

## Burned

by Will Schmitz

On a set of giant holo-screen, aerial views of what's below on Earth. Cities begin to disappear and forests take their place. The ice caps return. Towns follow, then roads, the Great Wall of China, Roman roads, The Pyramids ... Watching in an opulent room full of paired patrician codgers are Amy and Walt.

--Oh no, Walt--not the pyramids ...

Within reach, each cod has reach a tumbler full of milkshake-thick fluid to be sipped through a straw. The aged ones take frequent hits off their shakes. There are two presenters, Hetta and Mars, in the room with, slightly nervous about the outcome of this exchange between the living wrecks. This corporate boardroom and other "official places" are "quiet." They have no muzak or commercials. (Everywhere else on the planet there is "noise" of every kind all the time.)

--Walt?

Walt shrugs sheepishly:

--I thought we agreed ...

Walt's brother Ray chimes in:

--... to "everything."

Ray's partner, Emily:

--But the pyramids!

--Well, you agreed that all the rest of the crap ...

--... from Cairo to Karnak ...

--... could go.

Amy pleads.

--Just this one thing, Walt ...

--You make this one exception for Egypt and you'll want to make two for China and six for Rome.

--Well, we'll vote. Let's just take a vote. Show of hands—who's for keeping some of these original, monumental pieces and who's for sticking to the originally agreed upon plan?

--Keepers?

Only Amy, Emily and a third timid old gent raise hands.

--Sorry, ladies, Duke.

The holograms continue to delete all signs of human habitation of the earth. Organic life forms begin to multiply in opposite proportion to the number of human signs that disappear: vegetation, birds, mammals, fish, amphibians, reptiles, fish.

--There are going to be a lot of insects, aren't there?

--Needed to keep in balance the increased bio-mass.

Emily is staring at her holos.

--The poles are disappearing! How much will the oceans rise?

--Does it matter?

--Not very much.

--What else? What else?

--To keep to the time-table, we need to increase distribution.

--We need more funds.

--Recruit more salespeople.

--Cancel all unnecessary contracts.

Hetta inputs the commands.

--Done.

Far away in an automated chips factory, chips packages being redesigned and going out advertising jobs for franchises distributing the chips.

--Any other business?

--Well, we had an incident today ...

In an enclosed domed city, a middle-aged man, Anders, in a lab coat, runs from three female security agents. As Anders runs

through the crowd, he projects a message onto his palm computer by concentrating on its screen. A fellow-worker, Fische, shouts out as Anders runs past:

--Hey, Anders!

Anders keeps going.

--I thought we were having lunch!

One of the security women knocks Fische down and whips out an injector.

--No! I haven't done anything! Don't ...

She injects him.

--... do this ...

He becomes very passive and she leads him off.

In a holo screen shop where screens are wall-sized., a future form of "Jeopardy," with kids asking questions about physics, biology, chemistry, and math is on every screen. Anders runs through the store and is tackled under a screen on which a kid is asking:

--What is the Krebs Cycle?

The security women tackle Anders to the floor. He rips a high-heeled shoe off a nearby woman and smashes his computer with it before the security women can take it away. They inject Anders and lead him off.

Later, in a cell, Mars interrogates the doped Fische.

--What have you and Anders been taking about?

Fische shrugs his shoulders:

--My reprojected sex hologram, mostly.

Hetta, walks into frame. She plays with a zap gun in the form of an African fly switch.

--Meet Hetta.

--What about it?

--It's exceptional.

Hey, look, it's Fische playing with his program. Looking maybe like it's about to go down on him. Hetta smiles. She walks around Fische--provocatively.

--What did Anders tell you about "Azael"?

--Me? Nothing. I'd be afraid if he'd ever told me anything about that.

--But you're not afraid.

--Because I haven't done anything.

Hetta whacks Fische across his thighs with the switch, shooting some volts through him.

--Because you're afraid to--or can't?

--What? I don't know anything!

--I believe you.

The security women drag Anders in. One of the women bows to Mars and hands him what's left of Anders' hand-held. Anders is plunked

down next to Fische, who has begun to sob.

--Please--tell them I didn't do anything.

Hetta comes over and kisses Anders on the forehead.

--Hello, sweets.

She addresses Fische again:

--Your record shows three patents.

She checks the schematics on a wall-screen computer screen.

--Why, you're the man who gave the world the "better chip" bag.

--Yes--to live up to our motto, "We Won't Ever Let You Eat a Stale Chip."

--We weren't living up to it before?

--Well, no.

Hetta swats him again--this time across the mouth. She draws blood. She kisses him on the lips for a taste of it. Fische finds himself getting an erection. Anders sighs.

--Anders, please--get me out of this!

--I can't.

Mars puts Anders' hand-held down.

--You posted a message before you smashed it?

--Did I?

Mars nods to Hetta. She goes to a nearby closet and comes back with two helmets. She does a little dance with them as she

approaches the men. Mars snaps his fingers and security takes them from Hetta and puts them on the men's heads.

--No! Not me! I haven't done anything!

Anders stays calm.

--Not afraid of what's to come?

--What could be worse than working for you?

--Oh, you'll see.

--Void him! Void him, but don't void me!

Mars activates the helmets.

Later, back in the C.B., Walt congratulates Mars and Hetta as Emily and Ray kibbitz.

--Sounds like you nipped it in the bud.

Emily chortles:

--That your quaint euphemism for clipping a brainstem?

Walt ignores Emily and addresses Mars:

--Did he post his message about Azael?

--Yes, but we flushed it before any accessed.

Ray growls: No one accessed?

In a basement, over the shoulder of a person whose face I'm not letting you see, the person is downloading Anders' message: "Don't be fooled. Azael's real."

In The C.B., Hetta and Mars shake their heads.

Chips Carriers planet-wide are already delivering the new

chips packages to local stores from Boston to Beijing, Red Hawk to Baku.

Ray snaps his fingers and bot butlers emerge from closets to help the old folks into designer apparel that facilitates their mobility, providing all the lost muscle and flexibility that their original bodies have lost. Amy turns to Walt almost with tears in her eyes as the robot helps her into her gear.

--Is it much longer, Walt?

--No.

The old folks stride like twenty-year old Olympic athletes out of the room. Ray sticks around to have a last word with Hetta and Mars.

--Keep on schedule.

--We were on schedule. You just advanced it. Why?

--Stories are leaking.

--Leaking?

Ray whips out a list from a pocket.

--Here's the list.

Hetta reads it.

--Top reporters. What do you want us to do?

Ray shrugs.

--Kill them.

--Their stories?

--No, dear ...

-- ... them.

Ah, morning in the inner-city. Still ratty. A lobotomized Anders, looking about ten years older, in the remains of his lab coat, stumbles along, muttering incoherently and sometimes shouting at the citizens who cross the street to shun him.

--Loka-shiksha. Yeah. Maam-ekam. Masthaka!

Three late adolescents, Josh, Joy, and Hope hurry past Anders. Cutting diagonally across the frame is Fische, who does not recognize anyone or anything. He looks up and finds himself staring at an advertisement for chips and recoils in horror. The slogan under the bag of chips reads: "Bio-engineered With Your Pleasure In Mind."

--Eat it, eat it, eat it!

He disappears around a corner. Hope is moved to comment:

--Corporate voids.

Anders shuffles away muttering:

--Lobha.

Joy answers her personal screen and reads a message about her plans for a new city park being canceled.

--Hell!

Josh looks:

-Oops. 'Nother cut.

-But it was budget approved. My contract for my park design's been canceled.

-Can they do that?

Joy passes her the personal screen.

--It's done.

--Where are all the happy people who don't need parks?

Well, where? Let's look at what most productive people on the planet are doing: hobbies of all kinds, sports (officiated by bots), VR programming: whatever suits their fancy. The last group we see is into shooting.

Hope nudges Josh and points to a late middle-aged couple that's trying to get into a neighborhood liquor store.

--Your folks.

--Looks like they've locked themselves out again.

--Gotta go find out what they need.

Josh runs over to the store.

--Like he doesn't know what they need.

--They can't help it.

--Yeah, they're addicts.

Josh waves a friendly and loving hello to his parents.

--Hi, Betty. Hi, Tom.

Tom looks sleepily up at his son. They are standing by a

poster promoting the system. It reads: "The More You Consume, The Better It Gets." A chips carrier pulls up to the back of the store and makes a delivery.

--Won't let us in.

Another customer walks past through a type of electric eye. At the register, the customer is already ID'd and his current credit rating appears next to the photo. As he orders and/or brings stuff to the counter, the credits are added to his account credit. The delivery man restocks the chip display.

--You gotta love this system! Another six months and I've earned a free cruise.

The customer grabs several packs of chips and glances at the job offer.

--A job? Who the hell wants or needs a job?

He tosses the chips back, insulted.

Outside, Josh has taken out his screen and starts to hack into the government's welfare system.

--Let me help.

--Missed making our "minimum" last week.

--You gotta shop more.

Tom looks around.

--No thanks. I've got all the crap I need.

--If we consumed more, we could move.

--I don't wanna move.

Josh works on altering his folks' records by mentally projecting himself through his hand held into the welfare database.

We're in a Pentagon-like fortress sweeping through the front doors into its bowels where thousands upon thousands of bots at terminals, managed by some smaller flying overseers, are monitoring transactions. Josh's hacking gets one bots' attention. An Overseer is summoned. The Overseer sees who it is and gets emotional.

--Him? Again?

--Shall I burn his terminal?

--I'll need authorization.

The Overseer flies to the main office above the floor where, in a tub, there's Duke, in a tub ala Jean Paul Marat. David's painting is on the wall. Duke is having Montaigne read to him by a mellifluous voiced female synthetic, Chapter V, "I Set Myself to Making Love." The Overseer humbly approaches. Duke sips on his shake.

--We've locked onto a chronic *breacher*.

Duke points up to a framed sign.

--My new motto.

It reads: *Who Cares. So What? Forget About It.*

--I'd like permission to "burn him out."

--Too radical.

Duke looks up at the Synthetic and smiles at her:

--Let's make some work, shall we? Stick an agent on him.

--What kind?

--Follow standards. Background the target.

The Overseer doesn't follow. The Synthetic cues him:

--Find out what he likes and send it his way.

The Overseer understands and happily buzzes off. The Synthetic resumes reading.

Outside the liquor store, Josh receives approval for credit.

--You're set.

--Thanks, son.

Tom and Betty pass through the door. Josh heads back to where his friends are waiting.

Betty walks 'round, gathering up various items. Tom's busy at the counter gathering up packs of DMT laced cigarettes. The label on the DMT package reads, "New Formula, Guaranteed to Take You *Further*." Betty starts to pick up a bag of chips promoting job recruitment for chip distribution franchises in 'The Outlands.'

--Hey, babe--you know I don't like those.

Betty spills them on the counter. The saleswoman points out:

--It's advertising a legitimate job.

She points Tom to the ad. He turns to glance.

--Job? Don't want it.

--For Josh. His way out.

--What makes you think he wants "out"?

Betty ignores him.

--Sign him up.

--What's his number?

--8876-B/D.

--Got it.

--How many credits that earn?

--506. You'll need a lot more to make minimum.

Tom and Betty gather up what they've bought. The saleswoman says pointedly after Tom:

--See you soon.

They exit, Tom growling about the chip purchase. They start past a barber shop and stop to look in after a customer who just entered.

--You really wanna be normal, Bet?

They stare in at the client to be barbaled, greeted by a Synthetic.

--What can we do for you today? Style, trim, dye, manicure ...?

--Just a trim, please.

-Bot or human?

Bot and four human barbers appear at the rear of the store.

--Who's better?

--Who do you think?

She motions the bot forward. The humans amble out into the back of the store. Betty answers Tom's question.

--No.

In the back of the barber shop, the humans get back to work: shooting craps, betting on races, playing cards, mentally attempting to project winners onto slot machines.

On the street, Betty and Tom walk along, each lost in a separate daydream. Betty finishes one of the bags of chips and lets the bag fall to the sidewalk--where it dissolves leaving no trace behind. Tom opens up a pack of DMTs.

--Please--can't you wait till we're home?

--No.

He lights one up and, after one hit, he's "gone." Betty takes him by the hand and leads him on. Watching from across the street, Hope lights up one of her own.

--He's off.

Joy takes it from her and helps herself to a hit. She passes it back to Hope:

--Gotta give Josh credit--better than government certified.

She zooms. She gazes blankly at the warning on the side of the pack: "Potency not restricted by law." They enter a garage in a nearby alley where Josh is already fussing at his work table over his DMT formula. Hope slides over and offers Josh a hit.

--Good batch.

Josh takes it and puts it on the workbench. Joy nervously observes:

--You just gonna let it burn like that?

--How about some sex, Josh?

--Got a shipment to make.

--I'll get it ready.

Hope and Josh disappear into a back room. Joy gets to work, activating a bot that begins to package the materials.

--Ah, the 'Joy' of work ...

She leans back, puts on a virtual reality headset. Inside the V.R., Joy, peacefully swims underwater sans equipment through a sea era of Jurassic monsters that ferociously go about devouring one another.

In Betty and Tom's apart, screen's on, but the viewers are

blasted. Tom lights another. A show comes on about a new outbreak of a killer Ebola-like virus in a third-world country that resembles an American suburb from the 50's.

--Shit--look at that, Bet.

--Want to feel it?

She starts to reach for the remote that has a "feel the experience" option on it. Before Tom can say anything, she selects the option for him. He begins to howl in agony.

--What?

He continues to feel pain, unable to get up from his chair.

--How bad can it be?

He manages to wrench the remote away from her and turn the feature on his chair off and hers on. Now she is screaming in agony. He shuts it off after a few seconds.

--Oh, that is bad.

She licks her lips.

--Give me a few more seconds, will you, Honey?

--How about an hour?

--Joker. Just give me what I need.

He gives her a few more seconds of pain before he switches channels. A panel of world leaders is discussing what they're doing about the plague. Nametags I.D. Dr. Silk, but not the smarmy

moderator.

--... and that's our program in the outlands.

--Now, a word from Dr. Bush from United Planet Headquarters.

Tom sneers in hatred.

--What's the matter?

--You know how much I like black holes.

--We, at Headquarters, are doing all we can--medical experts, supplies, fiscal aide. At home, superfund emergency credits for research on a cure.

--Ha!

--What's the matter with you--they're doing their best to run the world.

--Sure they are.

Let's have a look for ourselves at various cities in contemporary America as far as the eye can see, editing out the bot cops on every corner. Well, back to Betty and Tom. You've seen all you need to.

--Can we watch another program?

A grumpy Tom changes the channel. It's a car pile-up.

--In a freak accident, one of our own, reporter Dan Ratternot, was killed today when his vehicle was sideswiped by a

Golden Chips carrier. Ratternot's skull was crushed. To experience the feeling of this, touch "four" now.

Betty hits the button and spasms in her seat.

On a rooftop, Josh and crew follow a police chase using a drone.

--Is it ...?

--Benny. With our raw materials.

Below, police disable Benny's ride. Benny jettisons and makes a run for it.

--Benny's on his last strike.

Benny furiously tries to outrun the authorities. Joy shakes her head and puts her binoculars down as enforcement grab Benny.

--End of game.

--End of round.

--What?

--Wait and see.

Folks have emerged their dwellings to watch the arrest.

--Verify: Benny Carlos Williams. Number 7788-D/B. Three strikes.

--Verified.

--Confirmed.

A granny offers advice:

--Burn him down!

The people all begin to chant, "Burn him down." Benny is burned. A bot lifts itself out of the police vehicle and sweeps the ashes into an urn.

Hope lights up a DMT.

--They get into it, don't they?

--Think we'll end up like that, Josh? I mean--I've got a strike already and Joy has two.

--I really needed that park contract to make it look a little like I was straightening out.

Josh shrugs.

--Hell, I'd take any kind of deal to get out.

--We know that.

Joy strokes Josh's arm.

--You wouldn't leave me, would you?

She slowly kisses him. They walk off together kissing.

Next morning in Josh's garage/lab, there is a knock on the garage door. Josh turns to see two female officers escorting a well-dressed manager. He passes Josh his card which reads, "R. Hayes."

--Joshua Chance?

--I've got a license.

--Who cares.

He goes over to the bot and takes a sample of the product.

He lights it up.

--Whoa! Where'd you get the formula for this, kid?

The Manager sniffs the air and turns around. Anders wanders by.

--From him. Before he was voided.

Walking past the shop door after Anders is an attractive young woman, Faith.

-Don't know any *chem*?

Josh shrugs.

--Only the standard. Everybody was doing all right around here.

--They still will.

An officer, after sampling, sighs:

-Sure you gotta take him?

--He's been recruited. Nothing I can do.

--Recruited for what?

--Outback chip distribution route.

Hope and Joy come walking out of the back.

--Well, he doesn't want it.

--Doesn't matter, honey. He can't legally turn the Corp down once he's registered. He takes it or takes a strike.

--How did this happen? Who the fuck would be dumb enough ...?

--His mother. Now, go away.

Hope and Joy retreat into the back, crestfallen. The manager picks up a few of the opaque data disks Josh has on his workbench.

--Sometimes you think you know stuff, but eventually you come to realize you don't know anything.

The Manager waves the opaque disks in Josh's face.

--Better not be anything too exotic on these, kid.

The manager starts for the door and waves enforcement to follow after. Enforcement are crestfallen that they have lost Josh.

--Sorry, kid.

--His own mother.

--Second time the bitch pushed him out.

--You come.

--Now?

--That's why we're here, to make sure you get on the rocket. Today.

--Can I tell my workers "Aloha."

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Officer puts cuffs on Josh while the 1<sup>st</sup> does the talking:

--Here's what you tell 'em, kid.

Re-zoned, Hope peacefully glides over a herd of carnivorous

dinosaurs while Joy is blissfully wandering through the park she designed. Josh seems to walk into their dreams and imparts some parting instructs.

--Here's what I've been told to tell you. In a couple of days, your new runner will show up with the first batch of raw materials. Recycle 10% of the profits into community projects so people stay happy with you.

--I finance my own park?

--If you want.

--How much do enforcement get?

--Fifteen percent.

--And the Corps? How much are they sliced for?

--Sixty-five.

--Man--who are we working for?

--Everybody else.

--Why are they sticking us like this?

--You're good horses and they like ride.

--Hard.

Josh leaves their dreams.

At the rocket port, Josh is escorted by the manager and the officers to the rocket. Faith, last seen dogging Anders, now has a collar around her neck and's being escorted by three female officers toward the same gantry. Faith tries to make a break for

it, but an officer pushes a hand-held trigger and the collar tightens and drops Faith, turning purple, to her knees. One of enforcement uses a modified nightstick to drag Faith back onto her feet.

--Come on, little princess--the provinces aren't that bad ...

--It's got plague.

--Not where you're going.

--At least, not yet ...

The three officers laugh. Faith is pushed next to Josh. Enforcement, unison, take out smokes. The Manager nudges Faith aside for a last word with Josh. He begins by offering Josh a smoke, but Josh begs off.

--Never a user.

The Manager laughs as he lights one for himself:

--Only used.

--Hey, I'd like one.

The Manager looks her up and down.

-Who'd you piss off, pretty girl?

He turns his back on her.

--Dick--all I want is ...

The Manager nods to Faith's handler and Faith is again dropped to her knees.

--But this is what you get.

He continues to chat Josh up.

--That true about the plague?

--Probably. My advice, distribute lots chips. Beat the tide back home.

The door of the rocket opens.

--Leaving time.

Enforcement put out their smoke and hustle Faith and Josh up the ramp before the group of normal travelers.

Josh and Faith get strapped in next to one another. The bot stewards help the other passengers to strap in. A passenger wants to know:

--How long's this flight?

--Five minutes.

She goes on to the next seat. Josh eyes Faith.

--They used to have to sail wooden boats to the other side of the world.

--Wish we were on one. I'm in no hurry to live life in the Outlands.

--Me neither. I'm a Corp recruit.

--Oh, yeah? Where they putting you up?

A pilot hologram announces:

--Twenty seconds to launch.

--Bluebird Motel.

The bot stewards fold themselves up and roll into storage. The rocket lifts off. There is no big ignition of engines—it's an anti-gravity rocket. It rises slowly, reaches sub-orbital apogee, then descends with a fury.

Funny faces here--passengers, experiencing G-force. Now the rocket brakes as it appears in the sky over the former outback near Ayers Rock. It gently sets itself down onto a platform. Attendants push a gangway up to the hatch. After opening the it, the attendants wheel out the benumbed passengers and crew. Josh asks groggily:

--Where are the pilots?

A freshly reanimated bot steward replies:

--Pilots?

--But the hologram ...

--... illusion is all you get.

After massages, the passengers are helped to their feet. Two Asian cops show up. Josh reacts as though they're there for him, but they grab Faith. Australia a completely polyglot culture? They still have the accent.

--Come along, Miss.

--Got a nice job in the fish factory waitin' for you.

--I don't want to ...

--Resistin' authority, eh?

The 1<sup>st</sup> cop stuns her with a modified night stick.

--Told you she wouldn't come peaceably.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> cop waves over a bot police cart and they put Faith in. A very attractive female supervisor, Judith, who looks like she could have been the human model for Duke's synthetic, approaches Josh.

--Mr. Chance? I'm Judith Fuller, your district supervisor. Welcome to the Outlands. I'm sure you'll find it's not as bad as rumored.

She helps him to his feet.

Inside a room of the Bluebird Hotel, Fuller is on top and at the end of the ride. She plops off Josh after she's through with him.

--... I haven't ...

--But I have and I'm boss.

She quickly starts to dress. She points to the bureau and is at the door before she finishes her speech.

--Keys to your vehicle, route maps. Be sure to fill your credit quota triple what it formerly was. Sample goods are in the trunk of the vehicle. Distribute lots. Make us proud.

She stops in the doorframe.

--And-thanks for the ride.

She's gone. Josh starts to fiddle through a menu of VRs that are available.

--Old, old, old ...

There is a knock at the door. Josh gets up reluctantly and opens. It's Faith, her blouse has blood on it. She has a frightened air.

--Come on-let me in.

-Is that fish blood?

She pushes past him and scopes out the motel room.

--You got anything to pop, smoke, or drink?

--No.

She plops down onto the bed.

--This hole all you get, chip sales rep?

Josh starts to answer, but she's already asleep. Josh selects the VR for *Finnegan's Wake* and puts on the glasses. It's the washerwomen going on and on. Josh forwards to the Shakespeare travesties ...

At daybreak Faith snaps out of her sleep and rousts Josh.

--Hey, how about some sex?

--Getting or giving?

Faith shrugs:

--First time? I'll give.

Josh exits room eight of the motel dressed in a suit.

Inside, Faith has on the wall screen and is listening to a report about the death of another reporter. Josh goes around to the rear of a convertible Cadillac with lots of chrome and fins and checks out the goods in the trunk of the. Faith pops her head out of the door.

--Any food back there?

Josh takes a sample case and tosses it into the back seat and then consults his route map.

--Just charge whatever you want to the room.

--I'm hungry now.

She starts out the door, naked, but Josh slams the trunk shut. A bot maid comes by and enters room #9 to tidy up.

--See you at the end of the day, right?

Josh doesn't answer.

--Hey, answer me!

Josh climbs into the vehicle, starts it up, and drives off.

--Dead little prick.

It's morning on the streets of the Outlands, a gigantic Levitt Town. The climate is semi-tropical. Josh waves to folks mowing or watering their lawns and drives on until he comes to a strip mall. He grabs the sample case from the back seat and enters a gigantic "Everything Store."

Inside, Josh shakes hands with the manager.

--Josh Chance, your new chip rep.

--People are getting sick of 'em ...

He points to a display where chips are offered two for one.

--Yes, well, that's what happens after eight or nine months.

Josh rips open a pack that has "New and Improved" splashed across it.

--New, eh?

--More potent, let's say.

The Manager looks around, paranoid.

--Shhh.

--Oh, it's one of the "un-utterables" is it?

The Manager chomps one. Instant feedback.

--Most supreme stuff.

Josh just smiles and watches.

--May I ...?

--Of course.

--How do they ...?

--Chemistry.

The Manager looks ruefully at the large display of old chips. On a small aisle screen, another reporter is shown having hanged herself in her shower.

--What do I do with ...?

--Open them.

--Penalty?

--None. Now, how many of the new units would you like to stock?

--I'll take all you can get delivered if you promise not to distribute to anyone else within fifty miles.

-Well ...

--You don't realize how hard it will be for me to get people to even try these.

Josh beckons a family over. They approach reluctantly.

--What?

--There's no way I'll ever eat another chip.

Josh offers it to the kid.

--Try one.

The kid goes first. He beams up at his parents.

--This is my last sample ...

The father starts to reach for a chip when the kid grabs the bag and runs away with it. The kid grabs a lawn implement and threatens to maim all who come near.

--What's making him do that?

The kid devours the bag of chips. He drops the bag. It melts away.

--All right, twenty-five miles ...

Josh extends his hand.

At the back of the store, the manager directs his staff to rip open the bags of old chips. The manager checks his watch. The bags and chips begin to melt away.

--How do they do that?

Along the endless strip mall that surrounds Ayers Rock, Josh drives along.

--Nothing can be that good ...

He rips open a sample bag and bites one. His eyes roll and he loses control of the car for a moment.

--Whoa!

He pitches the rest of the bag and it starts to disintegrate soon as it hits earth.

In the Bluebird motel room, Faith's reports in to Duke's synthetic via the wall-sized screen. Duke, shake in hand, is in the background hooked into a VR. He jerks around, though we don't see what kind of scenario he's in.

--Well, I'm in. He's off to work. Pump him again tonight.

The Synthetic smirks:

--For information?

--Oh, leave the girl alone. Let her work, let her work.

The Synthetic shrugs and ends the transmission. Faith plugs

into a VR:

In Duke's VR, it's a cops and robbers chase with Faith getting to catch up to and "burn down" the "bad guys" while citizens cheer her on.

In the Outlands, two cars ease up alongside Josh and start to bang up his wheels. Josh does his best to try and outrun them, but a third vehicle blind sides him. The air bag saves him. Four skinny geeks struggle to drag Josh out of the Cadillac and toward a hearse pulls up. Josh starts to come 'round.

--Who are you idiots?

One of the geeks sprays Josh in the face and Josh passes out.

In the hearse, the four geeks discuss Josh.

--He doesn't fit their agent profile, Jimmy.

--Well, Polly, that's because they know that we know it, so they're trying something new.

--I think she's right. It must have been the other one.

--Right. Nobody slips enforcement.

--But they're together, right?

--We could ask him if you hadn't doped him under so deep.

Peter sprays Josh with something else. Josh, coughing and hacking, comes around. He looks at his captors.

--What are you, chip hijackers?

--We're geeks.

--Stupid muscle boy.

--I don't get this.

Jimmy puts a weapon to Josh's head.

--Want some, dumb little agent bunny?

--I'm just a chip rep.

--Put the meter on him!

Polly jerks a headpiece over Josh's head.

--Set to read.

--Now, little bunny--what's Azael?

--Don't know.

The meter confirms. Jimmy's furious.

--Peter! Why did you ask him that?

--To find out if he knows.

--He's only an agent, for gob's sake! Of course he  
doesn't know!

--There's something highly addictive in the new line of  
chips.

--I don't like them anymore.

--Yeah? Have you tried one?

--We don't care about any fucking chips.

--I was a crooked chem stringer back in North America

but I'm telling you this straight.

--Oh, man--it's a setup!

--I say we void his contract--now!

-You little assholes ...

Jimmy takes umbrage and gasses Josh out. Josh dreams. In his dream, Judith Fuller has a diapered Josh in a giant highchair and feeding the struggling big-baby mashed chips.

--Don't want it!

--It's life, boy-toy. Eat it!

In the basement of a teched out geek paradise, Peter, Jimmy and Polly geek out on the network while Darlene keeps a weapon on a shackled Josh who's shivering in delirium while Faith is still busting criminals in Duke's VR.

Josh groans as his jaw masticates. Darlene snaps her fingers to get the attention of her cohorts. They ignore her. Peter drops a comment ...

--It lives.

... then returns to geek searching info. Josh jolts upright to discover his shackles. He peers through watery eyes to still sad geeks. His unopened chip samples are scattered on a table near chemistry equipment, except for a bag Darlene has been chomping and won't share when Polly reaches for one.

-Find anything? Square pegs for the round holes?

Darlene holds up the last chip. After it leaves the bag, it dissolves.

--These are really killer.

--Piggy.

Jimmy and Peter eye one another cautiously. Peter starts to talk.

--We ...

Jimmy nudges Peter.

--I do the talking this time, dopey.

He takes a step toward Josh.

--All right, there are your chips, do some chem.

Inside the home of Manager Hayes (who recruited Josh), a young man, bored, decides to have a look at the fiche that the Manager (who's taking a breakfast tray from a bot to bring to the center of the room) took from Josh.

--Where'd you get this?

--From a recruit I sent to the Outlands to push chips.

Why?

--'Cause he's got some formulas here that could raise your grade.

The Manager cuts his finger.

--Oh, what's the matter?

The Manager hustles over staunching the cut with a napkin

and grabs the fiche.

--This never existed.

He burns the fiche.

--Whoa! I smell fresh blood.

They kiss and make for the nearest couch.

Back in the geek basement paradise, Josh, analyzes the chips using a set-up made from various parts of geek equip. The geeks stand around waiting to hear the results. Josh looks up from his work, impressed.

--It's not chem. It's bio-tech.

Josh projects the results onscreen. He increases the magnification.

--Genes jostled here and there ... Now, give me a human body.

A human body comes onscreen.

--Inject these genes into its system.

'It' does as commanded. A high endorphin level shows up.

Peter, scornfully:

--Nothing, man. Just a good high.

Josh ignores Peter and addresses the machine.

--Accelerate.

--Over?

--A month.

The acceleration takes place. The body starts to develop the Ebola-like plague. Over the progression, Darlene's mood darkens. Polly has to step over to comfort her.

--Project the number of deaths along the chip delivery routes over a month.

Josh places his route fiche over the "read" screen. The group's agape as the projected deaths take out the entire community. Darlene looks over the unopened chips.

--Killer.

--I ate part of one.

Josh shuts everything down. Peter says:

--Azael.

--What?

--The Master Plan, bud.

--To do what?

Jimmy commands a screen.

--Show the world.

The post Azael (green world the Corps were viewing in the first scene) comes up.

--You hacked this when?

--Four days ago.

--Nice green world. Notice anything funny about it?

--No cities ...

--No nothin'.

--The plague?

--The start.

--But why?

--The bosses don't want to take care of us anymore?

--What's changed?

--More like, what hasn't?

Jimmy calls up some images.

--Give me Walt and Ray Driver fifty years ago.

Walt and Ray come up. They look in their late 70s.

--The Drivers today.

Walt and Ray come up, looking a couple of years younger, if anything. "Shakes" are within reach. Josh shifts view to look at the pristine Earth.

--Beautiful. But to make it like that ...

--Right.

Darlene puts some stats up onscreen--it's the world population, exponentially declining in numbers over the next couple of years until it's down to zero.

--Whoa! How long before it hits North America?

--The precious homeland?

--I have people, you know ...

Polly and Darlene embrace and kiss.

--So do we, Ace.

--You've already got an agent on top of you.

--Faith?

--No one gets away from enforcement.

--Start the revolution here. Hit the chip shipments. I  
have to go back.

--We can get you on a boat.

--How long will that take?

--Two days.

--Is there equip? I need to search a cure.

--For me?

--For everybody.

In the "Everything Store" the supremely ecstatic Manager watches as his new chips quickly empty off the shelves while back at The Bluebird, Faith is preening on the bed when Josh comes through the door. The last of the reporters on Ray's list is shown being mutilated by a group of New Zealand Highlanders whose ceremony he's violated.

--Have a good day today, baby? Ready to give me mine?

Josh nods, pulls out a weapon, and stuns her out. The geeks come scurrying through the door and take the body.

At a dockside, Josh turned over to a ship's captain by

Jimmy. The Captain turns off his deck-hand bots to sneak Josh by.

--What about their recorders?

--Looped in an old reality ...

The Captain consults a screen ...

--... for three more minutes.

Josh is smuggled below deck to the medical lab where he finds the oldish equip he'll be working with. Josh sighs the longest and most mournful of sighs before he steps to it.

Back home, Betty watches news. The first case of the plague spreading through the 3<sup>rd</sup> World has shown up in the Outlands. It's what's left of Faith's body on a conveyor belt into a crematorium. The report cuts to rich people leaving the cities for country homes.

--Bugs. You're all damned bugs ...

She hits the "experience switch" and the device merges her with the feelings of a young and comely rich thing scooting her brood into the family flyer.

--Ahhh--that feels so goooood.

The reporter announces that more tax credits are being diverted toward study of the new plague. Tom comes in, smoking, takes a look at the screen, at Betty, and walks back out.

In Duke's abode, the Synthetic rushes in and stop Duke's VR, even though there is a rapturous look on Duke's face.

--Don't you ever ...!

--The agent's dead!

--Agent? What agent?

Meeting at Ray's penthouse, yes? On screen virtual reality, Ray is playing polo against some tough opponents. Mars and Hetta enter. The game continues until Ray scores a goal. Mars applauds. Ray takes off the VR glasses and gestures for Hetta and Mars to take seats. Mars licks a bead of sweat off his upper lip. Ray wraps his fist around a shake.

--Now ...

Tiny needles insert themselves into Mars' arm. Mars is taken aback. Hetta? Cheshire Cat smile.

--... don't be alarmed.

--What's it doing?

--Creating incentive.

Ray sips his shake.

--This *Chance* kid, some chemically adept cocksucker recruited to sell chips in the outlands, after a single day of pushing the product, has figured out its little secret. Now, is this hustler only self-interested scum?

--Probably ...

--*Better* be. And, what you're injected with, we can stop it killing you--if you execute this *Chance* kid

expeditiously.

--How long?

--A week.

Ray snaps his fingers and a note pops onscreen. Hetta reads more quickly than Mars. Small flying bots leave their shelves and start to flutter around them.

--He thinks the chips are flawed and they're accidentally killing people!

--He wants a sizeable payoff to keep quiet about it. Also, he's offering to "fix" the flaw.

The three laugh.

--Azael's almost ready. If we pay ...

She gets stung by one of the bots and screams in pain.

--Pay? We *never* pay. Void him.

Ray finishes his shake. They bow and exit like Tweedle-Dum and Tweedle-Dee. A bot butler appears with another shake for Ray.

In the elevator, Hetta massages her hurt while reading out the information the government has on Betty and Tom.

--So ... how do we bait him?

--Well, he's offered to work on the chips.

--Yes ...

--We take up his offer to help.

--Invite him aboard. Think he'll swallow that?

Mars gets a message beep and looks at his pocket com.

--Chance. On his way back into town.

--Must miss his jolly folks.

--Tom's too difficult. But I know the perfect person to work on Betty.

Hetta takes her com and sends Josh an offer.

In his little hole, Josh reads Mars' counter-offer.

--Fish on the hook.

Josh sends an answer, routed via a circuitous path, then gets back to work on a "block" to the chips' effect.

Hetta receives Josh's answer just outside Corps Headquarters.

--See? Coming in early evening on the rocket from Moscow.

--Sure he is.

--Bet you some sex.

--Done.

Jimmy and his crew drive from store to store and place to place to intercept as many chip shipments as possible. This means toasting bot drivers and that means attracting attention.

At the rocket port, Mars and Hetta wait with lots of cops. The rocket lands and there's no Josh wheeled off.

--My place or yours?

A message comes in to Mars:

--He's on a ship.

An angry Hetta turns to the head cop:

-Go fish.

The cop vigorously nods an assent.

It's stormy at sea. The vessel's tosses. A huge wave smashes into the bow. The vessel does a complete roll. When she rights, not all bots are still at post.

Med Lab? Josh has been whirled 'round and has his hands protecting his head. Fetal position. Perhaps he'll be reborn now. The Captain and Mate, drenched from head to foot, appear.

--I'm abandoning ship. Coming?

Josh feebly nods. The captain and mate help him up. Josh grabs a fiche of what he has been working on.

On deck, the three living mortals climb into pods and launch. Boing! Into the formerly death-dealing sea with yous. But, now pods go to a depth beneath the fury of a storm. The captain and mate head straight east while Josh heads north. Josh punches in coordinates for Hawaii.

Back on board, enforcement land and search the vessel. Foreshadowing here. "Poor souls, they perish'd/Had I been any god of power, I would/Have sunk the sea within the earth or ere/It should the good ship so have swallow'd and/The fraughting souls within her." "Full fathom five thy father lies;/Of his bones are

coral made;/Those are pearls that were his eyes:/Nothing of him  
that doth fade/But doth suffer a sea-change/Into something rich  
and strange." "What dreadful noise of waters in mine ears!/What  
ugly sights of death within mine eyes!/Methought I saw a thousand  
fearful wrecks;/Ten thousand men that Fisches gnaw'd upon;/Wedges  
of gold, great anchors, heaps of pearl,/Inestimable stones,  
unvalued jewels,/All scatter'd in the bottom of the sea:/Some lay  
in dead men's skulls; and, in those holes/Where eyes did once  
inhabit, there were crept,/As 'twere in scorn of eyes, reflecting  
gems,/Which woo'd the slimy bottom of the deep,/And mock'd the  
dead bones that lay scatter'd by."

Take that, you lovers of the dead! Which is what Mars is  
right now.

In the med lab, the head cop finds evidence of Josh's work.  
He backs up the work on a fiche and pockets it. On the deck,  
enforcement transportation is swept away. Enforcement emerge and  
assemble around their captain.

--What do we do?

The Captain sees a massive wave come their way.

--Die ...

The wave crashes and the vessel snaps in half.

On a lanai of The Royal Hawaiian, Josh, sips a tropical itch

and hacks a rocket connection.

In Hetta's bedroom, she comes back into the room sulking.

Mars wears the face of a happy dog.

--Don't be a sore loser.

--We're going to be dead soon if we don't smarten up.

Mars comes to attention.

--What happened?

--Ship went down in a storm. Fuck. Not supposed to happen. Ever.

--Passengers and crew?

--No, just enforcement we sent.

--Who's "we"? You sent them.

--The captain and mate came in this morning.

--Does he admit having had Chance on board?

Look. See. At Enforcement Headquarters, The captain spills, the mate beside him, voided. Back to the ever entertaining H&M.

--He does now.

--So, where's our boy?

On the beach at Waikiki, an agent checks the origin of Josh's pod.

--His pod's been located in Hawaii.

--Then he's coming in on a rocket.

--Bet you some sex he's not.

--You're on.

Mars grabs his com for timetables.

--First one arrives in half an hour.

At the rocket port that evening, Mars and Hetta, wait with enforcement in tow.

--Was that the last one?

--Your place or mine?

--You think we have time for that.

He signals enforcement to follow him.

--What?

--I don't like how my week's been going. Let's do a little more homework on this kid.

In Josh's shop, Joy and Hope leave a message for the "delivery" boy. A hand-written note from Josh warning about the chips is on the workbench.

--You sure we're supposed to spread the news?

--That's what it says.

They duck out, leaving the place open. Soon, they're drinking with Josh at a particularly active low-life bar.

--How many do they want to kill?

Tom announces his arrival:

--All of 'em.

Tom lights up and continues:

--People's credits aren't being pumped into finding a cure for plague ...

--For what then?

--To spread it.

Josh beckons his dad closer. Joy mutters:

--Don't usually kill the customer.

--Less you don't need 'em any more.

--Where's mom?

Whoa! Hetta's dropped by, wearing appropriate clothes and garish makeup, to pump Betty's brain. Betty passes Hetta a cup that Hetta holds out to be filled. Obligated.

--Oh, please--this is so kind of you.

--You're new, you're new. Of course you want to know who your neighbors are.

--And your husband--what's he like?

--He's a heavy, heavy smoker.

--Oh, I'm so sorry.

--I'm alone, really.

Hetta indicates a family photo that shows Josh and Tom holding up a catch of fish.

--But your son ...

--I got him a job in the Outlands and now I don't see him anymore.

--Doesn't vid or post?

Betty shakes her head and starts to weep.

--Excuse me ...

--It's all right.

--Things are never all right. You have to make them right.

Betty turns on the screen and turns to the "Happy Children" network. She hits the "experience" button and is soon feeling pure joy. Hetta turns away in disgust as Betty shrieks happiness. Hetta waits for the effect to diminish.

--Where's your husband tonight?

So, where's Mars? Not in retrograde but with techs and enforcement able to view Betty's living room through its wall screen.

--I spy with my giant eye ...

--One big loony.

Betty refills her own glass. Hetta accepts a refill, too.

--He likes to smoke alone. Wanders the ugly neighborhood for hours even though everything there is can be seen and felt from here.

Betty hits a happiness button again. Hetta shakes her head at

Mars. Mars shrugs. He turns to a Third Technician. We continue to see Betty struggle desperately to be happy. Hetta makes excuses to leave. Betty gets back to her viewing after pretending to be concerned that Hetta doesn't want to participate.

--The dope on Chance?

--A chem kid.

--Genius grades?

--No. His low-lows, parents, heavy users. The kid tests sub-normal.

--Oh, yes. So far he's shown us nothing but his moronic side.

Betty laughs hysterically at something triggered by the show.

--Will somebody please turn that idiot off?

--I could jolt her for you.

--Feel free ...

--Shall I send in the decoy?

Mars nods assent. Betty receives an unexpected shock in the middle of a "happiness" mode. She turns everything off and stares at the control panel.

--Damn! It bit me!

Tom comes in. He's not smoking.

--What, babe?

She gets up and points down at the controls.

--The thing bit me.

Tom starts to look it over.

--Malfunctioned, you mean?

He can't find anything wrong. Betty eyes him suspiciously.

--And what's wrong with you, Tom?

Mars and crew get to watch, even when the set's off.

--Wrong with me?

--There's nothing wrong with him, lady.

--He's not smoking. Make him smoke.

The 1<sup>st</sup> Technician gets nervous and makes the Tom hologram actually exude smoke. Betty screams.

--You imbecile! What are you doing!

--You said to make him smoke ...

Betty runs around screaming and dumps the water out of a vase over Tom's head. It starts to short-out the holo.

--Get him out of there!

The holo Tom runs out of the house. Betty slumps in her viewing chair.

--Well, now I've seen everything ...

She turns the set back on.

--Sweep the city.

--High and low?

Enter Hetta, sans Shakespearean stage directions.

--Just low.

The Technicians scan for Tom's face in low-life bars around the world. We see multiple screens with people having fun, getting wasted, having fights in bars all over the globe.

Into Josh's shop breezes the delivery boy, with his two enforcement escort.

--Where's the stuff?

The delivery boy finds the note.

--There's only this note.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Enforcer snatches and reads it.

--This better not be true.

His partner grabs it from him.

--I knew the codgers couldn't be trusted. Call a meeting.

--What should I do?

--Find a place to hide.

In the low-life bar where Josh, Tom, Joy and Hope cower in a booth, Josh shows off the vision of the world the Outlanders hacked into.

--There's nothing ...

--On the surface. They'd never give up their synth butlers and bots.

--Right. Underground.

--Benny told me about--

--You and Benny?

--Only a couple of times.

--How was it?

--Good. Very good.

--What did Benny tell you?

--You know how he liked to go hunting around in the sewers, right?

Remembering Benny. He's knee deep in sewer water, hunting for old things shouldering a satchel for finds. Up comes an old fortune-telling crystal. Benny shakes it and a fortune comes up: "No." He starts to shake it again when he hears a fearsome noise. Benny yanks a breather over his mouth and dives. A flying fleet of bots, conveying parts on platforms, flies past. Benny is on his back, looking up, holding himself down with bricks his hands have found. Two Overseer Bots on flying scooters stop to check figures above Benny. Bots do not speak. Benny witnesses them mentally checking off items on a list. They then speed on. Benny reads the word "LEAZA" at the top of the list.

Still cowering in the booth, Hope opines:

--So when he got burned, I thought, maybe, but I didn't want to tell anyone because ...

--"Leaza." What kind of word is that?

--"Azael" backwards.

Tom inhales deeply:

-Ninnies.

He turns to Hope.

--So-where's this tunnel?

--I'm not ... I can't ...

--Nobody's asking you to go.

--We need weapons.

They get up and leave.

At an enforcement listening post, one screen shows Tom's back just as he reaches the door. Josh and the girls? Already out. Techs busy trying to keep up or diverted by amusing behavior or fights. Hetta feels she must assert her authority:

--This isn't working. We need Sweepers.

Mars nods sad assent. Mars projects onto his com a message: "Sweepers Out." Josh's and Tom's profiles? Scent. Oh, sorry, 'sent'.

--The ladies. Don't forget the ladies.

Mars adds Joy's and Hope's profiles to the hunt.

Swarming out of ports around the world, hundreds and hundreds of smallish flying bots respond to Mars' order.

At Duke's penthouse, Duke looks down as he sips his shake and sees the bots sweeping out. He turns to his Synth and says:

--Somebody's gone desperate. Tell me who and why.

The synth pops her index finger into a liquid display and accesses the main line. Duke keeps a close eye on the synth. She begins to look very unhappy.

--Wassa matter?

--We're involved.

--Us. How?

Well, here now is a flashback inside Duke's factory office. Duke's listening to the Manager bot who wants something done about Josh's chronic hacking.

--It's a waste of time to go after small fish. The "big lie"--that's the key to successful suppression.

--Even in this case?

--In every case. No "some/none/all" need be considered.

--Shouldn't it *always* be considered. This fish could be bigger than you think.

--When am I wrong?

--Never?

Present, here. Sweepers prowl, roust citizens everywhere, demand I.D. verification. Irate cits? Voided or burned, depending on their level of umbrage or threat.

In a very, very large hall, enforcement is assembled. Josh's

note is held up.

--... so it seems.

--It's a fuckin' note. It ain't proof.

Another enforcer comes running in:

--Sweepers!

--*Goddamnit!* Now, this is serious.

--Violation of our fuckin' contract.

Ray's villa, pool-side. Balmy evening, it be. Ray's company? A hot young woman. She turns on a screen after Ray, sex over, dozes. She sneaks a sip of his shake. What's on the news? Sweepers out, sans a declaration of a universal emergency. The young lady feels her skin tighten. She grabs a mirror from her purse and sees some light wrinkles have departed. Gone. She sneaks another sip, but nothing, disappointingly, happens.

Walt's so much more snivelized. He and Amy listen live to Henze's *Tristan* in company with equally old friends. A bot butler advances upon Walt and whispers in his ear. Walt's agitated. Even rises to his feet.

--Sweeps? Who ordered sweeps?

Hostess Amy's distressed by the interruption. Such an embarrassment.

--Walter ... can't it wait?

He shakes his head vigorously. He walks the butler to a quiet

corner.

--Has my brother been informed?

--He left orders ...

Walt gets a glint in his eye.

--Call his wife.

Walt returns to his wife's side and pats her hand to calm her. This doesn't satisfy Amy at all.

Down in the boondocks? Nope, the filthy mucky tunnels. Josh, Tom, and Joy, rubber suited with some light weapons, flash lights and make a way along.

Ray, Ray, Ray of light? No. No ray of light. Inside Ray's villa, Emily answers an onscreen call from the butler. She is half-drunk and (wow!) near naked.

--I've been told to tell you that Senator Mars has ordered sweeps.

--I'll arouse my husband.

A butler jerks out of a closet to help her into her apparel.

Hope comes out of a bar, smoking and very high, sees the sweeps coming and tries to duck back inside before she's spotted. Two of the sweeps enter the bar. Two sweeps, with the name tags Quincy and Adams, check identification. One man at the bar trembles and makes a run for it. The first sweep fires a stun blast that misses and takes off the bartender's head. The sweep

addresses the others in the bar.

--Please pardon my mistake.

The runner takes out a weapon and destroys the sweep that fired at him. He makes it out into the street, 2<sup>nd</sup> sweep on his tail. Hope pushes the dead bartender off her.

Outside the bar, the shooter's burned by the sweeps. Hear the sweeps? They communicate using a dolphin-sounding language between each other, but that you get translated. Please appreciate how much effort it took to learn dolphin to be able to do this.

A sweep captain:

--Sweep all inside?

--No. Quincy made a headless human before being voided.

The sweeps chirp. Their form of laughter.

--Go finish your work.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> sweep and two others enter the bar. It's empty, occupants bolted. The steady, confident sweeps sweep out, following the scent trail left by individual consumers.

--Have you heard the one about the three humans who have to draw lots to see which one of them will toast--

The place explodes taking out numerous sweeps. Fire alarms sound. Anders walks past, oblivious ...

--Lobha.

The sound of the explosion startles Ray awake just as Emily

appears. The young woman is jumping up and down, clapping her hands together.

--Action! Action! Finally, some action.

Ray stares down at the fire, then glances up to see Emily.

--What do you want?

--I was asked to get you up.

--Well, I'm up.

Emily looks the young woman angrily up and down and starts away hissing:

--Bet he still thinks he has it. Ha!

A butler comes to help Ray get dressed.

--What in hell is happening out there, Andy?

--I don't know, Sir.

--Maybe it's an uprising!

--An uprising against what?

--The boredom, of course!

Deep in muck and covered in filth, Josh, Tom, and Joy consult a map. Tom's smoking.

--This is around where Benny ...

Sound of a squad approaching. Their lights all go off simultaneously and they plop into the sludge water. A flying feet of bots conveying parts on platforms flies toward. As they're

over, a hand comes up out of the water and tosses a dime-sized device into the air attaching to one of the platforms.

The three come up. They wipe the gross stuff off as they can. They even help one another. Josh takes out his handheld and concentrates on it. The locator shows where the platforms are; miles away and still moving. Tom's distressed to discover his smokes wet. Joy checks the newscasts while Josh keeps an eye on his device.

--How far?

--To another smoke?

--Fifteen miles and ...

A pause. Time for a snack?

--Stopped.

--I can't ...

Joy shoves the newscast under Tom's nose.

--You'll have to.

--Damn. Sweeps.

They trudge on.

Above them, enforcement stands back and watches as the sweeps work.

Above them, Hope tries to break into a shed. She is zapped from behind by an old lady.

--Gotcha!

The old lady signals her bots forward. They hoist Hope and carry her down the stairs. Sweeps come by and the Old Lady waves at them.

--Go get em!

The sweeps salute her. After they pass, she mutters:

--Stupid fucks.

In the lady's apartment, Hope is gagged and strapped into a chair. The old lady plops down in a chair beside her. The butler bot puts food down on a tray before the old lady.

--Should have never let me catch you, dear.

She pats Hope's knee.

--You're mine now. Permanent company.

Hope wriggles in her chair. The old lady gives Hope a jolt. Hope spasms.

--You will behave, won't you? I like the old shows and so will you.

The old lady puts *Jane Eyre* onscreen. Little Jane, still at school, is being berated by the big-headed imbecile master. Meanwhile ...

Peter and company shoot it out with enforcement near an overturned chips delivery van. Darlene and Polly take one another out rather than surrender. Peter and Jimmy are knocked unconscious by stun grenades. They're hoisted up between officers, then

publicly burned. Cits at the scene applaud enforcement for ending of this "vandalism spree."

--And this is how it ended out here today, with the vandals refusing to surrender to authorities and, instead, getting "slapped back to the void," as they like to say in the Outlands.

Tunnels. Still slogging on. Tom looks about to break.

--How much further?

--Three miles.

At his Villa, Ray's dressing Hetta and Mars down. The Young Woman? Escorted out a back way. See her reflected in that large hall mirror. "Mirror, mirror on the wall ..." Hetta catches a glance and smiles.

--You called out the sweeps? Do you know how enforcement feels about the sweeps?

--They hate them.

The butler comes in and announces:

--Commissara Post and Secretary.

--What do they want?

Duke and his Synth have Manager Hayes in tow.

--We found him. It wasn't us.

--Found who?

--The officers who escorted him to the shop will confirm that he took a fiche.

--His *friend* reported him to us.

--Willful destruction of evidence.

--Our agent's life was lost because of this man.

Ray's indifferent to this argument.

--Is *he* why my aides are jumpy and the city is burning?

--All I did was ...

Using only her finger, the synth stuns Hayes onto his knees and into silence.

--All right. Let's cut our losses here.

The butler steps up, burns Hayes and another bot appears and vacuums the ashes that have not blown away in a sudden gust.

--Now we start fresh.

A bot comes out with shakes for Ray and Duke. Ray shoos Mars and Hetta away. Duke signals his Synth to retire. Ray and Duke take their ease on the pool-side furniture.

--Who's in your sights here, Duke?

--That stupid manager recruited some creepy little mutant kid and sent him into the Outlands to hustle chips for us.

--Right. Where is he now?

--Outfoxed and burned the agent we stuck on him.

--Right. But you have him in your sights now. Where is he?

--Don't know. Thought your Sweeps would have him netted

by now. I just came here to report that my office ...

Ray slaps Duke's shake out of his hand.

--Get out of here!

Ray puts his fingers to his head. Mars and Hetta come back in.

--Profile.

--Joshua Chance, only son of Thomas and Elizabeth.

--Thomas was a brilliant chemical engineer before the new program retired him.

--He was mated to Betty to water down his stock.

--She drove him into the smoke.

--But it didn't take ...

--Oh, yes it did. The kid's a bastard.

Down in the intestines of the city, Tom puts a weary hand on Josh's shoulder.

--Son-there's something I've got to tell you ...

--What? That you screwed with my DNA before I erupted?

--Yeah, how'd you know?

--You tell me before every withdrawal.

--Oh.

They hear another flight and submerge again. After the flight goes past, it stops. A door opens in the wall and the flight snakes through. Josh pops his head up and gets a look. Ho, ho!

And in this critical moment, where's Duke? What's he up to? In the United Planet Welfare/Credit Bureau, Duke's in a floating harness whipping his bots into action. The synth hovers nearby, bemused by this senile show of pathetic fury. Several enforcement wait in the back ...

--Goddamn, find them now!

The bot super tries to be informative:

--It's an entirely different platform, Sir.

Duke looks around the room.

--Anyone here care to take this unit's place?

Several arms go up.

--Found one!

Duke flies over have a look. Onscreen is Hope. The old lady is reading her old love letters. Duke addresses enforcement.

--Bring her to the Driver villa.

Near the end of the intestine, Josh, Joy, and Tom look for some way into the chamber behind the wall. Factory noises behind it.

--Nothing here.

Tom slumps down in defeat. On his way down, his back hits a sharp object and it tears open his skin.

--Ow!

Josh and Joy come over. Joy examines Tom while Josh looks at

what cut him. Josh stings it with his weapon and the door opens just wide enough to slip through. Suspicious, aren't you? The three slide on through. It closes behind them.

Two enforcement present Hope to Ray. For some reason, the old lady is in tow.

--Who's this?

Duke comes in followed by the synth.

--Hope Jones, one of the Gang of Four. She knows where they are.

--Ray? Is that you, Ray?

--Who are you?

--Dawn Jenkins. Don't you remember? Sixty years ago. But hell, you look the same.

Ray takes a nervous hit off his shake.

--I don't remember.

--You had a place up in the hills where ...

--Void her.

--But she hasn't done anything.

The synth steps up and does the job. The old lady's lights go out. Ray walks up to Hope.

--See that? You're next if you don't snitch ...

The big screen comes on. It's the manager in a lab coat.

--We've been penetrated.

--Be right down.

Ray walks to an elevator followed by Duke and the synth. Enforcement look perplexed. Ray and company step into the elevator.

--What do we do with--?

Before the door closes, Ray, in full back-of-the hand majesty:

--Void her.

Enforcement look at one another, not happy. The old lady has started to drool. Emily walks out of the back.

--You can let her go.

--But ...

--Just leave her here with me. Take Dawn to a home.

--Sure.

Enforcement leave with the old lady. A butler appears behind Emily.

--Would you like a drink?

Hope nods a frightened "yes."

Josh, Joy, and Tom are having a look around the Azeal factory. Row upon row of young adult human bodies in stasis.

--Whoa!

--What's it for?

--Rejuvenation.

Ray steps forward:

--Permanent rejuvenation.

They turn see Ray, backed by managers, technicians. They find themselves surrounded by bot guards and are disarmed except for a stinger Josh keeps palmed. Joy appeals to the closest tech.

--I see what's in it for the codgers, what's in it for you?

The tech doesn't answer.

--How many "immortals" you making, Driver?

--Two-hundred and seventy-six.

He turns and looks at the managers and technicians:

--With a support staff of several thousand who will be earning their way aboard as they serve us.

--Won't they get old?

Ray jiggles his shake dispenser.

--No.

Ray projects at the bot guards. They start beating Tom and Josh while Joy screams, restrained by two technicians. Ray strokes her face gently as the two males take one.

--You two have been a lot of bother.

Josh cries out between the blows:

--Who could *like* such a deal?

--Most people aren't going to like dying, but they're

going to do it. And, as for the machines ...

--You smelly old geezers aren't voiding me!

The synth emits a dolphin language squeal as she pops both Ray and Duke in the back of the head. The sweeps (Everywhere, Every Where) stop doing and mass to home to the synth's call. Both Duke and Ray, not able to realize, look puzzled. Their shakes drop to the floor,

but their clothes keep them standing. The guards don't know what to do. The synth starts popping the technicians. A tech shouts:

--Burn it!

The guards follow the command and start laying heat down on the synth. Josh and Tom slip the guards. Josh and Joy grab back weapons. They beat retreat while the guards busy with the synth. The synth? Wounded, it runs. In the chaos (Yes, chaos) Josh, Joy and Tom end up facing the synth. Guards converge behind her.

--Truce?

The synth nods agreement and they run together, guards on their heels. Joy tries to stop some of Josh's bleeding. Tom tends his own wounds. The four set up an ambush for the group of guards closing and eliminate them. The synth and Josh end up eyeball to eyeball, weapons on one another.

--Do we void Azael?

The synth smiles at him.

--I'm going to run the planet.

--Oh.

The synth smiles sadistically, but before she has a chance to see who's faster on the trigger, Joy drops the synth from behind. Back of the head. Brief sparks. Backup systems begin to kick in. Tom insists:

---Burn it down.

Another group of guards shows and before Joy can reset her weapon, they must run.

The guards, seeing the synth down, run past after Josh and friends.

The synth struggles to her feet, smiles, and makes her way back to the elevator. The guards corner Josh, Joy and Tom. They surrender and are marched to the main office where the head technician is screen to screen with Walt Driver.

--Both dead, eh? What about Duke's synth?

Josh, Joy, and Tom, shoved into the office. Josh and Tom and still quite wobbly.

--Hello, Walt.

--Hello, Tom. That your boy?

Tom nods. A tech reports:

--The synth ...

--... wants the planet.

--Yes, it's enlisted the sweeps. They should be there soon.

The technicians break out in sweats.

--And, friends, don't trust your bots. I'll be there quick as I can.

The technicians scramble to turn the guards off.

In an elevator, the synth, hot and eager to pursue her capital interests. She steps out only to have Hope pop it in the head, knocking it senseless. Emily steps up and yanks out its essential chip.

--We're not--

--It's just misguided. All it needs is a little reprogramming.

Emily walks over and slips the chip into a machine. She projects what she wants. Emily hums the scherzo from Schumann's 3<sup>rd</sup> Symphony while the chip re-programs. After a few bars, the chip's spit out. Emily reinserts the it and the synth's back on its feet.

--Who are you?

The synth now has a masculine voice and personality:

--Your servant, Madame.

--And what are we going to do?

--Follow your command.

They get into the elevator, Emily saying to Hope:

--Have you ever considered how tedious immortality would be?

--No.

The elevator starts its descent.

In the main office, Josh and Joy arm. A tech slips Tom a cigarette. Tom lights up and after a deep hit, he's ready to fight. Fight who? Fight what? The sweeps! Jamming through the intestinal tunnel. Joy pleads:

--Can't you turn them off?

A tech shakes her head:

--Independents.

Emily, Hope and the synth step out of the elevator and enter the office. Joy is ready to blast the synth, but Hope waves her off.

--What's amiss here?

Tom points to the synth.

--That called the sweeps down here.

--To take over Azael?

Tom nods "yes." She turns to her servant.

--Send them back.

The synth struggles with the command.

--Send them back!

*Banging!* The Sweeps are banging at the entrance. Gets louder and more furious with every second you're a-readin' this.

--I won't ...

Tom puts a weapon to the synth's head:

--Next stop, the void ...

The synth emits a dolphin chirp. Does that do it? Safe again? Safe from never-ending dangers? Upon hearing the call, the sweeps intensify efforts.

--If not me, then not you either ...

Tom pulls the trigger. The synth's head melts. It wails as it melts. Emily walks over to where her husband has been propped up against a wall next to Duke.

--A little short of immortality today, are we, boys?

A tech steps to Emily ear:

--Mr. Driver's on his way.

Emily grabs a weapon.

--I'm cheered.

--We'll never be able to hold them off in these bodies.

Ah! Ah! Ah! By the time the Sweeps break in and arc around the factory, searching for their leader. Inside the office, the tech pisses:

--Where's Driver?

Josh addresses Emily:

--Whose side are you on?

--Mine.

A Sweep locates the office and chirps for the others to join it. Tom shoots this first-comer down. Where is Driver? On a field, massing managers and codgers, male and female.

--This is for all of it! Let's go!

Reporters bark the story over the net.

--Something strange is happening out here today. Walter Driver seems be in a panic. The usually calm and ultra-controlled senior senator is ...

Another reporter tries to get an interview from a manager.

--Can you tell us what's taking place here?

--What I've always wanted to do ...

The manager kills the reporter. Watchers at home are aghast. Many people go to their closets or other hideaways to get their stashed weapons.

--Whatever they're trying to get away with, they're not.

On the streets, armed citizens annihilate any bot they see. As she's eviscerating a bot, a young woman states:

--I'm so sick of being taken care of.

She even blasts her own domestic bot trying to help her reload her weapon. Where two main streets converge, the cits come down one side and enforcement the other. They join forces. An

enforcement captain announces to the cits.

--The codgers were planning to kill us all.

--Let's bury that plan.

Walt hears firing from in each direction around his field.

--What the fuck is ...?

Anders walks past.

--Lobha!

A manager consults a satellite image:

--Enforcement and a force armed cits are coming!

Amy tugs at Walt's elbow:

--We need to get to the facility post-haste, Walter!

Walt agrees and signals his troops to follow him.

--It's immortality for anyone who fights with me today!

He projects at a wall on the far end of the field. Elevator doors open in it and the loyalist rush for them. Arriving cits watch their leaders disappear inside the elevators. Once inside, doors closed, the wall reappears. Several cits see if they can find any opening.

--Where'd they go?

--Down. Straight down.

--Let's get some diggers in here. I'm tired of not being invited to the party.

Down in the Azael facility, Josh and the others are

still fighting off Sweeps. Tom loses an arm and watches as his blood spurts onto the floor. He starts to slip in it and falls.

--Dad!

Josh reaches out and manages to touch his father's fingertips before Tom tumbles backwards to the floor. Joy's best at gunning down sweeps, but now a squad comes bearing down on her.

--Help me!

Josh jumps to it and blasts away. The sweep charge is broken apart. Everyone inside the office is wounded. The sweeps mass for the kill. Along the far wall, the elevators open and Driver's forces charge forth. He hangs back, along with most of the other codgers. The sweeps turn to face this enemy. Josh and Joy come out of the office, firing and knocking Sweeps down.

The front line of managers and techs gets butchered, but the sweeps are slowly decimated. Walt even steps forward to dispatch one from behind. The surviving techs turn to see that the codgers are almost all still untouched. A couple of the techs managers take a look around and begin to examine the rows of "immortal" bodies ready to be transferred into.

--A new day.

--Fresh deck, fresh deal.

--The old timers ...

They hear noise from above. It's drilling. On the field

above, armed cits everywhere. The work to keep up the furious drilling? Well, when you need bot efficiency, you'd better have one.

Down in the facility, lots of eyes on the beginning to tremble ceiling.

--Walt? Who ...?

-Goddamned cits.

-We just couldn't make enough for everybody! Could we?

Walt spots Josh leaning over Tom's body. He yells out:

--See what you started, kid?

--Gotta fight for what you want. Gotta protect what's yours--

--Everybody pays.

--Everybody but you.

--Shut-up, you old witch.

Emily blasts Walt's head off.

--No.

The rest of Walt stands tall in the suit. The drilling gets closer. --Thought you were against immortality.

--Changed my mind.

--Come on--we transfer into the immortals and scatter.

A wounded tech (that's actually part of the Azael team) has a correction to state:

--Transfer takes two days.

--Any of the tech portable? Or is it all stationary?

--It's portable.

--Vehicles?

The Azael Tech nods wearily.

--Fifty.

The techs do a quick count. Oops. They eye the codgers. The firing starts. Joy gets a foot blasted off. Josh drops his weapon and snatches her up in his arms. He runs for a door. The Azael tech sidles up beside Emily:

--Do I get one if I get you out of here?

Emily assents. The tech hustles Emily to where the vehicles are stored. They get in and use it as armor as they move through the other fighters. The tech parks beside the immortal "pods" and grabs two females.

--Grab a male!

The tech does, under protest. The firing continues. Holes appear in the ceiling. Enforcement and cit enjoin the fight. Others have secured vehicles and also try to grab and run. Enforcement spots the pods and start to butcher them. Not all who secured vehicles end up with pods. Only about twenty-five leave the place. The Sweeps start to turn the tide of battle in their favor. They block the holes preventing the cits reinforcement.

The vehicles emerge from various exits. Cits still above ground take shots at them and manage to bring several down.

Using a fireman's carry, Josh has Joy and sashes through the tunnel. He stops to put her down and assess her. She will soon bleed to death. Josh sobs. The sweep captain in a vehicle with a pod in it comes toward Josh. He fires and knocks it down. After executing the sweep, Josh puts Joy's body into the vehicle and heads away.

On the field above Azael, cit wounded are tended to by bots. The holes smoke. Beside, digger equipment's idle. The Enforcement captain is having a wound zipped closed by a surgeon bot.

But, in Josh's shop, he hooks Joy onto life support and starts a reluctant transfer into the body of the male immortal. After setting her up and programming a bot to be in charge, Josh locks up and leaves.

Way away in a jungle, Emily steps over the tech's corpse. She moves the pods into a cave, destroys evidence of her presence, before hooking herself into one male and one female body for transfer. One female body is left.

Josh? Where'd you go? To the field to have an exchange of information with the enforcement captain.

--We need to hunt every one of them down. Give me fifty men--bots even, and I'll ...

--I've got new worries.

The captain passes Josh a report.

--The plague is spreading.

--It mutated?

--Chips were just the "starter" batch.

--How long before ...

--It's already here. Go on a private expedition if you want.

--Two days and the transfers are complete.

The cop captain shrugs.

--They show up, we'll void 'em.

--They're not going to show up. They're going to hide until we're all dead.

A motley crew of ten well-armed cits gathers.

--Take them.

--We're hacked into three satellites.

--Know where seven are already.

--There's twenty-eight, total.

--What about the plague?

--We're not going to be able to stop it. Some of us are going underground. You stay up here and--

--Clock's running. We going?

Josh joins the hunters. The captain starts conferring with

lieutenants about prepping the underground hideaways.

In the Outlands, no movement except for native species that are about to resurge. Bots still performing their duties. An occasional mutant, immune to the plague, indulges in whatever suits his or her fancy.

Reports? The first signs of plague in The New World. Taken out most of The Old. Best to be very, very remote.

Enforcement seals the entrances to Subterreania.

Wanna watch Josh and crew? They wipe out the few number of immortals pods, satellites spotted. Josh and his new pals don't kill infected cits, but continue to void sweeps. Last found? Amy's pod. They happily hack it up.

--How'd you find me?

--Easy.

The Cit takes her shake away and dumps it onto the floor.

--All you codgers need shakes.

--Why aren't you burning me?

They laugh and leave her. One of the crew pulls the batteries out of her suit. She's left helpless in the vacation house retreated to. The other crew make sure to cripple all bots before they leave. Amy waits for them to go, then brings out two more. A butler brings her a fresh shake. Josh walks from cover and fries them. He steps over a sobbing Amy. After Josh leaves, she laps at

the remains of the shake on the floor.

The crew's next-to-last post is a sweep storage unit. They're down to four, including Josh. Two cough. The most enfeebled, is burned. They go on to find the sweep that's plugged into a pod. The crew voids them.

On a jungle mountainside, a weak and near dead Josh walks into a cave where he ferrets out Emily's corpse, aged about fifty, beside the two pods she's plugged into. The two immortals mumble baby-talk to one another. Josh turns and talks to Emily's corpse.

--Forget about the shakes, eh? So now all you are is immortally twice stupid.

Josh collapses next to the female pod that's left.

--I shouldn't ...

A quick loop 'round the planet reveals it's devoid of cits. Rumbling and gigantic machines emerge from the ground run by bots. They jump to pulverizing all evidences of civilization. Other machines run along behind and fertilize the remains. A third set of begins sowing seeds and releasing spores.

Squatting in the former Azael lab, the several hundred remaining cits, led by the Enforcement captain (all now considerably older), prepare weapons that they hand over to their children. Food's run out, though lots of kids run around.

--What are we going to find?

The captain shrugs.

--Don't know.

They chop through the seals, but find the tunnels filled in. They change strategy and re-design machines so that they can dig their way up.

On the surface, a multitude of ever-evolving species overgrows. The fragmentary remains of the giant reconstructors continue to decompose. The bots that attended them are dust. The team of twenty undergrounders struggles to erupt from the earth. First out takes a look:

--Oh, fuck, man! It's all gone!

A satellite in orbit arms, locks onto the undergrounders and fires. A little pile of briefly smoking cinders is left in place of each. Then, beams shoot down into the hole the Subs dug.

Screams? Last ones.

In the jungle, a female immortal lounges with a VR set on. Its male companion scans a screen looking at the remains of the undergrounders. Former techs at Azael ... She asks:

--Whatcha lookin' at?

--A blast from the past.

--Whatsa?

--The cits that survived underground tried emerging.

--Oh. Better turn that feature off. Be amusing to see how far any remaining survivors get.

The male immortal nods agreement.

On their mountainside, Josh and Joy watch the sunset. Joy's features, but she's now male while Josh ... A court of bots hovers in attendance, ala the fairy court in *Midsummer Night's Dream*. The bots "neutralize" potentially annoying insects.

--I'm going to start cataloguing the new life forms.

--I want to visit the other planets.

--Sure.

They hold hands and kiss.

On a shore, a group of immortals, mostly female, run down into the sea for a swim. They so, so happily chirp to one another.