing the oddly inhuman figures of the E.V.A. crew strung out across the skyline ahead.

LYLE:

Jesus. Am I glad to see you guys.

SGT. TRIGG:

Shut up.

The masked soldiers ring him, rifles trained at his face.

SGT. TRIGG: (CONT'D)

Pat him down, Gene.

The E.V.A. Officer's second in command slaps at Lyle's trousers, not bothering to be gentle or very thorough.

LYLE:

I'm U.S. Army just like you.  
Captain Lyle Maddox, third airborne.

Gene locates the transmitter, passing it back to his sergeant. One of the crew, Corporal Carlin, kneels beside Moon Rabbit taking her pulse.

SGT. TRIGG:

Let's see your stripes.

Lyle curses, extending his right hand so Gene can run a UV scanner over his wrist, exposing a subcutaneous bar code tattooed in photosensitive ink. The E.V.A. officer stiffens, offering a cautious salute.

SGT. TRIGG: (CONT'D)

How come you ain't in uniform, Captain?

LYLE:

I'm seconded to i-corps. The less you know about it the better.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

CPL. CARLIN:

Sarge...

SGT. TRIGG:

Shit. You're one of Moch's boys,  
ain't you?

Lyle is silent but his eyes tell the story.

CPL. CARLIN:

This kid's not breathing...

Lyle crouches, fingers going to Moon Rabbit's neck,  
feeling for a pulse. Only there isn't one.

LYLE:

Fuck's sake...

He rips Moon Rabbit's shirt off. A purple bruise covers  
her stomach and chest. Internal bleeding, aggravated by  
the long, jarring journey in his arms. He bends, placing  
his lips to hers, trying to breathe life back into her.

INT. NIGHT. MARK 13 CYBORG CEREBELLUM - HUB.

A fire ant hurries through a ribbed labyrinth of  
transparent tubing, glistening green body slick with  
insulation fluid, antennae twitching as it follows a  
chemical trail into the depths of the wetware.  
Synthetic nutrients surge through the pulsing walls, loud  
as drums or thunder, goading the tiny soldier onwards, to  
the very centre of the spiral.

INT. NIGHT. THE MOUND.

Jill drags herself down a narrow, steeply inclined  
tunnel, head swimming with the accumulated venom from a  
thousand tiny incisions. It is as if there is a light in  
the darkness and she edges painfully towards it, a sound  
like wind or running water in her ears.  
The tunnel seems to be partly man made, a relic of the  
zone's original inhabitants long since abandoned to the  
burrowing insects and she feels odd, raised geometric  
patterns beneath her swollen fingertips, ancient  
pictoglyphs lining the walls as she approaches the  
enclosed wombspace at the heart of the mound.  
Then she freezes, coming face to face with the source of  
that light.

The queen ant stares mutely back at her with jewel like  
eyes, a radioactive magna mater feeding on artificially  
enriched isotopes brought to her by her eager children,  
toxic phosphorescence oozing from her bulging abdomen as  
she reprocesses the deadliest waste mankind can offer  
into something useful, extruding her round, sticky eggs  
into the birth chamber, into the care of her attendant  
midwives, methodically giving birth to a post-nuclear and  
decidedly post-human future.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

JILL:

Ahhh God...

Jill casts helplessly about herself, realizing what she took for wind is really the excited rustling of a billion tiny bodies surging towards her through countless, unlighted galleries, antennae rippling in sheets of motion as if possessed of a single soul, a hive mind, the perfect social unit preserving and protecting itself, drawn as one to the defence of their matriarch.

EXT. NIGHT. THE ZONE.

Lyle shakes Moon Rabbit, willing her to move. Then someone places a hand on his shoulder.

GENE:

It's okay, soldier. You done enough.

He bows his head, eyes filling with tears.

SGT. TRIGG:

This is Trigg to Prairie Dawn Omega.  
Trigg to Prairie Dawn.  
We have a situation here...

INT. NIGHT. THE MOUND.

Jill curls into a foetal position, closing her eyes as the ants cover her. Then there is only blackness and the sound of the scurrying multitude.

INT. NIGHT. FINAL ASSEMBLY PLANT. LEVEL ONE.

Carlos has his back to the sliding doors, laying down sporadic covering fire as J.C, Frito and Shades make their way up the concrete ramp.

CARLOS:

It's alright! They've stopped firing! They've stopped...

A mortar shell explodes at the top of the ramp and the young militia man's voice is silenced, his body disintegrating in a pink spray.

SHADES:

Hasta el mono...

Shades reaches the top of the steps, skidding in Carlos's blood. He regains his footing to find Melchizidek and Cordero have already got their shoulders to the sliding door and are straining to push it home.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

MELCHIZIDEK:

C'mon! C'mon!

Shades goes to help them, putting his back to the reinforced steel. The gap narrows. And Narrows again. Then a whirring silhouette looms into view, casually extending its hand to block the door.

FRITO:

Mierda!

The portal shudders as all four pit themselves against the steel beast, flabby muscles straining against precision tooled pistons, sweating and cursing as they are forced relentlessly backwards.

EXT. NIGHT. SPLENDORA STATION.

A thin wind keens across the tracks as the soldiers escort Lyle towards the armoured train, head down, an army blanket about his shoulders.

INT. NIGHT. OP-CENTRE.

Hell is unravelling across a dozen screens, technicians crawling everywhere. The maelstrom is thickest around Barlowe who looks as if he's going to have a stroke at any moment.

Colonel McCarthy returns Lyle's salute as the troopers usher him into the compartment.

COLONEL MCCARTHY:

Where the hell have you been?  
You look like shit...

LYLE:

Where's Moch?

McCarthy nods towards Lyle's superior who hovers at General Buckley's side.

MOCH:

Maddox. It's about time...

In one Zen motion Lyle draws the automatic from the holster of the soldier standing beside him and squeezing off a single round, puts a bullet between Moch's eyes. The compartment goes quiet. There is a smell of cordite and singed hair. Moch's body crumples backwards, blood and brain tissue spattering across Barlowe's console. The soldier on his left goes for his gun and Lyle has no choice but to deliver a powerful blow to the man's septum, killing him instantly. All the while the automatic remains steady in his right hand, levelled at General Buckley.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

GENERAL BUCKLEY:  
Oh, for crying out loud!

LYLE:  
Call 'em off, Nate.

GENERAL BUCKLEY:  
Do you have any idea what you're doing? Drawing down on me? In here? They'll lock you in a cell, then throw the cell away.

LYLE:  
Call 'em off, now!

GENERAL BUCKLEY:  
I represent the full martial and judicial authority of the United States of America, you fuckin' retard!

LYLE:  
Screw the United States. Women and children are dying out there.

BARLOWE:  
I'm with you there, man.

Buckley snarls, lashing out at Barlowe with the flat of his hand. There is a sound of splintering cartilage and the software designer reels backwards, clutching his face.

GENERAL BUCKLEY:  
You stupid fuckin' civilian!  
Don't you dare dis' the flag again!  
You don't have the right! Its you and all the lying mouse pushing, mink livered, cappucino swilling, corporate lackeys like you that have brought this country to its fuckin' knees!

Barlowe settles into his chair, trying to avoid the General's eyes, blood running through his fingers.

GENERAL BUCKLEY: (CONT'D)  
I hope they hang you.  
You and all your kind.

LYLE:  
Call off the tin soldiers, Nate.  
I'm losing patience...

GENERAL BUCKLEY:  
Well, that's just the problem.  
Seems we can't call them off.

LYLE:  
Don't fuck with me.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

GENERAL BUCKLEY:

Go on, ask this sack of shit.  
He'll tell you.

He nods disgustedly at the software designer.

BARLOWE:

They're not responding to override.  
They'll have to be shut down  
manually...

Barlowe's eyes go past Lyle to the rear of the compartment where Colonel McCarthy is silently edging his gun from its holster.

LYLE:

The hell does that mean?

BARLOWE:

Kill them. Kill them before they kill  
you. Simple enough?

McCarthy levels his automatic at the back of Lyle's head, flipping off the safety.

The concussion is so loud in the confined space it makes the software designer wince.

Looking up he catches a fragmentary glimpse of the Colonel spinning to the floor, blood jetting from his throat and turning he sees Carla standing behind him, a smoking gun clenched in her tiny hands.

SCHNEIDER:

My piece, man... She boosted my  
frigging piece!

BARLOWE:

Carla?

He meets her eyes. A child's eyes. Brimming with tears.

CARLA:

You killed my parents.

The tears save him. Her first shot goes wide, ricocheting off a bulkhead and taking out one of the monitors. The few people who haven't gotten on the floor already try to duck out of sight.

Barlow starts to get up and Carla shoots him in the knee. He sits back down, turning grey; arterial blood running in rivulets across the waxy upholstery. Carla steadies herself, taking aim at his face.

LYLE:

He's not worth it...

The gun wavers.

LYLE: (CONT'D)

C'mon...

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

She lowers the automatic and is suddenly just a little girl again.

LYLE: (CONT'D)

This place is through...

Lyle gets one of Buckley's arms behind his back, twisting it hard enough to hurt and they start towards the door, Carla bringing up the rear.

No one makes the slightest move to stop them.

INT. NIGHT. FINAL ASSEMBLY PLANT. LEVEL ONE.

The crack in the doors widens another inch and the cyborg's telescopic neck lashes out, striking across the threshold at Cordero and the others.

SGT. CORDERO:

Jo!

J.C. steps forward and wresting the automatic from Carlos's death grip reaches over Cordero's shoulder, thrusting the barrel into the Stormtrooper's eye and blowing a hole clear through the beast's skull.

J.C.:

It's all just manifestation!

EXT. NIGHT. FINAL ASSEMBLY PLANT.

The brain-damaged war machine shivers, shaking its head from side to side as it hurls itself against the sealed portal, a high pitched trilling rising from within its shorting circuitry. One by one its cohorts turn towards the ramp, massing around their comrade, holding their main-frames together long enough to bring their cutting tools to bear on the assembly plant doors.

INT. NIGHT. FINAL ASSEMBLY PLANT. LEVEL ONE.

A metallic shrieking echoes through the building, revving up and up and up.

SGT. CORDERO:

Dios mio!

The Apache crosses himself as he backs away and for the first time Shades sees fear in his eyes.

INT./EXT. NIGHT. SPLENDORA STATION.

Lyle manhandles the General towards an armoured cruiser, a hundred or so gun-toting marines watching from a respectful distance.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

GENERAL BUCKLEY:

What in God's name do you think  
you're going to achieve?

LYLE:

I'm from Kentucky, Sir.  
I don't believe in gods...

He bundles the General into the passenger seat where  
Carla can keep an eye on him. Strapping on a pair of  
infra-red goggles he guns the engine into life.

LYLE: (CONT'D)

Only men.

Senator Fugate watches from the platform as the armoured  
cruiser skids out of the lot.

SENATOR FUGATE:

Now what are we going to do?

A figure stands to the left of the Senator, a patch of  
darkness deeper than the night.

NOMAD:

It's all part of the plan.

SENATOR FUGATE:

What plan?

INT. NIGHT. THE ARMOURED CRUISER.

Lyle guns the cruiser up the track, a crooked smile  
lighting up his face.

LYLE:

If there's one thing my Daddy taught  
me it's that there aint no fuckin'  
plan 'cept the one you work out for  
yourself.

The cruiser's radio crackles.

GENE: (O.S)

Identify yourself. Checkpoint Tango.  
Identify yourself.

Lyle squints through the laminated glass to see a soldier  
with an automatic rifle stepping into the roadway ahead.

GENERAL BUCKLEY:

And the devil? You believe in him,  
don't you?

LYLE:

I've seen the commercials.

GENE: (O.S)

Identify yourself.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Lyle hits a switch on the side of the wheel, unleashing a volley of armor piercing rounds and Gene flings himself down, hugging the dirt as the cruiser hurtles past, the night lighting up as his unit return fire. Lyle unclips his handset, thumbing the transmit button.

LYLE:

Sorry 'bout that, man.  
Brakes are fuckin' shot.

There is no response.

GENERAL BUCKLEY:

Your Daddy teach you how to drive too?

LYLE:

Don't mock me, Nate.

Lyle twists the wheel, taking the vehicle off the track and over a dry riverbed, weaving in and out of a forest of mud-spires. Carla claps her hands with excitement.

LYLE:

My daddy knew where he was at.  
He was a circuit preacher.  
Used to cross four counties in his  
Suzuki Jeep with a box of bibles in  
the back and me doin' all my growin'  
up in the passenger seat.

The project's domes are visible on the skyline now, the speeding cruiser circling the outer dyke.

LYLE: (CONT'D)

He tried to whip God into me right from the top. He believed in plans, in the resurrection, in the life eternal, in all that crap, but when he died they closed the lid of his box right down on him just the same.

He floors the accelerator and Carla screams as they leave the ground.

GENERAL BUCKLEY:

Jesus Christ!

LYLE:

He can't hear you. That's what I'm trying to tell you, Sir.

The cruiser's fender clips the edge of the carhenge as it touches down, sending one wreck tumbling into another like a row of dominoes.

GENERAL BUCKLEY:

The fuck are you doing now?

Lyle swerves to avoid a flying Buick, zig-zagging through the exclusion zone.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

LYLE:

Trying to remember where I planted  
those frag-mines this afternoon.

As if on cue a jagged explosion lifts the rear of the cruiser, taking out one tire. Lyle curses softly and without emotion, fighting to regain control as the vehicle slaloms to one side. Just then a figure looms up in the headlights, rising from the earth like a spirit from some Native-American underworld, body sculpted from a living column of glistening ants. Carla screams and Lyle goes instinctively for the firing controls.

The shape raises one hand, pale green eyes staring at them through the reinforced glass.

LYLE: (CONT'D)

Jill..

EXT. NIGHT. EXCLUSION ZONE.

The cruiser executes a three point turn, hatch opening as it skids to a halt. Lyle stumbles from the cabin, staring dumb-foundedly at his lover.

LYLE:

Oh baby...

She crumples into his arms and he starts to brush the insects from her with his blanket. They fall away with surprising ease as if they were protecting rather than attacking her.

LYLE: (CONT'D)

I'm sorry... I...

Her eyes meet his, gazing up through a venefic haze. Lyle hears a gun being cocked and glancing back notices that Buckley has gotten Carla's automatic off her and is levelling it at his face.

JILL:

You lied to me.

INT. NIGHT. OP-CENTRE.

Schneider grins, glancing up from his console.

SCHNEIDER:

Sir, we've just run a successful CRC  
check on units 5, 7, 12, 18, 23, 27  
and 28. We're back online!

Sporadic applause ripples through the compartment.

BARLOWE:

Must be my lucky day I guess.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Despite the saline drip and sutured knee things are beginning to look up for Barlowe. In fact the morphine is really kind of heady.

EXT. NIGHT. EXCLUSION ZONE.

Lyle backs away as a whirring automaton unfolds itself from the dirt, looming over the General and his hostage.

LYLE:

Behind you!

Carla screams as Buckley turns, brandishing her like a human shield. She manages to get her teeth into his hand and he releases her as the 'droid lunges at him. The kid hits the ground running, making a break for the cruiser and Lyle follows, gathering Jill in his arms.

INT. NIGHT. OP-CENTRE.

Barlowe watches with wry amusement as the General struggles in his cross-hairs.

SCHNEIDER:

We don't have full contact, Sir.  
Just enough to shut them down.

BARLOWE:

Shut 'em down? The hell would I want  
to shut 'em down for?

He watches Buckley run, musing on how a human heatshape is not much bigger than a jackrabbit after all.

INT. NIGHT. THE ARMOURED CRUISER.

Lyle guides the armoured cruiser on a zig-zag course through the exclusion zone, trying to gather momentum to leap the inner dyke. Jill opens her eyes, staring into flames. She feels changed by the experience in the mound. Belittled. Emptier somehow.

JILL:

I don't even know your name. Do I ?

They leave the ground, leaping through the flames.

LYLE:

Just call me Lyle. It's good enough.

The vehicle bounces as it touches down on the far side of the trench, windscreen exploding about them like confetti. Lyle whoops, bracing himself as they hit the bottom of the ramp, the plant's reinforced doors looming ahead, a host of 'borgs clustered before them, still hard at work with their cutting tools.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

CARLA:

Cuidado!

Jill throws her arms around the screaming child as the vehicle collides with the steel cladding, crushing the slow moving stormtroopers into shrapnel, driving the weakened portal from its frame.

INT. NIGHT. FINAL ASSEMBLY PLANT. LEVEL ONE.

The cruiser's momentum carries it through the tiled wall into J.C.'s inner sanctum, rolling onto its side in the centre of the disintegrating sand painting.

EXT. NIGHT. THE PROJECT.

General Nathan Buckley staggers to a halt at the edge of dyke, backed off as far as he can go. Bringing up his automatic he empties the clip, his last few rounds rattling harmlessly off his assailant's bodywork.

GENERAL BUCKLEY:

Okay... I'm done. Just go ahead and kill me, you fuck !

He winces, slipping his dogtags between his teeth and biting down as the drone lollops towards him, buzzsaws spinning. Then a volley of armor piercing rounds rip through the 'borg's bodywork and it keels over, emitting a high pitched whimper. Buckley blinks, seeing the E.V.A. crew emerging cautiously from the smoke.

GENERAL BUCKLEY: (CONT'D)

You boys sure in hell took your time!

SGT. TRIGG:

Sorry, Sir. Had a technical.

INT. NIGHT. FINAL ASSEMBLY PLANT. LEVEL ONE.

The acrid smell of gasoline fills the cabin. Jill shakes her head, brushing glass from her eyes, vaguely conscious of Carla pulling at her arm.

CARLA:

Dese prisa!

Jill manages to get the belt undone, gritting her teeth as she realizes the strap has burned the skin from her shoulder. She pushes Carla forward, helping her through the shattered windscreen before turning to Lyle. His colour is bad and he seems to be barely breathing, left leg caught between the dash and the frame of his seat. As she tries to free him he opens his eyes, bellowing in pain.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

JILL:

Oh, grow up! It don't do an old soldier any good to cringe.

He bites his lip, dragging at his shattered limb as Jill claws her way through the remains of the windshield. Then as she turns to help him free there is a whoosh and a flash of light.

LYLE:

Baby...

JILL:

It's okay. Just push!

She grasps Lyle beneath his arms, struggling half in and half out of the buckled window, the rear of the vehicle already consumed in flame.

JILL: (CONT'D)

Fuckin' push!!!

Lyle pops free as the gas tank explodes and she falls backwards onto the coiling sand painting, the wounded veteran on top of her, pinning her down, wisps of ash settling about them like the seeds of a black dandelion.

LYLE:

Kiss me...

He reaches out, touching her blackened hair.

JILL:

Why?

LYLE:

'Cause you're beautiful...

There is a shriek of feedback as their lips meet, J.C.'s distorted voice echoing from the PA system.

J.C.: (O.S.)

Form is not different from nothingness!

There is another explosion. Shrapnel patters into the colored dust. Jill shuts her eyes, giving herself over to the kiss, not caring if they are alive or dead.

J.C.: (O.S./CONT'D) (CONT'D)

Nothingness is not different from form! They are the same..

Above the roar of the flames she hears the whir of servomotors and Carla's shrill voice yelling in Spanish. She looks up, seeing the child waving frantically from the door of the service elevator. Lyle grimaces as she tries to get him upright, his shattered leg dragging uselessly in the dust.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

JILL:  
C'mon, soldier. Quit grab-assing.  
We got a war to fight...

EXT. NIGHT. EXCLUSION ZONE.

Corporal Carlin stumbles forward, clutching a Geiger counter, not at all happy about what it reads.

CPL. CARLIN:  
Fire in the hole, Sir! Level one.

SGT. TRIGG:  
Shall I give the order to pull back?

GENERAL BUCKLEY:  
Proceed as planned, Sergeant.

Buckley reloads, starting toward the plant. It looks as if Trigg is on the verge of countermanding him but the rest of his crew are already moving forward and he decides to go with the flow instead.

SGT. TRIGG:  
Like what's the objective here?  
Sir? Hey...

INT. FINAL ASSEMBLY PLANT. LEVEL ONE.

Lyle strains his eyes into the gloom, seeing lights flickering below.

LYLE:  
Ever heard of the cold war?

JILL:  
No.

LYLE:  
This country was stockpiling more warheads back then than it could keep track of. It was only a matter of time before they lost a few. Three serial numbers in a misplaced file...

The elevator shudders to a halt as the power goes down, plunging them into blackness.

LYLE: (CONT'D)  
It was my job to track 'em down...

The emergency lights flicker on, bathing their faces in a dull amber glow.

LYLE: (CONT'D)  
Why do you think that rail network exists up there?  
(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

LYLE: (CONT'D)

The components were manufactured in at secret locations all over the country before being brought together here, in the Pan-Tex final assembly plant. Only by the time the last three rolled off the line there was no central authority left to take responsibility for the damn things...

JILL:

What are you saying?

LYLE:

Arranged into the right configuration there's enough plutonium beneath our feet to turn the earth into a second sun.

Carla smiles happily up at Jill.  
It is the first time Jill has seen her smile.

CARLA:

Luz blanco!

The cage lurches and starts to descend, the Geiger counter's ticking speeding into a high pitched shriek as they enter the storage vault, the waiting missiles rising before them like an unholy trinity.

J.C. sits cross-legged at their base, Ginny, Melchizidek and the others gathered about him. Davalos is propped up examining a blueprint, a tie-dyed cushion keeping his stumps from the dirt. Frito and Cordero hover nearby, watching as Shades fusses over a mare's tail of wiring. The space jockey's skin is pale and blotchy and it does not look as if he is long for this world. J.C. glances up as the cage doors open, smiling broadly.

J.C.:

Hola, Jill. We were just talking about the end. What I was saying is that the sub-commandant and his people are here to help things come apart.

DAVALOS:

When things get bad enough maybe it's time for them to end.

JILL:

You're both crazy... nothing could justify this...

INT. NIGHT. FINAL ASSEMBLY PLANT. LEVEL ONE.

The outlines of the remaining Stormtroopers can just be made out through the oily smoke, cutting tools whirring as they force their way into the lift shaft.

INT. NIGHT. FINAL ASSEMBLY PLANT. LEVEL TWO.

J.C. wipes the dust smooth with his hand.

J.C.:

It is time. That's all. Time to take  
away what is here and build again.  
For the old ways to return...

DAVALOS:

Old ways are for old times, gringo,  
for the yanquis and the capitalists.  
Someone has to live on to get the new  
world started. To build again.

J.C.:

All you ever think about are your  
beloved North Americans, como se  
dice, "United Fruit Company", but I  
mean older ways than that. The kind  
of ways where you know all things  
have roots that grow into the ground,  
that grow together...

He brings his palms together as if in prayer.

J.C.: (CONT'D)

When you cut down a tree a star falls  
from the sky, you understand?

There is a detonation somewhere above, the walls of the  
vault trembling visibly.

LYLE:

The only thing you need to understand  
is that there's gonna be a thousand  
cyborgs in here any moment now and  
they're gonna have our asses!

J.C.:

I know.

He smiles and raising the microphone begins to chant a  
mantra, feedback echoing through the cavernous chamber.

J.C.: (CONT'D)

Gate... Gate... Parasamgate...

INT. NIGHT. THE LIFT SHAFT.

The Stormtroopers crawl like huge crab spiders down the  
walls of the shaft, homing in on the sound of his voice.

J.C.:

Bodhi... Svaha...

INT. FINAL ASSEMBLY PLANT. LEVEL TWO.

Lyle throws himself at the bewildered guru, grappling for the microphone.

LYLE:  
Gimme that!

J.C.:  
What's the point? Nothing we do or say is gonna change anything...

LYLE:  
We've still got a chance!

The Sub-Commander draws their attention to the blueprint.

DAVALOS:  
This shaft runs all the way to the inner dyke. At least that's what it says here...

JILL:  
Then what?

DAVALOS:  
I don't know about you but I've always wanted to see Venice Beach

SHADES:  
Lucky I hung on to these, huh?

Shades tosses the keys to the jetcopter in his hand.

DAVALOS:  
The hopis believed this world was destroyed before. Seven times. Each time their god saved back a few good hopis to start again. Once he hid them in the water. Another time in an anthill. Then a hollow reed...

Jill stares dazedly at him, a far off look in her eyes.

SGT. CORDERO:  
Fuck that Indian bullshit. That chart's a century out of date. What if the shaft's blocked by now?

Carla watches as Jill retrieves an angle grinder from the tools strewn at the base of the gantry.

JILL:  
Then we'll just have to cut our way out...

EXT. NIGHT. FINAL ASSEMBLY PLANT.

Trigg is just starting up the ramp after Buckley when Lyle's voice comes booming over the P.A. system.

LYLE: (V.O.)  
Pull back! Cease firing and pull  
back from the plant!

Trigg glances uneasily at the General.

LYLE: (V.O./CONT'D) (CONT'D)  
The warhead's have been packaged!  
I repeat, the warheads have been  
packaged!

SGT. TRIGG:  
Like this was part of the plan,  
right?

INT. NIGHT. OP-CENTRE.

Barlowe glances up from his screen.

BARLOWE:  
Schneider, I want you and Kiara to  
start transmitting the recall codes  
to every unit still responding, got  
that?

Schneider nods, keying in data.

INT. FINAL ASSEMBLY PLANT. LEVEL TWO.

The hatch to the cooling duct comes loose with a squeal of tortured metal and Cordero steps forward, the sub-commandant strapped to his back, shining his flashlight into century old darkness.

JILL:  
After you.

SGT. CORDERO:  
Venice beach, here we come.

Jill takes Carla's hand, glancing back at Lyle who is busy taping a transmitter to his palm.

SHADES:  
All systems armed.  
You just have to hit the button.

LYLE:  
Just need to hold 'em a while.  
Buy you and your lady time...

He hobbles towards the lift using his rifle as a crutch.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

SHADES:

You sure you want to do this?

J.C.:

Been waiting all my life for it.  
I'm not going to turn my back now.

SHADES:

That's cool. See you in the next  
world, okay?

Shades ducks through the hatch, following the others.

LYLE:

How 'bout her? She didn't even look  
back.

J.C.:

Like I said, man, it's all just  
manifestation...

Lyle produces the polythene baggy he took from the kids  
in the railway station, tearing it open with his teeth,  
the crystalline powder tingling beneath his tongue.

J.C.: (CONT'D)

This Goddamn human thing we've gotta  
play act...

INT. NIGHT. COOLING DUCT.

Shades hurries to catch up with Jill, the light bobbing  
before them, touching corroded pipes and sagging girders  
as they march into the cobwebbed gloom.

JILL:

What's the deal with you anyhow?  
You're looking pretty chipper  
considering...

Shades shrugs, proffering his pill dispenser.

SHADES:

Your basic Dimenhydrate/ Benacine/  
Dramamine/Gravol combo gets me  
through the night. Shape you're in  
you should try cutting 'em with a  
couple of Antihistamines...

JILL:

Yeah. You too...

\*

SHADES:

So? You're doing okay. For a while I  
thought you were dead. You and my  
good fuckin' buddy back there...

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

JILL:

Don't start, okay! He's not a sane person and he's not very bright. Sometimes people do simple minded things. They do what they think is right at the time. They take a chance to serve their fuckin' country or help their friends. Haven't you ever done anything like that?

He offers a handful of pills to Carla who eagerly accepts, munching them like candy as she walks.

SHADES:

Yes and no. I mean I don't know what that guy's doing or why he's doing it. I don't know what I'm doing or why I'm doing it or what it's like.

Cordero pauses, reaching the base of a shaft leading upwards, steel rungs glinting in the flashlight beam.

DAVALOS:

This is it.

CORDERO:

You sure?

DAVALOS:

Of course I'm sure...

The Apache starts wordlessly up the ladder, climbing hand over hand into the blackness.

INT. NIGHT. FINAL ASSEMBLY PLANT. LEVEL TWO.

\*

J.C. smiles, hearing the purr of servo-motors. Behind him the surviving deconstructuralists are already linking hands.

LYLE:

You crazy son of a bitch.  
They're going to kill us.

J.C.:

If they didn't have the love to do it, man, then who the hell would?

Something comes rattling down the shaft and as Lyle turns a concussion grenade explodes in front of him, ripping the doors from the elevator. As if in a vision he sees a phalanx of jointed silhouettes rising before him like abominations from some bottomless pit of Biblical prophecy.

INT. NIGHT. COOLING DUCT.

The party has come to a halt part way up the ladder.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

SGT. CORDERO:  
Maricon de meirda!

There is a sealed hatch blocking the head of the shaft. Davalos strains to budge the corroded hawser while the sweating Apache clings grimly to the top rung, bearing the Sub-Commandant's weight on his shoulders.

DAVALOS:  
Jo...! Frito, pass me up that bag of tricks!

The nine-year-old unclips a pouch from his belt, tossing the Sub-Commandant what looks like a wad of play dough.

JILL:  
You cannot be serious?

Davalos presses the plastique into place, priming a detonator.

DAVALOS:  
Short fuse! Everybody back up as far as you can!

They start to make their way down the ladder, none of them able to move quite as fast as they'd like to.

SGT. CORDERO:  
Dese prisa!

GINNY:  
This fuckin' sucks.  
This is no place to be.

JILL:  
It's okay, I'm scared too.  
We're all scared.

SHADES:  
Probably just physical.  
The mind-body problem.

JILL:  
Please stop talking shit.  
I can't handle much more!

There is a deafening concussion as the detonator goes off prematurely and everyone starts to scream at once, an explosion filling the narrow space.

INT. NIGHT. FINAL ASSEMBLY PLANT. LEVEL TWO.

Lyle pushes himself up on one elbow, blinking at the piece of shrapnel protruding from the puckered hole in his chest. It looks like part of one of the service elevator doors but his eyes are too far out of focus to tell for sure.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

He dimly registers the whirring outlines of the drones as they close in for the kill and holding his right arm aloft seizes his moment, the moment he was born for.

LYLE:  
BACK OFF! OR I'LL BLOW THE FUCKIN'  
WORLD AWAY!!!

But the shadows keep coming.  
Shards of night crowding in at him.

INT. NIGHT. OP-CENTRE.

Barlowe watches the dying man's heatshape, unable to halt what is about to happen. Turning down the volume on Lyle's screams he shifts his focus to the teddybear, waiting for his long distance call to be connected.

OPERATOR: (O.S)  
Ringin' for you...

INT. NIGHT. COOLING DUCT.

Jill can dimly make out the ragged silhouettes of Davalos and Cordero through the smoke, bound together like demented Siamese twins, both bellowing at once, the legless sub-commandant holding on to the rungs with one hand, supporting both their weight.

SGT. CORDERO:  
Frito!

The nine year old has vanished, his body blown into the abyss as if he never existed.

DAVALOS:  
Come on! If we don't get out of here  
we'll be as dead as he is!

Everything seems to be coming apart now, a series of blasts ripping through the guts of the plant. The Apache starts to climb, passing through the gap where the hatchway used to be and Jill follows, feeling fresh air on her face.

INT. FINAL ASSEMBLY PLANT. LEVEL TWO.

Lyle closes his eyes and presses the button.  
It's just like making a wish.

LYLE:  
FUCK YOU, DAD!

A second passes.  
Then he opens his eyes again. He glances at the remote to find his hand has been sheared off at the wrist.  
The only button he ever hit was in his head.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

LYLE: (CONT'D)

FUCK Y'ALL!

Reality closes in on him, planet Earth getting its revenge, a dozen razor tipped talons tearing into his flesh at once, his cries drowned by the whirring and revving of the cyborg's power tools as they methodically dismember him.

\*

EXT. DAWN. THE PROJECT.

The sky is changing color behind the ant hills, deep blue shelving into purple, the first light of the coming day. Jill helps Carla and Ginny from the mouth of the duct, following Shades as he wades across the paddies towards the grounded jetcopter.

SGT. CORDERO:

Go on! I'll cover you!

Two mortars open up from the direction of the plant and the Apache turns, the sub-commandant tied to his back, returning fire.

INT. DAWN. FINAL ASSEMBLY PLANT. LEVEL TWO.

The 'borgs tear the soldier apart, dismantling him limb by limb, joint by joint, dissecting out his major organs with quasi-surgical precision. Brain death can be a long time in a healthy adult male, six to twelve minutes after all oxygen has been cut off, after vertebrae have ceased to meet and flesh and muscle no longer connect. Lyle wants to scream but he has no lungs with which to expel the cry. He wishes he could close his eyes but without a functioning nervous system even that is beyond him. Instead all he can do is watch as they unravel what's left of his torso, his discarded head resting forlornly on its crown beside the stalled assembly line. Then to his relief he realizes he has not been forgotten after all.

\*  
\*  
\*  
\*

Time seems to slow down as a Mark 13 drone soldier hops jerkily towards him, Lyle's endorphin saturated consciousness registering his own regimental colors and the slogan 'Freedom is our Responsibility!' emblazoned across its grinning deathhead as the 'borg reaches out to crush his skull like an overripe melon, mercifully extinguishing whatever tenuous life it still contains.

INT. DAWN. COCKPIT.

Shades fumbles the key into the ignition.

SHADES:

Control frictions off. Cyclic centred. Collective down. AC circuit breakers in...

EXT. DAWN. THE PROJECT.

A war cry erupts from Cordero's lips, the Sub-Commandant opening fire as well now, bodies joined at the hip into a single being, four barrels blasting as one.

JILL:

COME ON!

Cordero turns to see Ginny standing behind him, waist deep in the muck, a service pistol glinting in her hand.

GINNY:

This is for my little girl...

She shoots Cordero in the chest, the bullet passing through him to lodge in Davalos's hip.

JILL:

NO!!!

She shoots him again and the burly Apache goes down, falling face first into the sludge.

GINNY:

Remember Roswell, you murdering, red-eyed, son-of-a-bitch!

She turns with a smile.

Then the 'borgs catch up to her and Jill looks away, not wanting to see the rest.

\*

INT: DAWN. THE OP-CENTER.

Schneider stares wide eyed at his console the sound of gunfire coming from outside the compartment.

SCHNEIDER:

Sir! We're getting a visual feed from the rogue units!

BARLOWE:

Not now, for Christ's sake!

SCHNEIDER:

But you don't understand...

Then the door at the end of the carriage is wrenched from its hinges and the first of the software designer's many children hop eagerly into the crowded control room. Barlowe fleetingly recognizes the words 'Hi Mom' tagged across its faceplate, realizing he has met this particular child before.

\*

\*

CHARMIAN: (V.O.)

You're talking to a machine...

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Matt Barlowe turns to see his own heatshape framed in the glowing crosshairs, the answering service recording his last despairing wail as the air seethes about him, the sealed compartment suddenly hot as an oven, its hull refracting and intensifying the microwave beams.

Schneider begins to shriek like a stuck pig, sweat steaming from his pores as he tries to get to his feet, uniform taking on the smudged outline of dissolution. Private Kiara Rudnick is cooing oddly, eyelashes shrivelling, blood and saliva boiling from her cracking lips as she lapses across her melting keyboard. Then Matt's cry is cut short as his throat and nostrils fill with white hot gas, his eyeballs exploding in a spray of scalding, viscous effluent, his brain boiling away in its own cerebro-spinal fluid as the Mark 13 project goes permanently off line.

INT. DAWN. COCKPIT.

Shades checks the voltmeter, deciding to worry about the fuel, the course and the radio when they're in the air.

SHADES:

Battery... fuel switches... throttle  
to engine idle...

At twenty four volts he pulls the trigger on the collective and hears the blessed sound of the engine cranking.

EXT. DAWN. THE PROJECT.

Jill leaps for the hatch as the twin rotors on the jetcopter's wings turn over.

CARLA:

CUIDADO!

She grabs an exposed strut as one of the oncoming drones snips Ginny neatly in two, flinging her spasming remains in two different directions as it closes the gap, blood slick talons grasping for Jill's trailing ankle.

INT. DAWN. FINAL ASSEMBLY PLANT. LEVEL TWO.

J.C. scrabbles beneath the work bench, dimly hearing his companion's cries as the 'borgs put an end to them. Then, finding what he's searching for, he snatches up Lyle's severed hand. The appendage is stiff and shiny as a mannequin's, the remote still taped to its palm.

J.C.:

All flesh is grass...

INT. DAWN. COCKPIT.

The hull lurches as the cyborg tries to clamber aboard, tilting to one side. Fifteen degrees is all it can take before the rotors beat themselves to death in the sludge. Shades yanks up on the collective and the craft starts to lift, the torque pulling jetcopter's nose to the right despite his best efforts to pump the left peddle.

SHADES:

Shit...

EXT. DAWN. JETCOPTER.

Jill screams as the ground falls away, body bearing the full, bone jarring weight of the war machine, talons shredding through her calves as if they were cheese.

INT. DAWN. COCKPIT.

Shades cranks the throttle open, a sudden pain shooting through his left side.

EXT. DAWN. THE PROJECT.

The jetcopter yaws, still rising. Jill locks one arm around the strut, shrieking as she cuts at her assailant, sparks showering as the whirling blade bites into reinforced steel.

INT. DAWN. FINAL ASSEMBLY PLANT. LEVEL TWO.

J.C. glances up as Melchizidek appears behind him, levelling an automatic.

MELCHIZIDEK:

Don't do it, man. Please...

EXT. DAWN. THE PROJECT.

Jill screams.

It is a cry as long and thin as a vein, the last animal sound of a consciousness stretched beyond limits, tortured beyond reason, maddened by pain and fear, becoming one with the shriek of the angle grinder and the revving turbines.

She catches a last glimpse of the Cyborg still mindlessly clutching her mangled, dislocated leg, steel death's head grinning through the sparks, eyes blazing like campfires on the shores of another world. Then, an instant later, it is gone, wrist separating at the joint, the rising sun glinting on its body armor as it tumbles away from her.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

EXT. DAWN. RICE PADDY.

Davalos grits his teeth, pulling himself through the muck, dragging Cordero behind him, the Apache's body tied like a ball and chain to his wriggling, legless torso.

DAVALOS:

C'mon, get it up... we've got a war to fight...

There is a great roaring in the brightening sky. Davalos cranes his neck but blood runs in his eyes. An instant later the falling cyborg plunges into the sludge, disintegrating on impact a few feet away from him. Heartened he draws himself forward.

DAVALOS: ( Cont. )

First we'll take San Antonio... then Houston... then the whole of Texas...

The sound of turbines diminishes, coming in waves like the ebb and flow of the tide over Pacific sand. Davalos blinks, the paddy reconfigured by his failing mind into a limitless expanse of cool, blue water.

DAVALOS: ( Cont. )

We'll carry the flag to the ocean and wash our boots at Venice beach...

INT. DAWN. FINAL ASSEMBLY PLANT. LEVEL TWO.

J.C. closes his eyes, trying to focus.

MELCHIZIDEK:

We don't have the right...

J.C.:

We've got to! That's the whole point! Either we transcend now or...

MELCHIZIDEK:

I love you, dude.

He shoots J.C. in the back of the head, watching him fall stiff as a redwood, the remote tumbling from his hand.

MELCHIZIDEK: (CONT'D)

We'll just have to work it out on the other side.

The white Rasta whispers a prayer as the cyborgs close in, focussing their microwave cannons. Then crossing himself with the automatic he places it in his mouth as if it were a chillum and pulls the trigger.

INT. DAWN. JETCOPTER.

Jill groans, letting the angle grinder fall as she eases herself through the hatch. There is no pain now, no pressure, only a dull warmth that spreads from what's left of her legs into her exhausted, shivering body. She knows she's losing too much blood but no longer has the strength to do anything about it.

She closes her eyes, head lolling against the strut, not noticing the fingers of the Cyborg's severed hand stir as it relaxes its grip on her ankle and begins to crawl inch by inch towards her unprotected throat.

INT. DAWN. COCKPIT.

Shades struggles to regain control of the craft, g-force pressing like a weight against his heart. The jetcopter bucks, starboard motor changing pitch.

SHADES:

Oh, baby. Don't do this to me now...

He tries to engage the back-up, fingers so numb he hits the wrong switch, turning on the radio instead, snuff metal filling the cockpit. Something clatters behind him and he starts to turn, sensing movement but even this effort is too much for him.

SHADES: ( Cont. )

Just hold together...

EXT. DAWN. THE PROJECT.

Out of spite, out of pride, Davalos forces himself on, dragging the dead Indian through the deepening sewage.

DAVALOS;

I'll be president for life and any sonofabitch who disagrees we'll string up over the beltway so everyone can see how justice is done in the new America... You will sit at my right hand in the oval office and be my vice-president...

Cordero's corpse is unresponsive.

DAVALOS: ( CONT. )

Carlos will take charge of education and welfare. Ramos and Juanita... industry and agriculture. Pepito... fisheries...

He barely notices the row of army boots that line the bank of the paddy, blocking his path.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

CPL. CARLIN:  
You think he's dead?

DAVALOS:  
Frito... department of...

GENE:  
No, he ain't dead.  
He's moving.

There is a sharp click as Trigg cocks his rifle.

DAVALOS:  
Justice...

INT. DAWN. JETCOPTER.

The crawling hand crouches on Jill's chest like a clockwork spider, hypodermics sliding from its fingertips as it searches for a vein. She sighs, too far gone to care.

CARLA:  
Vete a la mierda!

The little girl levels her automatic, blasting the twitching hand out of the hatchway. Then she begins to cry and dropping the gun, buries her head in Jill's blood soaked lap. Carla knows she isn't her mother but right now any lap will do. Jill puts one arm around the shivering child, the rising sun warming her tear streaked face, her long red hair flickering about them like wisps of fire in the jetstream.

INT. DAWN. COCKPIT.

The tiny craft continues to climb as if trying to escape the earth, the space jockey's hand frozen on the joystick.

SHADES:  
Hold...

He wishes he could see the stars again and for a moment almost does, outlines twinkling through the thinning air. Then something gives way inside, all those years off-world catching up, the walls of his heart crumpling like paper.

EXT. DAWN. THE PROJECT.

Gene tightens a pair of plasticuffs around Davlos's remaining limbs, a symbolic gesture as the Sub-Commandant plainly isn't going anywhere.

GENERAL BUCKLEY:  
Just hold it one moment...

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

GENE:

Sir?

The E.V.A. crew raise their eyes to find two of the general's civilian friends have arrived on the scene. Senator Fugate accompanied by a tall man carrying a battered Polaroid camera.

SENATOR FUGATE:

Right where you are.  
That's perfect...

Trigg glances disdainfully at the lens.

SGT. TRIGG:

Just who in hell's supposed to be giving the orders around here anyway?

NOMAD:

Why? Didn't they tell you gentlemen?

Gene obligingly places a gun to the Sub-Commandant's head, the burning greenhouses lighting up the sky as the man in the long, black coat frames them in his viewfinder. It is a perfect picture.

NOMAD: (CONT'D)

You all work for me.

INT. FINAL ASSEMBLY PLANT. LEVEL TWO.

Lyle's severed hand stiffens in the grip of rigor mortis, fingertips brushing the blood spattered remote.

EXT. DAWN. THE PROJECT.

There is a flash.  
Buckley and the Senator start to turn.  
Then there is nothing.

INT. DAWN. COCKPIT.

Shades sighs, white light falling as a blessing on his upturned face.

SHADES:

God...

CARLA:

Luz blanco...

Both engines stall out at once, a haze of blue smoke filling the cabin as an invisible wave of charged particles pass through the hull, putting paid to the on-board computer.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

The only thing still working is the radio, a headbanging top twenty hit lightening the mood as the craft goes into a terminal spin and they start to fall back towards the radioactive cauldron below.

SHADES:

I'm sorry...

JILL:

It's okay.

She places one hand on his shoulder, giving it a squeeze. It is the first time anyone has touched Shades with any real affection in as long as he can remember and for a moment he really does feel okay. In the end he is little more than a bundle of charged particles, no different to the seat he is strapped to yet somehow the warmth of her touch, that tiny incremental spark makes all the difference. He closes his eyes as the snuff metal track burns itself out, a smile haunting his paling lips.

ANGRY BOB: ( O.S. )

Hey, hey, folks! Rise and shine!  
This is America's favorite, the man  
with the industrial dick coming at  
you on Station W.A.R!

EXT. DAWN. THE DESERT SKY.

A mushroom cloud reaches towards the heavens, unfurling itself like an angry behemoth that has been imprisoned for centuries in the desert floor. Eight miles high and climbing fast it is an impressive sight albeit not as impressive as J.C. might have wished, big enough to put another dent in the world but not to end it.

ANGRY BOB: (O:S/CONT.)

And I am here to wake you up!!!

The jetcopter tumbles like a reed, achieving some degree of auto-rotation as it falls as if the tiny vessel and the man, woman and child it contains are riding on the firestorm, the shockwave sending them gliding forward across the morning sky until they are lost from sight in the blazing spume.

ANGRY BOB: (O.S)

The radiation count's way, way up  
thanks to that little mishap earlier  
this morning in the south west...

EXT. DAWN. GROUND ZERO.

Nothing remains of the project, of the general or his master, only a bat shaped smear on a blackened adobe wall. Nothing human could have survived within that witch's cauldron yet there are still signs of movement amidst the churning dust.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

ANGRY BOB: (O.S.)

Cesium levels are expected to hit  
record highs by lunchtime but don't  
let that put you off your  
thanksgiving turkey!  
Just keep your windows rolled up,  
stay tuned to this channel and have  
yourselves a hot one!

The drones wander aimlessly through the radioactive  
ash, twitching and shivering. One by one they stumble  
and go off line, becoming part of the landscape, the  
ants beginning their work, rebuilding their mounds,  
recycling the debris back into dirt, back into  
something useful.

ANGRY BOB: (V.O.) (CONT'D)

And as for the good news...

The wind rises and rain falls out of the smoke.  
It falls on the ash and on the mounds and on the husks of  
drones and men alike and when the skies clear winged ants  
hatch from their remains, swarming like smoke from the  
sockets of their armoured skulls to teem across the face  
of the zone, filling it with strange new life.

ANGRY BOB: (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Well, whadd'ya expect?  
A fuckin' miracle?

A green ant perches on the fingertip of one of the fallen  
titans, drying its gossamer wings.

ANGRY BOB: (V.O.) (CONT'D)

This is Angry Bob. Signing off...

Fade to white.

ROLL END  
TITLES.