

"COVER CROP"

By

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FADE IN.

INT. JACK'S POD - DAY

Natural light from above fills the lived-in space. The room teeters between futuristic and rustic.

PLAY-BY-PLAY (OS)
Epsilon Indi starts their last
possession on their base perimeter.

High-tech displays and cork boards loaded with printouts and annotated sheet music compete for real estate on the walls.

COLOR COMMENTARY (OS)
After squandering a number of
chances to score, the Aggies are
ten seconds from being eliminated.

Worn lab equipment shares counter space with a shimmering 3-D video loop of an middle-aged couple waving.

JACK (OS)
C'mon, dammit! Don't fold to these
finger wavers!

A FREE-FLOATING VIDEO DISPLAY

shows two armored sports teams lining up.

IN THE MIDDLE OF THE ROOM

JACK, early 30s, leans forward in a worn office chair, ten seconds from being a schlub for life.

His faded Epsilon Indi A and M sweatshirt and matching mug both bear the team mascot, an anthropomorphized alien animal with golden fur and eight legs.

Flanking the game, two talking heads narrate: PLAY-BY-PLAY, 45, and COLOR COMMENTARY, 50.

PLAY-BY-PLAY
There's the launch, and a quick
handoff to the fastback Diaz... no,
it's a fake!

JACK
Yeah! Go! Go!

Jack sets the mug down by a graduated cylinder full of blue-black kernels: DekaCorn.

INTERCUT - THE BIG GAME/JACK'S POD

A gargantuan figure appears out of thin air and lunges for the ball carrier...

...who coughs up the ball, a spiked affair you wouldn't want to drop on your foot.

Jack throws a pretzel through the image.

JACK (CONT'D)	COLOR COMMENTARY (OS)
Like that wasn't a blatant phasing foul? Who coded these refs, anyway?	Wow, what a takedown by number ninety-nine, Kwan! Looks like another turno --

Diaz snags the ball by a protruding handle and takes off.

PLAY-BY-PLAY
But wait, here comes Diaz!

Jack pumps his fist.

JACK
C'mon, Diaz, move your ass!

In the game, Diaz deftly spins around one defender. She then slams the ball into a second defender's gut. He crumples.

JACK (CONT'D)	PLAY-BY-PLAY (OS)
Yeah! Yeah!	A solid refusal by Diaz!

PLAY-BY-PLAY (CONT'D)
She's across no-man's land and heading for the Hackers' base!

Diaz slows, allowing a number of Hackers to close.

COLOR COMMENTARY (OS)
But what is she doing now?

Diaz shields the ball from view with her armored body as she threads between a half-dozen charging defenders.

Jack stares in disbelief.

JACK
Are you crazy, woman? Run!

At the last moment Diaz turns to reveal the ball -- now blinking an urgent yellow. She lifts it over her head to spike it. Literally.

COLOR COMMENTARY

Diaz is going for an eruption and the win!

Jack jumps out of the chair.

JACK

Diaz, you beautiful maniac!

In the game the defenders try to backpedal.

END INTERCUT

The game vanishes, displaced by the image of BEN, mid 30s. He oozes the insincere camaraderie of middle-management.

BEN

Jack, FieldMaster Seven's stuck.

Jack stands frozen in mid-cheer.

Ben scratches his chin, indifferent to Jack's consternation.

BEN (CONT'D)

I went out when the slateworm ate the tires off Forty. Your turn.

Jack's annoyance shifts gears.

JACK

So deploy its bot.

BEN

Tried that.

(mocking tone)

"The situation is outside my preset parameters."

(mutters)

Snotty little box of bolts.

(to Jack)

Here.

A dark scene replaces his image: two metal discs, lit by a spotlight, embedded in a pale dome protruding from the soil.

JACK

Huh. Looks kinda like...

BEN (VO)

Bone?

JACK

Yeah. A big skull or something.

Ben's image returns, now with a little static.

BEN

Right in one. Slateworm cranium.
Harder than a durakrete silo.

JACK

Damn. Wish the discs woulda just
snapped. Easier to replace them.

He rubs the back of his head to tease a memory loose.

JACK (CONT'D)

Hey, isn't it Arky's turn?

BEN

She's on her way to the condenser
grid on the west ridge. Achird
flared up and fried two commsats,
so we can't work on it remotely.

(when Jack shrugs)

The morning farm report?

Jack glances over at a high-tech musical keyboard on a table.

JACK

Worked late last night.

BEN

Virtual forecast says thunderstorms
if we don't stop 'em. Could push
back the harvest a week or more, or
wash out what's left entirely.

Jack scowls.

JACK

Wait a minute...

A gesture conjures up a topo map. Thirty-nine dots move
slowly around three icons shaped like houses. One dot,
blinking, stays still.

Jack's finger traces a visible line from one of the houses to
a ridge line on the west edge of the map.

JACK (CONT'D)

Arky can check Seven on the way.

BEN

Yeah, no, Arky started from here.

It takes one point two seconds for Jack to process that.

JACK

Right.

Ben smirks. The static grows worse.

JACK (CONT'D)

Guess I'll head out then.

He pulls on a ball cap that matches his shirt.

BEN

And find out why that bot has an attitude while you're there.

JACK

Sure.

Ben snaps his fingers and points at Jack as he fades out. The gesture is gun-like.

BEN

Appreciate it, buddy.

A few scorched pieces of armor surround a smoking crater on the slagball field. The static fades.

The scrolling banner at the bottom of the display reads "AMAZING SAC ERUPTION SALVAGES SLAGBALL TITLE FOR AGGIES."

PLAY-BY-PLAY

-- incredible sacrifice play ever!

COLOR COMMENTARY

Diaz will be able to write her own ticket just as soon as she's out of the refurbishment vat.

Jack, deflated, waves at the display to turn it off.

JACK

Bet you do. Buddy.

Jack grabs a lunch-box sized device on a shoulder strap with a hose and breath mask attached. The side reads "GrosGrain BreathEasy."

JACK (CONT'D)

Gerdie, spin up the Mantis.

The Xanax-voiced planetary A.I., GERDIE, responds.

GERDIE (VO)

Powering up your vehicle now.

As muted turbine whine seeps in from outside, Jack fumbles the respirator mask over his mouth and nose.

JACK

Gerdie, how long do we gotta wear these things again?

GERDIE (VO)

Projections show breathable oxygen levels in forty-two standard years.

JACK

Yeah, pretty sure I won't renew my contract for that long.

Sleek wrap glasses follow. Through them he sees a heads-up display of avionics info. The tachometer readout, six hundred R.P.M., displays in yellow.

Jack opens the door. Light and turbine whine flood the pod. His glasses become mirror-like.

EXT. JACK'S POD - DAY

A Mantis -- a two-person craft like a quad-rotor drone on steroids crossed with a pickup -- powers up on a landing pad.

EXT./INT. JACK'S MANTIS - DAY

Clambering in, Jack slams the hatch shut behind him, muting the whine. He fastens his safety harness.

A bobble-head of the eight-legged A and M team mascot wiggles on the dashboard.

When the tachometer readout reaches nine hundred R.P.M. it turns green. Jack pulls back on the stick. The Mantis rises.

INT. JACK'S MANTIS - AIRBORNE - DAY

The residential pod dwindles below. Magenta DekaCorn plants surround it, stretching from horizon to horizon, their silvery tassels tossing in the Mantis's wake.

A pleasant chime heralds the day's farm report.

GERDIE (VO)

Good morning, Jack. Here is your GrosGrain farm report for Standard October 12, 2287. DekaCorn futures were up eight at the bell --

JACK

Skip to local weather, Gerdie.

Through his sunglasses, Jack sees a satellite map of a planet. The view zooms in on part of one landmass.

GERDIE (VO)

Strong thunderstorms will develop
this afternoon unless condenser
reset is successful.

JACK (OS)

C'mon, Arky, don't let us down.

EXT. OVER PLAINS OF GOSHEN FARM - DAY

The Mantis zips over a FieldMaster: a harvester/processor a quarter-mile square and a hundred feet tall. It consumes DekaN Corn like a grass fire.

GERDIE (VO)

Oxygen levels constant at one point
five percent.

INT. JACK'S MANTIS - AIRBORNE - DAY

Jack stretches his neck. He starts to hum a jazzy tune as he flips the autopilot switch to OFF.

GERDIE (VO)

Winds from the north --

The farm report fades in volume as some sort of classical-jazz hybrid swells to match what he hums.

DAYDREAM - INT. CLUB STAGE - NIGHT

Jack plays the tune on a multi-tier electronic keyboard.

He alternates between pounding the keys as if he has a grudge against them and caressing them as if they were...

...the UPRIGHT BASS PLAYER, Jack's age, in the slinky dress. She smiles invitingly.

Jack winks back.

EXT. OVER PLAINS OF GOSHEN FARM - DAY - PRESENT DAY

The music continues as the Mantis does a barrel roll.

EXT. FIELDMASTER SEVEN - DAY

Achird sits directly overhead.

JACK'S MANTIS

circles in approach.

EXT. FIELDMASTER SEVEN - LANDING PAD - DAY

Jack hops out of the Mantis, heads to the top of a long tubular structure on the edge and jumps in.

EXT. FIELDMASTER SEVEN - BOTTOM OF PORT ACCESS TUBE - DAY

Jack floats down from the end of the tube, then drops the last foot to the dirt.

SEVEN'S BOT, a boxy thing with treads, awaits. Its torso rotates to face Jack, revealing a helpful "7" on its front.

A cartoon face suitable for a toddler's iPad game appears on the bot's otherwise featureless globular head.

SEVEN'S BOT

Greetings, Jack Flowerdew. Are you ready to inspect the object?

JACK

I'm working on it. How did we miss it before?

He pulls a cutting beam and power cable from a locker in the side of the FieldMaster.

SEVEN'S BOT

The object was not in the most recent soil geology report.

JACK

Does the soil depth match up?

The cartoon face tilts to one side.

SEVEN'S BOT

The most recent report does not include a soil depth value.

JACK

(sarcastic)
Thank you, Ben.

SEVEN'S BOT

In what capacity is Mr. Doherty involved? I am only familiar with his work on bot maintenance.

JACK

Ben likes to fix bots instead of doing his actual job.

Jack closes the equipment locker.

JACK (CONT'D)
Nothing like a soil geologist who
hates getting his hands dirty.

He hoists the cutting tool on his shoulder.

JACK (CONT'D)
Ahhh... can you delete the last
twenty seconds of our conversation?

SEVEN'S BOT
Deleting.
(cartoon eyes blink)
Greetings, Jack Flowerdew. Are you
ready to inspect the object?

JACK
After you.

The robot leads Jack between two thirty-foot tires.

JACK (OS) (CONT'D)
Why does something called a worm
even have a skull, anyway?

EXT. FIELDMASTER SEVEN - UNDERNEATH - DAY

Rows of harrow discs stretch into the darkness. A dome of
slate-gray bone the size of a dining room table lays exposed.

The bot's head glows brightly, washing out its face.

JACK
Done a ground sonar yet?

He pokes at the cranium.

SEVEN'S BOT
No, Mr. Flowerdew. Forensic
investigation lies outside my
parameters.

Jack stares, blank at first, then annoyed.

JACK
This is a slateworm skull, not a
crime scene.

He taps the skull with his boot. It rings like a muffled
church bell.

SEVEN'S BOT
My initial scans found evidence of
a sentient species.

Jack's expression shifts to straight-up shocked.

JACK
A slateworm? Intelligent? What
evidence?

The bot dims its head. A smaller, intense light shines from one animated eye into the gash made by the harrow disc.

Jack leans in closer. Something glints inside the skull.

SEVEN'S BOT (OS)
The discs exposed the cranial
cavity, which contains a fine
hexagonal mesh of gold wire.

Jack pokes the exposed wire. The slowly rising tide of realization shows on his face.

SEVEN'S BOT (OS) (CONT'D)
The mesh connects to a flexible
antenna along the creature's spine.

JACK
Antenna...

SEVEN'S BOT (OS)
Together they point to cybernetic
enhancement.

Tide's in. Jack stands.

JACK
Holy quinoa. Cybernetic?

He stares at the bot, who turns its floodlight back on, making Jack squint.

JACK (CONT'D)
What the hell is it doing here?
I know, outside your parameters.

SEVEN'S BOT
Actually, my parser classes your
inquiry with general xenobiology.
One hypothesis fits available data.

JACK
That being?

EXT. BEN'S POD - NIGHT

Three Mantises sit outside a pod on an island in a small lake, one for each moon visible in the sky.

BEN (VO)
Inhabited?

INT. BEN'S POD - NIGHT

Ben's pod is the same size as Jack's, but organized to the point of looking as if Ben does no real work there.

The only sign to the contrary fills the wall opposite the door: a shelf full of spare bot parts and a workbench occupied by a silvery-gold bot chassis, five feet long.

JACK (OS)
That was the bot's conclusion.

A few plaques dot the walls: Employee of the Year, Draconis Sector, 2284 and such.

Jack and Ben sit at a round table.

BEN
The bot said it was a hypothesis,
though. Not a certainty.

JACK
You got an alternative?

ARKY (OS)
Surveys certified this rock as free
of intelligent life...

ARKY -- the bass player from Jack's daydreams -- settles into the open chair. Her work clothes are not slinky.

Ben smiles at her. Jack avoids direct eye contact.

ARKY (CONT'D)
...right before we sprayed it down
with gamma rays for a year and then
dropped mountains of frozen soil
from orbit.

BEN
(to Jack)
See?

JACK
Looks like the surveys were wrong.

ARKY
Now that would be inconvenient for
Corporate.

She takes several black corn chips from a bowl and chomps
down.

ARKY (CONT'D)
(around chips)
Speaking of inconvenient, the
capacitor bank at the condenser
grid is shot. Tops out at seventy
percent of rated charge.

Ben sweeps the crumbs Arky drops into a small trash can.

BEN
We can't afford storms during
harvest. Did you do anything?

ARKY
Reprimed 'em to buy some time.

Jack taps the table in a staccato rhythm.

JACK
Doesn't Wessex Hills have an extra
capacitor bank?

Ben snaps his fingers and points at Jack with the gun-like
gesture.

BEN
Yes. From the tidal generator they
never brought on line.

He motions and a virtual keyboard displays.

BEN (CONT'D)
(typing)
Let's see if they'll part with it.

ARKY
The ones for generators have their
own specs... but it should work.

Ben brightens as he reads the reply.

BEN
They'll trade for one of our ATVs.
How's tomorrow around noon sound?

Arky and Jack both shrug.

BEN

So what kind of "pet owner" is going to keep a hundred-plus meter pal around for playtime?

ARKY

Not playtime.

She reaches manipulates the image with her fingers, zooming in on the worm's spine.

ARKY (CONT'D)

What do these look like to you?

Red dots display where she "touches" the image.

BEN

Red dots.

His attempt at humor gets nowhere.

Jack examines the image from different angles.

JACK

You're asking the wrong botanist, but they appear grafted into the spinal column. Sensors?

ARKY

Glad someone takes this seriously.

Arky sits back in her chair, her eyes locked on the display.

ARKY (CONT'D)

What if it's a cybernetic guard dog, for lack of a better term? It would need sensors...
(nods at Jack)
...and weapons.

Ben makes a dismissive gesture.

BEN

Like a few squiggly lines on a sonar scan mean anything.

JACK

(to Arky)

You still have contacts at InterCorp Security, don't you? Why not run the scan by them?

Arky starts to agree, but Ben interrupts her.

BEN

Because it's a waste of time?

They all start talking over each other.

BEN (CONT'D)

We know the gamma spray-down killed all carbon-based life.

ARKY

Down to five hundred meters. But the worms are still here. Q.E.D., they go deeper.

Jack stays out of the line of fire and examines the scan.

JACK

Poor thing must have come up for a look at just the wrong time.

ARKY

Or it got sent up.

BEN

By something we've never seen.

ARKY

So their owners go deeper too.

BEN

What sort of intelligent beings live a kilometer down in the bedrock?

JACK

And keep two-hundred tonne pets who swim through rock?

ARKY

Something that doesn't hold a grudge, one hopes.

Ben and Arky glare at each other. A normal conversation rhythm resumes.

JACK

So what do we do?

Ben waves his hands around.

BEN

About what? We have some bones and some wires and a big compost pile of supposition.

ARKY

Rather smell compost than a cover-up any day.

BEN

Who said anything about a cover-up? I only want to wait until we have something definitive.

JACK

And until the harvest is in.

BEN (CONT'D)

...yes, until the harvest is in.

Ben stands and jabs accusing fingers at the others.

BEN (CONT'D)

Don't give me that look, either of you. Last I checked, "harvest" wasn't exactly a dirty word on a farm. GrosGrain hired us to raise DekaNcorn.

He leans over the table. The slateworm skeleton snakes over his face.

BEN (CONT'D)

We make our goals, we help feed twenty worlds, we get three years' worth of bonus. We miss them, we get reassigned to some swamp planet growing Okratillos.

Arky and Jack glower without responding.

BEN (CONT'D)

All I'm saying is this thing's been in the ground a while. It's not going anywhere. We get the harvest in, we'll have the time for your investigation.

ARKY

Can we at least contact the other farms? Find out if their FieldMasters dug up anything?

BEN

What are we going to ask them? "Hey, we found a dead alien cyborg in our field, how about you?"

JACK

Sounds about right.

ARKY

Pretty much, yeah.

Ben plops into his chair and rotates away from them for a second. When he comes back around he's more composed.

BEN
I'll ask around tomorrow.
(to Arky)
Happy?

Arky nods once. Ben reads her face for several seconds before turning to Jack.

BEN (CONT'D)
You?

JACK
As a porcupine in a balloon
factory.

The other two blink.

JACK (CONT'D)
My mom used to say it.

Satisfied, Ben gestures. The slateworm skeleton vanishes.

Jack glances at the two and stands.

JACK (CONT'D)
It's late. I'll see you both
tomorrow.

He pulls on his BreathEasy and heads out.

Ben appears relieved at his departure. Not Arky.

BEN
Later.
AR KY
Jack, wait up.

She hops up, grabs her own respirator, and follows Jack.

Ben starts to call her back and stops, lips pursed.

EXT. BEN'S POD - NIGHT

Arky runs after Jack.

AR KY
Jack!

Reluctantly he turns, hands spread wide.

JACK
What?

She gets between him and the Mantis so he can't bolt.

ARKY
(studiously neutral)
Rumors used to circulate around
InterCorp about this kind of thing.

JACK
What kind of thing?

Arky clams up.

JACK (CONT'D)
So you threw on your BreathEasy and
ran out here so you could not tell
me something. Great.

ARKY
Just... poking around too much can
draw attention. Not the good kind.

JACK
Anyone else ever tell you that you
confuse the hell out of them?

A sad smile spreads across Arky's face.

ARKY
Only this one guy.

She heads back inside. Jack doesn't watch her go.

INT. BEN'S POD - NIGHT

Arky slumps into a chair. Ben hands her a glass of wine.
The sound of Jack's Mantis outside fades.

BEN
You worry too much. About Jack,
about subterranean aliens...

He moves in to rub her shoulders.

BEN (CONT'D)
You worked in Security. That's
enough to make anyone paranoid.

ARKY
(around a sip)
Mmm. Yeah. Paranoid. Careful,
you'll spill the wine.

BEN
Your shoulders are like stone,
woman. What did you two talk about
to make you so tense?

ARKY
Very little.

More rubbing. Ben tries to act jaunty.

BEN
You know what would be funny?

ARKY
(eyes half-closed)
What?

BEN
If Ingrid's crew planted the thing
as a prank.

Arky sets the glass down, not laughing. Wine sloshes out.

ARKY
(flat but furious)
A prank?

She spins the chair to face him and rises.

BEN
(backing up)
Whoa!

ARKY
Burying a cybernetically enhanced
slateworm skeleton. Half in
bedrock. A prank.

She puts on her BreathEasy.

BEN
Since when did you feel so strongly
about stuff that's dead and --

Arky's out the door.

BEN (CONT'D)
-- buried.

Ben scowls, glances down at the wine spill, and blots it up.

INT. JACK'S POD - NIGHT

Jack sits at the portable keyboard. The glow of its keys provides most of the light.

He plays the same tune he's been humming. He closes his eyes. His brow furrows.

DAYDREAM - INT. CLUB STAGE - NIGHT

Arky scowls at her bass, then Jack. The beat's off.

Jack glances back at the drummer -- Ben -- who pounds out a rhythm more suited to an arena than a jazz club.

INT. JACK'S POD - NIGHT - PRESENT DAY

Jack slaps the keyboard in frustration, stands, walks to the one empty section of wall.

A smartphone swipe writ large and the wall becomes transparent. The moons turn his face a ghostly white.

He shakes his head, amused, and returns to the keyboard.

He starts in on (what else?) the first movement of the Moonlight Sonata -- but an up-tempo version, where the yearning is angry, not resigned.

EXT. PLAINS OF GOSHEN FARM - NIGHT

FieldMasters mow through the DekaCorn non-stop.

INT. BEN'S POD - NIGHT

Ben examines a floating list of chemical compounds.

INT. ARKY'S POD - NIGHT

Arky's in her own bed tonight. The scan of the slateworm, complete with her annotations, floats above her.

INTERCUT ALL

Jack plays on, letting the music siphon off the rage.

The blades of the FieldMaster sever ten thousand DekaCorn stalks a second.

Ben glances over at his empty bed and frowns.

Arky touches a virtual "Send" button. The scan vanishes.

Gnashing machinery swallows endless streams of cornstalks.

Ben picks up a robot head from the shelf.

Arky turns on a small holo projector like Jack's and spins iPod-style through various "snapshots."

Endless streams of kernels pour from chutes to bins.

Ben pulls on magnifying goggles that enlarge his eyes to comical proportions and starts to work on the head.

Arky gets to a Vine-length video loop: younger versions of her and Jack play a duet. She shuts it off, thoughtful.

INT. JACK'S POD - NIGHT

Jack finishes the first movement. After the last chord fades he turns to face the center of the room.

JACK
Gerdie, general data inquiry.

GERDIE (VO)
Subject?

JACK
Slateworms.

He starts to go through the resulting images and text.

EXT. NEAR JACK'S POD - NIGHT

The soil of a recently harvested plot near the pod crumbles, swells, subsides. Below the surface, things are moving.

EXT. CONDENSER GRID - DAY

Dark clouds tower over an antenna farm on a ridge line overlooking the farm. Occasional lightning mirrors the electric arcs between antennae.

Three Mantises sit on the ground by a plain concrete building the size of a panel van. Jack's Mantis lands by the others.

As Arky and Ben lay out markers, Jack approaches INGRID, mid 30s. She looks skyward, shielding her natural eye with the hand on her imposing cyborg arm. The other eye and a swath of cranium are cybernetic as well.

INGRID
Glad you could fit this in your busy schedule. I'm only saving your farm's ass.

JACK
You're saving Ben?

Ingrid smirks.

JACK (CONT'D)
Your partners flying the lifter?

INGRID
They're busy shipping the last of
our harvest. I've got it.

She taps the metal part of her head.

INGRID (CONT'D)
Hey, Arky said you found a dead
worm with some kinda...
(wiggles metal fingers)
...implants?

JACK
Yeah. Not sure what to make of it.

INGRID
No dead ones over at Wessex Hills,
but the live ones are jumpy.

She bends conduit between her cyborg fingers.

JACK
Sightings?

Her cyborg hand locks up. Ingrid frowns.

INGRID
Damn solar flares. Rebooting
itself twice a day now, like
clockwork.

She bangs her metal arm against the concrete building. It
starts working again.

INGRID (CONT'D)
So yeah, five slateworms spotted in
two weeks.

JACK
Didn't think there were that many
left on the whole continent.

INGRID
Hope you've got some spare tires
for 'em to eat.
(points to equipment)
(MORE)

INGRID (CONT'D)

In your absence you got volunteered
to flip the big switch.

She tosses a roll of metallic mesh at him.

INGRID (CONT'D)

If you don't want to fry in the
process, you might want to set
about making a Faraday cage.

JACK

We're dropping the bank hot?

INGRID

Saves two days of pumping it up.

She waves her metal hand at the threatening clouds.

INGRID (CONT'D)

Unless you wanna tell GrosGrain you
have a fine harvest of hailstones
waitin' for them.

Jack picks up a handful of what look like tent stakes.

JACK

About those flares... they, ah,
don't interfere with the control
signal for the lifter, do they?

INGRID

I'll try not to drop the new
capacitor bank on you. Though if I
did...

(winks with her human eye)

...you could always get rigged up
like me.

Not reassured, Jack shuffles over to the existing structure.

He pushes the stakes into the dirt and pulls on their tops,
one at a time. Each motion produces a thin metal rod taller
than him. Jack folds over the tops to form a box, then wraps
the mesh around three sides of the framework.

Arky comes up from behind him as he works.

ARKY

Don't --

He jumps.

ARKY (CONT'D)

-- forget to leave a door.

JACK
I'm working on it.

ARKY
Why are you so jumpy? Ingrid can't
make you that nervous.

She glances over to where Ingrid hammers a metal support into the side of the concrete building with her cyborg arm.

JACK
It's not Ingrid. I like Ingrid.

ARKY
So... what then?

Jack starts to say something, but a growing whine makes conversation impossible.

They both look up to where a huge combination airship and Mantis scuds toward the ridge. A concrete block structure identical to the one they stand near dangles from its belly.

JACK
Later.

He climbs into the wire cage.

The craft hovers overhead. Ingrid makes what are probably superfluous hand motions to guide it lower.

When the building housing the new capacitor bank is just barely off the ground, Ingrid hands Jack a ten-foot fiberglass pole.

INGRID
Go for it.

Jack hooks the end of the pole on the structure's corner and rotates it into its final position. He motions to Ingrid.

The bank inches down onto the ground with a thud.

ARKY
Hold on...

She throws a big switch to "OFF" on the existing building, then joins the copper cables, as big as her wrists, to a coupling. She clears the area.

ARKY (CONT'D)
Now.

Jack pulls the same switch on the new structure with his insulated pole. A strobe-like electric arc announces the connection. A low hum builds in volume.

The arcs stabilizes into a blue-green St. Elmo's fire glow on the antennae. The dark clouds start to dissipate.

BEN

Yes!

ARKY

(inspecting dials)

One hundred percent charge within the hour. We're golden.

Ben offers a high-five to Arky. She walks past.

Ingrid retrieves the pole. She fist-bumps Jack through the wire mesh, then heads toward her Mantis.

INGRID

(over her shoulder)

Party at Ben's place.

INT. BEN'S POD - NIGHT

The thumping music turns conversation into pantomime.

Amid much drinking and draping of limbs Ingrid appears to make Jack an offer. Jack demurs.

Ingrid gestures at Arky: is she why? Jack shakes his head.

Ingrid shrugs and moves on to Ben, who's more receptive.

Jack glances at Arky. She sees what's going on, but she doesn't seem to care, though she does don her BreathEasy.

She departs. He follows.

EXT. BEN'S POD - NIGHT

The music bleeds through the pod's walls.

Jack's turn to catch up with Arky.

JACK

Hey!

ARKY

Hey.

JACK

You all right?

ARKY
 Couldn't be better.

JACK
 You wanted to know why I was
 distracted this afternoon.

ARKY
 Yes -- this afternoon.

She climbs into her Mantis, already powering up.

JACK
 Ingrid says worms are headed this
 way. Lots of them.

Arky pauses.

ARKY
 So she said.

For a moment her expression softens.

ARKY (CONT'D)
 We'll talk in the morning. Okay?

He nods. The craft takes off.

Jack turns back toward the pod. Through the transparent wall section, he sees Ben and Ingrid getting friendly.

JACK
 At least close the window, will ya?

He trudges toward his Mantis.

INT. JACK'S POD - DAY

Jack, bleary, tends to a chemistry experiment: Bunsen burner, glass flasks, et al. A dark liquid burbles, condenses, and drips into a beaker at the end.

He rubs his neck and squints against the morning sun.

JACK
 Gerdie, the sonar scan, please.

The slateworm skeleton reappears. Jack steps over and swipes the window closed.

JACK (CONT'D)
 Better.

He takes a few slow steps around the display, then sighs.

JACK (CONT'D)
 At least you don't have a taste for
 DekaCorn. Yet.

Ben's employee photo displays in mid-room.

BEN (VO)
 Morning, Jack.

JACK
 Yeah, it is.
 (looks around)
 Where's the video?

BEN (VO)
 You miss my smiling face?

JACK
 Like cotton misses boll weevils.

BEN (VO)
 Gonna assume that's your mom's.
 Anyway, more flares today, so...

INT. BEN'S POD - DAY

A bathrobe-wearing Ben spins around in his chair. He sips something colorful from a glass with a drink umbrella.

BEN
 ...we're stuck with audio only
 until they can fix the commsats.

INTERCUT - COMMLINK CONVERSATION

The lack of video allows Jack to show his dread at what's coming without let or hinderance.

JACK
 Is that going to delay you
 contacting the other farms?

BEN
 Nope. Been chatting with other
 crews all morning, in fact.

Jack grits his teeth.

JACK
 So what can I do for you?

BEN
 Number twenty's stuck.

JACK
Ah, shit. Another skull?

BEN
Nothing so exotic. Ran into some
big piles of dirt.

JACK
Worm boils?

BEN
A bunch popped up overnight. With
the commsats all kablooey, someone
needs to coordinate the diggers via
line-of-sight.

Jack turns off the Bunsen burner, already knowing the answer
to his next question.

JACK
And you're busy talking to the
other farms, I suppose?

BEN
Knew you'd understand.
(the gun-like gesture)
Thanks, buddy. Imagine me giving
you a thumbs-up. Doherty out.

INT. JACK'S POD - DAY

Jack slips the mask of the BreathEasy on but leaves it on his
forehead.

JACK
Just like I imagine you working.

He adds white powder to the contents of the beaker with a lab
spatula, methodically mixing it in. Then he picks up the
beaker, sniffs, and sips.

He grimaces but pours half of the coffee into a high-tech to-
go mug. He trots toward the door, pulling the mask on.

He opens the door. Arky stands there.

ARKY
Morning.

Arky pulls off her BreathEasy and walks past him. The door
slides shut behind her.

JACK
Sorry about the mess.

He picks up a piece of detritus and tries to find a less obvious place for it.

ARKY

Don't bother. You should see my place. Haven't had a chance to tidy in a...

She catches the look on Jack's face. Unlike Ben, she has the decency to look embarrassed.

An uncomfortable second later, Jack remembers his manners.

JACK

Have a seat. Coffee? Just whipped up a batch. Ten molar, works as a de-greaser too.

She regards the lab setup with a mix of amusement and fear.

ARKY

Grabbed a Qaldi bar at home, thanks.

JACK

So what brings you here...

She settles in and picks up his hologram projector.

JACK (CONT'D)

...and do you always mess around with people's stuff when you visit?

ARKY

Been meaning to ask you something for a while now.

Jack sits across from her at the small table.

JACK

Ask away.

Arky flips through pictures as she did on her own last night: a medal stand at a track event where Jack took third and looks happy about it; a piano recital pic with him in a tux.

ARKY

Why did you request this billet?

JACK

I needed two years of field work to qualify for a post-grad position back at Epsilon Indi.

(when she doesn't react)

(MORE)

JACK (CONT'D)

It was here or a winter wheat planet. Staring at snow for half the year didn't appeal to me.

She continues to review his past in visual form as they talk: lots of brief video loops of his family; a ten-year old Jack with a dog; a proud Jack with his B.S. degree in hand.

Jack hears the unasked follow-up in the silence.

JACK (CONT'D)

I didn't know you worked here. Last I heard, three years back, your old roommate Mahima said you were still an InterCorp detective.

She arrives back at the first picture in the sequence.

ARKY

You don't have any pictures of us.

JACK

Never did.

Arky sets down the projector.

ARKY

Kind of having a fight with Ben. Maybe you noticed.

JACK

Maybe.

Jack resets the projector to the loop of his parents.

JACK (CONT'D)

My turn for a question. Why him?

ARKY

You're about five years too late to be jealous.

JACK

I'm not jealous. But Ben? You used to have better taste.

Arky smirks, as if she could argue but won't.

ARKY

Didn't have a lot of choice.

JACK

Abstinence?

Arky glares, but her tone is almost apologetic.

ARKY

He can be fun when he's not a brown-nosing slacker.

JACK

I assume Ingrid got the fun Ben last night?

Regret washes over Jack's face as soon as he says it.

JACK (CONT'D)

Sorry. That wasn't nice.

He grimaces.

JACK (CONT'D)

Everyone at school joked about the pickings being slim on the big farm worlds. Now...

ARKY

Not so funny any more, is it?

JACK

(chuckles)

Maybe I should have taken Ingrid up on her offer last night.

ARKY

You could do a lot worse.

(leans in)

We're isolated out here. Sniping at each other is bad news.

Her hand slides awkwardly across the table to touch his.

ARKY (CONT'D)

For all of us. If you're uncomfortable about things, say so.

Jack gazes at her hand as if it were a tentacle.

JACK

What would you do if I did say so?

ARKY

Anything to make this less awkward.

Jack doesn't pull away instantly... but he pulls away.

JACK
Try going back in time three
minutes and starting a different
conversation.

He stands.

JACK (CONT'D)
I need to go un-stick twenty. What
are you doing today?

They both seem relieved to be talking shop again.

ARKY
Pumphouse issues.
(points to lab bench)
That coffee offer still open?

Jack, in mid-reach for his BreathEasy, shakes his head in
confused amusement.

JACK
Sure.

He decants some coffee into a clean beaker.

ARKY
Sugar and lots of MooJoo, if you
have it.

Jack adulterates her drink to her specs.

ARKY (CONT'D)
Kind of nice talking to someone in
the morning. Face to face.

Jack raises an eyebrow.

ARKY (CONT'D)
Not really Ben's style.

JACK
Color me surprised.

He hands her the coffee and sits.

JACK (CONT'D)
You really think that slateworm was
a guard for something intelligent?

ARKY
It didn't wire itself. And the
chemical process it uses to tunnel
could power sensors and weapons.
(MORE)

ARKY (CONT'D)

(sips)
Not bad for a botanist.

JACK

Thanks. And you mean if they're weapons. We can't know for sure until corporate inspects it. You send it to InterCorp for a look?

ARKY

Yeah, but it doesn't much matter. Weapon, nuisance -- the point is we're not alone.

Jack leans back, thoughtful.

JACK

Seven thousand usable worlds and we've never run into anyone else.

His face and voice reveal a hint of wonder (and fear).

JACK (CONT'D)

Hate to say it, but Ben had a point. Hard to believe we get to be first.

ARKY

You ever wondered about that?

Puzzled, Jack gestures for her to explain.

ARKY (CONT'D)

We find millions of species, weird and totally unexpected. Six-legged lizard things that curl into balls and roll from Gamma Pavonis, fire-breathing dragon birds from Merga Seven...

JACK

(helpfully)
...giant worms with a taste for rubber that burrow through rock, just down the street...

ARKY

...yet nothing with a hint of human-level intelligence. Tons of zoo specimens, no trading partners.

JACK

Or enemies.

Jack finishes his coffee and goes back for more.

JACK (CONT'D)

They didn't even discover the
slateworms until what, ten years
after they cleaned the planet up?

Jack searches the counter for something.

ARKY

(points)
Sweetener's next to the burner.

JACK

Thanks. More?

She shakes her head, but smiles. He refills.

JACK (CONT'D)

So, if the survey here missed worms
the size of orbital cutters, they
could miss a lot of things in a lot
of places.

ARKY

Miss? Or ignore?

JACK

What do you mean?

She stands as he sits, as if to keep him at arm's length.

JACK (CONT'D)

Oh, right, those mysterious rumors
you teased me with.

She "opens" his window. Jack shields his eyes.

Arky begins a staring contest with the corn.

ARKY

Sometimes a survey team would come
back, file a report, and retire.
All of them, even the new hires.
Some didn't come back at all.

(the corn wins)

Either way agriforming of the
planet proceeds, so there's no
inconvenient evidence.

Jack looks dubious.

JACK
Are these rumors or conspiracy
theories?

ARKY
Consensus around InterCorp was that
GrosGrain Human Resources used the
rumors to test employee
trustworthiness.

Arky finishes her coffee and puts her BreathEasy partway on.

ARKY (CONT'D)
Doesn't mean they made them up.
Thanks for the coffee.

Jack watches her go, clearly troubled.

EXT. PLAINS OF GOSHEN FARM - DAY

FieldMaster Twenty sits wedged between two mounds of dirt
almost as tall as it, part of a long line of mounds
stretching into the distance.

Two earth-moving machines dig next to the huge harvester.

Jack's Mantis zips overhead.

INT. JACK'S MANTIS - AIRBORNE - DAY

Jack splits his attention between flying and a small display.

JACK
From what I can tell, Twenty tried
to slalom though the worm boils.
Neat line of 'em, runs halfway to
the coast.

BEN (VO)
That's a first. Just what we need
right now, more delays.

Jack flips a few switches.

JACK
I'm going to record this for
Corporate.

THE SMALL DISPLAY

shows a closer view of the worm-built dirt pile. The word
"RECORDING" blinks.

JACK (OS) (CONT'D)
(half to himself)
It's almost like they're...
experimenting.

INT. BEN'S POD - DAY

Ben works on a bot. A tidy arrangement of tools lies nearby.
Lines of A.I. code scroll by the display, hanging in the air
next to him.

JACK (VO)
Finding new ways of screwing with
the FieldMasters.

BEN
Even so, I don't see why you need
to drag Corporate in.

Ben tweaks the robot's code: lines glow red, then change.

BEN (CONT'D)
Get tangled up in this sort of
thing and you get a reputation.

INTERCUT - JACK AND BEN - COMMLINK CONVERSATION

Jack smirks.

JACK
Funny, Arky told me the same thing.
Guess maybe I should listen if you
two agree on something.

Ben stops coding. His expression hardens.

BEN
Yeah, maybe.
(jollies up)
What if they're marking territory
because it's mating season?

JACK
Oh, now there's an image I want
stuck in my head. Thanks.

BEN
Don't mention it, buddy.

JACK
Do they even mate? Maybe they just
bud off. Like yeast.

BEN

Think of how much they'd save on
dinner and flowers.

JACK

It would make Mother's Day
confusing, though.

ARKY (VO)

Hate to break up the worm sex
channel, guys...

INT. PUMPHOUSE - DAY

Tight on Arky. She wears her BreathEasy indoors.

ARKY

...but when you two get done
discussing the sex lives of
agrarian vermin, you might want to
wander over to the pumphouse.

BEN (VO)

What now?

ARKY

Not going to ruin the surprise.

She ducks as a blob of something fetid flies by her head and
hits the wall with a splat.

ARKY (CONT'D)

Just make sure the batteries on
your BreathEasies are charged.

INT. JACK'S MANTIS - AIRBORNE - DAY

Jack raises an eyebrow, but the display keeps his attention.

He sees the FieldMaster lurch free of the dirt piles.

JACK

Twenty's free. I can head over
now. See you there, Ben?

BEN (VO)

Sorry, got a conference call with
the satellite folks.

INT. BEN'S POD - DAY

A map of the farm displays. Green lines spread from the
pumphouse like tree roots. One swath flashes red.

BEN

Let me know when you've got pump
eight going again. Ben out.

INT. JACK'S MANTIS - AIRBORNE - DAY

A few disgusted switch-flips to deactivate the camera and
Jack's ready to go.

JACK

Looks like it's just me, Arky.
I'll be over in twenty. Even if
you do make it sound ominous.

ARKY (VO)

Not the sound you need to worry
about. Arky out.

One last wet splat in the background contradicts her. Jack
makes a face and steers the Mantis toward the pumphouse.

INT. PUMPHOUSE - DAY

When Jack walks in, only the strapped-on respirator keeps his
jaw from hitting the floor.

Fetid slime the color of moldy guacamole covers most of the
horizontal and some of the vertical surfaces.

Arky stands atop a pump housing.

ARKY

Takes about twenty seconds for the
smell to work its way through the
BreathEasy's filters.

JACK

What is this stuff?

ARKY

Best guess? Some kind of slateworm
effluvium. Their D-N-A is all
through it.

He tries to find a way to get to her without stepping in it.

JACK

Slateworm shit? No... they don't
really have shit. Solid waste
works out through the skin to form
the outer shells.

Arky frowns.

ARKY
You've been studying.

Jack opens his mouth to agree. She interrupts him.

ARKY (CONT'D)
Warned you about that.

Unfazed, he lines up a jump for the top of one of the big pipes, a rare clean spot.

JACK
Between you and Ben, I swear --

The smell hits him, nearly causing a T.K.O.. He teeters and almost falls into the ooze.

ARKY
Don't vomit in your BreathEasy.
They can't repair that and
GrosGrain will charge you for it.

He tries to breathe normally, fighting the retch reflex.

JACK
Oh. My. God.

ARKY
Rub the inside of your left wrist
with your right thumb. Hard.

She demonstrates, nothing if not helpful.

Jack follows suit and recovers. Mostly.

JACK
Thanks.
(belches)
So what is this... stuff?

ARKY
The more important question is how
pump eight sucked fourteen thousand
liters of it out of the aquifer.
(pokes goo with toe)
My bet is worm barf.

JACK
When did we bring eight on line?

ARKY
You were there.

JACK

You're the water person. I don't keep track of which one gets switched on when.

Arky puts her hands on her hips and does some mental math.

ARKY

One month ago tomorrow.

JACK

And what happens when you turn a pump on?

ARKY

(deadpan)

It takes you home for the night?

JACK

Maybe you should have taken Ingrid home last night.

ARKY

Just trying to lighten things up.

She nods at a tank marked "Secret Sauce."

ARKY (CONT'D)

We inject an aerosol of hydrogen peroxide and acetic acid to fracture rock around the pump head.

JACK

Maybe they like the taste...

He hops from pipe to pipe to get to the control panel.

JACK (CONT'D)

...but it doesn't agree with them.

ARKY

The mix does seem to draw them for a few weeks, but this is the first... what are you doing?

JACK

Shutting eight down manually.

(works as he talks)

It needs cleaning now anyway, and I don't want to be responsible for any more dead worms.

ARKY

Afraid to piss off their owners?

JACK

At this point I feel bad about
messing them up in general.

ARKY

You care about slateworms?

Jack continues to flip switches as he rants.

JACK

Yeah, I guess I do. We plop down
on their planet, kill everything
alive as far down as the gamma rays
can go, then dump topsoil on top of
the debris and start plowing.

Arky tilts her head like she's re-evaluating him.

JACK (CONT'D)

If there's too much water we put up
condensers and if there's not
enough we pump it up from the
aquifer and usually we end up doing
both because why the hell not?

He looks self-conscious as he runs out of steam. One last
button push and he's done.

JACK (CONT'D)

Pump's off. Call in some bots to
deal with the goo.

(shakes blob from hand)

Ugh. I gotta figure out how to
clean this off before I go home.

Arky inspects her own clothes: just as befouled. She
strides toward the door.

JACK (CONT'D)

Otherwise the smell will never come
out... what are you doing?

ARKY

C'mon.

He follows her out.

EXT. PUMPHOUSE - DAY

Arky marches toward a large, water-filled cement basin,
twenty feet deep, with a ramp leading in.

ARKY

Being a cop taught me stuff.

She peels off her shirt without breaking stride, her BreathEasy still in place on its shoulder strap.

JACK

Like how to disarm berserk
corporate executives?

ARKY

Like when to do something before
it's no longer an option.

With two fluid kicks her shoes are off. She catches each.

JACK

But you're not a cop any more.

Arky doesn't seem to hear him.

ARKY

You don't wait until things get
settled for you. Until it doesn't
matter what you wanted.

She reaches the ramp and tosses the shirt into the water.

ARKY (CONT'D)

Because then stuff gets dry and
crusty and the stank of failure
gets stuck in your head...

Little hops punctuate her speech as she works her pants off.

ARKY (CONT'D)

...and you can't... ever... get
it... out.

The pants follow the shirt.

ARKY (CONT'D)

Strip, piano man.

She wades into the water. Some sort of filmy slick shimmers
around her floating clothes.

Jack stands by the side of the basin, perplexed, then pulls
his shirt over his head.

JACK

Is it cold?

ARKY

Nope. Durakrete holds heat.

Jack's pants come off without hops. He starts to jump in.

ARKY (CONT'D)

Don't get your BreathEasy wet. Ben
hasn't upgraded the firmware yet.

The jump turns into more of a gradual dip. Jack looks
pleasantly surprised.

JACK

Warm as the devil's taint.
(when Arky makes a face)
My mom --

ARKY

Yeah, yeah, where the hell did you
grow up, Aphorism Corners?

Jack points at the film coming off his clothes.

JACK

Think we need soap?

She half-swims over to him.

ARKY

Later. A good soak now should keep
the gunk from setting.

He can't keep from staring at her. She tries to sound
sarcastic but can't help looking a little flattered too.

ARKY (CONT'D)

Take a picture, it'll last longer.
Oh, that's right, you don't want a
picture.
(imitates him)
Never did.

JACK

(matter-of-fact)
Has nothing to do with not wanting
one. I don't need one.

ARKY

Like that's different?

JACK

I mean, I never needed any help
remembering what you looked like.

Though obviously uncomfortable, he keeps his tone even.

JACK (CONT'D)

What you sounded like. What you
smelled like. What you...
(MORE)

JACK (CONT'D)
(not going there)
Pictures would just get in the way.

Arky moves a step closer, something new (or perhaps old) on her face: affection.

ARKY
So you think about me that much?

She moves closer.

JACK
I used to think about us playing together again. Lately I can't even manage that.

Closer.

ARKY
Take a few slow, deep breaths.

JACK
What, is that some kind of secret InterCorp cop method for clearing --

ARKY
Just do it.

JACK
But how will --

ARKY
You used to trust me.

Outflanked, he complies.

ARKY (CONT'D)
Now one last deep breath, hold it, and pull off your respirator.

JACK
Are you insane?

ARKY
You could go a minute without the mask even without the preparation. Just trying to extend that time.

Jack's wary but intrigued. Two more breaths, then he holds the second. He peels the mask off. His expression says "now what?" for him.

ARKY (CONT'D)
Good. Can't have you fainting.

She pulls off her own mask and kisses him, wrapping herself around him.

On Jack's face, surprise and acquiescence flash by on the way to enthusiastic cooperation.

Jack comes up for air, little good as it does him.

JACK
Is this really a good idea?

ARKY
Don't squander your oxygen.

They resume. Apparently there's some pent-up desire here, as it gets as passionate as it can with breath held.

Finally, at the same moment, they break their lip lock and put their BreathEasies back on, panting.

JACK
This can't be... good for... the
respirator batteries.

ARKY
Screw the batteries.

And the respirators are off, and the two of them on.

The bright daylight dims. Thunder in the distance pops Arky's eyes open.

ARKY (CONT'D)
You hear that?

JACK
Hey, don't waste oxygen, remem...

His eyes get big too as he looks up at the clouds building: thunder means storms, which means...

ARKY
The condenser grid. Dammit!

BreathEasy back in place, she's gathering clothes and splashing back up the ramp.

Jack gets his mask back on and emulates her.

JACK
I thought we fixed it!

She shoots him a glance that discourages further comment.

ARKY

Come on!

An impressive row of thunderheads on the horizon grow with unsettling speed as they race to their Mantises.

Arky hops in her craft and starts it up. Jack's gets in his, a half-step behind her.

ARKY (CONT'D)

Ben! Ben, do you copy?

BEN (VO)

Hey, Arky, how's the pump --

ARKY

Look at the radar. Tell me what you see.

BEN (VO)

Sure thing, babe.

(beat)

Shit.

ARKY

Can you be more specific?

BEN (VO)

Line of kick-ass storms popping up along the West Ridge. I thought we fixed --

ARKY

Yeah, join the club.

JACK

We're heading there now. Fifteen minutes.

BEN (VO)

That's about how long you've got, from the looks of it.

ARKY

What's this "you" stuff?

BEN (VO)

(defensive)

I'm heading out now too, but it's going to be at least a half-hour from my pod.

Arky glances up at Jack in his Mantis. He returns the look: it's up to them.

The Mantises leap from the ground.

EXT. CONDENSER GRID - DAY

A wall of roiling clouds blots out Achird and most of the sky. Gusts of wind make the antennae of the grid sway.

The Mantises land by the new concrete building.

Jack and Arky jump out and run to the building. Both are still in their undies, but they did toss on jackets.

JACK

Hope there's an extension cord here, because otherwise I'm not going anywhere soon.

ARKY

If we don't figure out what happened, neither one of us is.

As if to underscore her concern, a sheet of lightning rips from one end of the cloud bank down its visible length.

JACK

Boy, that one's going to be --

God's own tympani drowns out "loud."

Arky isn't slowing down to listen. She's at the new capacitor bank, fiddling with a display on its side.

ARKY

This makes no sense. The new bank is below fifty percent charge.

JACK

Maybe we got a faulty one.

ARKY

Even if we did, alarms should go off when it drops below sixty.

The squall line sweeps past. Rain and wind pummel the pair. They have to shout to be heard.

Arky thumps herself on the sides of the head with both hands.

ARKY (CONT'D)

Dammit! Stupid, stupid, stupid!

JACK

What?

ARKY

The new capacitor bank's made for generator work. Doesn't have the same regulator logic. Must have confused the alarms.

JACK

Can we swap out the regulators?

ARKY

Yeah, but the one from the old bank has a higher native resistance. We'll lose efficiency.

Arky shakes her head, looks up at the storm, grits her teeth.

ARKY (CONT'D)

We'll have to bypass the individual breakers and crank up the power.

JACK

How long will that take?

ARKY

Maybe a minute. But we need to shut off the mains first.

Jack waves at the storm around them.

JACK

Won't that make this worse?

Arky nods, somewhere between exasperated and resigned.

ARKY

Hell yes. But if we don't the storm will overpower what little of the grid is working anyway.

JACK

When you put it like that... I'll pull the regulator off the old one.

Jack runs to the older capacitor bank and removes a briefcase-sized metal box from its mounting bracket.

Arky activates a display on the new bank and starts flipping virtual switches to the off position.

He returns with the old regulator. She points at a larger metal box with cables and warning stickers on the side of the new capacitor bank.

ARKY

Open the junction box and wait for my signal. Then pull the main feed off the left side and shunt it over to the grid distributor line.

JACK

Got it.

He runs to the box and opens it. She continues her preparation for the emergency shutoff.

JACK (CONT'D)

How do I make sure the connection is good?

ARKY

Don't worry, when the power comes back on, the cable will arc weld itself to the regulator.

(pauses to look at him)

Try not to be touching it.

Jack nods, duly motivated.

JACK

Make it an obvious signal, okay?

She grabs the handle for the big cutoff breaker.

ARKY

Ready?

JACK

Honest answer?

Arky shakes her head and muscles the lever down.

Outside, the sparking from antenna to antenna dies. The storm, no longer dampened at all, picks up intensity.

Arky points at Jack, who yanks the power line from one side out of place. He tugs the intervening breakers out and lets them drop on the ground.

The storm whips the antennae around. The Mantises rock back and forth.

Jack pulls the regulator unit off the new bank and attempts to replace it with the one he salvaged. The mounting brackets don't quite match.

A tornado descends from the wall of clouds, too close.

ARKY

Uh, Jack...

JACK

I'm... working... on... it.

Lightning flashes inside the descending funnel cloud.

ARKY

Want to find out what a milkshake
feels like?

He's got the mounting bracket close, but not close enough.
She points up. He looks where she's pointing.

Jack takes a few steps back and does a panicked flying crane
kick on the regulator. It drops into place on the wall.

JACK

Do it.

She obliges, shoving the lever into its original position.

A blinding arc between the power line and the regulator makes
Jack step back.

The sparks between antennae become a continuous Jacob's
Ladder style discharge, then a blue glow.

ARKY

It's working!

Indeed, the tornado above them starts to fall apart. The
clouds lighten. The rain slows.

ARKY (CONT'D)

We did it! We did it!

Jack embraces her.

JACK

(not shouting)
Maybe I should start taking deep
breaths again.

ARKY

(her either)
Or we both should.

They both inhale and pull their BreathEasy masks off. Their
lips touch...

...and the power coupling between the capacitor bank and the
grid explodes in sparks twenty feet away, knocking them over.

JACK
(shouting again)
What happened?

They put their masks back on in a hurry, then turn their attention to the blackened spot where the coupling was until a few seconds ago.

ARKY
The coupling overheated. The whole
grid is dead.

Annnnd here comes the rain again, and the wind, and yes,
that pesky tornado too.

JACK
Looks like we're not far behind.

They share a this-is-it glance.

ARKY
Sorry.

JACK
Yeah. Me too.

They hunker down as the funnel cloud lowers toward them.

Approaching turbine whine blends in with the tornadic winds.
They see something that might not kill them.

ARKY
Ben?

A Mantis swoops in low, Ben at the controls.

A silvery bot chassis is secured to the bottom of the craft.

Fighting the turbulence, he drops the robot body onto the
spot where the coupling was, completing the circuit.

With a flash and pop the reconnected grid snaps back to life.

So do Arky and Jack.

ARKY (CONT'D)
Where did he learn to fly like
that?

Once again the storm peters out, but this time nothing
interrupts the process. The wind dies down to a breeze, the
rain to a mist, the thunderheads to soft gray clouds.

Ben leaves the robot frame in place and lands nearby.

BEN

Wow, I thought the wind only ripped clothes off in low-budget holovids.

JACK

We're all right. Thanks for asking.

ARKY

How long will the bot chassis last?

BEN

Three or four days. Long enough to get a replacement coupling out here.

ARKY

And get the last of the harvest in.

BEN

Bingo. Once the DekaCorn's all in the elevator, we can take the whole grid offline and fix it right.

JACK

How did you know to bring the bot chassis in the first place?

BEN

Dumb luck. I was getting ready to go replace the grain elevator's bot when you called.

Ben sidles up to her.

BEN (CONT'D)

Are you sure you're not hurt?

Jack opens his mouth to say something but comes up empty.

Arky shoots Jack a look of what might be apology.

ARKY

(to Ben)

Not hurt, just tired.

BEN

C'mon. Let's head home.

Arky allows Ben to help her to his Mantis.

Ben pulls a loop of heavy cable out of it and returns to where Jack still stands, processing what happened.

JACK
You saved us. And half the
harvest.

BEN
Thirty-five percent if the
simulator's right, but yeah.

He hands Jack the cable.

BEN (CONT'D)
Think you can charge up Arky's
Mantis too?

A mute nod is all Jack can come up with.

BEN (CONT'D)
When you're done, come on over for
a drink. Arky makes a mean
Moondrop.
(glances down)
Though pants would be a good idea.

Jack shakes his head and inspects the ground.

JACK
Appreciate the offer, but I'll
probably head home and crash.

BEN
Suit yourself.

He cracks his knuckles and wiggles his fingers.

BEN (CONT'D)
Arky's going to need some serious
massage tonight anyway.
(gun-like gesture)
Later, buddy.

Ben trots to his aircraft. As the Mantis takes off, Arky
looks like an animal too exhausted to escape its snare.

Jack forces himself not to watch. He plugs in the cable.

JACK
(to himself)
I knew about the Moondrops.

INT. BEN'S POD - DAY

In near darkness, Arky stirs and wakes.

ARKY

Lights on.

The lights come on. Ben's by the test bench, dressed.

Behind him, a row of round robot heads display identical cartoon faces.

ARKY (CONT'D)

You turned the alarm off.

BEN

Thought you could use the rest.
You almost died yesterday.

Arky acknowledges the statement silently as he heads for the door, BreathEasy in hand.

BEN (CONT'D)

You take it easy today. I'm going
to talk to Jack.

ARKY

Not call him?

BEN

Face-to-face.

He pulls his BreathEasy onto his face.

BEN (CONT'D)

You know. Man talk.

Arky mouths "man talk" as he exits.

She waits until she hears his Mantis takes off. Then she jumps out of bed and begins searching the inside of the pod.

INT. JACK'S POD - DAY

Jack's in bed, asleep and disheveled. A chime repeats two or three times. He stirs, groans, rises.

JACK

I'm working on it.

He slaps a wall panel. The door opens. Ben comes in. He looks around the place and pushes his BreathEasy mask up with reluctance.

Jack registers surprise through the fog.

BEN

This a good time?

Jack throws on a pair of pants.

BEN (CONT'D)
Why didn't you tell me you and Arky
used to be an item?

Blank stare from Jack, interrupted only when he starts the
burner going for his Rube Goldberg coffee setup.

JACK
She never told you?

BEN
All she said was she knew you from
college. You track her down or --

JACK
I didn't bother checking who was
here before I applied for the spot.

Jack paws through a pile of shirts and picks one.

BEN
Six months watching your ex hook up
in front of you?
(whistles)
If it were me --

JACK
It's been years. Want some coffee?

Ben eyes a stained beaker.

BEN
Never touch the stuff, but thanks.
So, listen: I have friends in H-R.
Old frat sibs. If you wanted...

The coffee setup hisses.

BEN (CONT'D)
What's that?

JACK
Vacuum pump. If I wanted?

BEN
Right. After the harvest I could
talk to them. See about getting
you another assignment for the
balance of your field work.

JACK
Snowy or swampy?

Ben waves his hand. The room's display shows a picturesque hilltop village surrounded by rows of grape vines.

BEN

There's about to be an opening in
viniculture. Cotes de Provence.

Surprise on Jack's face yields to suspicion, then curiosity.

JACK

What system is that?

BEN

It's not a planet. It's a region.
On Earth.

Jack's back to a blank stare.

JACK

How do I rate an Earth billet?

BEN

You don't. Except I can recommend
you, and those friends I mentioned
can jigger the assignment rubric.

More burbling from the lab equipment.

BEN (CONT'D)

Your... coffee's ready.

Jack slides a beaker under the output just in time.

JACK

Okay -- why?

BEN

Do the math. One plus one doesn't
make three. You're uncomfortable,
Arky's moody --

JACK

And you're jealous?

That amuses Ben.

BEN

I'm concerned about results.
Distractions lead to accidents.

Jack sips coffee and speaks without making eye contact.

JACK
Say I just slip away to Earth.
What would you tell her?

BEN
Whatever you want, buddy.

Jack gives the musical keyboard a forlorn glance.

JACK
Give me a day to think about it.

BEN
Sure. But that Earth slot will
last about three minutes once they
announce it.

He pulls out a bottle from his pack and sets it on the table:
a dusty bottle of bourbon.

BEN (CONT'D)
In the meantime, I suggest liberal
applications of this.

Ben turns for the door.

JACK
Hey, Ben... thanks. For the rescue
yesterday, for this. I gotta
admit, I sorta thought you were a
jerk before.

BEN
I am a jerk. But I'm not an idiot.
You're a good farmer, when your
past isn't slapping you around.

He pulls on his BreathEasy. Jack doesn't watch him go.

JACK
Ben?

BEN
Yeah?

JACK
Never take her for granted.

Ben does the gun-like gesture and slips out.

INT. BEN'S POD - DAY

Arky paws through Ben's stuff, careful to replace things
exactly where she found them.

ARKY
C'mon, something's gotta be here.

Ingrid's employee pic displays in mid-room.

INGRID (VO)
Yo, Ben, you there?

ARKY
This is Arky, Ingrid.

EXT. WESSEX HILLS WAREHOUSE - DAY

Ingrid stands outside a Quonset hut, next to a half-dozen plastic barrels festooned with warning labels, listening to the commlink in her arm.

ARKY (VO)
Doesn't his status show him as out?

INTERCUT ARKY/INGRID

INGRID
All the bells and whistles are down while they fix flare damage. Anyway, one of you needs to come get this nasty shit off my farm.

ARKY
What nasty shit?

INGRID
SpaceX dropped off a bunch of chemical barrels here by mistake. More glitches from --

ARKY
...the solar flares, right.

INGRID (CONT'D)
...the fuckin' solar flares.

Ingrid reads the labels.

INGRID (CONT'D)
What the hell is he doing with cadmium salts and mercuric chloride, anyway? There's enough here to poison a couple of cities.

Arky looks surprised, but doesn't let it show in her voice.

ARKY
Don't really know. But one of us will deal with them. Arky out.

She glances around the room again, taking the news in.

Behind her, the cartoon face on one of the globular bot heads shifts its gaze just enough to be visible.

INT. BEN'S MANTIS - AIRBORNE - SAME

Ben sees Arky on a small dashboard display. The image goes in and out of focus.

ARKY (VO)
 (to herself)
 What are you up to, farmer Ben?

He tsks in disappointment.

BEN
 (to himself)
 Once a cop...

After a moment he touches the commlink control.

BEN (CONT'D)
 Hey, Arky, I know I told you to
 kick back today, but the bots
 cleaning up at the pumphouse could
 use a little guidance.

ARKY (VO)
 (not looking at display)
 Yeah, sure thing. Going a little
 stir-crazy here anyway. Hey, how'd
 your man-to-man with Jack go?

Ben's smirk is slap-worthy.

BEN
 Better than expected.

INT. JACK'S POD - DAY

Jack swigs bourbon and positions half-printed, half-scribbled sheet music on his keyboard. Piles of other sheet music lie scattered around him. He plays.

DAYDREAM - INT. CLUB STAGE - NIGHT

The stage is empty except for Jack. Arky's bass and Ben's drum set sit idle.

Jack's technique is surgical: precise and sterile.

INT. JACK'S POD - DAY - PRESENT DAY

Jack stops playing and reseals the bourbon. He starts to gather up all of the sheet music.

INT. PUMPHOUSE - DAY

Arky supervises three bots as they suck up the goo.

ARKY
(to commlink)
Less than two days? You sure?

INT. GRAIN ELEVATOR - OUTSIDE THE FREEZE CHAMBER - DAY

Ben works on a bot in a room with concrete walls, a control panel and a submarine-style pressure hatch.

The bot bears a large letter "E" instead of a number.

BEN
Gerdie estimates forty hours until
the last bushel is in.

INTERCUT BEN/ARKY

ARKY
Assuming nothing else goes wrong.

BEN
There you go, worrying again.

ARKY
We barely avoided becoming a
statistic.

BEN
Avoided being the key word.
Tonnage looks good. I smell bonus.

INT. PUMPHOUSE - DAY

Jack weaves into the pumphouse carrying a portfolio.

Arky tracks Jack's approach, clearly concerned.

ARKY
(to commlink)
Hope you're right. See you back at
your pod.

Jack holds the bulging portfolio out to her.

JACK
I wanted to give you these.

ARKY
What's the occasion?
(sniffs)
Have you been drinking?

He shakes his head, then nods.

JACK
Ben found another billet for me.
(when she hesitates)
Take 'em. I can't look at 'em.

Reluctantly, she opens the portfolio.

ARKY
Sheet music?

JACK
Stuff I wrote for us to play.

ARKY
Back in college?

JACK
After you left.

She flips through, more affected with each page.

ARKY
Haven't touched my bass in years.

JACK
You could pick right back up
anytime you wanted to. I'm the one
who dropped the beat, remember?

Arky closes the portfolio.

ARKY
When do you go?

JACK
Right after the harvest. Wasn't
sure I'd see you again before then.

ARKY
(quiet)
Thanks.

JACK
Guess that's it then.

Arky clutches the portfolio to her chest.

ARKY

Guess so.

She bites her lip hard as he wobbles out.

ARKY (CONT'D)

Goddamn Ben.

The robot nearest her cocks its head.

INT. GRAIN ELEVATOR - SAME

Ben pauses from his work. He's been listening in.

ARKY (VO)

Goddamn investigation.

Ben smirks and pats the bot's head.

INT. JACK'S POD - NIGHT

Jack packs. The coffee setup sits atop the workbench, disassembled and cleaned; the bric-a-brac is tucked away; the pod's walls are as devoid of personality as Ben's.

The mostly empty bottle of prescription bourbon is the only overt nod to his emotional state.

The central display is on as background noise: an ad features a green sand beach kissed by purple surf. A good-looking trio in swimsuits hold hands.

NOTE: The same voice announces/narrates these fragments, shifting delivery to fit the subject matter.

SULTRY ANNOUNCER (VO)

-- so fly away someplace special
this holiday season. The Orion
Riviera, where every day is a
chance for romance --

JACK

(slight slur)
Flip to educational.

A twenty-third century nature show. Something with too many legs eats something with too many eyes.

CLASSY NARRATOR (VO)

-- run into one of these venomous
rodents, their only chance is to
flee, even in the midst of their
mating dance. Here we --

JACK
Flip to business.

Graphics and charts.

MATTER-OF-FACT ANNOUNCER (VO)
-- stocks saw a general retreat
from higher levels this week --

JACK
(getting peeved)
Flip to History.

A map of Eastern Europe with arrows.

PRETENTIOUS NARRATOR (VO)
-- until the disastrous retreat
from Moscow, Napoleon had never --

JACK
Pause.

The display freezes. Jack glares at it.

JACK (CONT'D)
Really?
(waves at display)
Show sports.

Familiar talking heads cover the week's highlights.

COLOR COMMENTARY
-- about you, but I don't think
I'll ever get tired of this.

A defiant Diaz spikes the slagball and blows herself and a half-dozen defenders to kingdom come.

PLAY-BY-PLAY
It takes someone with nerves of
platichrome to stand their ground
under that kind of pressure.

COLOR COMMENTARY
I'll say. I want to shake her new
hand in two months when --

JACK
Flip to go fuck yourself.

The display fuzzes out for a moment. The words "Private Moments Channel" and "Adults Only" appear.

Jack puffs his cheeks out and expels air in resignation as the moaning begins.

JACK (CONT'D)
Gerdie, local space weather.

The display complies with a graphic of stars and planets.

GERDIE (VO)
-- the unexpected flares still
intensifying. Solar wind gusts...

Gerdie drones on. Jack returns to his packing. He hums.

DAYDREAM - INT. CLUB STAGE - NIGHT

Arky's on stage, playing a bass solo. She sounds fine... until the drums come in.

Ben -- whose drum kit now includes tympanies, bells and a gong -- pounds out a self-indulgent rock beat.

INT. JACK'S POD - NIGHT - PRESENT DAY

A cymbal crashes. Jack looks at where a half-disassembled shelf fell over.

JACK
Screw this. Lights off.

He flops into bed as the pod goes dark.

JACK (CONT'D)
Lights on.

The lights come back on. He grabs the bourbon.

JACK (CONT'D)
Lights off.

The pod goes dark again.

EXT. BEN'S POD - NIGHT

Fog covers the harvested fields. A deep rumble precedes a shower of dirt. Another follows, then another.

INT. BEN'S POD - DAY

Once again, in near darkness, Arky stirs and wakes.

ARKY
Lights.

The lights reveal Ben standing next to the bed, dressed, his BreathEasy half-on already, staring at her. She recoils.

BEN
Morning, babe.

ARKY
Don't scare me like that. Where are you going so early?

BEN
Number thirty. More flares fragged the G.P.S. network and its inertial navigation module.

ARKY
Can't it just visually steer?

Ben swipes open a "window" to reveal thick fog.

BEN
Not through that.

He reaches over and nonchalantly straightens one of his awards plaques.

BEN (CONT'D)
Don't worry. Worst case scenario, I finish thirty's run on manual.

ARKY
Are you even rated to drive a FieldMaster?

BEN
Trainee permit. But it's not like there's much to run into out here.
(grins)
At least much that would still be standing later.

He gives her a quick peck on the cheek, pulls his BreathEasy down, and heads out. The pink light of dawn through the door colors Arky's face for a moment before the door closes.

As the turbine whine fades into the distance, she jumps out of bed and grabs the plaque he moved from the wall.

With a little pushing and pulling a key-fob-sized object drops out of a hidden compartment. She picks it up.

ARKY
Now we're talking.

Arky waves the fob in the middle of the room. The main display appears, with the words "GrosGrain Human Resources -- Restricted Access" prominent.

A throbbing dot of green light appears by her. She grabs the dot with her hand.

GERDIE

Log in: Hydrologist Arcadia Reyes.
No access authorized.

ARKY

Override. InterCorp backdoor
protocol Echo Foxtrot Nine Seven.

She traces a geometric figure in the air with both hands.

GERDIE

Security Override granted,
Detective Reyes.

The display now shows an array of file folders with names like "Omicron Persei: Closed" and "Gliese 435: Closed."

ARKY

Damn straight.

One at the top is labeled "Achird." Arky touches the folder.

Numerous images appear: pictures of slateworms, maps of sightings, a graph labeled "Population Estimates."

A folder labeled "Chemical Countermeasures" catches her eye. She opens and scans graphics of molecules.

ARKY (CONT'D)

Jesus, Ben, what have you been
pumping into the ground?

Arky opens another folder labeled "Personnel." Under her photo the thumbnail caption reads "Former InterCorp Detective. Possible Plant." She chuckles.

ARKY (CONT'D)

Guilty as charged.

She proceeds to poke around the files more. She brings up a map labeled "Slateworm Movements," but frowns when she sees significant blank spots around Plains of Goshen.

Arky starts to dress.

ARKY (CONT'D)

Secure commlink channel.

INT. INGRID'S POD - DAY

Early morning light pours in through a "window." Ingrid has a large electric motor on a table like a surgical patient.

Ingrid's cyborg arm is in it up to the elbow. A bot stands by her side with a tray of tools, like a surgical nurse.

ARKY (VO)
Wessex Hills, you there?

INGRID
Kind of busy, but yes. Coming over
for those chemicals?

INTERCUT ARKY/INGRID

Ingrid continues working as she talks.

ARKY
Soon as the hydrology report is
done. Trying to put together a map
of slateworm movements for it.

INGRID
And this involves me how?

ARKY
Jack mentioned you saw a lot of
worms over the last few weeks. Did
you record the sightings?

Ingrid strains to reach something. Her arm's servos whine.

INGRID
That would be standard protocol.

She yanks out a fried DekaCorn husk from the motor and drops it in the waiting tray.

ARKY
Gerdie doesn't have your data.

INGRID
What? I put them in.

She touches a few spots on her arm and a small display pops visible in front her face: the same map as Arky's.

INGRID (CONT'D)
Well, damn. They were here.
(scowls)
(MORE)

INGRID (CONT'D)

This leaves out more than just my data. Charlie Bo reported a bunch around Crystal Shores last week.

ARKY

That area's blank on my map too.

Her face falls.

INGRID

Lucky for you I still have last week's backup loaded.

She touches a button on her cyborg forearm.

ARKY

You still have your data?

Dots begin to appear on Ingrid's map. Lots of them.

INGRID

I have everybody's data. Got fifty petabytes of storage in this thing, and zero-gee porn only takes up so much space.

Arky perks up as the same dots collect on her map: hundreds of them, tracing dozens of paths. All converge at one blinking spot on the Plains of Goshen farm.

INGRID (CONT'D)

Huh. Looks like your pumphouse is where the cool slateworms hang out.

The display in the middle of the room reconfigures: a new map shows a throbbing red arrow.

GERDIE

Alert. FieldMaster Twelve reports stoppage at grain elevator. Alert.

ARKY

Ah, great.

INGRID

There goes your day.

ARKY

Yeah. Thanks for the info, Ingrid.

INT. BEN'S POD - DAY

Arky pulls on shoes and grabs her BreathEasy.

ARKY
 (around food)
 Bot status, Gerdie?

GERDIE
 Bots for the elevator and
 FieldMaster Twelve can find no
 blockage. Human intervention
 required.

She finishes her breakfast in two big bites.

ARKY
 Ben? You there?

BEN (VO)
 I got the alert too. I'm stuck
 driving number thirty. Try Jack.

Arky does not look pleased with the prospect.

ARKY
 (to commlink)
 Jack? You up?

INT. JACK'S POD - DAY

Jack, still in his clothes, sprawls half off his bed.

ARKY (VO)
 Did you see the alert?

Jack grimaces in his sleep but doesn't wake.

INT. BEN'S POD - DAY

Arky puts on her BreathEasy.

ARKY
 Jack? Dammit, answer.

She punches a wall switch and her own Mantis powers up.

ARKY (CONT'D)
 Fine. Come on by the grain
 elevator if you can stomach the
 thought of talking again.

A chime sounds as she opens the door: the display shows
 Ingrid's employee photo.

ARKY (CONT'D)
 Not now, Ingrid.

EXT./INT. ARKY'S MANTIS - DAY

The fog has almost burned off. Arky climbs in and adjusts her safety harness.

ARKY

Check secure mailbox. Echo Foxtrot
Niner Niner.

GERDIE

Security access confirmed,
detective. One reply received,
five seventeen A.M. local time.

ARKY

Read text.

GERDIE

Estimate thirty hours to arrival
Achird system. Do not engage with
target of investigation.

She smirks mirthlessly.

ARKY

Now you tell me.

Arky pulls the stick back. As the Mantis takes off, she glances down. Her jaw drops.

The results of the recent slateworm activity become visible: a series of concentric circles in the fields around the pod, making it the bulls-eye of a target several miles across.

ARKY (CONT'D)

(touches a switch)

Ben, the slateworms left us a
message last night.

INT. FIELDMASTER THIRTY'S CAB - DAY

Ben sips something through a bendy straw from a high-tech travel mug. With a drink umbrella.

ARKY (VO)

Video's still down. Sending a
still pic.

INTERCUT BEN/ARKY

She touches a display showing the concentric rings. "SCREEN CAPTURED" flashes.

The picture shows up on a display in front of Ben.

BEN
(taken aback)
Okay, that's... ominous.

ARKY
Still want to argue about
intelligent life?

BEN
Yeah, no. We need to get more
creative in dealing with it,
though. See anything around your
pod or Jack's?

Arky cranes her head. Her data goggles magnify her view,
letting her see Jack's pod in the distance, then hers.

ARKY
Nothing around the other pods yet.

BEN
Good. After you deal with the
grain elevator, try Jack again. As
long as he's still with use can
help us brainstorm.

ARKY
Agreed. We need a plan.

INT. FIELDMASTER THIRTY'S CAB - DAY

Ben pulls a hand-held remote from his jacket and pushes a
green-lit button on it, making it blink red.

BEN
Way ahead of you, babe.

He waits until the red goes solid, then opens the window of
the cab and drops the remote into the whirling blades below.

He closes his window and sips his drink.

EXT. GRAIN ELEVATOR - DAY

Twenty FieldMasters wait in line to discharge their contents
into the five-mile-long row of durakrete silos.

Arky steers her mantis toward the landing pad atop the
structure, near rows of liquid oxygen tanks.

INT. GRAIN ELEVATOR - ACCESS TUNNEL - DAY

Arky emerges from the bottom of an access tube like Jack used
on the FieldMaster.

The ELEVATOR BOT waits on an A.T.V. that bears scorpion decals. Its voice is identical to that of Seven's Bot, yet somehow it comes off as less helpful.

ELEVATOR BOT
Greetings, Ms. Reyes. While you were en route I determined the cause of the problem.

ARKY
Lovely. Have a nice day.

She turns back toward the access tube.

ELEVATOR BOT
The area is inaccessible to robots.

That stops her, but she doesn't turn to face it yet.

ARKY
The transfer conveyor?

ELEVATOR BOT
I'm afraid so, Ms. Reyes.

Now she turns, pissed.

ARKY
(to herself)
Stupid ass design.
(to bot)
The conveyor, not you.

She climbs onto the A.T.V. next to the bot and starts to remove her BreathEasy.

ELEVATOR BOT
Please leave your respirator on, Ms. Reyes. Troubleshooting protocol required deactivation of the building's oxygenator. Reboot time is thirty-two minutes.

ARKY
All right, let's take a look.

They drive down the seemingly endless tunnel.

INT. GRAIN ELEVATOR - OUTSIDE THE FREEZE CHAMBER - DAY

The bot stops by the hatch, which hangs open.

Arky hops off and glances at the control panel by the door.

ARKY
Is the internal access tube
working? I don't want to climb a
hundred meters of ladder.

ELEVATOR BOT
The tube is functional.

It disconnects from the A.T.V. as Arky ducks through the
door.

INSIDE THE CHAMBER

Arky looks up, shielding her eyes, scanning all three hundred
feet of the cylinder's height.

ARKY
How far up is the conveyor access?

She sees the top of the chamber blur and wobble. She follows
suit, at least the wobble part.

ARKY (CONT'D)
Whoa.

She checks her BreathEasy. Lots of green lights.

ARKY (CONT'D)
Hey, bot, did you --

As she turns toward the door it clangs shut. The pressure
seal engages.

ARKY (CONT'D)
What the hell are you...

She sees the door blur. It stays blurry.

Arky's eyes are big.

ARKY (CONT'D)
That little ratfu --

She keels over mid-epithet with a thump.

INT. JACK'S POD - DAY

An identical thump, as Jack rolls out of bed, wakes him.

JACK
Ah... ahh...

INTERCUT JACK'S POD/FREEZE CHAMBER

Jack holds his head protectively and stumbles toward the facilities.

Arky's breathing goes shallow.

Jack emerges, toweling his hands and face. He picks up his beaker-cup, turns to where his coffee-making apparatus used to be, winces at its absence.

The bot's cartoon face peeks in through the freeze chamber porthole. Rime creeps across the glass, obscuring the view.

Jack clumsily dresses and rubs his eyes. He notices a blinking exclamation mark in the middle of the room.

Arky stops breathing.

INT. JACK'S POD - DAY

Jack waves his hand at the floating icon.

JACK

Messages.

Arky's employee pic displays.

ARKY (VO)

Jack? You up? Did you see the alert? Jack? Dammit, answer. Fine. Come on by the grain elevator if you can stomach the thought of talking again. Not now, Ingrid.

Jack cradles his head in his hands.

JACK

Owww. Ow. Shit. This had better be important.

He grabs his BreathEasy and heads for the door.

EXT. GRAIN ELEVATOR - LANDING PAD ON ROOF - DAY

Jack's Mantis alights next to Arky's. Jack gets out.

JACK

(on commlink)

Arky, you there?

He trots by the liquid oxygen tanks toward the access tube.

JACK (CONT'D)
(to himself)
Stupid durakrete silos. She might
as well be underground.

INT. GRAIN ELEVATOR - OUTSIDE THE FREEZE CHAMBER - DAY

Jack drives up on another Skorpyon A.T.V.. The one the bot
drove is gone. So is the bot.

JACK
Arky?

He checks out the controls for the freeze chamber. A display
indicates the temperature: minus seventy. Thick ice on the
porthole blocks his view inside.

Jack frowns and turns off the refrigeration. The temperature
climbs rapidly. When it gets to minus forty the red light
over the sealed hatch turns yellow.

INSIDE THE CHAMBER

it's as cold and still as death. The hatch creaks open. The
influx of warmer, wetter air creates instant frozen fog.

When it dissipates, Jack stands gape-mouthed in the hatchway
for a few heartbeats. When he does move, he's quick.

He strides forward, stops, props the hatch open with an
emergency respirator that had been sitting just outside, and
kneels by Arky's side.

She lies there in a heap, one hand on her BreathEasy and one
forever reaching for the hatch.

Jack pulls her stiff form to him, unable to speak, his breath
coming in short ragged puffs made visible by the cold.

A tear on his cheek freezes and snaps off.

With some difficulty -- her frozen body does not bend much --
he pulls Arky out of the chamber.

OUTSIDE THE FREEZE CHAMBER

he sets Arky back gently on the floor and sits heavily
against the side of the control console by her.

He addresses her body, stifling sobs.

JACK (CONT'D)
I should have been here with you.

He kneels and attempts to straighten her limbs into less awkward positions.

JACK (CONT'D)
Maybe I could have saved you.
Maybe we'd both be dead.

The legs work. The arms are less cooperative.

JACK (CONT'D)
Of course, if I hadn't let you go
five years ago we'd both be
musicians somewhere.

Her BreathEasy gets stuck underneath her in the process.

JACK (CONT'D)
Starving musicians, probably, but
still.

He pulls the respirator out of the way, stands, and sets it on the console.

After a deep breath, he attempts to collect himself and almost succeeds... until a new look of horror elbows shock and grief off his face.

JACK (CONT'D)
(to himself)
Fuck.

JACK (CONT'D)
What am I going to tell Ben?

He turns away from the body.

JACK (CONT'D)
C'mon. You have to call him.
She'd want you to.

A questioning glance at Arky's body yields predictable silence. Jack tries his commlink. Static.

JACK (CONT'D)
Dammit.

He switches to the console's built-in commlink. Reception is serviceable at best.

JACK (CONT'D)
Ben. I'm at the elevator.
Something happened.

BEN (VO)
Yeah, I skimmed through the preliminary report. Arky up in the transfer tube?

JACK
(with effort)
No, she's... down here with me.

BEN (VO)
Oh, well, put her on.

JACK
She's not... she's... somehow she got locked in the chamber.

BEN (VO)
Wait... what?

Jack struggles to force words out.

JACK
She must have been in there a half-hour at minus seventy. By the time I got here...

Any shred of composure collapses.

JACK (CONT'D)
Arky's dead.

BEN (VO)
Dead?
(angry)
What the hell was she doing inside the chamber? She shouldn't have...

A strangled groan comes over the commlink.

BEN (VO) (CONT'D)
I'll be there as soon as I can.
God. Arky...

Jack sits by Arky's body. He reaches over and closes her eyes, which had been frozen open.

INT. FIELDMASTER THIRTY'S COCKPIT - DAY

Ben slurps down the last of his drink through the straw.

INT. GRAIN ELEVATOR - OUTSIDE THE FREEZE CHAMBER

Jack, still distraught but restive, glances this way and that. Something on the BreathEasy catches his eye.

JACK

Huh.

He taps the respirator twice, then looks around the console, checking out various plugs and jacks. He scowls.

JACK (CONT'D)

(sarcastic, to himself)

Of course no one thought to put diagnostic connections in here. Equipment never breaks down in a grain elevator.

The external video on one display catches his eye: the FieldMasters lined up next to the grain elevator.

He uses the console's commlink again.

JACK (CONT'D)

FieldMaster Seven. You available?

SEVEN'S BOT (VO)

What do you require, Jack Flowerdew?

JACK

Hop in Seven's A.T.V. and meet me at the ground level access door.

He turns the BreathEasy over in his hands.

JACK (CONT'D)

I need you to test a respirator.

SEVEN'S BOT (VO)

Estimate arrival in four minutes.

Jack kneels again by Arky's body, which admittedly does look more peaceful after his work.

JACK

(to the body)

I have to check. Probably nothing, but... Ben will be here soon. You won't be alone long, okay?

He kisses her on the forehead and starts to get on the A.T.V., but stops short. He snags the emergency respirator holding the hatch open, then drives the A.T.V. down the access tunnel.

EXT. GRAIN ELEVATOR - MAIN ENTRANCE - DAY

The garage-style door opens. Jack drives out to the waiting A.T.V. and Seven's Bot.

JACK

Run basic diagnostics on this.

He hands the BreathEasy to the bot. The bot takes the unit with one mechanical hand and extends a probe from the other.

The probe clicks into a port on the respirator's side.

Diagnostic readings replace the left half of the bot's cartoon face.

SEVEN'S BOT

The battery is depleted.

JACK

It was in a freeze-drying chamber for half an hour. Cold runs down batteries, right?

SEVEN'S BOT

Power log readings indicate the unit stopped while in use forty-one minutes eight seconds ago.

Jack scowls.

JACK

That can't be right. She would have just gotten there...

The diagnostics vanish. The bot's cartoon face frowns.

SEVEN'S BOT

Is this a forensic question? I am not programmed...

JACK

...for forensic work, right. No, no, this is just equipment maintenance.

SEVEN'S BOT

You said "she." Is this Ms. Reyes's respirator?

Jack only hesitates a fraction of a second.

JACK

Obviously not, or Ms. Reyes would be using it.

The bot's cartoon face narrows cartoon eyes.

SEVEN'S BOT

The serial number corresponds to that of Ms. Reyes's unit.

Jack tilts his head.

JACK

Isn't that getting into forensics?

The bot shifts its eyes left and right in what resembles human evasiveness.

SEVEN'S BOT

No, no, this is just inventory management.

Jack and the bot regard each other silently, the BreathEasy between them.

JACK

Hypothetically speaking, wouldn't a low power alarm sound if the unit's battery were depleted?

SEVEN'S BOT

Yes. And the indicator lights would blink yellow, then red.

JACK

Would there be any circumstance where that wouldn't happen?

SEVEN'S BOT

Hypothetically?

JACK

Yes.

SEVEN'S BOT

Corrupted firmware could cause a device to malfunction in that way.

JACK

Is the firmware on this unit corrupt? Could a bot do that?

The bot, still wired to the respirator, turns away from Jack.

SEVEN'S BOT
We are not programmed for forensic
investigation.

The bot swivels its head around. Instead of its face, lines
of firmware code display. Several flash red.

SEVEN'S BOT (CONT'D)
Or to edit device firmware.

Jack's puzzlement yields to disbelief. He sits down hard on
the A.T.V. saddle.

SEVEN'S BOT (CONT'D)
Are you still functional, Jack
Flowerdew?

Jack shakes his head.

JACK
I don't understand. Why would Ben
sabotage her BreathEasy? Why would
he want to...

He can't make himself say "kill Arky."

JACK (CONT'D)
Maybe she tried to tell me
something when she called.
(rubs back of neck)
If I remembered any of it.

He tries his commlink.

JACK (CONT'D)
Gerdie, play back the message Arky
left me this morning.

Static.

SEVEN'S BOT
The mid-day solar flares are now
intense enough to disrupt even
commsat audio, sir.

JACK
I guess I can't blame that on Ben.
(brow furrows)
Did you say mid-day?

SEVEN'S BOT
The flares roughly coincide with
local noon and midnight.

JACK
 How convenient.
 (narrows his eyes)
Roughly coincide?

SEVEN'S BOT
 The interval is precise. Variance
 is based on one's precise location
 on the Plains of Goshen farm.

A map with a vertical red line replaces the bot's face.

JACK
 (tracing line with finger)
 Huh. Runs between the pods... and
 right through the pumphouse. Hey --
 if the commsats are down, how are
 you accessing Gerdie's maps?

SEVEN'S BOT
 The bot network uses terrestrial
 links only, to leave commsat
 bandwidth available for higher
 priority traffic.

JACK
 Can you access my commlink message?

Arky's employee pic replaces the map on the bot's head. Jack
 grimaces, but listens.

ARKY (VO)
 Jack? You up? Did you see the
 alert? Jack? Dammit, answer.
 Fine. Come on by the grain
 elevator if you can stomach the
 thought of talking again. Not now,
 Ingrid.

Jack's eyebrows go up at the last line.

JACK
 Patch me through to Wessex Hills.

EXT. INGRID'S POD - DAY

Ingrid and a bot stand atop her pod, adjusting an antennae.

Jack's employee pic displays on her bot's face.

JACK (VO)
 (from bot)
 Ingrid?

INTERCUT JACK/INGRID

Ingrid gives the bot a bemused look.

INGRID

Too late, Flowerdew. I dropped those damn barrels off myself. Tell Arky if she doesn't like where I put 'em to move 'em herself.

JACK

I wasn't calling about... what barrels?

INGRID

Do any of you actually talk to each other? That pile of nasty-ass poison of yours we got by mistake.

Her cyborg arm locks up.

INGRID (CONT'D)

Dammit. Is this important? My arm's on the --

JACK

Ben killed Arky.

Ingrid freezes in the middle of smacking her arm, stunned.

JACK (CONT'D)

I need to know why. You talked to her this morning, right?

INGRID

(hesitant)

Ben? Killed her?

JACK

Focus, Ingrid. What did you talk to her about? The chemicals?

INGRID

Yeah. I couldn't get in touch with her, so I just dropped them off where they were supposed to go.

Light dawns over Marblehead, or at least on Jack's face.

JACK

Our pumphouse.

Ingrid nods. Almost as an afterthought, she smacks her cyborg arm with her other hand one more time. It moves.

INGRID

What are you going to do? Call InterCorp?

JACK

I think Arky was InterCorp. Spying on Ben for some reason.

INGRID

That would help explain her staying with him this long.

She holds up a cyborg finger which flops over, limp, then retracts most of the way into the hand.

INGRID (CONT'D)

But what are you going to do?

Jack looks at Arky's respirator. His eyes go cold.

JACK

I'm working on it. Jack out.

EXT. GRAIN ELEVATOR - DAY

Jack starts his A.T.V..

JACK

Head back to your FieldMaster.

Seven's bot turns to go to its A.T.V..

JACK (CONT'D)

And Seven?

The bot's head turns.

JACK (CONT'D)

Thanks for everything.

Jack peels out into the access tunnel, leaving a puzzled cartoon face on the bot's head.

EXT. GRAIN ELEVATOR - LANDING PAD ON ROOF - DAY

Jack jogs past the liquid oxygen tanks. A low rumble makes him slow, then freeze. He scans the terrain.

NEAR THE GRAIN ELEVATOR

a huge mound of dirt boils up, then another, then another.

Within seconds fifty worm boils surround the silos.

They all slowly spiral in toward the elevator.

BACK ON THE LANDING PAD

Jack panics and sprints the rest of the way to his Mantis.

EXT./INT. JACK'S MANTIS - DAY

Jack dives in. He reaches to start it up. All goes quiet.

EXT. GRAIN ELEVATOR - DAY

The dirt boils, almost to the silos, stop moving. They subside. For a moment the landscape is still.

IN HIS MANTIS

Jack listens, anxious.

INT. GRAIN ELEVATOR - OUTSIDE THE FREEZE CHAMBER - DAY

Arky's body still lies in the middle of the floor.

Dust vibrates off the ceiling.

INT. JACK'S MANTIS - DAY

Jack sees the mascot bobblehead on his dashboard wiggle. His eyes go wide. He inhales sharply and starts the Mantis.

JACK
(on commlink)
FieldMaster Seven.

The rumble returns, complementing the whine of his craft.

SEVEN'S BOT (VO)
Yes, Jack Flower --

JACK
You have emergency control of the other FieldMasters. Disaster protocol eighty-six. Bug out.

SEVEN'S BOT (VO)
Protocol eighty-six accepted.

INTERCUT ALL

The ground around the base of the silos subsides in spots.

A crack appears in one silo wall, then another.

The dozen huge combines lurch into motion.

The Mantis sways with the elevator. So do the oxygen tanks.

Jack's eyes are on to the tachometer: the yellow R.P.M. reading rises at the speed of glue.

Cracks form on the floor around Arky. Power conduits crack, producing showers of sparks. The lights flicker.

The silo cracks spread. Durakrete groans, then gives. Streams of Dekacorn erupt from jagged holes in the silos.

The tachometer's at six hundred R.P.M..

JACK

Come on now...

Inside, the cracks in the floor join into a continuous, jagged circle around Arky's body. The lights flicker again.

Starting at the ends, the silos fall one by one, half-shattered, half-swallowed by the ground.

Seven hundred.

Seven's Bot, atop its FieldMaster, rotates its head to watch.

The plumbing for the liquid oxygen ruptures. Pressurized oxygen shoots down between the silos.

A flood of crushed Dekacorn and durakrete blasts down the length of the access tunnel.

The floor around Arky subsides. The lights go out. Only sparks illuminate her body vanishing into the ground.

Eight hundred.

The silo next to the one under the landing pad starts to go.

JACK (CONT'D)

Close enough.

He pulls back on the stick. The Mantis doesn't rise... but it also doesn't fall as the pad crumbles out from under it.

Arky's Mantis tumbles into the debris cloud.

Somewhere in the mix of dust and released oxygen a spark sets off the mother of all grain elevator explosions.

JACK (CONT'D)

Shit!

Still not at full power, he pushes forward on the stick to gain speed for his escape.

The Mantis plummets as a fireball blows down the five-mile length of the grain elevator.

Jack swerves and barrel-rolls in an effort to avoid house-sized durakrete shrapnel.

The roiling dust and smoke envelop his Mantis.

EXT. FIELDMASTER SEVEN - DAY

Chunks of twisted debris rain down. One the size of a Mantis crashes on the FieldMaster near Seven's Bot.

SEVEN'S BOT
Jack Flowerdew?

The dust and smoke settles. No sign of Jack ...

...until his Mantis zips up over the lip of FieldMaster Seven, beaten-up but still airborne.

JACK (VO)
I'm here, Seven.

INT. JACK'S MANTIS - MOVING - DAY

Jack turns the craft around.

JACK
Hold this position unless worms approach. I have a rogue robot to pretend to chase.

The Mantis zooms off.

INT. JACK'S MANTIS - MOVING - DAY

Jack scans the farm through his data glasses.

He sees numbers by the handful of FieldMasters still harvesting. He notes where Ben's is.

JACK
There you are.

He banks the Mantis toward the pumphouse.

EXT. PUMPHOUSE - DAY

Jack emerges from the Mantis as Achird touches the horizon.

He reads the labels on the barrels of chemicals Ingrid dropped off and shakes his head, disgusted.

INT. PUMPHOUSE - DAY

Jack heads straight for the control console. He calls up the map of where the pumps pull water from.

Except for pump eight's area all the branches are green.

JACK
Sync with my glasses.

The number "30" blinks red on the map.

JACK (CONT'D)
Reverse flow to pump four.

The branches around Ben's location turn yellow.

Jack opens the valve of the "Special Sauce" tank.

JACK (CONT'D)
(to himself)
Happy hour, everyone.

He heads out.

EXT./INT. JACK'S MANTIS - DAY

Jack clambers in and tries to start the Mantis. A "Low Power" light catches him up short.

He scans the area for another option and seems to spot one.

EXT. PLAINS OF GOSHEN FARM - NIGHT

The horizon still glows with a dim red half-light. One of the moons rises on the other horizon.

A FieldMaster in the distance chugs away, its lights on.

Jack, on a Skorpyon, blasts across a harvested field.

His data glasses are in night-vision mode. Through them he sees one of the last swaths of unharvested Dekacorn ahead.

Something about the size of the A.T.V. has knocked a path through the cornstalks. He follows the path.

IN THE DEKACORN

Ten-foot stalks loom on either side. Jack slows, then stops.

He sees the Grain Elevator bot's A.T.V. ahead. He grabs a hand-held spotlight and proceeds on foot.

JACK
 (to himself)
 Okay, Jack, time to act as stupid
 as Ben thinks you are.

Tread marks lead away from the A.T.V.. He follows.

The bot sits, apparently out of power, between rows.

Jack takes a cautious step. Another. The third produces a sharp clack, then a wince, then a scream. He collapses.

He sees his foot caught in an improvised snare chained to a stake in the ground. Jack stares at the thing, pain and disbelief competing for control of his face.

His attempts to pry it off fail -- he can't get leverage.

The bot's head lights up. Ben's face appears in lieu of the usual cartoon.

BEN (VO)
 Jack! You found the rogue bot!

JACK
 (through clenched teeth)
 Rogue, yeah. First it freezes Arky
 and then it sets out gopher traps.

He tries a different approach: pulling the stake out and using it to pry the snare open.

BEN (VO)
 You hurt?

JACK
 Only my pride.
 (attempts to stand, fails)
 And my ankle.

BEN (VO)
 I'm going to strip that thing down
 and find out why it went berserk.

INT. FIELDMASTER THIRTY'S COCKPIT - NIGHT

Ben has a map up with Jack's location blinking.

BEN
 Right after I come get you.

EXT. PLAINS OF GOSHEN FARM - IN THE DEKACORN - NIGHT

With difficulty Jack gets up and stays up.

BEN (VO)
Where are you going?

Jack ignores him and pushes through the stalks. The bot follows.

THE EDGE OF THE UNHARVESTED DEKACORN

looms like a starchy palisade in the darkness. A spot of light within the stalks grows brighter.

BEN (OS) (CONT'D)
Seriously, Jack, stay put.

Jack, using the two-foot-and-change stake as an improvised cane, hobbles into view. He plops down on the ground.

JACK
(exhausted)
Don't mind... if I do.

The bot, Ben's face and all, emerges from the DekaCorn.

The lights of a FieldMaster come up over a gentle rise a mile away. They blink off and on again as it approaches.

BEN (VO)
Here I am to save the day.

JACK
Watch me jump for joy.

BEN (VO)
Get some painkillers in you, wrap a HealzAll around your ankle, you'll be good as new.

JACK
Shame we can't fix Arky that easy.

Ben's face tightens.

JACK (CONT'D)
So was her freezing to death a backup plan in case she managed to not suffocate?

Ben's expression freezes then relaxes. He chuckles.

BEN (VO)

And here I thought musicians were stupid. Oh, wait. You're sitting on the ground crippled and I'm driving a million tons of hungry FieldMaster toward you.

Jack seems a tiny bit less anxious than one might expect.

JACK

Arky always said my timing was off.

BEN (VO)

Arky, Arky, Arky. Can we please stop talking about her?

JACK

Sore point? Like maybe you're embarrassed it took you so long to figure out she was still a cop?

BEN (VO)

(chatty)

I'll get over it. Not like anyone is going to be able to contradict my version of events.

The FieldMaster blocks the horizon, the churning blades of its header unit centered on Jack's tiny figure, their gnashing like an advancing wall of hi-hat cymbals.

JACK

So how many people are you willing to kill in the name of DekaCorn?

BEN (VO)

Not just the corn, buddy. Having it come out that GrosGrain wiped out aliens to farm their planets would be bad enough, but if people found out we missed one? Awkward. The stock would tank.

JACK

You're insane.

BEN (VO)

No, I'm with Human Resources. Time for a little right-sizing.

JACK
You should talk with the other
stakeholders first.

BEN (VO)
The what?

Through his data glasses, Jack sees twenty icons labeled "Unknown Seismic Anomaly" converging on his location: the area where he's pumping the worm's favorite libation.

JACK
Concerned local citizens.

INTERCUT ALL

An alarm goes off in the FieldMaster's cockpit. The same dots blink onto Ben's map.

Halfway between Jack and the combine, twenty slateworms erupt from the ground in a shower of soil and DekaCorn husks.

BEN
Shit!

He hits the brakes.

The FieldMaster shudders and stops.

Still half-underground, the slateworms are nearly as tall as the FieldMaster. None have visible cyber modifications.

Ben, stunned, watches them sway like oversized cobras.

Jack leans forward, unsure how his plan will play out.

Then...

One by one, the slateworms retreat into the ground.

Jack, crestfallen, sees their dots scatter through his data glasses.

Ben laughs in relief and triumph.

BEN (CONT'D)
Guess your pals decided they didn't
want to mess with a FieldMaster
after all, buddy.

He starts the harvester rolling again. It's only seconds away from Jack.

For a moment Jack looks properly terrified -- but surprise pushes the fear off his face.

Through his glasses he gets a brief glimpse of a much larger "anomaly" coming from deep below them...

...in the form of a much bigger slateworm breaching the surface. Its head is level with the FieldMaster's cockpit.

Both Jack and Ben's jaws drop.

Luminescent streaks down its back flare like fiber-optic cable. A dozen silver pods by them open to revealing those pointy "weapon-like" devices the gang discussed earlier.

Ben's eyes get big.

The slateworm turns to the left. Bright blue pulses flow to the pointy bits. The worm's head sweeps right.

The blades and the rest of the header unit on the FieldMaster briefly glow a matching blue. Then they stop, because they're gone.

The rest of the now-toothless FieldMaster remains intact. It's nearly on top of the worm now.

Ben pounds the arm of his seat.

BEN (CONT'D)
Goddammit! You stupid dirt-eating...

The worm's head "faces" the cockpit. Ben freezes.

BEN (CONT'D)
...oh, fuck. Jack? Jack? Do something!

The worm rears back, a towering question mark lined up with the cab.

Jack regards Ben's terrified face on the bot head with contempt.

JACK
Sorry, I don't speak slateworm.

He imitates Ben's gun-like gesture.

JACK (CONT'D)
Buddy.

Ben shrieks.

The worm lunges at the cab, crushing it in one blow. Or maybe two. Okay, three.

The bot's head goes dark.

The FieldMaster grinds to a halt.

The worm shakes debris off, then turns toward Jack.

Jack, trembling, leans heavily on his ersatz cane.

He stumbles back as the soil under the bot, right next to him, crumbles.

The bot first tips over into the hole, then unexpectedly takes flight: another, "smaller" slateworm's head hurled it.

The bot hits the side of the FieldMaster and shatters.

EXT. PLAINS OF GOSHEN FARM - NIGHT

The new worm slowly lowers its head. Though smaller than its pimped-out cousin, the thing still dwarfs Jack.

It opens a mouth big enough to drive a Skorpyon into.

Jack flinches reflexively, takes a peek when he realizes he's not Worm Chow yet, and gapes.

Arky steps out of the slateworm's mouth. She pats the side of its head. It slinks back into its hole and disappears.

The big weaponized worm follows suit, moving faster than anything its size has a right to.

Jack remembers to breathe.

JACK
You were dead.

Arky nods. She crouches to get a look at Jack's leg.

Her tone is a little distant.

ARKY
The bone doesn't appear broken.

JACK
(recovers a little)
Broken, schmoken. You were dead.
Why aren't you still dead?

ARKY
It's complicated.

JACK

The nitrogen cycle is complicated.
This is more like impossible.

ARKY

We needed to be alive to stop
Doherty and save you.

Jack mouths "we?" and glances at the disabled FieldMaster.

JACK

The worms.
(swallows hard)
Their masters.

She nods.

ARKY

We required a relay. Despite
respiratory failure, this female's
form remains fundamentally sound.

JACK

You took over her body.

ARKY

After minor repairs. Actually, her
inert consciousness made it easier.
Active human minds are...

She looks like she's trying to remember something.

ARKY (CONT'D)

...slippery. Like...

A little more exasperated this time.

ARKY (CONT'D)

...grabbing a fish with your bare
hands.

(puzzled frown)

Your language's idioms are
inefficient.

JACK

We prefer "colorful."

ARKY

Of course you do.

Jack rubs the back of his neck.

JACK

Thanks for saving my life.

ARKY

A practical matter, to some extent. We wished to have a... neighborly chat. Our attempts to contact you like civilized beings, by modulating the local star's magnetic field, went unnoticed.

JACK

Oh, we noticed. I'm glad you didn't boil off the atmosphere.

ARKY

That was our backup plan.

Jack blinks.

ARKY (CONT'D)

Now to business, before telepathic control causes permanent brain damage to this female.

JACK

You don't damage the slateworms, do you?

ARKY

Our larval stage possesses only rudimentary intelligence.

JACK

Larval? The worms --

ARKY

Our offspring. And our connection to the surface.

JACK

So... guard dogs. Scouts.

ARKY

That is one way of looking at it.

(frowns)

Two ways.

(frowns more)

How do humans communicate at all?

Jack shrugs. Arky tilts her head.

ARKY (CONT'D)

This female's memory suggests communication issues often lead to mating ritual failure.

JACK
We can be kinda larval too.

ARKY
But she also reminds us of the
other reason we saved you.

JACK
She thinks I have a redeeming
quality?

ARKY
You stopped the injection of
intoxicants into the aquifer.

JACK
Intoxicants?

ARKY
Mercury and cadmium compounds.

An exasperated, almost parental tone edges into her voice.

ARKY (CONT'D)
The oxygen compounds you used were
bad enough, but at least those are
short-lived highs. It takes weeks
for them to sober up after a heavy
metal bender.

JACK
I know the feeling.

ARKY
Until then they just... tunnel
around causing trouble. Like
knocking down your grain storage
structure.

JACK
Well, we were the ones that got
them drunk.

He gets serious.

JACK (CONT'D)
I'll make sure we stop pumping
anything down there.

Arky doesn't respond.

JACK (CONT'D)
Annnnd you won't fry us with your
star?

ARKY
 So be it, Jack Flowerdew. Take
 heed: we will not warn you again.

Arky's eyes roll up. She collapses. Jack tries to catch her, but his leg says no.

The two of them end up tangled in the dirt.

JACK
 Arky? Arky? Are you okay?
 (panics)
 Are you still there?

Her eyes focus. She stares at him, mystified.

ARKY
 Jack? What are you doing here?

She rapidly disentangles herself from him, then looks around. Her confusion deepens.

ARKY (CONT'D)
 And why are we harvesting in April?

JACK
 It's October. Do you remember the
 past six months at all?

Her blank stare answers him.

Jack looks overwhelmed at the prospect of explaining.

JACK (CONT'D)
 Me being assigned here...

He brightens, inspired.

JACK (CONT'D)
 ...by... InterCorp. To help you
 with the whole slateworm and H-R
 thing? Investigating Ben?

ARKY
 (flat)
 You... work for InterCorp Security.

JACK
 I do now.

He nods at the pulverized cab of the FieldMaster.

JACK (CONT'D)
 We can close the books. The worms
 dealt with Ben.

Arky's head pivots between Jack and the pulverized cockpit.

ARKY
 Oh. I see.

JACK
 (faux amazement)
 This is so unreal. You contact the
 underground aliens, the ones the
 worms are the larval form of,
 figure out they made Achird flare
 up to get our attention, and now
 none of this rings a bell?

ARKY
 (deeply confused)
 Ah...

JACK
 Well, you did say telepathic
 contact with them ran a risk of
 inducing amnesia.
 (shakes head sadly)
 It's so unfair... you make the
 first successful contact with
 another intelligent species and you
 don't even remember.

Arky starts to get into the idea.

ARKY
 Wow. First contact.

Jack nods agreeably.

ARKY (CONT'D)
 Good thing you were here. You
 deserve some credit too.

JACK
 Oh, no, no. And even if I did, I'm
 deep cover. You can't even mention
 me in your report.

ARKY
 (dubious)
 Wait -- I'm deep cover.

JACK

I'm deeper. There... isn't even a word for how deep I am.

Arky shoots him a "really?" look, but then glances over at the busted FieldMaster again. When she looks back at him it's with a mix of interest and trepidation.

ARKY

Hey... these last six months... I didn't... I mean, we weren't... you know... again. Were we?

Jack sighs as he reaches his ethical limit.

JACK

You know InterCorp policy about fraternizing on assignment.

ARKY

Oh, right.
(a little wistful)
Policy.

Jack picks up on her wistfulness.

JACK

I mean, I felt kinda iffy just asking you to play duets again.

He looks hopeful. Arky slowly smiles.

ARKY

Don't recall duets in the manual.

She stands, then extends a hand to help him up.

ARKY (CONT'D)

Hope you've got a ride.

He leans on her. She lets him.

JACK

Back this way. Sorry to slow you down.

ARKY

Sounds like we aren't in a hurry any more.

They walk into the DekaCorn. Jack's daydream music starts.

ARKY (OS) (CONT'D)

So... you're really with InterCorp.

JACK (OS)
(sighs)
No. Not really.

ARKY (OS)
Yeah, didn't think so. You're not
security material.

The music swells as Jack's spotlight recedes into the stalks.

ARKY (OS) (CONT'D)
No big deal. Not sure I am either.

JACK (OS)
Everything else is true, though.
You saved us.

ARKY (OS)
Yeah?

DAYDREAM - INT. CLUB STAGE - NIGHT

Jack's plays as smooth as silk, his energy infectious. Arky,
blissful, gives him a solid beat to wrap around.

Off to the side, the remnants of a drum set surround a huge,
ragged hole in the floor.

JACK
Yeah.

They continue to play, passing the lead back and forth.

FADE TO BLACK.