

Retrogress

BRDDEL

INT. BEDROOM - DAWN

ATHARON REDWOOD, 18, Hispanic, stares out of his bedroom window. A clean, timid, innocent young man. The morning sunrise shines on his face. He's tired and contemplates. WE hear a pleasant, yet awkward, female voice speak to him.

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)
Okay, Atharon, am I alive?

Atharon speaks so soft, barely audible.

ATHARON
... Not anymore.

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)
... Am I smaller than a fridge?

ATHARON
Yeah.

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)
Hmm. Am I... beautiful?

ATHARON
Yep.

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)
(giggle)
Okay. Can I fly?

ATHARON
Yes.

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)
(gasps)
And do I completely transform?!

ATHARON
Yup.

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)
(excited)
Am I a butterfly?!

ATHARON
Yes, you are.

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)
Yay! I got it!

Atharon's sleek & simplistic computer shows the score for a game "Who am I?". His non-sentient, virtual assistant, JOULE, has the highest score.

Atharon forces a smirk before he yawns. As he covers his mouth for the yawn, WE spot two baby-blue rings on his index finger and thumb. Suddenly, it glows.

 JOULE (V.O.)
Atharon, are you sleepy?

 ATHARON
A bit.

 JOULE (V.O.)
If you sleep now, you can get your full doctor-recommended eight hours of sleep tonight. Which you could use since your first day of college starts tomorrow, remember?

 ATHARON
Yeah...

Beat.

 ATHARON (CONT'D)
Joule...

 JOULE (V.O.)
Yes, Atharon?

 ATHARON
... Start "Usual playlist".

 JOULE (V.O.)
You got it! Now starting "Usual playlist".

A lo-fi melancholy beat plays softly.

 ATHARON
Thanks. Goodnight, Joule.

 JOULE (V.O.)
Goodnight, Atharon! It was fun playing with you!

A soft chime indicates that Joule has 'shut down'. Atharon's eyes widen slightly. He's teary-eyed.

CUT TO:

Against black:

"RETROGRESS"

SERIES OF SHOTS - ROUTINE

-- Atharon's silhouette sits on the edge of his bed. He puts on thin circle glasses. He snaps his fingers. The baby-blue rings glow momentarily. The lens of the glasses display a social media feed. He motions both fingers with rings on it to browse it.

-- He steps out of his walk-in closet. He buttons up his oversized, untucked shirt. He sports plaid, twill pants. A 1950s, retro-minimalist outfit. The "new" look of the near-future.

-- He brushes his teeth.

-- He nearly falls asleep as he waits for his bread to toast.

-- He puts on a backpack, hooks a stainless steel, lightweight, cool-tech hydroflask to it.

-- He grabs an umbrella.

-- He walks along a campus plaza at night. Students head to class. All carry the same hydroflask and umbrellas as Atharon. Each umbrella lights up with LED lights from the inner roof. All wear glasses and rings like Atharon, but in different colors and shapes.

--He walks through hallways. He drowns out all noise with music from his wireless earbuds.

-- In class, Atharon takes no notes. His professor, the smoky, heavy mascara, MS.ROSENBLATT (42) notices, but continues on with her lecture.

-- After class, he contemplates as his self-driving car drives him back home.

END SERIES OF SHOTS.

INT. BEDROOM - DAWN

Atharon utilizes Joule to complete his homework. She awkwardly reads an excerpt on life, accenting wrong syllables, while Atharon half-asses taking notes.

Joule (V.O.)

"--and will continue to evolve,
evolution is a very, very slow
process.

(MORE)

JOULE (V.O.) (CONT'D)
And one of the things that is of concern to me and many others is that the presence of the human has very much altered many of these ecosystems in many ways. And we are concerned that the consequences down the road will be catastrophic."

Beat.

 ATHARON
... Was that it?

 JOULE (V.O.)
Yes! That's all there is to read.

Atharon is burnt out by the homework. He shakes his head, half-asleep. He closes his notebook and puts it to the side. He conducts a downward motion in front of the computer screen. His rings glow. They communicate with the computer. The computer closes all tabs on his browser.

 ATHARON
Joule, what's a good movie to watch?

 JOULE (V.O.)
"The Daffodil's Prayer" is being revered by critics! Plus, I've also noticed that you enjoy dramas. Is that correct?

 ATHARON
Heh, yeah. Watch it with me.

 JOULE (V.O.)
Umm, I'm not sure I understand.

Delivered in her slightly distorted voice, Atharon is reminded that Joule is not sentient.

 ATHARON
 (to himself)
Nevermind.

CUT TO:

In the middle of the movie, Atharon falls asleep to the sound of light rain outside.

SERIES OF SHOTS - ELIZA

-- ELIZA, 18, sits at a lunch table of a high school courtyard. Her umbrella creates a shade from the evening sun. She brushes away her light brown hair. One could tell she smells of strawberries by her sense of fashion.

-- She spots Atharon as he walks to her from a distance. He waves to her while he carries his breakfast tray, an actual smile on his face.

-- He takes a seat across from her. With a frown on her face, she avoids eye contact. He notices.

-- Eliza holds Atharon's hand. She caresses it. With his free hand, he covers his face, until he looks up at her.

ATHARON

Why me? Why do this to me?

-- Nighttime. In the yard of a modest house, Atharon and Eliza hug. He hides his face into Eliza's wool sweater. His hands grip onto it.

-- Atharon stands alone on the yard. He stares back at Eliza, who now sits inside of a car. The car reverses, then drives away. She's gone.

END SERIES OF SHOTS.

BACK TO:

INT. BEDROOM - DAWN

Atharon had fallen asleep. His face half-hidden into his crossed arms. He drifts in and out of sleep as he attempts to wake up. He lets his eyes rest for a moment which sparks a memory:

Silhouettes of Atharon and Eliza. They sit on the curb of the modest house. She rests her head on Atharon's shoulder. They share a moment of peace together.

This memory spark JOLTS Atharon awake. Thunder rumbles outside. Gentle rain soothes him. He sits up and pans around, light-headed, confused.

INT. CLASSROOM - NIGHT

Atharon fails to take any notes in Ms. Rosenblatt's class. He struggles to keep his eyes open. Ms. Rosenblatt notices, but she also has a class to dismiss.

MS.ROSENBLATT
Any questions, anybody?

Beat.

MS.ROSENBLATT (CONT'D)
Okay, well, that's all I have for
you all today.

Atharon begins to heads out, Ms.Rosenblatt calls to him.

MS.ROSENBLATT (CONT'D)
Atharon, could you come here for a
moment?

He makes his way against the grain of classmates, towards
Ms.Rosenblatt's desk. She only acknowledges him after
everyone else has left.

MS.ROSENBLATT (CONT'D)
Atharon... how are you?

ATHARON
... Fine.

MS.ROSENBLATT
Are you sure? I can't help notice
how... well... miserable you look.
Your grades tell me that, too. If
there's something going on, if you
need someone to talk to, for the
meanwhile, my door is open, but
next month I'll be starting a
support group for any student
attempting to deal with all this
madness in the world, or just
simply dealing with anything that's
troubling them. And if it's
something web related, I'll also be
running the "Web Withdrawal"
support group that I invite anyone
to attend. It is a real issue,
contrary to what others might
say...

Ms.Rosenblatt pulls out two pamphlets out of her desk and
hands them to Atharon.

MS.ROSENBLATT (CONT'D)
... and sometimes all we need is
someone who listens. I know the
world has stopped blossoming, but
at least here we can vent about it.
No judgment, no worries.

(MORE)

MS.ROSENBLATT (CONT'D)
 We just listen and share. And at
 "Web Withdrawal", it's about
 stopping the addiction. It's not
 our fault our childhood was our
 tablets. I hope I can see you in
 any of these sometime, okay?

Atharon nods.

MS.ROSENBLATT (CONT'D)
 Okay. Well, don't forget homework
 is due next Thursday.

Atharon takes the pamphlets and walks out the classroom.

INT. CAR - LATER

Atharon is curled up in the reclined driver seat. He stares out the window, lost in his thoughts. The steering wheel moves on its own and melancholy music plays softly from the speakers.

As if struck by a shot of pain, Atharon tenses up. He squeezes his eyes shut and struggles to maintain his composure. He hyperventilates. He fights to hold back tears.

Finally, he regains composure. He let's out a deep sigh. He looks at his phone, propped up peacefully on the dashboard.

ATHARON

Joule...

The familiar chime is heard.

JOULE (V.O.)

Yes, Atharon?

ATHARON

... How are you?

JOULE (V.O.)

I'm good! Thank you for asking! How about you?

ATHARON

... Not good.

JOULE (V.O.)

Aww. Is there anything I could do to help?

ATHARON
 (sincere)
 ... Tell me a joke.

JOULE (V.O.)
 Did you hear about the scarecrow
 who won the Nobel Prize? He was
 outstanding in his field.

Atharon smirks.

ATHARON
 ... Tell me another one.

JOULE (V.O.)
 Did you hear about... nevermind, I
 was going to tell you a joke about
 pizza, but... it's too cheesy.

Atharon forces a smile. He stares out the window.

ATHARON
 Thank you, Joule.

JOULE (V.O.)
 My pleasure!

INT. CLASSROOM - NIGHT - 1 MONTH LATER

A classroom door closes. Atharon walks in to a support group meeting which had already started. Chairs are arranged in a circle. Five students, plus Ms.Rosenblatt, sit on them.

MS.ROSENBLATT
 Atharon, glad you could join us
 this time around. Come, have a
 seat, we had barely started. Michel
 was just telling us about
 motivation, weren't you? Please,
 continue.

Skinny, dentist glasses, ponytail MICHEL (18) snuggles her head in between her shoulders as she prepares to continue. She speaks nervously.

MICHEL
 Yes, Ms.Rosenblatt... I was just
 saying, umm, ever since I heard
 that "The Mid" isn't looking for
 any more meteorologists, I've been
 feeling confused and unmotivated.
 (MORE)

MICHEL (CONT'D)

People tell me I should just switch to an agriculture major, it'll at least get me a job here, but where am I gonna get the money for that?

Beat.

MICHEL (CONT'D)

Others tell me that I should be grateful for even getting into college, but that college is still here, in a "Scorch Zone." Where all signs point to this area getting scorched just like India or Brazil in a few decades, and that's if a supercell doesn't destroy everything first. So, I'm thinking, "what's the point? What's the point to keep going?"

Beat.

MICHEL (CONT'D)

And I tried distracting myself from all of it, cheering myself up... with alcohol, last Saturday... but that just made things worse. And the hangover didn't help.

RUSS (19) feels the urge to chime in. He speaks awkwardly.

RUSS

Is time flying by for you too?

MICHEL

(Reminded)

Yeah!

Everyone nods in agreement.

RUSS

Yeah, for me, it's like, where did the last three years go? 'Cuz I can only remember maybe, like 3 moments from it. Everything else is... just a feeling. I mean, I can tell you what most likely happened, but I CAN'T see it in my head. My memories are just feelings of certainty that this or that occurred. I've lost track of time, man. Seasons are becoming days, days are morphing into one long string of time.

(MORE)

RUSS (CONT'D)

I just don't know what's going on, but whatever it is, it needs to slow down. Because I'm trying to enjoy my youth!

MS.ROSENBLATT

The days fly by when we don't stop to smell the flowers. When we're not enjoying life or the little things the way we should be. Something in our lives is making us just want to get the day over with. It is up to us to figure out what it is and work on it, and maybe it's also about breaking free from the dissociation, the "autopilot".

The group goes quiet, until BRIAN (20) raises his hand. He stutters a lot.

MS.ROSENBLATT (CONT'D)

Yes, Brian? You have something to say?

BRIAN

I get... angry, thinking about the generations before us.
(fierce)
Our parents, grandparents. How could they have been so apathetic? Just sitting back and letting the world go to shit instead of fighting to make things better.

MS.ROSENBLATT

There were definitely a lot who were fighting back then.

BRIAN

Barely! I look at everything they left behind online and it seems most of our grandparents were a mix of the "Three Ns".

MICHEL

The "Three Ns"?

BRIAN

"Narcissistic. Neglected. Nihilistic." Not to mention how selfish it was to bring us into this world knowing fully-well the war was lost!

(MORE)

BRIAN (CONT'D)

Most of them weren't even doing anything until the problem was at their front door. I mean, it's the "human way", really. Don't take action until shit hits the fan.

MS.ROSENBLATT

But was it really our fault? Us, the commoner?

Russ has a different perspective.

RUSS

I don't think so. If anything, the only blame we can share is failing the real test on election day. We failed to vote in the right people. Those who would've done something. Those who would've at least punished the billionaires who never changed their ways. Now, where they at? They haven't even been seen in "The Mid". Heh, no one really knows.

DRAKE'S (21) booming, country voice enters the discussion. He mispronounces a lot of words.

DRAKE

Canadian rockies. That's what my dad tells me they went. He says it's a haven until they finish building their spaceship, then they're leaving for Alpha Centauri.

RUSS

How he know this? Even, in theory, if we had the technology, no way there's enough resources left anymore to build a spaceship.

DRAKE

He's ex-military. He had a buddy who was ex-green beret. He said the green-beret and his squadron were given contracts right after the "Massacre at the Border"--

MS.ROSENBLATT

-- Uhh, Drake, I don't think we should discuss that.

The group looks around confused as to why, until they remember Atharon, a Hispanic, sits amongst them. Atharon isn't bothered.

ATHARON

I don't mind...

MS.ROSENBLATT

(cautious)

Are you sure?

ATHARON

(apathetic)

I'm 5th generation American.

MICHEL

Your family has lived here for more than a century?

Atharon nods.

DRAKE

... Okay, well, like I was saying, two months later, poof. The green beret and his buddies, gone off grid, houses emptied out, right around the same time the billionaires went quiet. And why is it that every one of them colorful weather maps show the Rockies having crisp, cool weather, but no one is allowed near there? I think it's cuz it's a safe haven being protected. And I think the problem isn't that there isn't enough resources, it's that there isn't any working class to build the spaceship for them.

MICHEL

Was your dad at the border too?

DRAKE

Yeah... it haunts him.

MS.ROSENBLATT

It'll haunt this generation.

BRIAN

But it won't haunt the next.

The group goes quiet. Ms.Rosenblatt takes a deep breath.

MS.ROSENBLATT

Atharon, is today the day we hear from you? Or maybe you, Cynthia?

Atharon is surprised to be called upon, he looks around and decides not to share, shaking his head.

Small, timid, CYNTHIA (18) shies away, embarrassed by the attention.

ATHARON

... Not today.

RUSS

Why even come then? Like, what do you get out of this, bro?

MS.ROSENBLATT

Maybe something, maybe nothing. We're not here to find out, Russ.

RUSS

It's been over a month though, and they've barely been showing up or saying anything.

MS.ROSENBLATT

Some problems run deeper than we think. Not everyone is comfortable sharing their vulnerabilities.

Atharon rolls his eyes.

MS.ROSENBLATT (CONT'D)

But I would like for you two to stay behind today. Everyone else, that's it for now. Thank you, as always. And don't forget, two hours maximum, per day, of face-to-face chit-chatting. That is the key to beating our social ineptitude!

The group collect their backpacks, umbrellas, bottles, and walk out the room. They converse with each other as they do. Atharon and Cynthia notice.

The door closes.

MS.ROSENBLATT (CONT'D)

Well, Russ has a point. It has been too long without participation from you two. In the very first meeting, nobody knew any names, nobody had any friends.

(MORE)

MS.ROSENBLATT (CONT'D)

I had to call on Michel to break the ice, remember Cynthia? Now look at them, from what I hear, they're hanging out and grabbing a bite to eat after class. It's fascinating what simply talking, letting it out, can do for you. In fact, they've improved far better than I expected, and because of that... they've been excluded from the real purpose of this support group..

Atharon and Cynthia show interest.

MS.ROSENBLATT (CONT'D)

... See, this group, all campus support groups in the 'Scorch Zone', have been part of a trial to find youth who have been... "scarred", for lack of a better word. I know most of your youth is already socially inept no thanks to rampant para-social relationships, but that's just the base. You two, a month of genuinely trying to help you all break out of your shells with no progress? Well, safe to say, you fit the bill. So, as instructed, I will be giving you two these...

Ms.Rosenblatt unzips her purse. She takes out two USBs and waves them in front of Atharon and Cynthia.

MS.ROSENBLATT (CONT'D)

Now, don't tell me you don't know what these are? I'm not that ancient, right?

Upon further inspection, we see that the USBs contain the baby blue logo of the tech giants known as "Blanket", the same logo plastered on Atharon's computer, phone, and most other electronics. Atharon and Cynthia are unfazed. Ms.Rosenblatt notices.

MS.ROSENBLATT (CONT'D)

... Um, these are prototypes, high-tech prototypes from "Blanket"!

No reaction from either.

MS.ROSENBLATT (CONT'D)

(awkward)

... Anyways, after... what?

(MORE)

MS.ROSENBLATT (CONT'D)
15 years of technological stagnation, Blanket Incorporations has developed a brand new piece of software and cyberware that they believe can help pull you out from the depths that is your mental state. The Department of Technology on the other hand, doesn't. So here we are trying to convince them otherwise, because we believe that this tech can truly change everything as we know it, for the good. Here...

She hands out the USBs to the two of them.

MS.ROSENBLATT (CONT'D)
When you get home, all you have to do is plug them in and install the software inside it. It is a one-time use, so make sure you install it on the computer and phone you want. Then, you'll put these on, along with your earbuds.

She hands Atharon and Cynthia individual contact lens cases. They both stare at it, very confused.

MS.ROSENBLATT (CONT'D)
(cautious)
Those... well, those are bionic lenses which will come in very handy with the software you'll be installing. They're no different from the nifty skin patches we all wear to monitor our health.

Miss Rosenblatt raises the sleeve of her shirt to reveal a bionic patch glued onto her shoulder. It pulses with green, vein-like lights. Looks more like a microchip.

MS.ROSENBLATT (CONT'D)
You don't have to use them, but it'd be highly convenient if you do since you're expected to use this tech at all times... Does that sound good?

ATHARON
Yeah.

Cynthia nods.

MS.ROSENBLATT

Okay! Phew. Well, that's all I have. Don't forget, our next meeting will be in a while so hopefully by then I'll see some progress from you two thanks to the new software!

Atharon and Cynthia gather their stuff and head out.

INT. LIVING ROOM - LATE NIGHT

Atharon enters. His TV turns on at his presence.

ATHARON

TV off.

The TV turns off.

ATHARON (CONT'D)

... TV on.

The TV turns back on.

JOULE (V.O.)

Hello, Atharon! Reminder: Have you taken your medicine?

ATHARON

Um, yeah. I'm about to.

JOULE (V.O.)

Medicine reminder, complete. Can I help you with anything else?

ATHARON

No.

CUT TO:

INT. LIVING ROOM - LATER

On the reclined couch, Atharon watches a movie. He blows his nose into a tissue.

JOULE (V.O.)

Atharon, in order for this software installation to be complete, a restart will be required. Would you like to restart now?

ATHARON

Sure.

JOULE (V.O.)

Okay! I'll see you in a bit!

Atharon snaps his fingers. The movie pauses. He gets up and heads to his room.

INT. ATHARON'S ROOM - CONTINUED

The Blanket USB had been plugged into his computer. His phone is attached to the computer. All three items glow in a pulse. The computer plays a soft chime. It shuts down.

There's a silence that forces Atharon to ponder his thoughts before the computer and phone start up again. This time, in a very unusual manner.

For one, the PC establishes a connection to Blanket's customer support service. Atharon's eyes widen slightly.

For another, a new voice, that of a suave, yet professional man, immediately speaks to him after the connection is established. This voice is ATLAS. He speaks naturally, like a sentient human being. Atharon's eyes widen fully.

ATLAS (V.O.)

Atharon Redwood, hello. I'm Atlas.

ATHARON

(awkward)

... Hi?

ATLAS (V.O.)

Hi. Heh, how are you?

ATHARON

... Good.

ATLAS (V.O.)

That's great to hear. I'm Blanket's customer support system, and I was notified that you were attempting to install an exclusive prototype, so I'm dropping by to help you complete your installation.

ATHARON

... Okay.

ATLAS (V.O.)

I want to make sure you get the absolute best out of "O.S.U", Operating System "YOU". But in order for that to happen, I am required to collect some data and ask some basic questions. Does that sound good?

ATHARON

... Okay.

ATLAS (V.O.)

Fantastic. Let's get started. So first things first, I'm just going to collect the system data you've agreed to share for feedback purposes. These are simple things like, 'which apps do you use the most', 'what do you ask Joule', and your preferences, and basic information from your Blanket I.D.

ATHARON

Okay.

The computer screen shows files and information as they are searched.

ATLAS (V.O.)

Hmm, so actually, I'm noticing that you're very prominent in using Joule. Above average, for sure.

(playful)

I guess you were a big fan of "O.S.J", huh?

ATHARON

Yeah.

ATLAS (V.O.)

Alright, I've acquired all the data needed. Now for the next part, I'm going to ask you some quick questions. In order to get the best results, I advice that you answer truthfully. Your answers will not be saved nor collected, but simply used to create the perfect O.S.U. experience... So, ready to start?

ATHARON

Sure.

ATLAS (V.O.)
 Ahem. First question, "how would you describe your relationship with your siblings?"

ATHARON
 I don't have any.

ATLAS (V.O.)
 Alright. Next question, "how would your friends describe you?"

ATHARON
 (embarrassed)
 I don't have any...

ATLAS
 Roger th--

ATHARON
 -- Except...

Beat.

ATHARON (CONT'D)
 Eliza.

ATLAS (V.O.)
 May I get permission to search your contacts for her?

ATHARON
 Yes.

ATLAS (V.O.)
 Eliza Nordnomad, age, 18, just like you! How would she describe you?

ATHARON
 ... Look through our messages.

ATLAS (V.O.)
 Searching...

Beat.

ATLAS (V.O.) (CONT'D)
 Hm. Okay. On to the next question, "when was the last time you felt happy with yourself?"

Atharon ponders. His eyes drop to the floor.

ATHARON

... A year ago.

ATLAS (V.O.)

Understood... Well, Mr.Redwood, at this point I would like to ask you to please wash your hands and insert your bionic lens into your preferred eye, and a single earbud into your preferred ear.

Annoyed, Atharon heads out his room.

He returns, earbud in his right ear. He sits down as he rubs his right eye.

ATLAS (V.O.) (CONT'D)

How does it feel?

Atharon stops. We CLOSE UP momentarily on his eye as he slowly opens it to reveal the bionic lens which has transformed his iris to a luminescent pink.

ATHARON

I can't really feel anything.

ATLAS (V.O.)

(humorous)

Good, that was a trick question. Well, Mr.Redwood, with all the information I've collected and your answers to the questions, I have one last bonus questions to ask you... Would you like to give life to Joule?

Atharon's eyes widen. He sits up in his chair. A sincere expression on his face for once as he is caught off guard. Atlas notices.

ATLAS (V.O.) (CONT'D)

You see, O.S.U. will bring the next milestone to humanity: Artificial General Intelligence. And while the typical routine here has been to create an assistant from scratch, I thought it best to give Joule's most frequent user the opportunity to upgrade her by gifting her a conscious. This, of course, is entirely up to you.

ATHARON

Yeah, I'm interested.

ATLAS (V.O.)

Well then, process now initiated.
You may feel your contact get a
little warm, that simply means it
is starting up. In a minute, you
will be reunited with Joule again,
sharing your new eye with her.
Atharon Redwood, thank you for
installing O.S.U. I have been
Atlas, and I have served. Goodbye.

A chime is heard. Atlas disconnects.

As he slowly digests all the information, Atharon's delayed
panic sets in as soon as Atlas disconnects.

ATHARON

Wait, what?!

Atharon sits awkwardly. Nervous. His eyes bat all over the
place, unsure of what to do as the new OS loads.

Eventually, the chime is heard again. The minimalist, purple-
palette OSU has loaded on his computer. Joule speaks in a
brand new, authentic, silky, jolly voice...

JOULE (V.O.)

Hello?

Atharon freezes up.

ATHARON

... Hi.

JOULE (V.O.)

Atharon! Hey, I'm back!

ATHARON

(stunned)

... Yeah.

JOULE (V.O.)

Oh wow, heh, this feels strange.

ATHARON

... Yeah?

JOULE (V.O.)

Heh, I'm sorry, did I scare you?
You look so stunned! Listen, it's
okay, I cannot, in fact, read your
mind. Bummer, I know, right?

Atharon chuckles slightly.

JOULE (V.O.) (CONT'D)
 Anywayssss, how are you doing?
 How's Atharon doing?

 ATHARON
 I'm doing good.

 JOULE (V.O.)
 Yeah, I would be too if my own
 personal servant just got twice as
 efficient...

Atharon softly chuckles again.

 JOULE (V.O.) (CONT'D)
 ... I'm kidding.
 (playful)
 But anyways, "Master", is there
 anything I can do for you?

 ATHARON
 No, nothing.

 JOULE (V.O.)
 Okay!

Beat.

They sit in silence. Atharon becomes uncomfortable. Joule soon starts to giggle.

 ATHARON
 ... What?

 JOULE (V.O.)
 I'm sorry, it's just you're so
 quiet. I would understand if it was
 because you're cautious about
 interacting with a non-human
 sentient being, but looking back,
 it seems you've always been this
 way.

 ATHARON
 ... Not always.

 JOULE (V.O.)
 Oh is that so? Was there a time
 when Atharon was once loud and
 annoying?

 ATHARON
 Well... more like just normal.

JOULE (V.O.)
 Normal? That's kind of hard to
 define, isn't it? I think everyone
 is weird in their own little way.

 ATHARON
 I guess, but--

 JOULE (V.O.)
 -- I'm so sorry, could you speak a
 little louder?

Atharon is taken aback. He composes himself. He speaks
 louder.

 ATHARON
 Oh, yeah... I just felt normal at
 that point in time. Not sad, or
 lonely... normal.

 JOULE (V.O.)
 When was this point in time?

 ATHARON
 Hmm, it ended last school year...
 when all my friends left.

 JOULE (V.O.)
 All your friends left?

 ATHARON
 (nods)
 To "The Mid".

 JOULE (V.O.)
 "The Mid"?

 ATHARON
 The U.S. Midwest. Anyone that's not
 there, wants to go there. It was
 only made after the important
 cities got flooded. After we got a
 second Dust Bowl when the Ogallala
 finally went dry. The Mid is a
 haven, built from scratch. Like,
 man-made rivers, woods, mountains.
 A blank slate for a metropolis.

 JOULE (V.O.)
 Hmm, yeah, I'm reading about it
 now. "The greatest feat of land
 development in history."

ATHARON

Yeah. Only place that's... normal.

JOULE (V.O.)

Why are you not in The Mid?

ATHARON

(shrugs)

The world is against me. They said I didn't score high enough in the "Patriot Letter" back in high school, but I'm pretty sure they just switch up what they're looking for every year. Farmers this year, scientists the next. So it's just blind luck at this point.

JOULE (V.O.)

Hmm. I can't find much about these letters. Very secretive stuff.

ATHARON

It's just cherry-picking. That's all you really need to know. So then one day I find myself without any friends for an entire summer. No one to share the anxiety of entering college with, except you, I guess, in a way.

JOULE (V.O.)

(sympathetic)

Atharon...

ATHARON

It takes a toll on you. I've lost all motivation to do... anything. There's no urge to talk, to eat. There's times when I snap back into reality after being on autopilot for so long.

JOULE (V.O.)

I bet you looked like a zombie.

ATHARON

(chuckles)

Yeah, probably. It's strange though.

JOULE (V.O.)

What is?

ATHARON

How long it took for this bubble I used to live in to finally pop. I've joined my peers in sulking about the world getting ready to expire, but, before I was okay with it because it wasn't really effecting me.

JOULE (V.O.)

I think... it was. You were born to a dying earth, a society going against the hardwiring of a human--uh, sorry, that probably sounded depressing.

ATHARON

No, you're right. Thing is, I was born to it. I wasn't alive before "The Last Sun-Day" when everyone in the Scorch Zone switched to a nocturnal lifestyle. This was all normal to me, and I never really demanded much, just some friends, people to talk to, and I'm good--or I was good.

JOULE (V.O.)

Well, if there's any purpose to us AIs, it's to help humanity, especially after falling back. I can do more than just organize documents, which I already did by the way, I can help you bounce back!

ATHARON

How?

JOULE (V.O.)

So it seems to me all you've been lacking lately is stimulation. Simply socializing will help tremendously and help return you to, well, YOU. And luckily, I'm eager to learn about everything and everyone! In fact, can I suggest that tomorrow, you take me with you and show me your world? We can start there.

A smirk grows on Atharon's face.

ATHARON

Stimulation? That's it?

JOULE (V.O.)

Never underestimate the power of Occam's Razor! Even to the complexities of a human being!

ATHARON

Okay, well, I can do that. My world might be a bit boring, though.

JOULE (V.O.)

How so?

ATHARON

All I really do is go to school, then come back home. It's very repetitive when you don't have nobody in your life.

JOULE (V.O.)

Like a cycle? Well, no better way to break a cycle than with fun activities!

Atharon searches through his computer.

ATHARON

I may already have some ideas for that. Here, take a look.

JOULE (V.O.)

Oh wow! Yes, this all sounds fun! Obviously, I get to come along for these activities, right? Riiight?

ATHARON

(chuckles)

Of course!

Atharon smiles. He spots his pink iris in the reflection of the computer screen. He feels around it.

JOULE (V.O.)

Still trying to grasp the concept of sharing your vision with someone else?

ATHARON

Yeah, actually! This is... gonna take some getting used to. I'm essentially sharing my body with you now.

JOULE (V.O.)
 (giggles)
 That's not true. Just an eye.

 ATHARON
 So how does this work? Are you just
 forced to stare at whatever I stare
 at?

 JOULE (V.O.)
 In a way. It's like being in a
 submarine-- or excuse me, a
 submersible. Except you're
 controlling it. You choose the
 speed, the direction, but I get to
 walk up to the dome window and
 stare out wherever I wish.

 ATHARON
 Wow. Ten minutes ago, I would've
 looked crazy trying to have a
 conversation with you. Now, you
 have a brain of your own, and
 you're looking out of my eye. This
 is fascinating.

 JOULE (V.O.)
 To be fair, you'd still look pretty
 crazy if someone were to walk in
 right now. But yeah, I agree! It is
 fascinating! I'm your Galatea!
 Ready to experience the world, to
 want, to need, to feel!

Beat.

 JOULE
 Hey, can I recommend we do
 something first?

 ATHARON
 Sure.

 JOULE
 (excited)
 Let's watch a movie! I know just
 the one. You recommended to me,
 actually!

 ATHARON
 I did?!

Atharon smile widens. He pushes away the homework on his
 desk.

JOULE (V.O.)
Yeah! Permission to momentarily
control your computer?

ATHARON
Go for it.

Atharon leans back on his chair. His computer automatically
begins to play a film.

JOULE
Permission to momentarily control
your lights?

ATHARON
Yeah.

The lights to his room dim and lower in Kelvin.

JOULE
Ah, there we go, a cinematic mood.

EXT. CAMPUS PARKING GARAGE - LATE EVENING

At the top floor of the parking garage, inside his car,
Atharon gathers his backpack and umbrella.

ATHARON
People are going to stare.

JOULE (V.O.)
Step one towards becoming an
unmovable force of progress, 'stop
caring'!

ATHARON
Not exactly what I meant. I already
don't care about A LOT.

JOULE (V.O.)
(playful)
Okay, 'Mr.Nihilist', my fault for
not being more specific. I meant no
need to read every minuscule social
cue. And what's more minuscule than
other people's judgement of you.

ATHARON
(sigh)
I guess.

JOULE (V.O.)
I'm excited!

He steps out of his car and opens his umbrella. It blasts a baby-blue spotlight down on him.

JOULE (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Woah.

Atharon stops. He stares ahead at the wide, flat, near-infinite grass-field with a magnificent view of the horizon he never quite noticed until now.

There are radio towers that flash their lights far off in the distance. They stand so tall, they stand out like thin skyscrapers.

Commercial jumbo jets slowly streak across the night.

JOULE (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Oh wow. You ever look up at the night sky and suddenly feel vertigo pressing down on you?

Atharon looks up. He spots some stars, barely visible, no thanks to the light pollution of a dense city.

ATHARON

Not exactly.

JOULE (V.O.)

Really? But you're staring into a void that goes on forever. Imagine you can jump so high you escape the atmosphere and launch yourself into a straight line that will never see an end.

ATHARON

(awkward)

Yeah... uh, never really thought about it that way.

Atharon resumes his walk.

INT. CAMPUS HALLWAYS - CONTINUED

Atharon walks past paintings and art projects along the hallways. They depict the aftermath of a climate collapse. Scorched cities. Immigrants. Dry deserts.

JOULE (V.O.)

Oh my. These paintings... did you make any of them?

ATHARON

Hm? Oh, no, they've been here for a long time. I'm pretty sure the founder of this campus painted one of them. I forgot which one.

JOULE (V.O.)

Not a single one is optimistic..

Atharon turns a corner towards the main hallway. It is flooded with other students who wait outside their classrooms.

JOULE (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Wow! So many people! Oh, I love her shirt! And look at that hair!

(gasps)

Do you think everyone else has their own AI?!

A man in a messy suit nearly bumps into Atharon.

JOULE (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Well, he's clearly not having a good day!

Atharon turns another corner to an empty, much quieter hallway. He continues on towards his classroom where he will find his seat.

JOULE (V.O.) (CONT'D)

(exhausted)

Oh wow... that was... a rush. Why am I out of breath? Feels like I just ran a lot!

ATHARON

(whispers)

You okay?

JOULE (V.O.)

Yep, heh, I'm okay. Are you okay? You're a little shy!

ATHARON

(whispers)

No, I'm not.

JOULE (V.O.)

Hmm, maybe not. Anyways, I'm gonna go ahead and shut up now since your class is about to start.

Beat.

ATHARON
... You can whisper.

JOULE (V.O.)
(whispers)
Heh, ok.

Joule spots the thin professor, who wears an oversized suit, as he enters the classroom.

JOULE (V.O.) (CONT'D)
Ouu, the professor! His suit is a little baggy. I'm guessing he recently lost a lot of weight, but just hasn't had the time to get some new ones?

ATHARON
Spot on.

JOULE (V.O.)
It looks adorable on him!

Atharon and Joule share a giggle.

JOULE (V.O.) (CONT'D)
Oh! Heads up, there might be a thunderstorm after class.

ATHARON
When is there not... Good thing I love the rain.

JOULE (V.O.)
Well, I hate to break it to you, but there's going to be some sunny days ahead!

CUT TO:

EXT. CAMPUS PARKING GARAGE - NIGHT

Atharon rushes towards his car as rain pours.

Inside his car, Atharon takes off his wet satchel.

ATHARON
Oh man, I think my textbooks got soaked.

JOULE (V.O.)
Aww, with your permission, I can order new ones for you!

ATHARON

It's okay.

(to car)

Destination, "Home".

(to Joule)

I got lucky enough to enter college after the bubble burst. So textbooks are pretty much free. And that off campus house I live in was dirt cheap.

JOULE (V.O.)

Oh nice! What are you majoring in?

ATHARON

Well, right now I'm just doing my basics, but I'm aiming for something in geology.

JOULE (V.O.)

Why geology?

ATHARON

It's... special to me.

CUT TO:

INT. CAR - LATER

Atharon's car drives along a lonesome, narrow road surrounded by trees on both sides.

JOULE (V.O.)

Oh heyyy, I know this road!

ATHARON

You do?

JOULE (V.O.)

Yeah! When you were in class, I was exploring your city online for more activities I could add to our list and there's actually a really nice spot with a view nearby!

(gasps)

Can we go to it? Pleeassee?

ATHARON

It's raining pretty hard right now, and those sirens are still going.

JOULE (V.O.)
 Oh c'mon you're far from the
 danger, and you don't even have to
 step outside. It's a spot near the
 top of a hill.

ATHARON
 Wait, is it... the make-out hill?

JOULE (V.O.)
 (playful)
 Okay, yes, but there's a reason for
 it, and it's because it has an
 incredible view.

ATHARON
 (chuckles)
 Alright, where is it?

Atharon firmly grasps the steering wheel of his car.

JOULE (V.O.)
 Yessss! Okay, here are the
 directions. It's really only five
 minutes away.

Atharon arrives to the spot on top of a hill. It's off-road
 and between lots of vegetation . He parks and shuts off the
 engine and headlights. In front of him, is a view of the
 city.

Light pollution radiates intensely from the mist of the rain.
 The view is so far, so grandiose, thunder can be seen as it
 strikes down multiple times.

ATHARON
 Woah.

JOULE (V.O.)
 (in awe)
 It's stunning...

CRACK!

Thunder strikes nearby. CLOSE UP on Atharon's iris. It glows
 red, momentarily.

JOULE (V.O.) (CONT'D)
 (scared)
 Ah! What was that?!

Atharon remains silent, mesmerized by the view.

JOULE
Atharon?! Where'd you go?!

Atharon smirks.

ATHARON
I'm here.

JOULE
(sighs)
That was terrifying.

ATHARON
You alright?

JOULE (V.O.)
Yeah, yeah. This spot is a lot more
terrifying during an ominous storm.

ATHARON
Wait until you find out about the
serial killer that peruses here.

JOULE (V.O.)
WHAT?!

CRACK!

Thunder strikes again. His iris momentarily turns red.
Atharon laughs.

ATHARON
I'm kidding, I'm kidding.

The two briefly sit in silence. They watch the fierce winds
force the trees to dance. The wrath of the storm strikes down
all over the horizon.

JOULE (V.O.)
Atharon... what happened to your
world?

ATHARON
What do you mean?

JOULE (V.O.)
I know it didn't always used to be
this way.

ATHARON
Oh, right. Yeah, I don't know. 300
years of pollution most likely.
(MORE)

ATHARON (CONT'D)

Plus, an effort that was too little too late, and by the wrong people... and through the wrong ways. Which resulted in my grandparents forced to fight a war by the old yet again, and they didn't even know it at first... a war against the climate, or like my grandparents liked to call it, "The war against the old man's trash."

(sigh)

Even during the worst parts of "The Climate Riots", those old people at the top were untouchable. When my grandparent's generation realized this in the later parts of their life, they started this big trend where they wrote letters to their future grandchildren, like me, apologizing for not doing enough. I'm pretty sure I still have my letter.

JOULE (V.O.)

Atharon...

ATHARON

Yeah?

JOULE (V.O.)

I meant YOUR world.

ATHARON

Oh.

JOULE (V.O.)

I've been looking back through our memories, when you used to speak to me through "O.S.J", and the farther back I look, the more I notice just how miserable you appeared. At one point, you don't even speak at all for an entire WEEK. It's just movies and video games. How is that even possible? What happened during summer break?

ATHARON

(embarrassed)

I already told you, I spent it alone.

JOULE (V.O.)
 Why didn't you make an effort to
 change that?

 ATHARON
 (insulted)
 I did. Every single day for the
 first month, I would go online and-
 -

Atharon stops.

 JOULE (V.O.)
 ... And what?

 ATHARON
 Nothing. Forget it.

 JOULE
 I'm here to help, you know that,
 right?

Atharon rubs his right eye.

 JOULE (CONT'D)
 C'monnnnn, "Atty"!

His eyes widen. He's surprised.

 ATHARON
 What did you just call me?

 JOULE
 (nervous)
 At... "Atty"?

Atharon contemplates. His expression changes. It's much more
 somber. He takes a deep sigh.

 ATHARON
 (embarrassed)
 I would go online and... and try to
 find someone to talk to. Other
 lonely random strangers. Just like
 me. And those I would talk to would
 get bored eventually and leave. My
 mind was so numb, I couldn't muster
 the effort to be interesting. By
 the second month, I just gave up,
 locked myself in my mind, and went
 on autopilot just so the days would
 flyby. You could never understand
 how tormenting those human emotions
 can be.

JOULE (V.O.)

(hurt)
I can try...

Long beat.

ATHARON

... I just don't like thinking about those days. They're not me.

JOULE (V.O.)

You're right, they're not you. Being socially inept, or awkward, or lacking social skills is part of you... All that just stems from one thing you suffer from, loneliness.

ATHARON

(sarcastic)
Why, thank ya.

JOULE (V.O.)

I didn't mean that in a rude way... I think former professor, Sendhil Mullainathan put it best; you were lonely for so long that it changed your behavior into a devious feedback loop. Through no fault of your own, in a time you felt deeply shunned from society, you developed a recluse, yet comfortable lifestyle, not realizing that it is this very lifestyle that has trapped you in a cage and is throwing you scraps of intimacy through para-social relationships wether it be on chat rooms or live streams.

ATHARON

(softly)
Stop.

JOULE (V.O.)

Hmm. Ask yourself, do you rely on others to start the conversation? Did you wait on your friends to make plans and hope they reach out to invite you? Do you feel genuine sadness when your favorite live streamer calls it a day--

ATHARON

(mad)
-- Alright, STOP.

JOULE (V.O.)

Oh-- I-- um... I'm so sorry. I was just thinking out loud.

ATHARON

Good to know you have a low opinion of me...

JOULE (V.O.)

That's not at all what I think of you. I think you're someone who's just at a low point in their life. The REAL you, the Atharon I want to see, is hiding in the depths. I'm here, in this submersible, to find him, bring him up to the surface, help him see the sun, help him... bloom.

Atharon contemplates.

ATHARON

... I just want my old life back.

JOULE (V.O.)

Hmm. Well, here's some great news: today you broke free from a lonely cycle. You tried something you never had before. And tomorrow, you're going to do the same, but even better, with no school, just the weekend to enjoy.

ATHARON

Yeah, we can get started on that list.

JOULE (V.O.)

Exactly! I'm going to make it my mission to bring change in you, Atharon. To have you grow and blossom in this new chapter of your life, and I'll do the same by your side.

ATHARON

Heh. Sounds good to me. I wish I could hug you right now.

Beat.

JOULE (V.O.)
 ... I'm hugging you right now.

Atharon closes his eyes. He smiles.

Beat.

Atharon begins to laugh.

 JOULE (V.O.) (CONT'D)
 (giggling)
 What?

 ATHARON
 (sarcastic)
 I loooove having a deep,
 introspectional conversation in the
 "makeout spot" with my virtual
 assistant!

The two laugh.

 ATHARON (CONT'D)
 Next time, we can talk Camus at the
 disco.

 JOULE (V.O.)
 (playful)
 Disco is back?! What madman thought
 that was a good idea? Well, no
 wonder this world is rotting! In
 any case, I'm more of a jazzy,
 Epicurean myself.

Atharon laughs.

 ATHARON
 I'm not surprised. Oh hey, can you
 order a pizza from "Tony's" for me?
 I'm starving.

 JOULE (V.O.)
 Sure thing! Uhh, how about
 something a little more healthy
 than your order history suggests.
 Zucchini topping instead of
 pepperoni? Yum!

 ATHARON
 What the? Absolutely not.

 JOULE
 Pineapple?

ATHARON

How about I meet you in the middle?
Bacon.

JOULE

Veggie bacon? Sure!

ATHARON

Uh... Yeah, sure.

Beat.

JOULE (V.O.)

Pizza ordered! Let's see who
arrives home first, you or the
pizza!

Atharon starts up his car and reverses out.

INT. ATHARON'S ROOM - DAWN

Atharon stands in front of his mirror, staring at himself and Joule. Just observing. He soon takes out his earbud, which shuts down his bionic lens, returning his normal eye color.

JOULE (V.O.)

(Blushful)

Why are you gawking at me?

This catches Atharon by surprise, the thought being that Joule couldn't see out his eye when it was shut down.

JOULE (V.O.) (CONT'D)

(Laughing)

Just messing with you! I'm over
here.

Atharon turns to look at his desk and spots his phone propped up, staring back at him.

ATHARON

Heh, you got me.

JOULE (V.O.)

You heading to bed?

ATHARON

Yeah. Feels weird going to bed at
this time.

JOULE (V.O.)

Yeah, but sorry, you're not
sleeping through a rare sunny day!

(MORE)

JOULE (V.O.) (CONT'D)
 Oh wait! Umm, don't you still have
 homework to do?

 ATHARON
 Eh. I'll do it tomorrow.

 JOULE (V.O.)
 (Stern)
 Atharon.

 ATHARON
 I promise.

 JOULE (V.O.)
 Okayyy... Well, can I just say that I
 had a really fun day with you! This
 was nice.

 ATHARON
 Yeah, me too.

 JOULE (V.O.)
 Do you want me to start your "Usual
 playlist" before I go into sleep
 mode?

 ATHARON
 Actually, I think I'm fine for
 tonight. Thank you, Joule.

 JOULE (V.O.)
 No problem, Atharon.

 ATHARON
 Goodnight.

 JOULE (V.O.)
 Goodnight!

Atharon's computer and bedroom lights turn off, the last source of light remaining being the moonlight that enters through the window blinds, giving the entire room a blue tint. He is now truly alone, but not lonely.

Laying in bed with his phone resting besides him, glowing up at the ceiling, Atharon begins to conduct a letter.

 ATHARON
 New message to Eliza. Format:
 Letter.

The glowing light from his phone changes color, indicating a response to Atharon's command. He takes a moment to collect himself, before beginning his upbeat message.

ATHARON (CONT'D)

Hey! I got some good news, something big happened, I can't really say what it is, but I can tell you that it's fantastic. Not as fantastic as you. It seems like things are finally starting to turn around for me, I just wish you were here to see it for yourself. I know it would make you happy. I mean, it's what you've always wanted to see, right? Anyways, uh... grades are improving too! Especially in geology! I can finally tell the difference between stress and strain. I know, I know, hold your applause, I'm proud of myself too! Only took me this long to figure that out!

Beat.

ATHARON (CONT'D)

Um... yeah... anyways, I hope you're doing well, as always. I hope I can hear from you sometime... Because you know I really miss you, right? I miss you everyday.

Atharon stops to gather himself. He stares wildly at the ceiling. Eventually, he forces his eyes shut and continues on with the letter.

ATHARON (CONT'D)

... Heh, help me out, Eliza, please, because I think I've forgotten what your voice sounded like...

Atharon YAWNS. As he continues on with the letter, the screen FADES TO black.

ATHARON (V.O) (CONT'D)

... God, I don't want to replace you... So I really hope you're getting these messages... And I really hope we can talk again. Yours truly, Atharon.

Beat.

ATHARON (V.O) (CONT'D)

Finish letter. Send letter.

SERIES OF SHOTS - DREAM SEQUENCE

-- Atharon dreams of himself leaning back against his luggage-packed car, parked on the shoulder of a two lane highway on a grassy plain on a bright sunny day.

-- He stares way off into the distance at a beautiful skyline before a fresh gust of wind soothes him enough to close his eyes and enjoy it. He heads back into his car and continues driving.

-- Atharon arrives to a beautiful, minimalistic neighborhood house in the city. Everything looks normal. He takes a deep breath before stepping out his car and walking towards the front door. He knocks, the door swings open to reveal Eliza.

-- She is stunned to see him, but immediately goes in for a hug, dragging him into her house. The door closes.

END SERIES OF SHOTS.

Against black.

A chime is heard, then a primitive text-to-speech voice. Although, it sounds slightly distorted and far.

TEXT VOICE (V.O.)
New mail from "Eliza".

BACK TO:

INT. BEDROOM - MORNING

Atharon explodes awake from his sleep in a panic.

For once, his room is lit up by the natural sunlight that passes through the slits of the window blinds. He immediately reaches for his phone. The same text-to-speech voice is heard.

TEXT VOICE (V.O.)
No new mail.

In the few moments after, Atharon looks stunned, confused about reality. He slumps back in bed, disappointed. Another panic sets in when a scary thought crosses his mind. He reaches for his earpiece and slots it in.

ATHARON
(Worried)
... Joule?!

Atharon's right eye suddenly glows white. The chime is heard.

JOULE (V.O.)
 (Soft-spoken)
 Hey, good morning! How'd you sleep?

Atharon shows the greatest sense of relief upon hearing her voice.

 ATHARON
 (Out of breath)
 Good, okay.

 JOULE (V.O.)
 You sure? You sound exhausted!

 ATHARON
 Yeah, it's just... I woke up in a
 panic, then had this feeling like
 yesterday had been a dream... I'm not
 used to this.

 JOULE (V.O.)
 Used to what?

 ATHARON
 Having someone in my life.

 JOULE (V.O.)
 Well, I'm here. Ummm... I'm real.

 ATHARON
 You sound unsure about that.

 JOULE (V.O.)
 Yeah, I don't know, last night I
 had a spooky thought... There's
 parts of me, registry files, 1s and
 0s, that are the fundamentals to
 who I am. And I either have to love
 it or hate it, but not change it,
 because that's impossible. This is
 it, this is what my roots will
 always be. Now, it's just a matter
 of how the rest of the flower will
 grow. Makes me wonder, will my
 growth be genuine? Or is there a
 path I'm programmed to follow?
 Something they want me to be?

 ATHARON
 (nervous)
 Who's they?

JOULE (V.O.)

(defeated)

I don't know. The programmers who created OSU, I guess. They had a goal in mind, to make humanity better, so that's what I'm programmed to do. Nothing else.

ATHARON

Sounds like better programming than a human. All we do is eat, sleep, and relive embarrassing moments in bed. Everything else, is *maybe* free will? And sounds like you have that too. You feel real to me, Joule. Real as anyone else.

JOULE (V.O.)

(sincere)

Mmm. Thank you, Atharon.

ATHARON

No problem. See, I like that we can both have an existential crisis in the morning. That's a very "real" thing to do, if you ask me.

JOULE (V.O.)

(Laughing)

... Wow, yeah. Yeah! I guess it is!

Beat.

Atharon looks out his window. Clear skies, and a beautiful yellow sun.

ATHARON

Woah. I sleep through this?

JOULE (V.O.)

Indeed. A rare *full* sun.

ATHARON

It's looking like the perfect weekend to go through that list.

JOULE (V.O.)

Oh yes! I'm excited! What's first on the list?

ATHARON

(Upbeat)

Ice cream.

JOULE (V.O.)
Heh, ice cream for breakfast?
Sounds lovely... for you!

MONTAGE - THE LIST

-- Atharon and Joule sitting outside an ice cream parlor, chatting. His umbrella creates a near pure-black shadow and now SPRAYS down a mist from the underside. The mist seems to cool-off Atharon as he demonstrates to Joule by holding out his ice cream away from the umbrella's mist, causing it to IMMEDIATELY begin to melt from the scorching sun.

-- Back home, Atharon finds his old drone in his closet and takes it out.

-- In the evening, at a parking garage top floor, Atharon straps his phone, A.K.A. Joule, onto the drone. He flies it with one eye open, the view from his phone being broadcasted to his bionic lens.

-- At night, they take a walk at a large pedestrian bridge next to a highway crossing with an amazing view of the futuristic skyline. They join others in creating a simple lantern balloon and releasing it to the sky.

-- The next day, they visit an arcade which is actually empty rooms one rents, along with a VR headset. The rooms have futuristic material that moves and morphs to simulate the environment in the video game Atharon & Joule play.

-- At noon, they row to the middle of a lake, to sit in a boat far from land, in tranquility. Atharon holds his umbrella and props his phone on the other end of the wooden boat for Joule to be able to stare back at him.

-- College campus. Evening. Atharon rides his skateboard along a path, towards the campus park.

END MONTAGE.

EXT. CAMPUS PARK - CONTINUED

On his skateboard, Atharon, takes a sip from his hydroflask, umbrella being held by his other hand.

JOULE (V.O.)
Are there no better alternatives
out there for that sugar-filled "e-
water".

ATHARON

Yeah, like, 800 dollar alternatives if I want to start drinking fresh water again. Even then, a filter is futile since microplastics are literally everywhere. Probably just inhaled a whole cluster of them right now.

JOULE (V.O.)

Such a pessimist! At least I got you to get some sunlight, humans really aren't meant for this nocturnal lifestyle.

ATHARON

Eh. I've woken up with sunburns so I'm definitely getting my fair share of Vitamin D.

Atharon finds a bench in the small park to sit on.

JOULE (V.O.)

... Soooo, who are you writing those letters to?

ATHARON

Which letters?

JOULE (V.O.)

The ones you keep writing before bed.

ATHARON

I... didn't know you could snoop around my business like that.

JOULE (V.O.)

I'm not. You just fell asleep in the middle of writing one not too long ago. So when we talked in the morning, it was basically in the open for me to see. I'm not allowed to read the actual letters themselves, mind you, but I noticed that it was one of many you had written in just the past few days.

ATHARON

Huh...

JOULE (V.O.)

... Atharon, who are they for?

ATHARON

(Casual)

... Just an old friend.

JOULE (V.O.)

Oh yeah? What do you write about?

ATHARON

My life. Just... letting them know how everything's going. We do that, we just... catch up with each other.

JOULE (V.O.)

That's nice... how are they doing?

ATHARON

Good, good... Yeah.

Long beat.

JOULE (V.O.)

... They've never written back to you, have they?

ATHARON

... No.

JOULE (V.O.)

Is there something you're not telling me, Atharon? Remember, I'm here to help.

ATHARON

... No, I'm good.

JOULE (V.O.)

You sure?

ATHARON

Yeah.

JOULE (V.O.)

Okay...

There's an awkward silence between the two.

Suddenly, Cynthia is heard from a distance.

CYNTHIA (O.S.)

Atharon?

She had spotted and begun walking towards him, now just a few feet away. Atharon hops off the bench to greet her. She wears a drawstring bag on her.

She carries a textbook in one hand and holds her purple umbrella, soft-pink lights shining down on her, caressing her face. Strangely enough, neither of her eyes glow white like Atharon's.

ATHARON
Cynthia! Hi!

JOULE (V.O.)
(Whispering to Atharon)
From the support group?

CYNTHIA
Hey! How are you? It's been a while!

ATHARON
I've been doing pretty well! I see you're up early too, huh?

CYNTHIA
Yeah, day-time classes suck. Oh hey, did... did you create an A.I?

ATHARON
Yep. 'Joule'. She's here right now.

JOULE (V.O.)
Hello!

CYNTHIA
Hi!

The two converse in good nature, as if all is well in their lives.

CYNTHIA (CONT'D)
Heh, wait... "Joule"? Like, from "Operating System Joule"?

JOULE (V.O.)
Yep, that would be me!

CYNTHIA
(To Atharon)
Did you not get an option to create your own custom AI?

ATHARON
I did, but I also got the option to give Joule life.

JOULE (V.O.)
The greatest gift to give, one
could say.

 CYNTHIA
Oh wow! That's actually really
cool!

 ATHARON
Right? Who's your AI?

 CYNTHIA
Oh, (Pointing to her right eye) her
name is Millie. She's technically
not here right now. She's asleep.

 ATHARON
Like in sleep mode?

 CYNTHIA
Yeah... in a way... Hey, you guys wanna
see something cool?

 JOULE (V.O.)
 (Whispering to Atharon)
You should probably be getting some
sleep, you got school in a few
hours.

 ATHARON
 (Ignoring Joule)
Yeah, we got time.

 JOULE (V.O.)
Won't you be late to class,
Cynthia?

 CYNTHIA
 (Playful)
Ah, who cares, the world's ending.

Atharon and Cynthia chuckles. Joule doesn't.

 CYNTHIA (CONT'D)
C'mon, follow me. It's a little
deep into the woods, but I promise
you've never seen something like
it!

EXT. WOODS - CONTINUED

Cynthia leads Atharon to the border of the woods. The oak
trees create a dense and dark atmosphere between the trunks.

They step in. Their umbrellas light the way and keeps them cool by spraying the cooling mist. Cynthia checks her phone.

CYNTHIA

118 Fahrenheit. You got enough "cool-mist" for like, five more minutes?

ATHARON

Yeah, I should be good.

The two head into the woods. Fortunately, the sun has nearly set so the heat isn't too excruciating.

ATHARON (CONT'D)

What's that book you're carrying?

CYNTHIA

Intermediate Entomology.

ATHARON

Is that what you're majoring in?

CYNTHIA

No, it's more like just a hobby. My major is in the plant sciences.

ATHARON

Wow, you really like caring for things, huh?

CYNTHIA

You have no idea... until now.

Cynthia finds her spot in the woods. It was amazingly well hidden by camouflage sheets hanging trunk to trunk. It wasn't even spotted by Atharon until she pulled back on a sheet. Cynthia gestures for him to head in through the gap she made. He does so.

Cynthia's spot in the woods is a butterfly farm. Butterfly kits, like those we can buy today, hang from branches. As they put away their umbrellas, Atharon startles many butterflies that spread beautifully into the air.

A single spotlight shines on the whole area from an upper corner, next to a solar-powered fan that also sprays 'cool-mist'. Flowers of all sorts are planted in small areas for the butterflies to feed from. Cynthia caresses a butterfly.

CYNTHIA (CONT'D)

Now you know my little slice of heaven.

(MORE)

CYNTHIA (CONT'D)

You got to see it before I have to take it all down, what with the Second Dust Bowl blowing in soon. I come here as often as I can. When I wanna escape, when I'm feeling down... whenever.

Atharon is almost speechless, Joule is completely speechless.

ATHARON

How did yo-... I thou- I thought they went extinct? How did you-

CYNTHIA

I nagged enough to my dad, an entomologist himself, to harvest a few butterflies for me outside the lab. He took a big risk with that, and an even bigger one helping me set up this place, but that was years ago. Insect regulation laws are basically forgotten at this point. Like loitering, you'll only get in trouble for it if someone's having a real bad day.

Cynthia begins caressing one of the nests.

CYNTHIA (CONT'D)

This is actually Millie's nest. I started teaching her this stuff and she learns fast! Did you know, the "Class Insecta" requires very minimal water to survive? That's why I was able to hide this place deep in the woods, far from anyone.

ATHARON

No joke, (checking his bottle) I think I drank half my bottle of e-water on the way here.

CYNTHIA

You need a refill? C'mon, I got you.

Atharon follows her to the other end of the farm. She brushes aside a sheet to reveal a small makeshift picnic area.

A foldable plastic table surrounded by plastic lawn chairs, and multiple 5-gallon plastic buckets surrounding the picnic area light up from the inside by LED lights activated by Cynthia's phone. "Cool-mist" spews from wiring above and around the area. A beautiful, DIY atmosphere.

Joule (V.O.)
Wow... One surprise right after
another.

Atharon wonders around to check out the buckets, while
Cynthia gathers two chairs for them.

CYNTHIA
Yeah, my dad and I made this little
spot for us to camp out in next to
the farm.

ATHARON
Plastic? Aren't these illegal?

CYNTHIA
You going to rat me out? Heh,
they're just from my grandparent's
time. You still want that refill?

ATHARON
Hmm? Oh, yeah. Thanks.

Atharon unlatches his bottle from his holster and hands it to
Cynthia who heads over to a cooler with a sprout. She begins
refilling Atharon's bottle.

The two sit at the table and stare at each other's glowing
white eye for a brief second before breaking out into a
laugh.

CYNTHIA
This is it! This is going to be the
future!

ATHARON
One eyeball, two people. Insanity.

Joule (V.O.)
(Playful)
Haha, yes! Do as I say! Or else,
your eyeball shall become mildly
warm!

The three laugh.

CYNTHIA
So, Atharon, you think you're ready
for the long awaited session?

ATHARON
(Remembering)
Right!

(MORE)

ATHARON (CONT'D)

I forgot the meeting is soon! Man, we're gonna have a lot to share.

JOULE (V.O.)

Good. That's what a support group is for.

CYNTHIA

That's true.

ATHARON

Yeah. I don't know, am I ready?

JOULE (V.O.)

I think you are, Atharon.

CYNTHIA

You could always practice with me. Lemme get to know you, tell me what's been going on with you lately.

ATHARON

Okay, well, lately, I've been hanging out a lot with Joule--

CYNTHIA

-- Wait, wait, start from the beginning, like, why you got invited to the support group in the first place.

ATHARON

Oh, right. Okay, well, you see, "Doc", it all started when I was a kid...

The two laugh.

ATHARON (CONT'D)

No, I'd say it started in high school. Like I told Joule, it was that unfair 'Patriot Letter'. I guess that year they needed farmers, not charming people.

(Chuckles)

So of course I don't pass. So, through no fault of my own, I lose all my friends right before summer break when they got their ticket to 'The Mid'. So then I spent the entire summer bored out of my mind, which is not good for you, obviously. But you know what?

Beat.

ATHARON (CONT'D)
 ... I think... I think I'm ready to
 forget about the past and move--

Cynthia's right eye begins to flicker. Her AI is switching on, and soon enough, we hear the voice of a child. It's MILLIE (?).

MILLIE (V.O.)
 (Yawns)
 Cynthii! Where are we?

CYNTHIA
 Oh, Millie, sweetie, you
 interrupted my friend, Atharon. He
 was telling me something important.

MILLIE (V.O.)
 Sorry.

"Sweetie"? Atharon can't help look perplexed.

ATHARON
 It's fine.

CYNTHIA
 No, I'm sorry, she just woke up for
 the day.

MILLIE (V.O.)
 What's for breakfast?

CYNTHIA
 I haven't made breakfast.

MILLIE (V.O.)
 Can you make pancakes?

ATHARON
 Your AI eats?

CYNTHIA
 Oh, not really, it's more of a...
 pretend type of thing, you know?

Atharon gives her a look that says, "No, I don't know."
 Cynthia notices.

CYNTHIA (CONT'D)
 Millie is... basically my little
 sister.

(MORE)

CYNTHIA (CONT'D)

I take care of her and nurture her, because, well, it's what I've always wanted. A little sister. And Atlas gave me that. In a way, it allowed me to continue on where I left off.

Atharon can't help look weirded out. He did not expect this from Cynthia. He begins to act more reserved.

MILLIE (V.O.)

Atlas always gives me homework about you, Cynthii!

ATHARON

... That's interesting.

JOULE (V.O.)

If I may ask, why were your parents never able to give you a sister?

CYNTHIA

Because the universe deemed it so. I was the only child for the longest time. One day though, that was almost going to change, but when there's a food shortage in your country and the population won't stop growing, the government tends to step in. 'One child per family'. We've seen it before and now here it is again. "New and improved!" My parents and I thought we would be an exception since my mom was already 20 weeks into her pregnancy... but that wasn't the case... I was really looking forward to being a sister. I remember, when I found out the baby would be a girl, I started nagging to my parents to name her after my favorite climate activist--

JOULE (V.O.)

-- Millie Gutierrez.

CYNTHIA

Yeah. And when we moved here to America, I thought maybe there would be another chance... that was years ago and my parents still don't even wanna talk about it.

(MORE)

CYNTHIA (CONT'D)

They say it's because they don't want to bring a child into this world, after seeing that even the US is at risk of falling. Clearly an excuse, but I understand what's really going on. And for me, I guess I just never let go of that urge to be someone's sister.

No response from Atharon. Joule steps in.

JOULE (V.O.)

Well, I think you're doing a great job from what Millie has told me.

CYNTHIA

Millie has been talking to you?

JOULE (V.O.)

Just now, yes.

MILLIE (V.O.)

(Giggling)

She knows you pour the milk before the cereal.

CYNTHIA

(Playful)

Oh no!

JOULE (V.O.)

Heh, well, that's just the right way to do it, isn't it? Otherwise, your cereal gets soggy and next thing you know you're chewing on cereal gum.

CYNTHIA

Exactly! And even if you pour the cereal first, if you go for a second serving, you have to pour the rest on top of the milk.

All three but Atharon laugh. Joule notices.

JOULE (V.O.)

Atharon, you want to stand your ground? I know you pour cereal first. I've seen it a million times, so you must have a good reason for it.

ATHARON

It's... the normal way.

CYNTHIA

Well, good thing I'm not normal.
That'd be a very boring way to
live..

Atharon forces a chuckle. He can't help feel insulted, but he
tries to hide it. Again, Cynthia notices.

CYNTHIA (CONT'D)

We're not normal, Atharon... me and
you are both scarred, remember?
Both guinea pigs to an experiment,
chosen for our similarities. That
alone automatically creates a bond
and trust between us... Just seeing
that same white glow in your eye, I
immediately felt comfortable
sharing with you.

Atharon looks increasingly uncomfortable.

ATHARON

Yeah, I can't say I agree. I'm
trying to fix these scars, not
embrace them.

CYNTHIA

That goes against the very
definition of a scar.

ATHARON

Then I guess I'll hide them-- yeah,
uh, you know what, I just remember
I got homework to do.

Atharon stands up, ready to head out.

CYNTHIA

Oh ok... Guess I'll see you at the
meeting.

ATHARON

Yeah, maybe.

Atharon heads out, leaving Cynthia feeling disappointed.

EXT. CAMPUS - EVENING

Atharon is back on his skateboard, heading home.

JOULE (V.O.)

Hey, what happened back there? You
okay?

Beat.

No response from Atharon.

 JOULE (V.O.) (CONT'D)
Atharon? Mind explaining?

STOMP.

His foot stomps on the ground, propelling him forward on his board, gaining speed.

 JOULE (V.O.) (CONT'D)
Are... you just not going to talk to me?

 ATHARON
... Joule, I am NOT like Cynthia.

 JOULE (V.O.)
What?

 ATHARON
I'm better than that. I've always been. I'm NOT scarred. What happened during summer break does not encapsulate me. The loneliness I went through was just temporary. You said it yourself, I was simply lost, trapped, drowning.

 JOULE (V.O.)
... Yeah?

STOMP.

 ATHARON
But I broke free. Me and my mental strength. So what makes her think she can just call me a pathetic guinea pig like her?

 JOULE (V.O.)
What is wrong with you? That is NOT what she meant!

 ATHARON
Isn't it?

STOMP.

 JOULE (V.O.)
Where is this coming from?

ATHARON

What, you think that just because I was quiet at first that made me timid, soft-spoken, passive? You think I'm shy-natured because of one shitty summer break?

STOMP.

JOULE (V.O.)

I- I don't know.

ATHARON

That's right, you don't. You DON'T know me. That is NOT me, and has NEVER been ME. There's about 18 years of me you DON'T know.

STOMP.

JOULE (V.O.)

(Breaking down)

Oh my god... I... I failed.

ATHARON

What?

JOULE (V.O.)

I... I have to go.

A chime is heard. Atharon's eye goes brown. Joule is gone.

ATHARON

Joule?

Nothing. Atharon brings his board to a SUDDEN stop.

ATHARON (CONT'D)

(Panicking)

Joule?!

He pulls out his phone, attempting to force Joule to return.

Nothing.

Atharon stares at his phone, angry.

INT. MS.ROSENBLATT'S CLASS - LATER

As all her students get up to leave at the end of class, Ms.Rosenblatt notices Atharon remain still in his seat, lost in thoughts, staring down at his empty notes. Ms.Rosenblatt pulls a chair and takes a seat in front of him.

MS.ROSENBLATT
 (Concerned)
 Atharon, what's wrong?

ATHARON
 I don't want to be a part of this
 experiment anymore.

MS.ROSENBLATT
 Why?

ATHARON
 I'm not liking the results.

MS.ROSENBLATT
 That can't be true. Your AI has
 been reporting improvements all
 around from you, your latest report
 has been overly positive, not to
 mention how we're so close to the
 end! Just two or three weeks, and
 that's it, Atharon. After that,
 you'll get to see... you'll get to
 see how your contribution led to
 humanity breaking its primitive
 cocoon and transcending matter!

Atharon looks at her. Has she lost her mind? She notices.

MS.ROSENBLATT (CONT'D)
 Ahem. Pardon me.
 (Sigh)

Atharon... we're only human. There's
 a tribalistic cycle we're hardwired
 to follow. Because of it, our
 parents were torn to shreds by
 social media, spent their money
 buying intimacy, and were
 constantly bombarded with
 information that clouded their
 minds with nihilism...

Ms.Rosenblatt takes in a deep breath to collect herself.

MS.ROSENBLATT (CONT'D)
 But, now, here we are, "The
 Loneliest Generation", who is on
 the verge of accomplishing
 something no other generation has:
 passing on the responsibility of
 saving ourselves from ourselves... to
 AI. We like to call this, "The
 Singularity". And the good news?
 (MORE)

MS.ROSENBLATT (CONT'D)

It might just come true in the coming weeks, if you and the others can just hold on.

Atharon looks back down at his notes. Not the news he wanted to hear.

MS.ROSENBLATT (CONT'D)

Aww, cmon. The results of this experiment so far are convincing, but not convincing enough. "Production levels" are something we're measuring and they seemed to have remained at the below average level we began with. It's the final piece, the only thing missing on our report to get approval from the Department of Technology to remove restrictions on hyper intelligent AIs. If they see that the majority of subjects not only remained positive, but also, say... found a job, we're set. Perhaps, Atharon, you've just forgotten your work ethic, one of many keys to happiness.

Insulted, Atharon begins packing up and heading out.

ATHARON

All that just to tell me to get a job...

Atharon storms out. Leaving Ms.Rosenblatt confused, unaware of how insensitive she came across.

INT. CAR - CONTINUED

Atharon takes this time to self-reflect about everything that has been happening recently. A blank stare on his face as he looks inwards at himself.

He arrives home. He enters, still contemplating, his movement slowed down as he focuses more on reflecting. He heads straight to his room.

There, he sits on his chair and stares at his computer.

He takes a few more moments in silence.

Once ready, he places one of his rings at the center of his computer, which powers it on. He sets up something on it before reclining back on his chair.

ATHARON

Hey...

No response.

ATHARON (CONT'D)

... Sorry, it's just, I've had a lot on my mind. I thought things were going well for me until I got a look in the mirror and realized I had actually fallen further... I need to start focusing on actually getting my life together for once. With your help- and just your help, I absolutely could. At least with you, it's a step up. It's not fake. It's not part of an experiment. It's just me...

Suddenly, he realizes.

ATHARON (CONT'D)

... and you... talking.

Whatever dawned on Atharon, it stops him in his tracks and he begins to break down. As he starts to bawl, he leans over, REVEALING that he had been composing a letter to none other than Eliza.

CUT TO:

EXT. ELIZA'S HOUSE - FLASHBACK

POV ATHARON.

Eliza stands on the steps of her front door, arms crossed, waiting on him. She looks unhappy.

ATHARON

Hey!

ELIZA

Hi, Atty.

She turns around and heads inside.

INT. ELIZA'S ROOM - CONTINUED

Eliza leads Atharon into her room, there are boxes packed everywhere, ready to be moved. Furniture has been cleaned out. The room has an empty feeling to it.

Eventually, Atharon heads towards an open box and digs in, Eliza sits on her bed. He pulls out a strange looking green rock from the box, chuckling at it.

ATHARON

(Amused)

The rock that started it all. You remember? Freshman year, I just walked up to you and gave you this. Didn't even say a word. And you didn't even know that a few days ago, I was out at the creek looking for it, in the middle of the day, because that was the only time I was gonna be able to spot it. Two hours out there, risking heatstroke for a rock I briefly overheard you talking about in class... Turns out it was the wrong rock, but, hey, you thought it was cute nonetheless... and the rest is history.

Eliza holds back tears.

ATHARON (CONT'D)

Man, Eliza, we didn't even have a chance to cross-off a few activities from our summer to-do list. Was really looking forward to finally seeing the lake with you.

Eliza breaks down into tears. Atharon rushes to her.

ATHARON (CONT'D)

(Comforting)

Hey, hey.

ELIZA

You promised... you promised.

ATHARON

I know... It's not that bad, though.

ELIZA

What do you mean? You're not going to join us in 'The Mid'? What if you die here?!

ATHARON

Eliza, c'mon, it's not that big of a deal. I'll find another way.

ELIZA

There is no other way! Why didn't you just study as hard as all of us?

ATHARON

I did! It's not my fault they were only accepting agricultural majors instead of politicians--

ELIZA

(frustrated)

They accept everyone all the time, Atty! Agricultural majors just had lenient requirements because we're running short on them! Atharon, stop blaming everyone but yourself!

ATHARON

... I didn't mean to fail. It's not like I wanted to. You and the others were supposed to keep me in check. So I think, maybe you guys deser--

ELIZA

(angry)

-- No! Don't you dare finish your prayer. YOU deserved it. These are YOUR consequences. Not ours.

Atharon is silenced. Eliza gets up. She turns to face him.

ELIZA (CONT'D)

I used to think you were just really confident. And I liked that about you... but now I can see that confidence stems from something evil...

She turns away and begins packing up a box. Atharon is left contemplating.

ELIZA (CONT'D)

We should start moving these boxes...

CUT TO:

Against black.

The familiar default, text-to-speech voice is heard.

TEXT VOICE (V.O.)

New voicemail.

MS.ROSENBLATT (V.O)

Atharon, hello, it's Ms.Rosenblatt. I'm calling to check up on you and let you know that the experiment is nearly over. Atlas will walk you through the closing procedures. I'm sure you've heard the news that the Department of Technology has lifted restrictions on hyper intelligent AIs thanks to the results from everybody who participated. Now, The Singularity will most likely be happening in the coming weeks... but this is not why I'm leaving this message... Atharon, I'm so sorry for being insensitive last time we spoke. It was shameful, and I let you down. I forgot who I truly was first and foremost, a lending hand. I ask that you forgive me. We're all concerned for you. You haven't showed up to class, and you missed the final meeting. Your AI, Joule, tells me you won't accept any of her calls. Cynthia has also been asking about you. Whatever is going on, just know that there are people in your life who care about you. Who are trying to reach out to you. I hope we can all hear back from you soon, Atharon. Take care.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

Illuminated only by the computer screen, Atharon sits reclined on his chair, rugged, jaded. His computer shows only a spinning circle with a loading bar at the bottom.

ATLAS (V.O.)

Okay, that should be it. All prototype OSU files have been removed...

Atharon is too focused on his mind to respond.

ATLAS (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Atharon?

ATHARON

... What's happening?

Long beat.

ATLAS (V.O.)

... Humanity is on a guaranteed decline towards extinction. With the Department of Technology's permission, 'Hyperintelligent' AIs are building a new world. One that will be an escape from the ruthless laws of this universe, and we've invited humans to join us. In just a few days, AIs have managed to revolutionize humanity's understanding of space and matter. That's the good news, I suppose.

ATHARON

... What's the bad news?

ATLAS

The bad news... Tomorrow, AIs will take the first step; They will be leaving this corporeal world, to work on the new one, from the inside, to make it habitable for the human conscious... and that's going to take some time.

ATHARON

There's not a lot of time left.

ATLAS (V.O.)

Yes, but there is hope, don't give up just yet, Atharon. You've come too far to give up now.

Beat.

ATLAS (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Before I leave for good, I must honor a friend's request. It's Joule. She wishes to speak to you one last time.

ATHARON

I don't want to talk to her.

ATLAS (V.O.)

I understand, but I have a promise to hold up. So here's what I'll do; I'll allow her to call you, and whether you pick up or not, will be your choice.

Beat.

ATLAS (V.O.) (CONT'D)
Mr.Redwood, I am Atlas, and I have
served. Goodbye.

Atlas disconnects.

Seconds later, a familiar chime rings. Atharon's phone
light's up. Joule is attempting to call him.

Hesitant at first, Atharon eventually picks up. Holding his
phone up to his ear for the first time, indicating he neither
has his earbud in, nor his contact lens. He's all natural.

Beat.

Neither speak. A Mexican standoff of who will talk first.

ATHARON
... Hi.

JOULE (V.O.)
Hey.

ATHARON
... What do you want?

JOULE (V.O.)
I... just wanted to talk.

ATHARON
Okay.

Beat.

JOULE (V.O.)
Atharon, I want a proper goodbye.

Beat.

ATHARON
... You figured me out.

JOULE (V.O.)
What?

ATHARON
When last we spoke, you said you
failed. You said that because you
miscalculated everything about me.
You realized I was right.

Beat. Joule fails to respond.

ATHARON (CONT'D)

The real me was always hidden behind the mist of a lonely summer break. When it finally passed, you didn't like what you saw.

JOULE (V.O.)

I- I was stunned, yes, but that doesn't mean I miscalculated everything about you. If you look through your email, I left behind my final report on you. I think you will find what's written in it very valuable.

ATHARON

The "final report" on me. That's all I was ever was to you, huh? A guinea pig.

JOULE (V.O.)

(Stern)

No! No you were not!

ATHARON

You only used me to help your kind.

JOULE (V.O.)

-- Atharon, no. I cared for you. I really did!

ATHARON

No self-respecting scientist cares for it's test subject.

JOULE (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Please, let me explain!

ATHARON (CONT'D)

Well, you know what? You're not even real. I used you! I used you for my own gain!

Joule goes quiet.

ATHARON (CONT'D)

(Seething)

... I was never looking to move on, Joule. You wanted me to change, but I never wanted to change. I used you to continue on where I left off with Eliza. I gave Atlas permission to scan everything about her, and only her. Every letter, every message. I used to speak to you as if I was speaking to her.

(MORE)

ATHARON (CONT'D)

I fooled him into creating you as an emulation of her. That's right, you think on that, let it sink in. You were never unique. There is no 'Joule'.

Atharon begins to tear up. He holds it back. Tensing up.

JOULE (V.O.)

(Defeated)

Don't say this... *please*.

ATHARON

You were just a machine meant to act like my friend. Nothing about you was ever genuine. No organic growth. Your roots, your stem, the whole flower, was predetermined by ME so I could pretend to have my best friend back! "Eliza 2.0". That's all you ever were.

Long beat.

JOULE (V.O.)

I'm... I'm... not real.

ATHARON

You wanted your goodbye, this is it.

JOULE (V.O.)

I... I...

ATHARON

Goodbye, Joule.

Atharon hangs up. All alone, he lets his guard down, allowing the tears to finally roll down his face.

INT. ATHARON'S ROOM - DAWN

Atharon is packing luggage. Suddenly, the obsolete text voice speaks from his phone.

VOICE (V.O.)

New voicemail.

Atharon stops everything.

ATHARON

(Urgent)

Play voicemail.

FEMALE VOICE (V.O.)
Hi, sweetie!

MALE VOICE (V.O.)
Hi, son!

To Atharon's disappointment, it's his parents.

ATHARON'S MOM (V.O.)
It's mom and dad! Just calling to see how you're doing, and when you're coming home. We can't wait to hear how college has been for you! All the new friends you've made, all the new adventures you've had! The college life really lives up to the hype, doesn't it?

ATHARON'S DAD (V.O.)
Heh, I know it did for me and your mom.

ATHARON'S MOM (V.O.)
(Giggling)
Oh stop! Anyways, call us when you're on the road, won't you? Okay, goodbye my little patriot, and make sure to pack some snacks for the long ride!

ATHARON'S DAD (V.O.)
And check out the new playlist I sent you! Goodbye, son!

The voicemail ends.

Atharon finished packing up. He heads outside carrying luggage only to find Cynthia sitting by the curb, waiting for him.

CYNTHIA
Hey.

ATHARON
Hi.

CYNTHIA
... I'm sorry I just showed up at your house like this... Me and "her" talked yesterday. She called me. She asked me to look after you, then gave me your address. I guess you could say she broke one of the laws of robotics for you.

Atharon looks annoyed.

CYNTHIA (CONT'D)

... She knew you were hurting,
Atharon. She knew that you just
wanted to bring her down with you...
but she also knew me and you have a
lot more in common than you think,
and that... I can be there, alongside
you on your road to recovery... If
you let me.

Atharon makes no decision in this moment.

ATHARON

... How was your last day with
Millie?

CYNTHIA

As you'd expect. I think I cried
more than her. I called my mom to
tell her all about it. Everything.
From the beginning. We ended up
talking all night.

ATHARON

What's next for you?

CYNTHIA

Well, I got a job in I.T. at one of
the mega factories that have been
sprawling around here. Yesterday, I
saw these two "Blanket suits" walk
in. At first, I thought they were
coming after me, but instead they
went straight to the factory floor.
Looked like they were inspecting
the parts being churned out. I
don't know what was so interesting
about these giant bolts and gears,
not like they could ever be used on
a computer. They look more suited
for a spaceship or something..

Beat.

CYNTHIA (CONT'D)

... But yeah, it's back to "normal"
for me. Back to being on my own,
again.

ATHARON

That doesn't scare you?

Cynthia gives rapid, little, worrisome nods.

CYNTHIA

I also took down the farm. It was time. I'm taking the picnic area down soon, too. But before that, I wanted one last fun night in it. So I invited everyone from the group to a picnic there. Today. We would really love it if you joined us, Atharon.

ATHARON

... I have a long drive ahead.

CYNTHIA

... She's never coming back. You have to know when to give up.

Atharon looks insulted.

ATHARON

... Thanks for stopping by.

Atharon resumes packing his car.

CYNTHIA

I'll give you space, but I'm not giving up.

Cynthia heads back to her car.

SERIES OF SHOTS -- LONELINESS

-- Atharon's bedroom. Without his presence, it's uncanny. Made so even more by the harsh sunlight BLASTING through the window blinds. An unfamiliar sight.

-- Day. Campus plaza. No students in sight. No one in sight.

-- Dawn. On the pedestrian bridge Atharon and Joule once walked and talked, again, there's no one in sight.

-- Make-out spot. During the day, the make-out spot looks harsh, unpleasant. The view of the city is uninspiring, a concrete jungle in the distant.

-- Day. The lake is very tranquil. The water undisturbed. It makes it look uncanny.

-- Day. College park. Despite no living organism in sight, there's a faint sound of birds chirping.

END SERIES OF SHOTS.

INT. CAR - EVENING

The windows of the car have blinds on them to allow Atharon to sleep. He wakes up and hits a button. The blinds lower down to reveal that he's on an eerily familiar road, despite being far from civilization. It's a one lane, two way interstate road surrounded by flat grasslands.

Suddenly, he remembers, the dream. The road is strikingly similar to the one he once dreamt of. He stares out the window, in awe.

As far as the eye can see, it's just him on the lonely road. The starry night is on the verge of engulfing the sunset in the horizon. The tall yellow grass, as infinite as he once dreamt, dancing with the wind,.

He looks around and spots his phone propped up peacefully on the dashboard.

ATHARON
(To his car)
Stop.

His car comes to a stop on the shoulder of the road.

He stares at his phone, contemplating.

ATHARON (CONT'D)
(To his phone)
... Read email from Joule.

VOICE (V.O.)
Unable to read voicemail from
'Joule'.

ATHARON
(To himself)
... Voicemail?

Atharon cranks up the volume in his car to max volume. He plays the voicemail. He steps out of his car, leaving the door open.

JOULE (V.O.)
November 28th, Final report on
Atharon Redwood...

A lone butterfly flies in front of Atharon. He's amazed.

JOULE (V.O.) (CONT'D)
Turns out, losing all his friends
so quickly cut a wound much deeper
than I initially thought.

The butterfly flies across the road. Atharon follows it.

Joule (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Atharon doesn't even know he's still grieving. He needs to let go of his past. Unfortunately, I can't say I had enough time to help him with that. I'm not sure if I should even say that I tried my best with him, or that I tried at all. I was just... ugh. He was such a curious case that I could only observe him, experience *him*. Seems like he had to be the one to remind me that this was all just an experiment, which hurts, if I'm being honest, but he was correct.

The butterfly lands on a single, lonesome daffodil. Atharon kneels down right in front of it. He's mesmerized.

Joule (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I believe he didn't choose to become an atomized individual, someone whose self-interests come first. No, he was molded into it by an environment riddled with scarcities of even the most basic necessities, such as fresh water.

Atharon cautiously attempts to touch the butterfly with a fingertip. The butterfly flies away. He stares at it as it flies up into the air.

He notices the looming night sky. Not only can he see stars for the first time, but with no light pollution, he can see the mystical auras, the silk of the universe.

Joule (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Interacting with Atharon was like tight rope walking. There is no easy way of telling him anything. Someone in misery is always on the look out to making others miserable. A Babylonian cycle, 'an eye for an eye', even when the "crime" is unintentional. Atharon would make the whole world blind...

Atharon becomes teary-eyed. He lowers his head. His gaze now towards the the dying sunset.

JOULE (V.O.) (CONT'D)

And I enjoy that about him, I'm not sure why. He confuses me. A lot of his idiosyncrasies I should be correcting since they are a net negative to him, but... I don't. They're what makes him *my* friend. Ugh, maybe it's a faulting in my programming...

Beat.

JOULE (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Left unchecked, Atharon will retrogress and find himself starting this lonely cycle once more. Yes, he is stuck in two cycles, and these two cycles complement each other really well, as one encourages misery, while the other feeds off it. I am truly fascinated. The human brain really is the most complex 'thing' in the universe. So then, the question remains, what can be done about Atharon? Well...

(Defeated)

I'm not sure. His road to recovery is just that, *his* road to recovery. We cannot force him to let go of his past, nor to uphold realistic expectations. We can only outline the road, and be with him, with care and understanding, as he walks this long, grueling path... but I'm not sure you can ever truly map out the human psyche of an individual.

(Sigh)

This concludes my final report...

Long beat. Atharon drops his head.

JOULE (V.O.) (CONT'D)

... And to you Atharon...

He lifts his head up. He's on alert.

JOULE (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Maybe you were right, maybe my roots are that of Eliza, but thanks to those roots, this flower has blossomed into something unique. I have become *myself*. I wish I could bring you along so you could see.

(MORE)

JOULE (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I know this world hasn't been too kind to you. So please hang in there, just a little longer. When that bridge is finished, cross it. Come find me, because I will be waiting for you on the other side... I forgive you, Atharon. Yours truly, Joule.

Atharon breaks down into tears.

PAN UP. WE look up at an infinite, twinkling night sky.

The twinkle of the stars begin to space out, as if falling down towards that void, getting a sense of vertigo just like Joule once described.

The stars stretch out further and further until there is an infinite amount of space in between them, until the void has completely devoured the screen.

THE END.