

THE PLAYER OF GAMES

by Iain M. Banks

adapted by Gabriel Harry

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FADE IN

EXT. SPACE

The great disc of the MILKY WAY, colossal and majestic.

An ethereal mist of clusters and countless stars.

We approach ONE STAR, hanging in the pristine hugeness.

We go closer. The star is as big as the Sun now. Its brilliance is suddenly BLOCKED by a CURVED BLACK STRIP.

We see the strip is actually a huge RING in space. The star SHINES again, now appearing to be SURROUNDED by the megastructure in its orbit. God-like technology.

The graceful ORBITAL spins slowly - a ring habitat 3,000,000 km in diameter, 1000 km in width. Its inside surface speckled with deserts, oceans, green land and sky.

The structure is composed of five great strips - PLATES. Two more Plates await construction on opposite sides. The great circle is almost complete.

We approach one of the Plates: Chiark. Home of our hero.

EXT. CHIARK PLATE BEACH - DAY

BABY GURGEH crawls across the very shallow water on the shore. He finds a ROCK and picks it up. The majestic Orbital stretches up into the blue, hazy sky.

INT. CHIARK FAMILY HOME - DAY

Children are playing. The fatherly, wise drone CHAMLIS AMALK-NEY, is watching over them. Adults talk nearby. One of the children, TWO YEAR-OLD GURGEH, is playing with a Rubik's Cube-style device. He has solved one side.

INT. CHIARK SCHOOL - DAY

Floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking a playing field. FIVE YEAR-OLD GURGEH sits playing chess against Chamlis who has AQUAMARINE forcefields, indicating modest emotion. The child is winning. Children play outside.

INT. GO TOURNAMENT HALL - DAY

A game of Go is taking place between FIFTEEN YEAR-OLD GO PLAYER and NINE YEAR-OLD GURGEH. Nine Year-Old Gurgeh loses. The two SHAKE HANDS. Nine Year-Old Gurgeh grabs his bag by the chair, walks out quickly.

## EXT. TOURNAMENT HALL - CONTINUOUS

Nine Year-Old Gurgeh KICKS a nearby building pillar on his way out: hard, unforgiving rock. Bursts into tears of disappointment and rage.

## EXT. PLAZA - DAY

Utopian place, perfect weather. Buildings have a circular aspect to their design. YEAR-OLD GURGEH sits alone, practising the board game Weave, a more complex form of Go, with a morphing sand-like substance. Pan-humans, aliens, and drones walk and float by.

Three FRIENDS, two boys and a girl, approach him. They ask him to come with them. He wants to continue practising. One of the boys tries to pull him out of his seat. Fifteen Year-Old Gurgeh insists he stays. The trio wish him good luck, walk away. FIFTEEN YEAR-OLD GURGEH watches them leave and returns to playing his game.

The board morphs and transforms, the strategies dancing by. Floating trays flit in briefly to supply him with food and drink. People dart by. The days turns to night, exterior lights come on. He has not moved from his seat.

## INT. SCHOOL ROOM - DAY

Fifteen Year-Old Gurgeh and other students are sitting, watching a HOLOGRAM of a primitive empire defending themselves from a barbarian horde. He is mesmerised.

## INT. OAK ROOM - DAY

Fifteen Year-Old Gurgeh is playing a LARGE DRONE at Go. The audience applauds. The drone holds up a hand-sized forcefield cube, coloured formal BLUE. Fifteen Year-Old Gurgeh stands and grasps it, shaking hands. He's won.

## INT. LARGE HALL - DAY

A thousand people sit in the terraces watching a large holographic game, some black, mostly white. EIGHTEEN YEAR-OLD GURGEH is playing a YOUNG MAN.

The black volume suddenly explodes, takes over the white volume. The crowd erupts in cheers. The TWENTY FIVE YEAR OLD MAN begrudgingly applauds. Gurgeh wins again.

## EXT. ARENA - DAY

A crowd of pan-humans, aliens, drones are in their seats. Fifty thousand people applaud. Camera drones float around, filming. A 50 by 50 metre version of a Weave board dominates the arena's central floor. Huge.

EIGHTEEN-YEAR OLD GURGEH bows to his opponent, a pan-human ELDERLY MALE.

Later. Elderly Male is confident. The master. He is dominating Gurgeh's positions. They both stand on raised platforms on opposite sides.

Gurgeh taps a few commands onto a tablet. The large pieces quickly rearrange and pierce through Elderly Male's forces, and reaches his army's heart.

A group of PROFESSORS are in disbelief at what they've just seen.

Gurgeh walks onto the playing surface as the oversized playing pieces disintegrate into artificial SAND around him.

The crowd erupts.

The Elderly Male is consoled by the Professors as he looks down to the victor, applauding.

Elderly Male catches Gurgeh's eye and nods honourably.

Gurgeh nods back graciously and waves to the crowd.

ELDERLY MALE (V.O.)

Great players come and go...

Gurgeh picks up a handful of sand. He hold up the sand in his palm and lets it run through his fingers.

ELDERLY MALE (V.O.)

...this one has changed the game itself.

The sand falls through his fingers. This will be seen again at the end. The noise envelops him. Like thunder.

The sand continues to fall. We see now we're in-

EXT. DESERT - DAY

ON-SCREEN TEXT

I: CULTURE PLATE

The sand is now a rolling dune. A lazy wind blows.

FLERE-IMSAHO (V.O.)

This is a story of a man who journeyed far away, just to play a game.

Hot. The sand is ultra-fine, surreal, almost liquid. The graceful Orbital rises into the sky beyond the hazy horizon.

FLERE-IMSAHO (V.O.)

The story starts with a battle  
which is not a battle, and  
ends in a game which is not a  
game.

We see rolling waves off the coast. A house in the  
distance. On a far dune, we see a group of people.

FLERE-IMSAHO (V.O.)

Me? I'll tell you about me  
later. This is how the story  
begins.

A black, sleek, floating DRONE screams past, low. Its  
slipstream disturbs the sand.

It approaches the twenty humans in black combat suits,  
helmets with mirror visors, holding pulse rifles. In the  
background we see another drone, distant. Another. The  
group of humans are near a sea, and atop a large dune.

A man and a woman are separate from the group - Gurgeh,  
master game player, and YAY, fun-loving life-liver.

The drone FIRES a pulse at them. It narrowly misses Yay  
who dives, rolls deftly, and FIRES her weapon.

The drone is HIT. It spews black smoke, screams over the  
heads of the two humans, and arcs into the nearby water.

We see from Gurgeh's POV, inside the suit helmet. HUD  
display. He fires at a drone and misses, his plasma pulse  
trailing. He aims in front of the drone's trajectory,  
leading it.

He accidentally hits Yay in the side of the arm. She  
staggers and FALLS to one knee, her gun arm disabled.

GURGEH

I'm sor-

Gurgeh is HIT in the chest with a pulse, and flies  
through the air, tumbling down the dune's slope and  
landing on his front, lying disabled in the sand.

Gurgeh's POV: blackness. The suit's COOL VOICE says:

You are dead.

Yay fires at the approaching swarm of drones with her  
weak arm, her strong arm useless.

The group of humans battle the drones, a few are hit.

The battle ends with scattered, smouldering wreckage amongst the dunes.

Yay takes off her mirror-finish mask and smiles pityingly at Gurgeh, lying pathetically in the sand. She slides down the slope. Tips him over onto his back.

Yay stands over him with her hands on her hips.

YAY

Were you playing  
sarcastically?

Gurgeh's mask hisses open. 60 years old, he looks 27.

GURGEH

Why do you bring me along to  
all these things?

Yay LIFTS him up with one arm, her strength multiplied.

YAY

To haul you out of that  
comfort zone of yours.

GURGEH

We're always pieces on a board  
to me.

Yay walks off towards the shore with her helmet in hand, stepping over some wreckage.

YAY

Pieces on a board need to do  
their job. That can be fun.

Yay takes off the torso section of her suit and drops it by the water's edge. She wades into the water.

Gurgeh wades in to his knees and uses his helmet to scoop up some artificially made fresh sea water. He drinks.

A floating DRONE uses its translucent field to retrieve the broken attack drone's wrecked body from the water. As it rises, we see the colossal Orbital, a faint, narrow band in the sky.

Gurgeh looks down to see Yay bathing herself.

Later. The two walk along the shore toward a distant CLUBHOUSE. Fit, handsome SHURO is walking the other way towards them. He squints in the sunlight.

SHURO

This must be a mirage. Jernau  
Gurgeh himself.

Yay walks on a few steps and turns back.

SHURO

Man. I studied your work on  
Implicit Feints. I couldn't  
ask for a, well...

GURGEH

What's your game?

SHURO

Deploy. But you... I heard you  
can even challenge a Mind.

GURGEH

Deploy it is. We're having a  
gathering tonight - drop by.

Gurgeh walks on, catches up with Yay.

SHURO

Thank you. That would be a  
dream! See you there!

Yay looks Shuro up and down as he walks on.

YAY

Did he say a Mind?

GURGEH

A subsection of Hub, a few  
years back. We tied.

YAY

Impressive.

GURGEH

Yes, isn't he?

Yay smiles as they walk on towards the club house.

EXT. IKROH HOUSE - DAY

An impressive, super-modern house, in mountainous, alpine surroundings. Floor-to-ceiling windows, large balconies. The house's roofs are at the same angle as the mountains.

Yay, in shorts and a T-shirt, runs down the path away from the house, towards a forested area.

INT. IKROH HOUSE - DAY

Huge lounge. Decorated with a technical, geometric style. Holograms of game moves and theory papers everywhere. All Marain writing is in a 3x3 dot grid. Everything made well; built to last. A crackling fire.

Gurgeh is playing a board game, Deploy, against himself, his fingers dancing deftly around the board, gazing out of the window. He's too good, no need to look at the board, all in his head. Chamlis sits on the sofa.

Chamlis watches Gurgeh.

CHAMLIS

It's always pleasant coming to visit you.

Gurgeh seems not to hear him.

CHAMLIS

How did she do this time?

GURGEH

Unwinnable by move nineteen.  
Better.

(beat)

Rain patters on the window.

GURGEH

Everything seems so flat,  
Chamlis. New games feel like  
old ones in disguise.

Chamlis floats over to him, fields flushing YELLOW.

GURGEH

And what am I playing for?  
Take Deploy, for example.

Gurgeh indicates the board in front of him. He picks up a piece and plays with it.

GURGEH

Played by a pre-Contact species. If they lost, they'd lose their house. It meant something to them.

CHAMLIS

So fearing for the loss of your home is meaningful?

Gurgeh goes over to the fireplace.

CHAMLIS

That species joined the Culture, where we have everything we need.

Gurgeh stokes the fire.

GURGEH

Well, I don't. I need a challenge.

Gurgeh walks to the floor-to-ceiling windows and looks out over the view.

Chamlis floats up to the window to join Gurgeh.

CHAMLIS

That species didn't join by accident, you know.

GURGEH

Contact.

CHAMLIS

Yes. Why you aren't drawn to them is a mystery to me.

GURGEH

Cooped up in a GCU with a bunch of gung-ho do-gooders, searching the galaxy for barbarians to teach?

CHAMLIS

Contact take risks. And above all, they win. If it's challenge you want, they're the ones to talk to.

GURGEH

I wouldn't even know how.

CHAMLIS

I didn't live four thousand years without making a few good connections.

We hear a door open, then *SLAM*. Yay walks in, shivering.

YAY

Holy shit it's cold out there!

Chamlis floats over to the fireplace.

CHAMLIS

Come here to the fire. Gurgeh, fetch a towel will you?

Gurgeh walks out, lies to Yay affectionately:

GURGEH

Twenty five moves this time!

YAY

Hey! Getting there!

Chamlis turns to Gurgeh with fields coloured PURPLE with guilt. Gurgeh leaves the room.

Yay kneels by the fire. Chamlis moves precise comb-like force fields through her hair. Water droplets hiss on the hot flag stone.

YAY

What were you talking about?

CHAMLIS

His... disaffection.

YAY

Do any good?

Gurgeh returns and *THROWS* the towel across the room to Chamlis. It is *CAUGHT* mid-air by an invisible field. Chamlis continues drying Yay.

A disembodied voice gently informs the room.

HOUSE (O.S.)

Location notification. The party is thirty minutes away. The rain will stop in eleven.

YAY

Woah. Step on it, Chams!

Yay takes off her top. Gurgeh turns his head away and walks out towards the kitchen.

GURGEH

I'll sort some drinks and bowls.

EXT. IKROH HOUSE - NIGHT

Later. Ikroh house has interior and exterior party lights beaming. Two AIRCRAFT are parked on the lawn. Music and talking are faintly heard. We hear applause.

INT. IKROH HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

Applause. A crowd of thirty pan-humans and drones are gathered around a Deploy board game in the centre of the room. Gurgeh and Shuro shake hands warmly.

The crowd fans out to drink, sniff drug bowls, and talk. An ALIEN THREE LEGGED BEAST lumbers around looking at the artwork. PROFESSOR BORUELAL, game expert, and a few STUDENT guests walk out to the exterior balcony.

Gurgeh walks with Shuro, out towards the large outdoor balcony, drinks in hand, talking.

GURGEH

I always recommend drug glanding *Sharp Blue*. Helps with mechanical thinking.

MAWRHIN-SKEL (O.S.)

A thirty year old, Gurgeh?

MAWRHIN-SKEL, mysterious, devious, a drone, half the size of Chamlis, floats in front of the pair, and opens the door onto the balcony, fields GREY with frustration.

MAWRHIN-SKEL

Resorting to beating toddlers now are we?

Shuro tries to laugh it off.

GURGEH

Mawhrin-Skel. Socially aware,  
as ever.

Shuro clinks glasses with Gurgeh and starts to walk off.

GURGEH

House, refill for Shuro. Make  
yourself at home.

SHURO

Thank you.

Shuro walks off as a drinks tray floats up to him.

EXT. IKROH HOUSE LOWER BALCONY - CONTINUOUS

Gurgeh and Mawhrin-Skel move onto the balcony, where  
Students are talking. Borealal looks over the GARDEN.

MAWHRIN-SKEL

Professor, I believe you've  
met a stronger opponent?

The pair join the Professor. A faint silver pseudo-  
moonlight falls on the scene, sunlight reflecting from  
the Orbital's far side.

Gurgeh kisses Borealal on the cheek.

GURGEH

How was the tournament?

BORUELAL

Standard issue. There was one  
play, though, this girl...

Borealal makes an *impressed* gesture.

GURGEH

Send it over, I'll have a look  
tomorrow.

BORUELAL

Certainly more interesting  
than playing amateurs.

Gurgeh glances into the house and sees Shuro talking to  
Yay, who laughs flirtatiously. Gurgeh looks hurt.

MAWRIN-SKEL

I agree, focus on the professionals. Don't lose it.

BOREALAL

Very few people can tell the difference between even a top-30 player and someone like Gurgeh. I can. He won't lose it, trust me.

GURGEH

I've been round and round. Mastered them all. Past a certain point, things become...

MAWRIN-SKEL

Bored are we? Professor. That girl, who did the move?

BORUELAL

A cabin-brat, raised on a GSV. A wonder kid at Stricken.

We hear a *BANG* As a TROPICAL BIRD hits the window and falls to the floor. Nearby guests are shocked.

MAWRIN-SKEL

Allow me. Carry on, Professor.

Mawhrin-Skel floats off towards the bird. Two guests kneel down to help the stunned creature.

BORUELAL

Yes... the kid, she'll be in Tronze in a couple of days. She'd love to play you.

GURGEH

As long as she can give me a good game.

BORUELAL

You have my word. The day after tomorrow, be there. This rabble does behave better when their god is playing.

Students in the garden climb a tree, laughing madly.

BORUELAL

See you there. I'll send you  
that move.

Borealal walks over to sort the commotion.

Gurgeh walks off, leans on a railing, sips his drink. He looks up to the faint GREEN CLOUD, above the galactic disc. He looks off to the vast, rising, tapering shape of the Orbital in the sky.

One of the Plates is a dark, primordial colour, with no green or blue, but bright orange FLASHES. Under construction. The great circle is nearly complete.

We see closer in. A cluster of ASTEROIDS are floating in space above the Plate. A LARGE NON\_SENTIENT DRONE pulls one down towards the Plate's fiery surface, where a second DRONE is waiting with two forcefields.

Chamlis floats over to Gurgeh.

GURGEH

A few years until Hub starts  
on the ocean over there. Still  
hot.

CHAMLIS

Fire burns before water flows.

The asteroid is CUT as it falls, each piece passing through a different kind of field held by four more DRONES. The pieces turn into lava, which is draped over the Plate's primordial landscape, shaping mountains.

GURGEH

Yay hears back from the Plate  
design college soon.

CHAMLIS

Next few days. I've never seen  
her want something so much.

GURGEH

That's passion for you.

The two start walking along the edge of the balcony, away from Mawrin-Skel, towards a door.

CHAMLIS

You're playing the wonder kid?

Gurgeh tosses the remainder of his drink up in the air. Chamlis forms a field and catches the liquid before it falls, swirling it round in mid-air.

GURGEH

A brief respite, hopefully.

CHAMLIS

Come on. Let me put your name around my people at Contact.

They enter the house and sit, opposite each other.

CHAMLIS

Mawrin-Skel used to be in Contact, you know. Special Circumstances, even.

GURGEH

What happened to it?

CHAMLIS

It was dismissed from SC. Personality was judged to be too...unstable.

Mawhrin-Skel draws gasps and shrieks outside as several guests are splattered with a tiny fountain of blood as it kills and dissects the bird in mid-air with its field. Blood spatters on the window, obscuring our view.

GURGEH

Could you tell it to stop murdering sentient beings on my balcony please.

Chamlis turns to Mawhrin-Skel who shields itself with a MIRROR FORCEFIELD, with the bird inside.

CHAMLIS

Ah. Can't talk when it gets like that. Anyway, Contact prefers a more subtle talent. Like yours.

Gurgeh spots Yay KISSING with Shuro.

Gurgeh gets up, trying to ignore them. Takes a sip.

GURGEH

I'll think about it. Ask me  
again at the end of the night.

REN, a beauty, is on the other side of the room, drinking on her own. She's admiring a wall hologram showing a sequence of chess moves. Gurgeh approaches her.

Later. The house is deserted, apart from HOUSE DRONES cleaning up. Gurgeh is waving at the open front door to the aircraft on the lawn. One of the aircraft rises.

Chamlis floats back to him, Yay following.

CHAMLIS

So. Should I ask around about  
Contact?

GURGEH

Oh. Yes. Let's do it.

YAY

I love seeing you happy.

Yay kisses him on the cheek. Chamlis and Yay board the remaining aircraft. It hisses up into the night.

Gurgeh closes the door and walks up the stairs, past all the drones quietly tidying up.

HOUSE (O.S.)

Professor Boruelal sends a  
game file.

GURGEH

Thanks, House. Goodnight.

HOUSE

Goodnight.

INT. GURGEH'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Gurgeh enters.

Ren undoes her dress, lets it fall, revealing her lingerie and perfect, genetically designed figure.

Gurgeh makes a pinching motion in the air. Lights OFF.

EXT. IKROH HOUSE UPPER BALCONY - NIGHT

Gurgeh is shirtless.

Nearby cricket-like sounds pierce the quiet, warm wind. A BIRD is perched nearby. It flies off. In the starry sky we see the Green Cloud, rising out of the galactic disc. Gurgeh returns indoors to his room.

INT. GURGEH'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Gurgeh closes the door.

Ren is sleeping, covered by a sheet. She whimpers in her sleep and struggles, clearly having a nightmare.

Gurgeh kneels down at the bedside. He watches her.

FLERE-IMSAHO (V.O.)

Gurgeh wondered, with a strange sadness, what nightmares the young woman must be having, to make her struggle and whimper so.

The cricket sounds continue, the house under the stars.

EXT. IKROH HOUSE - DAY

Ren is walking out of the house and away. Hollow night.

INT. IKROH HOUSE - DAY

Gurgeh is studying a Striken cube hologram, a sequence of moves playing out.

He looks puzzled. He plays the move again.

GURGEH

Ah.

Gurgeh nods, impressed.

EXT. IKROH LOWER BALCONY - DAY

Evening. Gurgeh is eating dinner alone, replying to messages on his RING TERMINAL's screen. Invitations. He declines them. The screen vanishes. He rests his eyes.

Gurgeh's ring finger terminal *BEEPS*.

GURGEH

House? I said no calls.

The terminal keeps beeping. Gurgeh taps his finger.

GURGEH

Yes?

LOASH (O.S.)

Please forgive the override. I represent the Contact Section. We'll talk directly.

We hear a distant *BOOM*. Gurgeh looks up to see a thin vapour trail in the sky, disappearing behind the house.

LOASH floats around the house and approaches Gurgeh.

GURGEH

Hello.

Loash floats there. The drone is a lot smaller than Mawhrin-Skel - it could fit within a hand palm.

LOASH

Good evening, Jernau Gurgeh. I'm here at the request of a mutual friend.

GURGEH

I must say, I wasn't expecting a Contact operative so soon.

LOASH

Yes. I was on board a Rapid Offensive Unit, just passing through the volume. Nice little system you've got here.

Gurgeh smiles and nods. Loash floats closer.

LOASH

Contact might have something for you.

GURGEH

A game, I presume?

LOASH

It is connected with a game. I'm here to ask how long you would be willing to travel.

GURGEH

To where?

LOASH

I understand that the game is to be played in a location outside this Orbital.

GURGEH

I've never left home before. I can't imagine local colour adding anything to a game.

LOASH

This game may be unique. Also, it may take a while to learn.

Gurgeh waits for elaboration.

GURGEH

Can you tell me anything else?

LOASH

I'm afraid not.

GURGEH

It's hard to say. A few months, though. Let's say a few months' travel time.

LOASH

Very well. I will report back. Enjoy your evening.

GURGEH

Wait a second!

Loash rises and races up, accelerating smoothly. We hear two sonic *BOOMS* after it disappears behind the house.

Gurgeh *RUNS* along the side of the house to get a look.

GURGEH

House, call that drone.

HOUSE (O.S.)

Which drone?

GURGEH

The one I was just talking to.

HOUSE (V.O.)

You have been sitting in  
silence for two hours.

GURGEH

Nevermind, call Hub.

Gurgeh looks up to see a vapour trail growing slowly  
downwards, because he is right underneath its line.

HUB (O.S.)

Game player! How are we?

GURGEH

Hub, is there a Contact ship  
visiting?

HUB (V.O.)

Ho-ho! That was for you?! It  
crash-stopped from forty  
kilolights and swerved twenty  
years, just for a two minute  
chat. Serious energy usage.

The vapour trail stops short of a star, the only one in  
the early evening sky. The star accelerates away.

HUB

Leaving just as fast. Look at  
that kid go! Oh, sorry. You  
can't. So what was that about?

GURGEH

I wish I knew.

EXT. CHIARK COUNTRYSIDE - DAY

Gurgeh walks along an alpine ridge. Perfect weather.

He hikes down towards a quaint little RAILWAY PLATFORM.  
He looks around the deserted peacefulness of it all.

Later. Gurgeh is sitting down on the platform beside the  
tracks. He plays with a few rocks in his hand. He is  
talking to Chamlis through his terminal.

CHAMLIS

We triggered something. They  
came too fast and hard for it  
to be casual. They were sizing  
you up.

Gurgeh throws one of the rocks onto the track. It is repelled by its anti-gravity field and lands.

CHAMLIS

But it's over. They aren't interested. Sorry.

Gurgeh eyes a BIRD flying over the plains below.

GURGEH

No, no. You were trying to make me feel better.

CHAMLIS

Must go, Yay needs to talk. I'll see you at the game.

A TRAIN approaches the platform.

EXT. TRAIN - DAY

The open top carriage is deserted, apart from one other man, mysterious DELTRAM. Gurgeh walks down the carriage, wind whipping at his hair. Deltram nods to him.

The train continues on the track, high above the plains.

Later. Gurgeh is sitting down playing with a hologram of a Stricken cube when Deltram approaches him.

DELTRAM

I thought it was you. Jernau Gurgeh, right? I heard you lived here. May I?

Gurgeh hesitates but DELTRAM sits down anyway, forcefully.

DELTRAM

My first time on an Orbital actually. Practising for a game, no doubt?

GURGEH

On my way to one.

DELTRAM

Mind if I play you? Possession? I spotted a board by the bar.

Later. They are playing the board game and talking.

DELTRAM

What's the point in an Orbital  
though?

GURGEH

Well, Minds do like  
efficiency.

DELTRAM

Well, exactly. Seems like a  
massive waste of energy to me.

GURGEH

You can hold fifty times more  
people on an Orbital than a  
planet, and use one thousandth  
of the mass.

A BIRD (the same one as on Gurgeh's balcony last night)  
lands behind Gurgeh. In the background, it seems to look  
at his cards.

GURGEH

Planets can be left untouched,  
like ecological preserves.  
Quite beautiful, really.

Deltram doesn't seem to be listening.

DELTRAM

Challenge red.

Gurgeh is taken aback, and looks in disbelief at his  
cards and the board.

GURGEH

Ah, well played. You win.

Deltram is silent.

GURGEH

I believe it's customary for  
the loser to take the centre  
piece as a keepsake.

Gurgeh picks up the centre piece, a WAFER object.

DELTRAM

Yes, you do that.

Deltram looks arrogant. The train pulls into a PLATFORM.

GURGEH

I get off here. Nice to have met you.

Gurgeh rises from his seat.

DELTRAM

You game players sit in your ivory towers, with your *reputations*. But you're not special at all. Are you?

Gurgeh tries to rise above the taunt, and walks off.

We are left with Deltram as he packs up the board with no emotion. He glances up at the Bird perched on the seat. The Bird flies off. Deltram continues, with a tiny smile.

EXT. TRONZE - DAY

Early evening. Utopian town square, near a cliff with waterfalls flowing to the peaceful plains far below. People drinking, flirting, sniffing from drug bowls. Pan-humans and aliens dancing in clubs.

People eating at a RESTAURANT, machines serving extremely fine food cooked by a MASTER CHEF, driven and focussed.

The Master Chef looks up and nods in recognition of a figure walking through the square. Revellers, dancers, aliens, drones turn to see him as he walks through. Games are so important in the Culture. Gurgeh is almost a god.

EXT. HAFFLIS' BALCONY - DAY

A large balcony, host to a gathering of hundreds of game students, talking, drinking. A fountain is nearby. A band plays nearby, mostly to themselves, jamming.

Borealal is talking to HAFFLIS, who has just changed gender to male, and who is drunk.

Mawhrin-Skel floats nearby, playing with the fountain's running water with its fields.

Gurgeh approaches. The group around the table cheers and applauds. Hafflis gives him a big kiss on the lips. Gurgeh is taken aback, smiles, wipes his lips.

GURGEH

Hello you. Fully male now, I see.

HAFFLIS

Still haven't got used to it,  
if you know what I mean.  
Welcome!

Boruelal smiles at Gurgeh.

Hafflis walks off back to the table, to talk to a shy,  
blonde young girl, OLZ-HAP. The wonderkid.

Boruelal and Gurgeh approach the table. The table is  
enraptured by the meeting of Gurgeh and the whizz-kid.

The two make eye contact and bow slightly.

Later. On the table is the Stricken game, a metre cube,  
subdivided into a 3D web, housing hidden, coloured beads.  
A screen is in front of each player.

Three NON-SENTIENT DRONES hover above to counter  
cheating. Olz-Hap is winning comfortably.

Olz-Hap has a blank, calm face. She is in her element.  
She places a piece in an aggressive position, increasing  
her dominance. The crowd appreciates this, applauds.

BORUELAL

And I thought she'd be  
intimidated.

HAFFLIS

She's playing well?

BORUELAL

Brilliantly. He's on the  
ropes. But she's holding back.

Gurgeh plays an ingenious defensive move. The crowd nods  
and murmurs in appreciation.

HAFFLIS

Finish him off, girl!

Olz-Hap plays a solidifying move, defensive.

BORUELAL

She can't be...

FEMALE STUDENT

I think so, Professor.

HAFFLIS

She's what?

BORUELAL

She's going for the Full Web.

Gurgeh is lost in thought, staring at the cube, frowning.

FLERE-IMSAHO (V.O.)

The boldness of it. Not just to win, but to achieve the Full Web? It's an almost mythical possibility. And yet, here she is.

Gurgeh looks at his opponent and smiles in appreciation.

FLERE-IMSAHO (V.O.)

Well, good for her.

Gurgeh shifts position in his seat.

The scene speeds up. The shape of the cube's bead volumes morph, change, wrestle for dominance. Members of the crowd come and go. Olz-Hap and Gurgeh the only stationary figures in the scene. Monuments.

FLERE-IMSAHO (V.O.)

Gurgeh, as always, was faintly aware that he held in his head a model of the game, multi-planed and dense.

We see Gurgeh sitting in the middle of a GIGANTIC WEB. An infinite fractal, extending out in every direction. Beads hang, repeated on top of each other - possibilities.

FLERE-IMSAHO (V.O.)

He looked at that model. And twisted it.

The cube world in which Gurgeh sits TRANSFORMS, rotates, the lines breaking, new ones springing up.

FLERE-IMSAHO (V.O.)

Another *twist*.

Gurgeh looks up to see himself, standing outside the cube world now. The cube world turns inside out. The beads, the lines, the planes die and regrow, morphing shapes within shapes. And then we see one bright line, defiant as everything else is shifting and changing. An epiphany.

FLERE-IMSAHO (V.O.)

Then he saw it.

The whole scene is DESTROYED from the right. A powerful gale rushes in, obliterating the delicate structure, the lines and shapes splintering and collapsing, caused by Borealal's voice;

BOREALAL (V.O.)

Gurgeh?

EXT. HAFFLIS' BALCONY - NIGHT

The crowd is gone. There are a few people in nearby bars drinking, a few people sleeping. Dawn is starting to appear over the horizon. The non-sentient drones still hover over the table. Borealal is on Gurgeh's right.

BOREALAL

A break?

Borealal hands him SOUP and a roll of BREAD. He croaks:

GURGEH

Um. Yes, of course.

Gurgeh walks through the arcades. Faint music wafts through the air from a bar where a few people are still dancing. He munches on the bread, still thinking.

He reaches the BALUSTRADE at the edge of the balcony, looking out over the misty plain, far below. Distant mountaintops shine pink and naked. He stares blankly.

He is startled by the ring on his finger. Gurgeh looks at his ring, which is flashing. He taps it.

CHAMLIS (O.S.)

Sorry I couldn't make it. Yay  
got rejected from the Plate  
design college. Inconsolable.  
Good luck with the game.

Gurgeh sighs. We hear the quiet wind. The peace is broken by;

MAHRIN-SKEL (O.S.)

Good morning.

The drone floats next to Gurgeh.

GURGEH

Mawhrin-Skel.

MAWHRIN-SKEL

How goes the game?

GURGEH

Good. I'll win now. But there's a chance I can win... famously.

MAWHRIN-SKEL

How do you mean?

Gurgeh leans back on the Balustrade. Cocky.

GURGEH

The simultaneous capture of all of the opponent's locked beads. The fabled Full Web. She was approaching it, but now I might have a glimmer.

MAWHRIN-SKEL

Fabled because no-one has done it?

GURGEH

No-one in the whole Culture.

Gurgeh finishes his soup.

MAHRWIN-SKEL

And the Full Web is a measure of skill?

GURGEH

Not past a certain point. It needs a... lucky genius.

Gurgeh turns to look out over the plain.

GURGEH

(remembering)

Hey, that bird. On my balcony.

MAHRWIN-SKEL

It had a malignant tumour, I  
did it a favour. SC didn't  
take it all from me. My eyes  
are still exceptional.

Mawhrin-Skel floats over the edge of the balcony,  
suspended over the huge drop, fields faint YELLOW.

MAHRWIN-SKEL

I can tell you the contents of  
those locked beads. I can give  
you your Full Web.

GURGEH

What are you talking about?

MAHRWIN-SKEL

I can help you. You can pay me  
back someday. But today. Right  
now. You could be the first to  
do it. Become a Stricken god.

GURGEH

Are you talking about  
cheating?

MAHRWIN-SKEL

You said it yourself. It's  
blind, stupid luck.

GURGEH

It is *cheating*.

A COUPLE appears nearby and walk slowly towards ear shot.

Gurgeh walks away, half to get away from this ridiculous  
conversation, half to keep it secret. Mawhrin-Skel hovers  
alongside him, still over the edge.

GURGEH

This is over, Mahrwin-Skel.

MAHRWIN-SKEL

Let me prove it to myself. It  
was good luck that made you a  
great player. It was bad luck  
that banished me from SC.

Gurgeh's heart rate is rising.

GURGEH

I'm not a cheater.

MAHRWIN-SKEL

I just want to see someone do  
it. I want to be useful. Like  
anyone does.

Gurgeh looks back at the game board. People are  
returning. Olz-Hap is sitting back down at the game.

MAHRWIN-SKEL

Life is great in the Culture  
isn't it? Maximised peace and  
prosperity for all. A paradise  
watched over by those Minds,  
with an oh-so capital M.

Gurgeh brings his hand out of his pocket to find the  
WAFER from the disastrous train game the previous day. He  
remembers the humiliation.

MAHRWIN-SKEL

But there is still advantage  
and disadvantage. Heartache,  
and luck. Take hold of your  
luck, Gurgeh.

GURGEH

The risk is...

MAHRWIN-SKEL

Non-existent.

BOREALAL (O.S.)

Ready when you are!

Gurgeh looks back to see the game ready to proceed, the  
crowd returning.

GURGEH

Even if I did say yes, you'd  
be caught. We'd be caught.

Mawhrin-Skel floats closer.

## MAHRWIN-SKEL

Those non-sentient machines  
never caught me looking. *It's*  
*already done.* The Full Web.  
Yes or no.

Gurgeh pockets the wafer, with a steely look on his eyes.

## GURGEH

Alright. Just the four  
verticals nearest topside  
centre. No more.

Later. The final move. The crowd is larger than before.  
Jaws open, eyes covered. History about to be made?

Cheers, sighs, a few claps. Disappointment, relief.

## FLERE-IMSAHO (V.O.)

The wonder kid fought  
brilliantly to the end, and  
denied our player the Full Web  
on the final move.

Gurgeh shakes Olz-Hap's hand. Disappears into the crowd.

The crowd disperses and the people talk through the game,  
sharing holograms, talking to the shy Olz-Hap. The drones  
set about clearing the table, packing up the game.

One DRONE sweeps the floor. It stops at the foot of  
Gurgeh's vacant chair, where the Wafer lies, broken in  
anger, stained with blood. The drone wonders dumbly at it  
for a second, then clears it with the rest of the debris.

## EXT. IKROH FJORD - DAY

Gurgeh has a long walk alone along the fjord near his  
house, later that day. He looks vacant, utterly lost.  
That mysterious Bird is just visible, high above him.

## EXT. IKROH COAST - DAY

Gurgeh, later, walking along the windswept coast. Wind  
lashes at the GRASS and TREES around him.

## MAHRIN-SKEL (O.S.)

Lost, are we?

Gurgeh shields his face from the wind as he looks to one  
side of the path, towards the shadow of a tree.

GURGEH

What do you want?

The drone floats five paces in front of the man, in the middle of the path.

MAWHRIN-SKEL

I need a favour.

GURGEH

And what could I possibly do for you?

Gurgeh continues walking, but the drone refuses to move. Gurgeh has to stop to prevent bumping into it.

MAWHRIN-SKEL

Special Circumstances. The organisation that banished me. Help get me back in.

GURGEH

Don't be absurd.

As Gurgeh tries to walk on, the drone flits past his legs and SWEEPS him with a field. It SWOOPS up the other side of him, rises over him while he's in mid-air, and SLAMS him down to the floor, pinning him there.

The drone's fields shine WHITE with anger. Frightening power and precision. Rain begins to patter.

MAWHRIN-SKEL

You will listen to me. I have our conversation from this morning, recorded in atomic detail. What I have on you cannot be faked. You will recommend to SC that I be given another chance, or I will release this recording.

Gurgeh cannot move, apart from his terrified face.

MAWHRIN-SKEL

Your good name will be destroyed, and you'll be branded a filthy cheat for the rest of your life. There is an old name for what I'm doing. It is blackmail.

Gurgeh struggles to talk against the artificial force.

GURGEH

Why... S... C?

MAWHRIN-SKEL

Because I am a soldier,  
Gurgeh. The personality they  
grew for me did not fit, but a  
soldier I remain. They drew my  
talons and clipped my wings  
and left me to wander the  
paradise I was born to fight  
for.

The rain is becoming heavier. It is dripping into  
Gurgeh's paralysed mouth. He starts to splutter.

MAWHRIN-SKEL

Do you have any idea how it is  
to lose a limb but still to  
feel the pain? Human-basic  
people felt that. Their limbs  
didn't regrow. They lived with  
their pain.

The drone relaxes its grip. Gurgeh struggles to compose  
himself, and holds up his hand. Heavy rain.

MAWHRIN-SKEL

I will not live with this pain  
any longer.

GURGEH

Okay. Okay. How?

MAWHRIN-SKEL

I've told you. Talk to  
Contact.

GURGEH

I won't even be able-

MAWHRIN-SKEL

Don't even try it. I've been  
watching you. I know about  
their visit.

GURGEH

What? You son of a-

MAWHRIN-SKEL

I have no idea why they're interested, but they are. Get them back here, and recommend me for reinstatement.

The drone EXPANDS a field from its casing, clearing the rain from its surface, holding it up like an umbrella.

MAWHRIN-SKEL

You have until tomorrow. And don't try anything, player. If you wish to remain one.

Mawhrin-Skel floats off, disappears, into the rain.

INT. IKROH HOUSE - NIGHT

Gurgeh bursts in, soaking wet. He takes off his clothes and throws them on the fire.

INT. IKROH HOUSE BATHROOM - NIGHT

An ICE BATH is waiting for him. He dips straight in and inhales sharply, as if the water will stop his heart.

INT. IKROH HOUSE - NIGHT

Gurgeh is standing naked in front of the fire. He is admiring one of his many old trophies. He THROWS it at the floor-to-ceiling window, in utter fury. The advanced glass does not break, but SMASHES the trophy into pieces.

The dark landscape beyond the window is obscured by the smudged stain on the glass. Gurgeh lets out a harrowing, furious, terrible SCREAM at the window, half at the darkness, half at his dim, distorted reflection.

EXT. IKROH HOUSE - DAY

Gurgeh is sitting up in a TREE. Fine day. He observes a herd of DEER-LIKE CREATURES grazing at the bottom of his garden. In the tree, he is invisible to them.

The triangular-headed creatures spot something, and disappear into the forest.

Gurgeh looks to see what scared them. A large drone is floating towards the house, towards him. It looks around. Old, large and unrefined WORTHIL.

Gurgeh JUMPS down from the tree.

WORTHIL

Mr Gurgeh?

GURGEH

That's me.

WORTHIL

Greetings. I am Worthil.  
Charming house you have here,  
I must say.

GURGEH

Thanks.

WORTHIL

I noticed the roofs slope at  
the same mean angle as the  
mountains. Your idea?

GURGEH

Yes, actually.

Worthil looks around again.

WORTHIL

Beautiful. Anyway. Contact  
received your communication. I  
am here to tell you what you  
want to know.

GURGEH

Please do.

WORTHIL

First, I need your word that  
what I'm about to say is not  
repeated to anyone.

INT - IKROH HOUSE - DAY

Gurgeh stands far opposite Worthil in the main room. The windows polarise, darkening the room. Between them materialises a large HOLOGRAM of the Milky Way Galaxy. A small, uneven volume of it lights in BLUE.

WORTHIL

This volume is generally  
defined as Culture space, home  
to us and thirty trillion  
other citizens.

The hologram zooms in on the volume. A cloud of millions of dots, each an artificial habitat or ship, light years

apart, among clouds, star clusters, civilisations.  
 Different sub-volumes and species are in various shades  
 of blue. No hierarchy. Amorphous, leaderless, peaceful.

The hologram zooms out to a medium distance to reveal the  
 Culture far bigger than the civilisations around it.

WORTHIL

Contact interacts with every  
 civilisation you can imagine.  
 We monitor, and when needed,  
 we influence. By now we've  
 written quite the rule book.

Our view moves out to a volume of space in the green  
 Small Magellanic Cloud, above the galactic disc. A small,  
 ragged red sphere appears, a group of two thousand stars.  
 Several stars at its edge are flashing; conflicts.

The hologram zooms in on a planet, near the centre. A  
 number of countries on its surface are highlighted, their  
 borders following coasts, rivers, resources.

WORTHIL

One rule is that civilisations  
 which exist on a planet tend  
 to think in two dimensions.

The hologram animates, showing countries changing and  
 fighting with each other.

WORTHIL

Borders are guarded.  
 Populations and resources are  
 controlled. Dominance. It's  
 all about dominance.

The countries coalesce into one. The hologram zooms back  
 to show the planet as a tiny speck orbiting a BINARY SUN.

WORTHIL

But space is just too cold and  
 three dimensional to be  
 dominated. Co-operation and  
 freedom tend to win out here.

The hologram zooms out to reveal the ragged red sphere  
 again. Parts of it change colour, trying to break away  
 from the home planet, but change back to red. Stays red.

WORTHIL

Which makes this civilisation quite the rule breaker. It is an interstellar empire.

GURGEH

I take it you want me to go to there?

WORTHIL

Correct.

Gurgeh looks at the distance across the galaxy.

GURGEH

How long will that take?

WORTHIL

Two years. But you need to know the Special Circumstance which holds this empire together. It is a game.

GURGEH

What are you talking about?

WORTHIL

It's called Azad. It's so important that the empire itself takes its name. You are looking at the Empire of Azad. And this is one of the game boards.

GURGEH

You're joking.

The hologram has transformed into a large floor square, twenty metres a side. Azadians are stood around it, pointing, talking. They are humanoids, pale and slightly smaller than Gurgeh.

The board is a multicoloured mosaic, many complex systems represented, with stacked, tapering pyramids forming mountains and valleys. Each space is not a square but a hexagon. The game pieces are equally varied and complex.

Gurgeh starts walking around it, transfixed.

WORTHIL

"Azad" means "machine", or "system". Its main function is to choose the player's level in the empire's hierarchy. In short, whoever wins the game outright becomes Emperor.

GURGEH

This cannot be right.

WORTHIL

Actually, it also chooses the political, economic or military thought, expressed by the emperor's playstyle.

GURGEH

And *they* go along with this?

The Azadians continue talking silently.

WORTHIL

Until their dying breath. You see, the idea is that Azad is so demanding, so complex, that it's the finest possible model for life itself.

GURGEH

But is that true?

WORTHIL

It doesn't have to be. They believe that it's true, so it becomes true. It's willed into actuality. This, *this* is what keeps the Empire together.

GURGEH

You're not expecting me to go out there and become emperor are you?

Worthil laughs, and his fields flash RED.

WORTHIL

Of course not. Azadian players have been surrounded by the game since birth.

Gurgeh examines the board along with the Azadians.

WORTHIL

We want to see if a player  
like you can compete at all.

GURGEH

Are they... superintelligent?

WORTHIL

Azadians are about as bright  
as the average Culture  
citizen. But technologically,  
we are far more advanced.

GURGEH

There's no way I'm going so  
far for so long. But I need to  
know more about this game.

WORTHIL

That's not possible. I'm only  
to tell you what I have.

GURGEH

Why all the secrecy?

WORTHIL

If the public knew of the  
Empire's atrocities, they  
would demand that we invade,  
which would only unite them  
against us. The Empire has  
done unspeakable things.

GURGEH

Pre-Contact societies are  
quite animalistic.

Worthil's fields turn BLUE.

WORTHIL

Careful. That's something *they* would say. Technically, of course, they are animals, just as I am a machine. But they are fully conscious beings. One less ice age on their planet and our situations could've been the other way around.

The windows DEPOLARISE, light returns, the hologram gone.

WORTHIL

But they aren't, so we needn't worry. Now then. Game player. Are you in?

EXT. PLATE UNDERSIDE - NIGHT

The dark underside of the Plate is lit by starlight. Incomprehensible machinery jut out downwards like upside down skyscrapers.

A track stretches off into the inverted horizon, on which a SUBWAY CAR silently whizzes past, no air resistance, thousands of kilometres per hour.

INT. SUBWAY CAR

Gurgeh is looking out of the window, thinking.

GURGEH

Hub. Tell Worthil I've decided.

HUB (V.O.)

He appears to be visiting our nearby gas giant. Permission to displace?

GURGEH

Granted, thanks.

A silver SPHERE appears out of thin air in the AIRLOCK, then grows, then disappears to reveal Worthil, covered in frost. Worthil enters the SUBWAY CAR.

GURGEH

I'm in.

WORTHIL

Congratulations on a wise choice. Brave, even.

GURGEH

I have one condition.

WORTHIL

Yes?

GURGEH

There is a drone here called Mawhrin-Skel.

WORTHIL

Ah, yes. Former SC agent. I was briefed.

GURGEH

We're good friends. I promised that I'd recommend its return to SC if I ever could. I can only play Azad if it's reinstated.

WORTHIL

Mawhrin-Skel was civilianised for a reason. That's a rather foolish promise to have made.

GURGEH

I never thought I'd get the chance.

WORTHIL

I'll see what I can do.

Gurgeh looks out of the car window into space. The Green Cloud above the galactic disc.

GURGEH

Is that it?

WORTHIL

That is indeed your destination.

EXT. HAFFLIS' BALCONY - DAY

Crisp dawn. Gurgeh WAKES on the floor amongst party debris and other sleeping bodies, half naked in the warm summer air, post-orgy.

He finds his clothes and puts them on, including his signature BROWN JACKET. He sneaks off.

EXT. IKROH HOUSE - DAY

Worthil is waiting at the door. Gurgeh enters, Worthil follows.

INT. IKROH HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

Gurgeh looks around the room, SUNRISE LIGHT streaming in.

Mawhrin-Skel is hovering in the fireplace amongst the ash, having just come down the chimney.

WORTHIL

Ah, Mawhrin-Skel.

MAWHRIN-SKEL

I understand I am being returned to active service?

WORTHIL

You are.

Mawhrin-Skel turns to Gurgeh.

MAWHRIN-SKEL

Thank you. I wish you a good journey, and much luck.

Gurgeh says nothing. He turns to Worthil.

GURGEH

I'm ready to go.

WORTHIL

Do you need to pack anything?

GURGEH

Nothing.

Gurgeh and Worthil leave.

Mawhrin-Skel watches them but does not follow.

EXT. IKROH HOUSE - DAY

Gurgeh and Worthil walk down the garden towards a SUBWAY ELEVATOR, built and hidden among the vegetation.

WORTHIL

Your ship is ready to leave.  
It will rendezvous with a GSV,  
the *Little Rascal*, which is  
much faster.

GURGEH

A ship Mind, all to myself.

WORTHIL

A GOU left over from the  
Idiran war. The *Limiting  
Factor*. It will be your  
training partner in Azad.  
You've been giving the cover  
story, yes?

GURGEH

I'm going to a tournament. Not  
entirely untrue.

They approach Chamlis, waiting near the elevator. WORTHIL waits to one side.

CHAMLIS

Yay couldn't bear to say  
goodbye.

Gurgeh nods. He looks hurt.

CHAMLIS

Farewell my friend.

Gurgeh hugs the drone. Chamlis gently pats him on the back with a field.

WORTHIL

Good luck, game player. You're  
in good hands.

Gurgeh enters the elevator.

YAY (O.S.)

Hey, wait!

Gurgeh rushes out of the elevator.

Yay runs down the garden. The two meet.

YAY

Sorry. I've been a wreck.

GURGEH

It's okay.

Yay is emotional.

YAY

Why are you leaving?

GURGEH

I need to play this  
tournament.

YAY

Games aren't everything.

GURGEH

The whole universe is a game.  
It's made of rules and luck.

Gurgeh takes one last look at Yay's face and brushes her hair back, wipes tears from her eyes.

GURGEH

And like a game, it can  
produce some beautiful things.

Gurgeh kisses her cheek and turns away.

Gurgeh enters the elevator. Gurgeh and Yay share a moment. He punches a button and the doors close.

INT. TRAINSIT GALLERY - NIGHT

Empty space stretches out below, everything installed on the Plate's underside. Grey, silver, sleek environment. He approaches the LIMITING FACTOR, waiting for him. His steed. His Aston Martin.

A sleek, simple craft, with eight blisters along its hull. 300 metres long. Its surface has a mind boggling array of patterns and textures, multi-coloured and threatening. Psychological armour.

ON-SCREEN TEXT

General Offensive Unit  
*Limiting Factor*

Gurgeh inspects its surface and sees that the patterns extend to very small scales, like a fractal.

Gurgeh enters the ship.

EXT. TRANSIT GALLERY

The craft detaches from the housing and falls away from the orbital, into the sea of empty blackness.

EXT. SPACE

The Limiting Factor accelerates away gently, heading for the Green Cloud. The immense Orbital slowly turns behind it. The scene starts to shrink. Journey's beginning.

INT. LIMITING FACTOR

Gurgeh walks through the NARROW CORRIDORS of the large, mostly solid vessel. No decorations, no comforts, minimalist. Deserted and utterly SILENT.

He rounds a corner and comes face to face with a huge, two-metre tall TEDDY BEAR.

Gurgeh is scared out of his wits and recoils, DROPS to the floor.

TEDDY BEAR

Hello. I am the Limiting Factor.

GURGEH

What?!

TEDDY BEAR

I wanted you to feel at home. I made you some clothes as well! I've never hosted an on-board human before.

GURGEH

You're the ship Mind?

TEDDY BEAR

Yes. This conversation is occupying a miniscule fraction of my processing power - the rest is concerned with other stuff. You're in good hands!

The Teddy Bear reaches out for a hug.

GURGEH

Could you just talk to me with  
a voice?

The Teddy Bear's face turns blank.

TEDDY BEAR

Oh. Okay. I'll just get rid of  
this, then.

The Teddy Bear turns and walks away *slowly*, with its head  
turned, comically maintaining eye contact with Gurgeh.

TEDDY BEAR

I want you to remember.

GURGEH

Remember what?

TEDDY BEAR

How frustrating this feels.

GURGEH

What?

It continues walking away slowly over several comedic  
beats.

TEDDY BEAR

Having to talk to an animal.  
Which is much slower than you.

The Teddy Bear slowly disappears around a corner,  
maintaining eye contact to the last. Gurgeh sighs.

INT. GURGEH'S QUARTERS

Gurgeh walks into his room. Finely decorated. He checks  
his wardrobe - a variety of fitting, functional clothes.

LIMITING FACTOR (O.S.)

Jernau Gurgeh?

GURGEH

Yes.

Gurgeh tries on a shirt.

LIMITING FACTOR (O.S.)

We have now reached our terminal aggregation point and are moving at around eight point five kilolights in ultraspace one positive.

GURGEH

So when do we reach the Little Rascal?

LIMITING FACTOR (O.S.)

Nine months from now. It's sending me everything on the game of Azad. Let's play. I wanna play.

GURGEH

I need a strong foundation before I can start, I'll study the theory first.

LIMITING FACTOR (O.S.)

Fine.

The bedroom's floor-to-ceiling SCREEN lights up with an incredibly beautiful menu of Azadian game theory.

INT. LIMITING FACTOR SWIMMING POOL

Gurgeh is swimming underwater. The floor and walls of the pool are an unbroken screen showing a false image of the stars around the ship drifting by.

LIMITING FACTOR (O.S.)

There are many effective actions unique to each piece.

He climbs out the pool and sits, his TONED BODY panting.

A hologram of an Azad board is displayed in front of him, showing the location of a piece in the midst of battle.

LIMITING FACTOR (O.S.)

For example, a piece could be an observation post on the front line, or a philosophical idea, in home territory.

Gurgeh takes this in, and DIVES back into the pool.

## INT. GAME ROOM

The game room is set in one of the craft's dome-like blisters, showing dark space beyond.

Gurgeh is stood in the middle of the large game board, looking out over its complicated surface. Holograms showing power-time curves, move sets and tactical formations pop up in front of him. He looks tired.

GURGEH

Okay. The piece is left-handed. Regret splinters are half delayed. Vectors are covering me. My resources and charm superiority give... 58% chance. So, I move.

His blue piece FLOAT to where Gurgeh indicated, into a red battlegroup. The piece is TRANSFORMED into red, along with a large portion of his own army. A silly error.

GURGEH

Shit, it's additive.

LIMITING FACTOR (O.S.)

23% actually. Yes, charm switched to additive because of the piece's moral outlook.

## INT. MESS HALL

Minimalist hall. Gurgeh is eating at a table alone. In front of him, a hologram is showing a hierarchical diagram of Azadian society, with many layers.

LIMITING FACTOR (O.S.)

...Azadians have three sexes.

The hologram shows three Azadians. A bulky MALE, a fit, confident APEX, and a timid, beautiful FEMALE.

LIMITING FACTOR (O.S.)

The males are used for physical work and the females as "possessions", if you can remember what that word means. There's an intermediary, Apex gender which is the dominant sex.

GURGEH

The *what*?

LIMITING FACTOR (O.S.)

Dominant sex. Apex individuals hold almost all positions of authority, and are the only ones allowed to play Azad.

Gurgeh looks mystified, and carries on eating.

LIMITING FACTOR (O.S.)

The male impregnates the apex, who has a reversible vagina-penis. This then implants the female with a fertilised egg.

Gurgeh becomes queezy, is put off his food and slides his plate away, annoyed. The Limiting Factor LAUGHS madly.

INT. GAME HALL

Gurgeh is sitting against the wall, staring out at the stars. Lights off. Starlight streaming in. A nebula drifts by the large window, bathing the scene in blue light. We drift by, and through, other wondrous things.

LIMITING FACTOR (V.O.)

I slipped through the fleet so fast they never knew I was there. Started a chain reaction in their engines, then jumped to ultraspace. The ships exploded from within, arcing flame and metal. I watched in seven dimensions. Every mass a ripple, between Fabric and Grid.

GURGEH

A training simulation?

LIMITING FACTOR (V.O.)

Sadly, yes.

GURGEH

Must be frustrating.

LIMITING FACTOR (V.O.)

The war was concluded before they needed me. But Azad is a fun battle. Shame there's no one around to give me a good game.

Gurgeh smiles and shakes his head.

INT. GAME HALL - Later

Gurgeh is asleep against the wall, clutching a game piece to his chest. The lights are off.

LIMITING FACTOR (V.O.)

Gurgeh, wake up. We've arrived  
at the rendezvous with the  
Little Rascal.

Gurgeh wakes up and puts the piece back on the board, embarrassed. The lights slowly come on. The WALL SCREEN is showing a top-down view of a large, green landscape below some clouds, with rivers, villages, trees, hills.

GURGEH

What planet is this? Where's  
the GSV?

EXT. LITTLE RASCAL - DAY

The Limiting Factor is surrounded by a surreal array of overlapping forcefields. Below it are clouds, and a vast green landscape, a rectangle, fifty three kilometres in length, twenty-two in width.

The Limiting Factor descends, and we see other craft coming and going.

ON-SCREEN TEXT

General Systems Vehicle

*Little Rascal*

Population: 250 million

The Limiting Factor flies silently overhead. There are whole cities on the surface of this park, people everywhere, some in rivers, lakes, suspended in the air with anti-gravity harnesses, having 3D parties mid-air.

EXT. LITTLE RASCAL HANGAR BAY - DAY

Colossal sounds of machines, unimaginably complicated engineering. SHIPS are under construction, their vast hulls disappearing into the hazy distance.

FLERE-IMSAHO (V.O.)

Remember I said I'd tell you  
who I was? My name is Flere-  
Imsaho. Library drone.  
Gurgeh's guide to the Empire.

The Limiting Factor smoothly lands in a DOCKING BAY. Sensible and cautious drone FLERE-IMSAHO hovers, even smaller than Mawhrin-Skel, waiting to greet Gurgeh.

EXT. LITTLE RASCAL CITY TERRACE - DAY

Gurgeh is sitting in a chair, memorising probability density graphs on floating holograms. Aliens of many shapes and sizes are talking and working nearby.

Flere-Imsaho hovers up to him.

FLERE-IMSAHO

We need to start learning  
Eachic, the Azadian language.

GURGEH

I've got enough to learn as it  
is, Flere-Imsaho.

FLERE-IMSAHO

If you think we can get by  
without the language, you're  
even more naïve than I  
thought.

Gurgeh moves the graphs to block his view of the drone. Pissed off. Flere-Imsaho looks away, at two nearby BIRDS.

A CHEER erupts nearby. Slim, BLUE HUMANOID ALIENS are disembarking from a large PASSENGER SHIP, landed nearby.

Gurgeh stands to get a better look.

FLERE-IMSAHO

Ah. The Culture welcomes a new  
species. No better sight.

FIREWORKS go off. Pan-human people EMBRACE the blue aliens. Music. They guide the blue aliens towards the LAKE, THROW them in, DIVE in after them. A high cliff overlooks the lake, which people JUMP off. Laughter.

Anti-gravity harnesses on people allow them to FLY into the sky. They take some of the surprised blue aliens by the hand and FLY upwards and dance among the clouds.

INT. GAME HALL

Gurgeh stands motionless amongst the game board as we see hundreds of games flitting by, a condensed blur of months of relentless practice.

FLERE-IMSAHO (V.O.)

Gurgeh fought the ship  
relentlessly. Days became  
weeks, weeks became months.

EXT. LITTLE RASCAL DOCKING BAY - DAY

The Limiting Factor flies upwards to the artificial sky.  
Floating pan-humans and aliens in the sky wave him off.  
The craft passes through the fields.

It enters a ship, a SUPERLIFTER, which exits to the  
surreal hyperspace beyond, which slows it down to a speed  
it can deal with. It then exits the Superlifter, which  
speeds away to catch up with the Little Rascal.

FLERE-IMSAHO (V.O.)

It was now that it dawned on  
Gurgeh. It was really  
happening. He was on his way  
to the Empire of Azad.

ON-SCREEN TEXT

II: IMPERIUM

EXT. SPACE

The Limiting Factor approaches the Azadian homeworld of  
EA. Vast streams of space ship traffic are coming and  
going. Dots. Space stations litter orbit. The homeworld  
of an interstellar empire. A BINARY SUN shines.

INT. LITTLE RASCAL SWIMMING POOL

Gurgeh is floating in the water on his back.

Flere-Imsaho floats in, carrying a BULKY METAL CASING.

FLERE-IMSAHO

Are you ready?

GURGEH

Ready to play a whole  
civilisation at its own game,  
without a single victory under  
my belt? What do you think?

FLERE-IMSAHO

Excellent. Remember, the  
Empire thinks we are much less  
advanced than we are.

GURGEH

Believe it or not I can remember basic instructions, drone. I won't let anything slip. What's that?

FLERE-IMSAHO

I've got to wear this, so they think I'm far less sophisticated.

EXT. SPACE

Two Azadian ESCORT FRIGATES are waiting for the Limiting Factor. An Azadian SHUTTLE crosses over to the Limiting Factor and DOCKS.

INT. LIMITING FACTOR

Flere-Imsaho is hovering near Gurgeh's head in its bulky casing, emitting a loud *BUZZING* noise and causing his hair to stand up due to the static electricity.

FLERE-IMSAHO

Greeting custom?

GURGEH

Reveal I have no weapons.

FLERE-IMSAHO

And *never* make physical contact. That's important to them.

Three AZADIAN MILITARY PERSONNEL enter the corridor. Gurgeh and Flere-Imsaho are waiting politely, Gurgeh holding up both hands, his hair sticking up ridiculously.

One of the Military Personnel, the LIEUTENANT, approaches Gurgeh while the other two walk through the vessel. None of them ever make eye contact with Gurgeh. We hear the first few words of Eachic before we translate to English.

LIEUTENANT

Kledscka yf. The game's kindness to you. Once we finish our inspection, your ship will be required to exit Imperial space.

Gurgeh looks in awe over the apex's uniform, bright and dazzling against the minimal interior surfaces of the

Limiting Factor, and their pale, shaven skin. [their = genderless singular, referring to the Apex individual]

LIEUTENANT

Where is your bridge?

LIMITING FACTOR (O.S.)

I don't have one. No need.  
Could we hurry this up please,  
Lieutenant?

GURGEH

It's an honour to see the holy  
planet of the Empire.

The Lieutenant nods.

LIEUTENANT

We will escort your dropship  
to the surface for the welcome  
ceremony. Your Eachic is good.  
How is your game?

GURGEH

Well, I hope I'll provide you  
all with some good  
entertainment, at least.

The Lieutenant grants himself a quick smile, but still does not look at Gurgeh.

EXT. SPACE

The Limiting Factor glides away, purposely much slower than normal. A small MODULE is dropped off and glides towards a large continent on the surface of Ea. The two Frigates follow it down.

INT. MODULE - DAY

Gurgeh stands looking through the floor-to-ceiling window screen, at the land approaching. The module is spacious, well decorated, with a large open surface for further study of the game.

EXT. MODULE - DAY

The module, flanked and tailed by the two large frigates, approaches a sprawling city. The frigates drop off.

The city has many architectural styles, but a consistent HEXAGONAL, number six theme. In contrast to buildings on

the Culture GSV and Orbital, it is ugly and inefficient - but vibrant and sexy. Planes and space ships come and go.

ON-SCREEN TEXT

*Grosnachek*

Azadian Imperial Capital

INT. MODULE - DAY

FLERE-IMSAHO

You'll meet our Culture rep,  
if he's remembered to turn up.

EXT. PALACE - CONTINUOUS

An extravagant Palace. Azadian Apices wearing various military, bureaucratic, religious uniforms are talking, drinking. Other alien guest players have already arrived and are meeting officials. There is a MUSICAL BAND.

The module LANDS gently in front of a luscious carpet.

INT. MODULE - CONTINUOUS

FLERE-IMSAHO

He's something of a maniac.  
They asked him if we have an  
official anthem, so he just  
played them a song from the  
Net.

The module's RAMP DOOR lowers. Warm city air flows in. The noise of the capital. Sirens, aircraft engines. A thousand scents.

EXT. PALACE - CONTINUOUS

ANNOUNCER

From the Culture, Morat Jernoh  
Gergee.

The band starts playing an alien, ceremonial version of "Genie in a Bottle" by Christina Aguilera. Large males provide backing vocals and music, an Apex SINGER provides deep, important-sounding vocals in an Azadian accent.

SINGER

I feel like I've been locked  
up tight for a century of  
loneliness...

Gurgeh walks down with the large drone. Applause.

FLERE-IMSAHO

Don't react. If they found  
out, they'd declare war.

A group of five apex officials, including official,  
nervous PEQUIL, meet Gurgeh. They invite him onwards into  
the PALACE and disappear into the lavish entrance.

SINGER

...just come and set me free  
baby, and I'll be with you...

The song continues despite Gurgeh's absence.

INT. PALACE - CONTINUOUS

Inside the Palace is the most vibrant, colourful, bright  
party Gurgeh has ever seen. Great fire-torches held by  
Azadian males light the scene. Huge tapestries depicting  
ancient space battle victories hang on the walls.

Apices and their females dance. Everyone is more direct,  
compact and hard than Culture people.

Pequil is addressing Gurgeh. The other four apices have  
walked off to greet another alien.

PEQUIL

The game's kindness to you. I  
am Pequil, of the Alien  
Affairs Bureau.

GURGEH

It's an honour sir.

PEQUIL

After the ceremony I can  
accompany you to The Grand  
Imperial Hotel, where you-

FLERE-IMSAHO

That's not what was arranged,  
we are staying in the module-

PEQUIL

I have instructions to  
accommodate you-

FLERE-IMSAHO

No. We keep our own space.

ZA (O.S.)

Hello there!

A dashing Culture man pushes his way through a group of Azadians and approaches Gurgeh.

FLERE-IMSAHO

Za. You remembered.

Za shakes Gurgeh's hand. Pequil is mildly disgusted by this.

ZA

Hi drone. Pequil, how are things at the Bureau?

Za is semi-forcefully leading Gurgeh away from the pair.

ZA

Smooth? Yeah? Good. Back in a flash.

Gurgeh walks down some stairs, admiring the dancing and the decor. Some Azadians stare at the tall alien men as they pass.

GURGEH

I take it you're the Culture ambassador?

ZA

Ha! A Culture mercenary, really. I spotted some Grif behind a bar...

Za leads them to a BAR, puts a piece of paper on it, waiting for the BARMAN. Gurgeh takes and looks at the paper, curiously. He's never seen money before. The Barman takes the money, gives them two BOTTLES.

Za and Gurgeh sit down at a BOOTH, beneath a huge tapestry depicting another Azadian space victory.

ZA

Thought I'd get us some before the Emperor's goons scoff the lot.

Za unstops a bottle.

ZA

Made during Oxygen Season on  
the Empire's holy fire planet.  
Liquid silk.

Za downs the bottle in one.

GURGEH

Did Contact recruit you like  
this, or is this some effect  
from the Empire?

Za laughs.

ZA

Both. You're not drinking  
yours? I just spent a year of  
a worker's salary on that.

Gurgeh raises the bottle as a toast.

GURGEH

I was planning on bypassing  
it, but that wouldn't be  
right. To the workers!

Gurgeh DOWNS half the bottle.

GURGEH

Wow.

ZA

Takes the pain away. A lot of  
pain in the Empire.

A group of ATTRACTIVE ALIEN FEMALES are eyeing the pair  
from across the dance floor.

ZA

Word of advice. Don't get  
mixed up with any Azadian.  
They can't wait to see the...  
*enhancements* we've got.

Gurgeh looks at the attractive Azadian females.

ZA

And the Empire takes that stuff very seriously. But hey, if you want to, I can set something up, nice and discreet. Ask any of these guys!

Za laughs. His face turns serious again, and he grabs Gurgeh's wrist.

ZA

Seriously. I can fix you up.

GURGEH

I'll bear that in mind.

There is a huge *GONG SOUND* from the top of the stairs.

ZA

Shit. Drink up, man!

Gurgeh downs the rest and is lead quickly back to Flere-Imsaho and Pequil, through the rushing, panicking crowd.

Za arrives with Gurgeh.

ZA

Here's your boy.

PEQUIL

Emperor Nicosar wishes to see the players.

FLERE-IMSAHO

Careful. *No mistakes.*

Pequil marshals Gurgeh to the twin lines of Apex and alien players which borders the lush, prepared carpet.

APEX HONOUR GUARDS descend the stairs, scanning the players with advanced instruments, checking for weapons.

A vibrantly-dressed Apex, IMPERIAL ANNOUNCER, walks down the stairs, wielding an equally colourful STAFF.

## IMPERIAL ANNOUNCER

Their Imperial Highness of the  
College of Candsev, Prince of  
Space, Defender of the Faith,  
Master of the Fires of  
Echronedal, the Emperor-Regent  
Nicosar the first!

Quiet, serious, Emperor NICOSAR descends the stairs,  
surrounded by a retinue of fabulously dressed Azadians,  
along with a variety of four and six-legged ANIMALS, held  
on leads by fat, almost naked MALES with oiled bodies.

Nicosar is dressed all in black, flanked by IMPERIAL  
ELITE GUARDS, in distinctive masks. Nicosar talks quietly  
to a few players, up the line from Gurgeh. They kneel on  
both knees as they speak to him. The room is silent.

Gurgeh is fascinated by the spectacle, and is surprised  
when Nicosar approaches him. Gurgeh looks at the Emperor.

## FLERE-IMSAHO

(hissing)

*Kneel!*

Gurgeh kneels on one knee. Pequil suppresses a *moan*.

## NICOSAR

Sir One-Knee. My foreign  
guest.

Gurgeh realises his mistake, and kneels on both knees.  
Nicosar waves a ringed hand.

## NICOSAR

No, no; I admire originality.  
You shall greet me on one knee  
in future.

## GURGEH

Thank you, Your Highness.

Nicosar walks on, reaches his THRONE on the DAIS. Music  
starts, the twin lines break up, everyone starts talking  
again. Pequil looks like he's about to collapse.

## PEQUIL

At least he could talk, eh,  
machine?

Pequil picks up a drink from a passing male servant. He  
downs it.

PEQUIL

Most people freeze. I think I might have. What does one knee matter?

FLERE-IMSAHO

(to Gurgeh)

We'd better go before you do anything else.

Za is talking to two Azadian females. He shakes Gurgeh's hand goodbye, looking impressed and amused.

ZA

I'll see you around.

EXT. AZADIAN PALACE - NIGHT

Flere-Imsaho is leading Gurgeh out the door towards the parked Module. A POLICE HOVERCAR escort is waiting.

FLERE-IMSAHO

I reached a compromise. We can stay in the module, but it'll be parked on the hotel's roof.

EXT. IMPERIAL HOTEL ROOF - NIGHT

The module LANDS gracefully on the roof of the HOTEL, hexagonal, like a game board space. The police hovercar lands nearby. A bulky male POLICE GUARD gets out.

INT. MODULE - NIGHT

POLICE GUARD

I have orders. I guard this hexagon.

FLERE-IMSAHO

That's fine. Thank you.

The Police Guard walks off to guard the ROOF ACCESS DOOR.

INT. MODULE - CONTINUOUS

Flere-Imsaho floats into the Module, where Gurgeh is trying on his formal playing robes in front of a mirror.

FLERE-IMSAHO

That bare patch on your  
shoulder - shall I make an  
insignia?

GURGEH

Don't bother.

Flere-Imsaho ties up some of the laces and cuts the stray  
threads off his legs and arms.

FLERE-IMSAHO

You know why they invite alien  
guest players, don't you?

GURGEH

To show that the Empire is  
strong and the barbarians are  
weak.

FLERE-IMSAHO

That's right. So at least they  
won't see us as a threat, when  
you get knocked out in the  
first round.

Gurgeh wheels round, pissed off.

GURGEH

First round you say?

FLERE-IMSAHO

Oh, are you offended? I was  
assuming... I mean, I've  
watched you play...

Gurgeh removes his robe and drops it on the floor.

GURGEH

I think I'll have a shower.

Gurgeh enters a door to his QUARTERS. Flere-Imsaho  
pauses, leaves the Module and flies off to explore.

INT. GURGEH'S QUARTERS

Gurgeh is in the SHOWER, standing there, letting the  
water wash over him.

FLERE-IMSAHO (V.O.)

In fact, he wasn't offended at all. He hadn't been extending himself in his games with the ship. He wanted to keep his own secrets from SC. It was a gesture on a lesser board. A small victory against the elements. Against the gods.

EXT. IMPERIAL HOTEL - DAY

Hotel entrance. Mad bustle. Loud vehicle engines. You can almost smell the fuel. Gurgeh is waiting in his game robes, attracting looks of adoration from a variety of PASSERS-BY. OLD AZADIANS, smoking at a cafe and playing a mini-game of Azad, eye him. A GROUND CAR pulls up. He and Flere-Imsaho board.

INT. GROUND CAR - CONTINUOUS

PEQUIL

My office has obtained permission for you to watch the Main Series games all the way to holy fire planet.

FLERE-IMSAHO

A great honour.

GURGEH

Thank you, that's good.

Gurgeh's hands are shaking.

INT. GAME HALL

Gurgeh passes the SECURITY CHECK. Flere-Imsaho, in its bulky casing, is refused entry by the OFFICIALS. No machines. Gurgeh walks on alone.

Gurgeh is introduced to nine other Azadian apex PLAYERS. Eight of them, dressed in low-level official uniform, greet him cordially. One, the PRIEST, merely nods.

INT. GAME HALL - DAY

The ten players stand around a large blank board.

ADJUDICATOR

Play.

We see Gurgeh's board pieces spreading, eating away at the other nine coloured areas of the other players.

FLERE-IMSAHO (V.O.)

Gurgeh built up a considerable advantage.

The light crowd of the hall applauds.

FLERE-IMSAHO (V.O.)

But it was near the end of the day's play that Gurgeh realised he was going to be knocked out.

Later. Gurgeh is looking stunned. His forces have been overwhelmed, clinging to the corner of the board. The Priest's orange army is bearing down on him, with two other players' armies dominating his flanks.

The remaining six players' forces are holding back, waiting to swoop in and pick off the scraps.

ADJUDICATOR

Close of play until tomorrow.

The Priest walks up to Gurgeh. Flere-Imsaho is let in.

PRIEST

Custom dictates that we request your submission. Will you retire or continue?

Gurgeh is resigned in his head.

Flere-Imsaho interrupts.

FLERE-IMSAHO

I think we should get you back home.

GURGEH

I suppose I'll continue.

Gurgeh and Flere-Imsaho leave. The Priest watches them.

INT. MODULE - NIGHT

Gurgeh walks in, seething.

FLERE-IMSAHO

I'm off - there's a  
fascinating bird species on  
the outskirts I'd like to see.

Gurgeh says nothing.

FLERE-IMSAHO

Well, goodnight.

Flere-Imsaho discards its casing, shields itself with a  
BLACK BODY FIELD, and floats off into the night.

Gurgeh PUNCHES a nearby decorative object, SMASHING it.

INT. GURGEH'S QUARTERS

Later. Gurgeh turns over and over in his bed. He can't  
sleep.

He sits up.

INT. MODULE - CONTINUOUS

Gurgeh enters, turns on the lights with a reverse-pinch  
hand motion. He sits in the CHAIR in front of the GAME  
BOARD DISPLAY.

GURGEH

Display current game state.

The floor lights up with Gurgeh's current game position.  
Hopeless, about to be crushed by the weight of numbers.

Gurgeh sits down and stares at it, hopelessly. He presses  
a button on the chair's arm.

GURGEH

Limiting Factor.

LIMITING FACTOR (O.S.)

Hello. Up at this late hour?

GURGEH

Is there any way out of this?

LIMITING FACTOR (O.S.)

Out of your current situation  
in the game?

GURGEH

Yes.

LIMITING FACTOR (O.S.)

You are further behind than anyone who has ever come back to win a Main Series game. They're united against you.

GURGEH

Answer the question.

(beat)

LIMITING FACTOR (O.S.)

Of course there is a way. There are many ways. Each very unlikely, approaching impossible - there isn't enough time fully to show-

GURGEH

I see. Goodnight, ship.

Gurgeh clicks the button OFF. He stares at the board.

INT. GROUND CAR - DAY

Pequil is talking to Gurgeh.

PEQUIL

You've done remarkably well just to stay in the game. You'll see the fire planet, most Azadians go their whole lives without that honour.

Gurgeh stares out the window. Thinking.

INT. GAME HALL

Gurgeh is sitting in his high chair, surveying the scene. The players are all waiting on him. The crowd impatient.

A SPECTATOR Azadian apex sits in the crowd.

SPECTATOR

Hurry up. Resign.

Gurgeh inhales sharply, a surprised look on his face.

INT. NEWS ROOM

A highly-presentable female NEWSREADER is delivering a news report to the camera.

NEWSREADER

Our Emperor did predictably well in today's play, progressing to the Board of Form with ease. But with all respect to Their Imperial Highness, the story of the day is undoubtedly this other first round game.

The screen shows Gurgeh surveying his position.

NEWSREADER

The Culture guest player Gurgee was in a hopeless position, surrounded by a concerted attack by all nine other players.

The screen turns into a plan of the game board, transforming with the reporter's words.

NEWSREADER

The alien took everything he had and lashed out at the player to his right flank, who was caught off-guard with a strange flanking manoeuvre.

The map shows Gurgeh's pieces in a line, almost completing a hexagon, cutting into the alien's forces.

NEWSREADER

The Priest then threw himself into the fray. But with the most subtle manipulation of skill harmonics I've ever seen, the alien countered with a mine trap.

Gurgeh uses his last ounce of momentum, against the flow of the Priest's advance, to complete the hexagon to surround the Priest's pieces, which are mostly destroyed. Some are converted to Gurgeh, a few to the other players.

## NEWSREADER

The Priest's forces were  
either destroyed, converted,  
demoralised, or blinded.

Gurgeh's forces solidify and attack the remaining  
players, one by one. The map shows Gurgeh's forces  
spreading along one side of the board.

## NEWSREADER

The greatest comeback in Main  
Series history. Astonishing.

The screen shows Gurgeh walking away as the game hall is  
flooded by the crowd and a few reporters, trying to grab  
a picture or an interview.

EXT. GAME HALL - DAY

Gurgeh walks out, with Flere-Imsaho. Hounded.

The Ground Car pulls up just in time to rescue the pair  
from the WILD CROWD. Pequil gets out and holds the door  
open. They get in and the car drives off.

INT. GROUND CAR - CONTINUOUS

PEQUIL

I came as soon as I heard.  
Unbelievable.

FLERE-IMSAHO

Yes, well done.

GURGEH

Thanks.

Gurgeh is trying to calm himself.

PEQUIL

Media organisations are  
requesting an interview.

GURGEH

No, don't arrange anything.

PEQUIL

But, they want to know who you  
are! They want a story!

GURGEH

They'll have to make one up.

FLERE-IMSAHO

Don't think they won't.

INT. MODULE - NIGHT

Gurgeh puts on his brown jacket.

FLERE-IMSAHO

I don't approve of you going out gallivanting like this.

GURGEH

Za will have me back by midnight.

Gurgeh starts to leave.

LIMITING FACTOR (O.S.)

Before you go, one question.

Gurgeh stops at the door.

LIMITING FACTOR (O.S.)

Why didn't you listen to my help? I could have shown you a clear strategy.

GURGEH

I didn't want help, I needed to know if it was possible.

Gurgeh leaves.

INT. HOLE ELEVATOR - NIGHT

LOUD ALIEN MUSIC, muffled from the layers of rock and metal which comprises the huge club The Hole. It still DROWNS OUT the words of Za as he and Gurgeh are let into the ELEVATOR by a bulky ALIEN BOUNCER.

The elevator doors close and Za PUSHES Gurgeh in a friendly, excited way, and SHOUTS, celebrating Gurgeh's incredible victory on the Board of Origin.

INT. THE HOLE - CONTINUOUS

The elevator opens into a huge cylindrical cavern, a converted natural gas tank, now a nightclub. Super-

crowded. Where the poor Azadians and the ghettoised aliens come to forget their pain. Music dominates.

Za guides Gurgeh through the crowd. Physical contact is not sacred in here - people bump into him, jostle him, no longer stare at him. Aliens of every morphology conceivable, mixed in with the poor Azadians.

Alien dancers and cage fighters are islands in the sea of half-naked bodies. People are fighting and copulating with no second thought.

Za and Gurgeh arrive at a bar. Nearby, an AZADIAN DANCE FIGHTER is fighting/copulating with a HUMANOID in steaming red mud, in a low-gravity field.

The two drink an exotic drink, which, by Gurgeh's reaction, is very spicy. Za laughs. So does Gurgeh.

The AZADIAN DANCE FIGHTER wins the fight. The crowd CHEERS.

Four BEAUTIFUL AZADIAN FEMALES are now talking to Za and Gurgeh. They are dressed spectacularly, with anti-gravity hairnets, and dresses which actively change patterns. Za is making them laugh, being very charming.

A pair of Azadian apices are looking at Gurgeh from afar.

Za is pulled away by one of the females. They kiss. ZA pulls himself away momentarily and indicates to Gurgeh to MEET BACK HERE, points to the floor. Winks and leaves.

Gurgeh is left alone with the two females, INCLATE and AT-SEN, who are being very charming, laughing at his reluctant jokes, touching his bicep.

They play an Azadian form of rock-paper-scissors, blade-cloth-stone-water-fire. Gurgeh beats both of them, who become mock-upset.

Gurgeh dances with the women. They're amazing, the music is incredible. He becomes lost in their beauty and forgets about the game for a while.

Gurgeh pulls himself away to go to the toilet.

Gurgeh finds the toilet marked "ALIEN", next to "APEX", "FEMALE" and "MALE". He ENTERS and is confused at the variety of alien apparatus.

He EXITS the toilet and is confronted by a distressed Inclate. She takes him by the arm, looking for At-Sen.

They search the confusing, heaving crowd. At-Sen guides Gurgeh to an off-shooting ROOM from the main cavern, where a naked PAN-HUMAN is on stage, in front of a large screen which is magnifying parts of his bruised skin.

At-Sen is nearby, being shouted at by her MASTER, an apex. The Master pulls her hair and THROWS her to the ground. She scrambles away and runs through a DOOR leading under the stage. Her Master runs after her.

Gurgeh runs in too, followed by Inclate.

INT. CORRIDOR - CONTINUOUS

The Master is threatening At-Sen with a GUN. Gurgeh runs in. The Master points the gun at Gurgeh's head. He SHOUTS at Gurgeh but we hear no words. They kick At-Sen in the back, not especially hard. And RUN OFF, up some STAIRS.

Gurgeh CHASES after them up the stairs.

INT. THE HOLE - CONTINUOUS

Gurgeh looks around. He sees only a heaving crowd. The Master is gone. He DESCENDS the stairs again.

INT. CORRIDOR - CONTINUOUS

Inclate and At-Sen are gone. A DOOR leading off the corridor is open.

INT. MIRROR ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Gurgeh looks inside to see At-Sen on a low-down bed, sobbing. Inclate is comforting her. The walls are all covered in MIRRORS. At-Sen's ripped dress is discarded on the floor and she is just wearing lingerie.

Inclate stands up and rushes to Gurgeh. She HUGS him.

Gurgeh walks over to the bed, and puts his arm around At-Sen and comforts her.

At-Sen rests her head on Gurgeh's shoulder. She starts KISSING his neck.

Inclate joins them on the bed. She CRAWLS towards Gurgeh, revealing voluptuous curves. Super-hot, predatory. At-Sen rips open Gurgeh's shirt, kisses his chest, pushing him down.

INT. CORRIDOR - CONTINUOUS

Za RUSHES in, frantically looking for Gurgeh. He is buttoning his shirt, re-dressing after his hot encounter. He BURSTS IN to the MIRROR ROOM.

INT. MIRROR ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Gurgeh is on the bed. At-Sen is undressing him, Inclate is astride him, topless.

ZA

(amused)

Holster your weapon.

Za runs up to one of the mirrors and SMASHES it with a deft KICK.

Beyond the mirror we see a dark deserted room, with a CAMERA mounted on a tripod.

Za ejects a DISK from the camera's port, looks at it.

He returns to the bed, where Gurgeh is getting dressed.

Za takes out a strong blow-torch LIGHTER and INCINERATES the disc. He PULLS at Gurgeh. RUN! Points to the door.

INT. CORRIDOR - CONTINUOUS

The two exit the mirror room and run towards the stairs.

Za picks up the discarded GUN and, on the run, TESTS it. He frowns as it is evidently fake, and DISCARDS it.

Gurgeh SHOUTS and POINTS behind them at a pair of BULKY APICES entering the CORRIDOR, RUSHING after them.

Za and Gurgeh LEAP up the stairs.

INT. THE HOLE - CONTINUOUS

Music is pumping, light is flashing from one side.

Gurgeh emerges first and sees two more BULKY APICES running towards him. One takes a big SWING at Gurgeh.

Gurgeh clumsily DUCKS and SHOVES them back towards Za. Gurgeh takes a huge PUNCH to the face from the second apex and hits the floor.

Za, at the top of the stairs, DUCKS in front of the staggering apex, SCOOPING them, THROWING them back over his shoulder down the stairwell. They COLLIDE with the other two ascending apices. They CLATTER, fall back down.

Gurgeh is recovering when he is KICKED by the second apex. Za executes a perfect spinning KICK and connects with the apex's chest, throwing him up and back, where he SMASHES through a colourful GLASS PANEL.

Za PULLS Gurgeh swiftly to his feet. They RUN through the club and out of an EXIT.

EXT. AZADIAN STREET - NIGHT

ZA is piloting a MOTORBIKE, with Gurgeh on the back. The bike is Azadian, advanced, but not at Culture level. It SCREAMS through the broad street, dodging traffic. There is a low central reservation separating the traffic flows. Neon lights illuminate the bike's sleek surface.

Gurgeh SPITS some BLOOD onto the road and nurses his jaw.

ZA

They wanted to hold something  
on you, in case you keep  
winning your games.

The bike passes a LARGE LIT BILBOARD showing an AZADIAN MODEL posing, wearing a dress fashion product. Gurgeh spots two HOMELESS AZADIANS living in the darkness under the billboard. The homeless Azadians watch the bike pass.

A BLACK UNMARKED JEEP ROARS after them, dodging traffic. The jeep is about to ram them off the road.

ZA

Hang on.

The bike uses its LATERAL AIR BRAKE to ZIP to the side, between a gap in the central reservation, down a side road. The jeep tries to follow but it's not agile enough.

The jeep, going at high speed, starts to drift and SMASHES its back wheel on the central reservation. It TAKES OFF and starts to turn, flip and roll in mid air.

Gurgeh watches the destruction's early stages over his shoulder before his view is blocked by a building.

The jeep's safety measures kick in mid-air, an advanced roll cage SPREADING across its roof and windows. It CRASHES back down to the deck and rolls several times. Glass everywhere, metal layers flying off. Cars dodge it. It scrapes to a stop.

The bike races on into the night, through streets between large, high-rise buildings. The buildings and the streets are in a hexagonal grid pattern, like the game.

INT. GAME HALL - DAY

Gurgeh is sitting pretty on his raised seat. He has a good position on the board - a small, dense, almost impregnable enclave on a piece of high ground.

We see the other players attack Gurgeh's fortress one by one, but not with any real conviction. They smash harmlessly against his barriers like waves on a rock.

INT. GAME HALL - DAY

Days later. The remaining five players, Gurgeh the Priest and three others, are standing around the board.

The PRIEST'S forces take an attack, then another.

FLERE-IMSAHO (V.O.)

After five days of maintaining  
his diamond-hard defences,  
Gurgeh attacked.

Gurgeh's pieces ATTACK and wipes out most of the Priest's forces. The remaining three players hold their hands up and resign.

The crowd applauds.

INT. GROUND CAR - DAY

Gurgeh is loosening his ceremonial robes.

FLERE-IMSAHO

I've caught up on some of the  
media reports. Apparently  
we're cheating with some kind  
of supernatural power.

Gurgeh spots some commotion up ahead on the side of the road.

GURGEH

Life is cruel, as they say  
here.

The car passes a group of APEX THUGS, BEATING UP a MALE on the floor.

FLERE-IMSAHO

Here, they are correct.

INT. GAME HALL

The crowd applauds.

A small section of the crowd is devoted to Gurgeh's fans, who are CHEERING.

FLERE-IMSAHO (V.O.)

Gurgeh always felt at home on  
the final board, the Board of  
Becoming.

Gurgeh's forces spread out in every direction, taking two players on at the same time.

FLERE-IMSAHO (V.O.)

The board of the elements.  
Earth. Fire. Water. Air.

Gurgeh mixes all four elements in his play, the holograms on each piece and position illuminating his forces and adding yet another layer of complexity.

EXT. FARMHOUSE - DAY

JUN'S MALE FATHER is tending to some crops, struggling to grow in the dust. Dried-up sprinklers hang dry. The vast city scape looms on the horizon. JUN, a female toddler Azadian, is watering a WITHERED TREE SAPLING carefully.

On the DIRTRACK nearby, a BUS stops.

Jun looks up and SMILES with glee. Daddy's home! She shakes off the last few drops of water carefully.

JUN'S APEX FATHER walks away from the accelerating bus and PICKS UP Jun. They have a work bag slung round their shoulder. Exhausted after a long day.

The Apex Father puts their arm around Jun's Male Father, and touch heads, in greeting. They enter the house.

INT. FARMHOUSE - CONTINUOUS

JUN'S FEMALE MOTHER is cooking a modest dinner. The TELEVISION is on, showing Gurgeh playing.

Jun's Apex Father KISSES Jun's Female Mother and SITS DOWN, with Jun on their lap. He looks at the TELEVISION, where Gurgeh's board is displayed. Gurgeh continues to dominate. Jun's Apex Father shakes his head.

JUN'S APEX FATHER

We should have never let this  
cross-bred foreigner play.

INT. GAME HALL

Gurgeh is focussed as the crowd stare, wondering what was driving and inspiring this demon alien.

The ADJUDICATOR signals the end of play.

FLERE-IMSAHO (V.O.)

He was through to the second  
round.

Gurgeh walks out of the hall, undoing his collar and cuffs. Cruising.

FLERE-IMSAHO (V.O.)

All day, he hadn't made a single error.

EXT. BUREAU HIGH-RISE - DAY

An IMPERIAL AIRCRAFT is parked on the roof. Gurgeh and Flere-Imsaho are being escorted inside by Jun's Apex Father.

INT. BUREAU HIGH-RISE - DAY

Gurgeh and Flere-Imsaho are walking down a lavishly decorated, wide and tall corridor. Jun's Apex Father stops at an extravagant, huge door, activates a THUMB SENSOR.

INT. SHAV OLOS OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

It opens to a large office, with an epic window looking out over the cityscape. Similar vibe to Tyrell's office in Blade Runner. SHAV OLOS is looking out of the window.

JUN'S APEX FATHER

Bureaucrat Olos, the Culture alien, Jernau Gurgeh.

SHAV OLOS

I have no appointments for another few minutes.

JUN'S APEX FATHER

I'm sorry sir. I should have-

SHAV OLOS

Welcome. Please sit.

Jun's Apex Father hesitates, then leaves.

Gurgeh sits. Flere-Imsaho hovers at his side.

Shav-Olos sits, in front of a huge cityscape. Aircraft are dots, moving between huge skyscrapers, windows sparsely twinkling in the early evening light.

SHAV OLOS

And this must be your little machine.

GURGEH

It helps me with your language.

SHAV-OLOS

Very cute.

GURGEH

It is.

Flere-Imsaho *BUZZES* angrily. Gurgeh smiles.

SHAV-OLOS

Your game is better than anyone could have predicted. Father Tounse was expected to do well.

GURGEH

Perhaps I was lucky.

SHAV-OLOS

Well, I'm sorry you weren't lucky in the draw for your singles game. Judge Bermoiya is a formidable player.

GURGEH

So I've seen.

SHAV-OLOS

An interesting match it'll be, I'm sure. Now, do you know why I've invited you here, into my humble office?

Shav-Olos retrieves a PIPE from a desk drawer and lights up. In the background we feel the Empire's huge scale.

GURGEH

I am required to register my game's political and philosophical Premises.

SHAV-OLOS

Yes.

Gurgeh goes to speak but is Shav-Olos holds up a finger.

SHAV-OLOS

However, since you're playing in a strictly honorary capacity, this would only be for... formal purposes.

GURGEH

I just want to play the game.

SHAV-OLOS

My Bureau would be satisfied if you gave vague answers.

GURGEH

Suits me.

SHAV-OLOS

We don't want to cause embarrassment by asking you to reveal Culture ideas which the public might find... offensive. So, no details.

GURGEH

I'll bear that in mind.

SHAV-OLOS

I'm glad. The Empire would be nothing without its discipline.

Shav-Olos activates an intercom.

SHAV-OLOS

Assistant.

SHAV-OLOS

The Culture, as I understand it, has none.

Jun's Apex Father walks in.

JUN'S APEX FATHER

Yes, sir?

Shav-Olos maintains eye contact with Gurgeh.

SHAV-OLOS

This appointment was many minutes too early. You no longer work for me.

JUN'S APEX FATHER

Yes, sir.

Jun's Apex Father walks out.

SHAV-OLOS

You see. Discipline. I suppose I will see you out.

Shav-Olos puts his pipe in his mouth and stands up.

INT. BUREAU HIGH RISE OFFICE - LATER

Jun's Apex Father is standing at a large, open window, looking at a picture of their daughter. Ready to jump.

They're a failure. They cannot live with the shame. A tear runs down their cheek as they takes one last look at their child.

He feels the sunset wind on his face. Closes his eyes.

EXT. FARMHOUSE - LATER

Sunset. Jun is helping Jun's Male Father water the crops.

A BUS approaches.

Jun LOOKS UP excitedly. Daddy's home! The bus drives on. The toddler watches it go.

EXT. HOTEL ROOF - DAY

Dawn. Gurgeh stands, a tiny figure, looking over the huge, waking city.

INT. GAME MARQUEE - DAY

A large MARQUEE. The ADJUDICATOR is escorting Gurgeh towards the game area.

ADJUDICATOR

Apologies for the change in venue but, well...

He indicates to the huge CROWD packed into the space.

The Adjudicator introduces BERMOIYA, a graceful apex, a high judge who has given horrific sentences to thousands.

GURGEH

The game's kindness to you.

Gurgeh BOWS slightly.

The apex NODS to Gurgeh.

INT. GAME MARQUEE - LATER

The Adjudicator ends play for the day. People are filing out of the Marquee. Game ATTENDANTS are erecting a fence around the game board, to lock it down for the night.

Gurgeh and Bermoiya occupy roughly equal territory. Bermoiya's forces are hierarchical, with powerful leader structures deep in territory, expendable cannon fodder at the front. Gurgeh's forces are formless. A network.

INT. MODULE - NIGHT

Gurgeh is slumped over, having fallen asleep, exhausted. Flere-Imsaho gently uses its fields to rearrange him into a sleeping position, then covers him with a blanket.

INT. GAME MARQUEE - DAY

Several days later. The board has changed little, still very closely matched. Everyone is scattered around, talking. Most have exited for lunch.

INT. CANTEEN

Gurgeh is sitting at a table, zoned out. Pequil and Za are sitting at his table, talking to each other.

ZA

He ain't doing bad.

PEQUIL

Quite fascinating. Good luck, Gurgeh.

GURGEH

Thank you for this game, Pequil. Azad is... a wonder.

PEQUIL

Well, I didn't make it, but I'm glad you think so.

Pequil stands to leave and pats Gurgeh on the SHOULDER. A few AZADIANS nearby GASP, and whisper to one another. Pequil looks at his hand in shock. Gurgeh looks up too.

PEQUIL

I'm sorry. Good bye.

Pequil walks off. Za smiles and drinks his drink. Gurgeh is zoned out again.

INT. MARQUEE - LATER

Bermoiya approaches Gurgeh. Gurgeh snaps out of his thought process.

BERMOIYA

Mr Gurgee, I challenge you to a wager of the body. You are a male, yes?

GURGEH

Yes.

BERMOIYA

I wager removal of the genitals, without anaesthetic. Do you accept?

INT. MODULE - DAY

FLERE-IMSAHO

Put this under your tongue.

Gurgeh is sitting, looking at his current game situation. Flere-Imsaho holds out a small grey BEAD with its field.

GURGEH

What's this?

FLERE-IMSAHO

The Limiting Factor is at an eighteen light year holding distance. They wouldn't mutilate you until dawn.

Gurgeh puts the small bead under his tongue. It dissolves away.

FLERE-IMSAHO

If you lose, I'll signal it.  
In three hours it'll slingshot  
through and displace you on  
board.

Gurgeh feels under his jaw for the device. Nothing.

FLERE-IMSAHO

Feel three sharp jabs in your  
tongue and you'll have two  
seconds to assume the foetal  
position.

GURGEH

Why the foetal position?

FLERE-IMSAHO

The displacement sphere will  
only have a three quarter  
metre radius around your  
tongue.

Gurgeh makes a pained expression.

FLERE-IMSAHO

Indeed. Three jabs, in the  
tongue. Remember.

Gurgeh turns back to the game board.

GURGEH

I can't beat this apex. I  
wouldn't want to. This is  
someone's life.

INT. GURGEH'S QUARTERS - NIGHT

Flere-Imsaho discards its casing. Gurgeh is serious. Sad.

FLERE-IMSAHO

I'm going out. Good luck.

GURGEH

Wait.

FLERE-IMSAHO

Yes?

GURGEH

Signal the ship. I'm done. I can't do this.

(beat)

FLERE-IMSAHO

Before I do that, why don't you come outside with me.

GURGEH

I'm not in the mood for bird watching. Thanks though.

FLERE-IMSAHO

I haven't always gone out to watch them. Sometimes I see other things.

GURGEH

What are you talking about?

FLERE-IMSAHO

Please. Just come with me.

EXT. IMPERIAL HOTEL ROOFTOP - NIGHT

The module's lights are off. Its roof is open. Gurgeh silently floats up into the sky, in an anti-gravity harness under a hooded robe, accompanied by Flere-Imsaho.

EXT. GROSNACHEK ALLEY - NIGHT

Flere-Imsaho leads Gurgeh down. He lands gently, adjusts the AG harness under his cloak.

They walk down the alley. Gurgeh TRIPS over a mass on the floor, which moves. Homeless Azadians try to sleep under rubbish. Shapeless masses. All thin, malnourished.

A BLIND HOMELESS man fumbles past, using a thin, withered STICK as a walking cane. He has no eyes. Pitiful.

EXT. GROSNACHEK SQUARE - NIGHT

Light from a huge BILLBOARD on a high-rise bathes the desolate scene. An OLD AZADIAN is on the floor, being BEATEN UP by THUG APICES. They take it in turns to kick him, like entertainment. Teeth are on the pavement. A small CROWD watches but does nothing.

Gurgeh goes to help the poor man.

FLERE-IMSAHO

Do *not* touch him!

Gurgeh stops. The thugs GLARE at him. Gurgeh disappears back into the crowd.

INT. GROSNACHEK HOSPITAL - NIGHT

Gurgeh and Flere-Imsaho move through the hospital. Pregnant, injured, amputated, starving Azadians line every square inch of the corridors. Gurgeh can barely move. He covers his hand with the stench.

FLERE-IMSAHO

Proper hospitals are expensive. These doctors are volunteers.

Doctors rush to and fro, can't keep up with demand.

EXT. QUARRY - NIGHT

Endless SLUMS go from horizon to horizon. Gurgeh and Flere-Imsaho look down onto a GIANT MINESHAFT. A POLICE GROUND CAR approaches.

FLERE-IMSAHO

Police radio says this man was convicted of stealing food. He has been sentenced.

A THIN MAN is lead from the POLICE GROUND CAR and THROWN down the mineshaft. The POLICEMEN return to their car.

GURGEH

Back to the module. Now.

Gurgeh is about to cry. The slums go on forever.

INT. MODULE - NIGHT

Lights off. Gurgeh floats through the ceiling. The lights come on.

Flere-Imsaho removes his AG harness in silence.

FLERE-IMSAHO

There's one more thing I want to show you.

Flere-Imsaho turns on the wall TV. Gurgeh sits, dazed.

FLERE-IMSAHO

Imperial select channel. Level  
One, mild encryption.

The TV shows two APICES having sex with a FEMALE.

FLERE-IMSAHO

Level Two. Reserved for the  
Empire's upper echelons.

The TV is a swirl of colours. Then shows five Azadians,  
tied up. An APEX whips them while APICES LAUGH at them.  
They look like they're there against their will.

FLERE-IMSAHO

And this is Level Three.

Gurgeh watches. The light on his face changes colour.

FLERE-IMSAHO (V.O.)

He watched the screen. I  
watched him. I watched his  
pupils narrow. His muscles  
contract. I waited for him to  
turn away. But he didn't.

Gurgeh continues to watch.

FLERE-IMSAHO (V.O.)

The screams filled the room.  
Adults. Children. Sometimes  
they were silenced quickly,  
but mostly not. The final  
scene featured a pregnant  
female being doused with  
gasoline.

Orange light fills the room. Gurgeh looks down, away.

GURGEH

Enough.

The TV turns off.

FLERE-IMSAHO

Those images were live. They  
are happening as we speak.

Gurgeh is stunned.

FLERE-IMSAHO

Just because the Empire hides  
all this, doesn't mean it  
isn't real.

Gurgeh looks at the drone. The drone floats to the door.

FLERE-IMSAHO

I thought you ought to see.

Flere-Imsaho enters a SIDE ROOM. The door closes.

Gurgeh turns on the game board, displaying his position  
against Bermoiya. He is emotionless now. Merciless.

EXT. IMPERIAL HOTEL - DAY

A group of FOUR AZADIAN ASSASSINS are waiting on the  
opposite side of the street, in or near a CAR. One is  
SMOKING. They are looking at the entrance to the hotel,  
but not being too obvious about it.

Gurgeh exits the hotel in his game robes, flanked by  
Flere-Imsaho in its large case. REPORTERS mob them. A few  
MALE POLICE OFFICERS are protecting the pair as they get  
into the waiting GROUND CAR.

INT. GAME MARQUEE - DAY

Gurgeh is striding in quickly. Pequil is struggling to  
keep up. Bermoiya is waiting on his game stool.

INT. GAME MARQUEE - DAY

Later. Gurgeh stands over the board. Bermoiya remains on  
his stool, an ASSISTANT making the moves for him.

FLERE-IMSAHO (V.O.)

It was like they were playing  
on separate boards. What are  
you up to, Culture man?

Bermoiya wipes sweat from his brow, then laughs to  
himself. Why the nerves? You're still well ahead.

Bermoiya climbs down from his perch and moves a piece  
himself. Gurgeh GLANCES at an area of board, menacingly.

FLERE-IMSAHO (V.O.)

The alien attacked  
immediately.

Members of the crowd GASP. Gurgeh's forces, turn by turn,  
blast through Bermoiya's forces.

FLERE-IMSAHO (V.O.)

A hundred years in the courts  
hadn't prepared the judge for  
that attack.

The attack is still small compared to the whole board.

FLERE-IMSAHO (V.O.)

Over the years they had seen  
many attacks of blind hatred,  
from criminals with nothing to  
lose.

The attack goes on. Searing destruction.

FLERE-IMSAHO (V.O.)

Those moves felt the same, but  
sequenced and synchronised  
with savage grace.

INT. MARQUEE - DAY

Later. The judge's position is in chaos. They cannot hear  
the crowd. They are in shock. They stumble across the  
board, over the raised sections, trampling the pieces.  
Gurgeh looks up, as if he'd forgotten Bermoiya was there.

FLERE-IMSAHO (V.O.)

Bermoiya thought of the faces  
of the sentenced criminals.  
Not a look of despair, but one  
of terrifying hopelessness.

Bermoiya looks into Gurgeh's eyes.

FLERE-IMSAHO (V.O.)

Bermoiya looked to the alien  
and saw no sorrow or remorse,  
and finally understood.  
Understood what it was, to  
look into *their* own eyes.

Bermoiya SINKS to his knees and collapses onto the board.

EXT. STREET ROOFTOP - DAY

We hear POLICE and NEWS HELICOPTERS BUZZING, Dopplered.

On the rooftop is a raised section for an entry door. A  
dead AZADIAN POLICEMAN is being dragged around the  
corner, quickly.

An AZADIAN ASSASSIN, hidden behind the corner, unpacks a SNIPER RIFLE from a suitcase. It self-assembles menacingly. They are wearing POLICE UNIFORM.

INT. MARQUEE - DAY

Pequil joins Gurgeh and leads him out of the exit.

EXT. MARQUEE - CONTINUOUS

Noise. Pequil and Gurgeh are walking out together. Pequil is fending off reporters and members of the public. There is a weak line of POLICEMEN holding the crowd back. A placard rises above the crowd, bearing Eachic writing:

ON-SCREEN TEXT

GO HOME ALIEN

Flere-Imsaho is hovering on the walkway. He approaches Gurgeh and sticks close to him, escorting him down towards the waiting CAR on the road.

PEQUIL

Za should be somewhere.

EXT. STREET ROOFTOP - CONTINUOUS

The Assassin is aiming down his scope. His view of Gurgeh is obscured by all the commotion.

EXT. MARQUEE - CONTINUOUS

Gurgeh, Flere-Imsaho and Pequil continue. Noise.

PEQUIL

There he is.

Gurgeh spots Za struggling through the crowd, off to the right.

Gurgeh notices the three ASSASSINS in the crowd, who look out of place. They are dressed like civilians, but their physique and expressions give them away. They are in a formation, two in front of one, like a jaw.

Suddenly we notice the floor has a HEXAGONAL PATTERN. Gurgeh's imagination. Gurgeh looks at his position compared to the positions of the three assassins.

Gurgeh takes a few steps forward, slowly.

The three ASSASSINS take a few steps forward.

EXT. STREET ROOF - CONTINUOUS

The sniper Assassin still can't get a clear shot. His rifle gleaming in the red setting sun.

EXT. MARQUEE - CONTINUOUS

Gurgeh is standing still but he doesn't really know why. He looks to the right. Pequil has gone on a few steps, and turns back to see what Gurgeh is doing. Flere-Imsaho sees something is wrong, and FLIES UPWARD.

EXT. STREET ROOF - CONTINUOUS

The Assassin trains his sights, waiting for Gurgeh to enter the kill zone. Stillness.

EXT. MARQUEE - CONTINUOUS

The three Assassins LUNGE forward, overloading two POLICE APICES. Gurgeh DODGES backward and executes a deft ROLL along the floor, crouching in a clear hexagonal space behind him. There are many loud BANGS of PULSE GUNFIRE.

People start SCREAMING. One of the Assassin's bodies FALLS onto Gurgeh. CONFUSION. The CROWD SCATTERS. Two CIVILIANS lie DEAD on the floor and several are injured. Pequil is on the floor, on his back.

Za emerges from the crowd.

ZA

Alright, game player?

A POLICE HELICOPTER DESCENDS quickly, and six RAPPEL lines touch the deck.

Za HELPS Gurgeh to his feet.

Six ELITE POLICE APICES rappel to the floor.

ZA

Three attackers. I punched one, a bit too hard. Police must've got the other two.

Flere-Imsaho DESCENDS from high up.

An ELITE POLICE APEX approaches Gurgeh.

ELITE POLICE APEX

Sir, are you injured?

GURGEH

No!

Gurgeh frantically directs them to a WOUNDED CIVILIAN. A NEWS CAMERAMAN notices this and films the act of compassion.

ELITE POLICE APICES assist the POLICE officers in securing the area and tending to the wounded.

Za goes to Pequil, lying on the floor. Gurgeh and Flere-Imsaho follow.

FLERE-IMSAHO

I was just gaining altitude to better ascertain-

GURGEH

You fled.

ZA

Very heroic, drone. Old Pequil got in the way of a bullet!

Gurgeh and Za go to tend to Pequil. He is lying on his back, blinking up at the sky. He has a wounded arm.

ZA

Alright, Peqqers?

Pequil nods weakly.

Gurgeh gets down on one knee and puts his face in his hand, close to tears. All this horror, just for me?

INT. STREET ROOFTOP - DAY

Three ELITE POLICE APICES are RUNNING up the stairs, onto the roof. They BURST the door open and run onto the roof.

EXT. STREET ROOFTOP - CONTINUOUS

They level their guns, throwing blue laser dots, at the Assassin, who is hunched over his rifle, not moving.

The Elite Police Apices approach cautiously. They PULL the Assassin by the shoulder, who SLUMPS on their back. They have a very small HOLE dead centre on their forehead. Their eyes stare blankly. Dead.

INT. MODULE - NIGHT

Gurgeh throws himself sitting onto the couch, exhausted.

ZA walks up to the DRINK MACHINE on the wall.

ZA

Module.

MODULE

Yes?

ZA

A double standard of stoal and  
chilled warp wing liver wine  
bottoming a mouth of white  
Eflyre-Spin cruchen spirit in  
medium cascalo...

Flere-Imsaho makes a show of looking at Gurgeh, who just  
stares at Za.

ZA

...topped with roasted  
weirdberries, served in a  
Tipprawlic osmosis bowl.

MODULE

Male or female warp wing?

ZA

Hmm...

Gurgeh puts his head in his hands.

ZA

...both.

MODULE

Coming up.

Za activates the TV screen and tunes into the news, and  
joins Gurgeh.

ZA

This was Bureau 9 I suspect.  
But they'll try to blame it on  
the revolutionaries.

The screen shows news footage of the crowd. Flere-Imsaho  
flying up, Gurgeh dodging. We can see Za PUNCHING an  
Assassin in the temple, as they move towards Gurgeh.

ZA

I was beautiful, wasn't I?

Za notices Gurgeh looking distraught.

ZA

Unlucky civilians. I feel  
sorry for the assassins too  
really. Just doing their job.

There's a *BLEEP*. Za retrieves his drink from the machine  
and sits down next to Gurgeh.

Flere-Imsaho discards its casing.

FLERE-IMSAHO

I'm off out for a while.

ZA

Stay out of harm's way, eh,  
drone?

Flere-Imsaho floats off into the night.

GURGEH

Doing their job, how?

ZA

Secret police. Fear and  
ignorance is the only thing  
stopping full-on revolution  
around here. Hey, you want to  
go out again?

GURGEH

No thanks. I need rest.

ZA

Last time was a real hoot. We  
got in a fight, we raced. I  
got laid, you almost did!  
Great night.

GURGEH

Being so close to death does  
make you feel more alive. I'll  
give the Empire that one.

ZA

Also a great motivator to win,  
so I've heard.

Za drinks the remainder of his drink.

ZA

Anyway, must be off.

Za stands to leave.

GURGEH

Za, thank you. For today.

ZA

Think comparatively little of  
it.

Za KISSES Gurgeh on the top of the head. He walks out.

Gurgeh continues to look troubled.

He looks into the bowl of ZA's drink. He takes a sip. He  
nods. Incredible taste. He takes another sip.

INT. POLICE HOVERCAR - DAY

Gurgeh is sitting in the aircraft, looking out across the  
city crawling by beneath him. Flere-Imsaho sits next to  
him. An ELITE POLICE APEX sits opposite, also looking out  
the window. Gurgeh looks like he hasn't slept.

GURGEH

I hope security's as good at  
the venue as it is in here.

FLERE-IMSAHO

It is.

GURGEH

Well, I can't rely on you for  
protection, can I?

Flere-Imsaho remains silent. Unreadable. Gurgeh looks out  
the window.

GURGEH

What's the venue?

FLERE-IMSAHO

Win this match and you're in  
the finals. Not as a  
spectator, as a player. The  
venue will be bigger than  
before.

INT. STADIUM TUNNEL - DAY

STADIUM ANNOUNCER

Culture honorary player  
Jernoh Gergee.

Gurgeh walks out in his official game robes, through sacred CLOTH hanging from the tunnel ceiling, to a wall of noise.

INT. STADIUM - CONTINUOUS

30,000 people pack the stadium. Security personnel watch over them, from the ground, and atop the large open roof. Gurgeh joins the NINE PLAYERS in the centre, stood around the BOARD on a slightly raised strip. Gladiators. A huge SCREEN magnifies the board for the crowd.

They are high-end players, playing for their careers, not to take Gurgeh out. Half the stadium is for Gurgeh, half against, both equally hysterical. Delirious with energy.

INT. STADIUM - DAY

PLAYER NINE points at a space deep within Gurgeh's territory. An ASSISTANT places a piece there, converting several of Gurgeh's pieces to his colour.

PLAYER EIGHT joins the assault, placing a piece in a location on the same front of Gurgeh's army. Player Nine turns to the crowd and makes an upward LIFTING motion, to raise the noise.

PLAYER ONE takes advantage of their diverted attention to attack both of them with a piece which captures and RAISES a section of the board which they held.

Gurgeh responds by fighting off Player Nine and Player Eight's assault. His section of the crowd CHEERS.

INT. STADIUM - DAY

Five PLAYERS remain. Shadows are longer - evening.

PLAYER FIVE and PLAYER FOUR are ganging up on PLAYER ONE, a joint assault of his territory. PLAYER ONE stops the assault in its tracks. PLAYER TWO and PLAYER THREE assaults Gurgeh's well-organised base. The crowd are BAYING for Gurgeh's blood.

INT. STADIUM - DAY

Next day. Gurgeh responds with a powerful counterattack, wiping PLAYER THREE out. PLAYER THREE GLARES at Gurgeh before walking out of the stadium.

PLAYER TWO goes on a full scale assault of PLAYER FOUR and PLAYER FIVE's armies, wiping out most of them.

INT. STADIUM - DAY

Gurgeh, Player One and Player Two remain. Player Two is established over most of the board. Player Two extends their dominance.

Player Two intentionally BUMPS into Gurgeh as he walks round the board. The crowd CHEERS and HISSES.

INT. STADIUM - DAY

Gurgeh FIGHTS BACK. His forces are mostly made of FIRE. The crowd is going WILD. His front line overwhelms a raised position of Player One. He then POINTS at six positions in a curved line across Player Two's army.

Gurgeh turns his back to the board, to see his fans start to realise. The ASSISTANT places pieces on those six locations, which destroy or convert increasingly large portions of the board to Gurgeh. Player One holds up his hand to resign while he still can.

Player Two KICKS a piece off the board in frustration, sending fire and sparks through the air.

The ADJUDICATOR indicates to Gurgeh. He wins.

INT. FARMHOUSE - CONTINUOUS

Jun is sitting cross-legged on the floor, watching the crowd erupt on the TV, mesmerised. WOW.

INT. STADIUM - CONTINUOUS

Gurgeh RUNS and LEAPS, slow motion, in front of his thousands of screaming, weeping fans, with his fists clenched by his sides, adding his ROAR to theirs.

Gurgeh in slow motion, continues towards the peak of his jump. An animal. Utter defiance. You tried to break me. But I am here. I am alive. I am fucking magnificent. We hear an Azadian word, "alee", being chanted by thousands.

ON-SCREEN TEXT

Hero

Hero

Hero

EXT. CARPETHIAN HOME PLANET ORBIT

A large AZADIAN ATTACK FLEET is being commanded by the huge flagship, the INVINCIBLE, on which we close in.

## ON SCREEN TEXT

*The Invincible*

## Azadian Imperial Flagship

INT. INVINCIBLE CONTROL ROOM

COMMANDERS sit in rows, plugged into their machines. They quickly issue instructions via TOUCHSCREENS, in a hexagonal game-like grid.

EXT. CARPETHIAN HOME PLANET ORBIT

Garbled radio chatter. LARGE CARPETHIAN DEFENCE STATIONS are in orbit, FIRING at the AZADIAN FLEET.

Hundreds of AZADIAN SINGLE SHIPS POUR out of the Invincible's external hangar doors.

They start DOGFIGHTING with CARPETHIAN SINGLE SHIPS.

A defence station FIRES at a large Azadian ship, obliterating it. The station FIRES again, but an Azadian single ship flies in the way, blocking the larger ship. It sacrifices itself in a mad blossom of destruction.

Azadian Single Ships BREAK THROUGH and release VOLLEYS of PLASMA against the DEFENCE STATIONS.

INT. DEFENCE STATION COMMAND ROOM

CARPETHIANS, furry quadrupeds, rush around the technical environment. A HUGE EXPLOSION rips the WALL open. Atmosphere is sucked out. The poor Carpethians are SUCKED OUT with the explosive decompression.

EXT. CARPETHIAN HOME PLANET ORBIT

AZADIAN CAPITAL SHIPS unleash orbital bombardments onto the planet surface. NUCLEAR EXPLOSIONS grow. White dots.

INT. VILLA - DAY

Gurgeh wakes up with a start.

Sunlight streaming in. Birds tweeting. An island paradise off the coast of Grosnachek.

EXT. VILLA PATIO - DAY

Shav Olos, Gurgeh, and Pequil are sitting at a table. Pequil and Shav Olos are drinking alcoholic drinks. There is a jug of water on the table. Breathtaking sea view.

SHAV OLOS

There are rogue elements which want you dead, but please know that it's not our wish for you to come to harm.

GURGEH

Good to hear.

A WAITRESS approaches Gurgeh's side.

GURGEH

A bottle of *Grif*, please.

WAITRESS

None left. Sorry, sir.

GURGEH

Ah, pity. Water's fine.

The waitress bows and walks away. Gurgeh pours some water for himself from the extravagant jug on the table.

GURGEH

How's the arm?

PEQUIL

Healing.

SHAV OLOS

But we must urge you. Don't join the fleet's journey to the holy Fire Planet, for the finals. You need but to name your price.

GURGEH

The Empire wishes to give me a gift?

SHAV OLOS

There is no limit to what the Empire can give you.

GURGEH

I'm the one who should be giving gifts. I owe the Empire a great deal.

PEQUIL

Why?

GURGEH

I've been playing games all my life. Games from many places. And Azad is a precious jewel. I am quite in love. I *must* go to the fire planet.

Shav Olos looks at Pequil and lights up his pipe.

SHAV OLOS

I hope you realise, we have control over all media. We will have no choice but to fabricate your early defeat in the finals.

GURGEH

Is there anything that the Azadian people can believe in?

SHAV OLOS

The Empire, God, and the Game - these are what Azadians believe in. This is what we fight for.

Gurgeh takes a sip of water.

PEQUIL

What does the Culture believe in?

SHAV OLOS

(mockingly)

Love? Pleasure?

GURGEH

I suppose we believe in that which is often invisible, but which matters most.

SHAV OLOS

And what's that?

Gurgeh finishes the glass and taps it with his finger.

GURGEH

Technology.

He places it carefully on the table. It gleams. Gurgeh looks out over the beautiful vista, the sun on his face.

EXT. VILLA - DAY

A DROPSHIP is parked by the VILLA. A large FRIGATE is HOVERING in the sky above GROSNACHEK.

Gurgeh and Flere-Imsaho are about to board.

Pequil is waiting to say goodbye. Gurgeh offers his hand.

GURGEH

Goodbye Pequil. The game's kindness to you.

Pequil smiles. Pequil hesitates, then shakes his hand.

PEQUIL

And to you.

EXT. FARMHOUSE - DAY

FIREWORKS erupt from the city. The FEMALE TODDLER watches the FRIGATE ascend into the SKY.

EXT. SPACE

Ea orbit. The FRIGATE joins the IMPERIAL FLEET, dominated by the flagship, the *Invincible*. The fleet starts to move, then WARPS away, towards the main GALAXY.

EXT. SPACE

ECHRONEDAL. The Imperial Fleet WARPS IN.

The *Invincible* and its Navy Fleet wait in orbit, as three FRIGATES carrying Gurgeh and the other game players descend towards the holy fire planet of ECHRONEDAL. The planet has two ice caps, two large oceans north and south, and a single ribbon of land between its tropics. A continent wide band of FIRE sweeps slowly across. Barren.

ON-SCREEN TEXT

*Echronedal*

Holy Fire Planet of Azad

EXT. CASTLE KLAFF - DAY

An ancient hexagonal castle atop a spur of rock, overlooking a broad plain.

INT. KLAFF CORRIDOR - DAY

Gurgeh and Flere-Imsaho are ambling down the corridor. Gurgeh is struggling with his GAME ROBES. Tight against his bulked-up muscles.

GURGEH

These robes have become tight.

FLERE-IMSAHO

Didn't you know this? Your body has muscled up to deal with the heavier gravity. One point five standard.

INT. OBSERVATION GALLERY - DAY

Flere-Imsaho is watching Gurgeh play against nine other players.

FLERE-IMSAHO (V.O.)

He was speaking Azadian and thinking Azadian. He was another carnivore now.

Gurgeh is tearing apart his opponents. Emotionless.

Gurgeh picks another group apart. Flere-Imsaho watches.

FLERE-IMSAHO (V.O.)

It chilled me to the core.

EXT. HUNTING GROUNDS - DAY

High ranking Azadians are lined up on a platform behind a high wall, shooting helpless six-legged TROSHAE as they run through the trap from the Cinderbud forest.

Gurgeh is watching them kill the animals.

Nicosar walks in, surrounded by his six STAR MARSHALLS, including YOMONUL.

Gurgeh and others kneel.

NICOSAR

No! One knee!

Gurgeh goes on one knee instead. Nicosar and the Star Marshalls LAUGH.

EXT. HUNTING GROUNDS - DAY

Later. SERVANT MALES clear the corpses of the killed and wounded animals from the clearing. Drinking and laughter.

Admiral TRAFF SHOOTS a servant male dead. The other SERVANTS duck in fear. Laughter from the apices.

TRAFF

(to Yomonul)

Those beasts are prettier than  
your mongrel wife, Yomonul.

Hushed laughter. Yomonul, furious, HOISTS his weapon from its tripod, goes to Traff and POINTS it at their head.

YOMONUL

Admiral, you seem to have  
forgotten your rank.

We hear a sword being DRAWN. Yomonul realises there's a blade on their neck. Nicosar is holding it.

NICOSAR

Be calm, Star Marshall.

YOMONUL

I apologise, Your Highness.

Yomonul lowers the gun, and kneels. Nicosar re-sheaths the sword and crouches, speaks to Yomonul's ear, smiling.

NICOSAR

You make me draw my  
grandfather's sword again, and  
I'll throw you to the  
Incandescence.

It's hard to tell if Nicosar is joking or not.

INT. ECHRONEDAL GAME HALL - DAY

ADJUDICATOR

Main Series semi final, game  
over. Admiral Traff, third  
place. Star Marshall Yomonul,  
second place. Culture alien  
Jernau Gurgeh, first place.

Gurgeh leaves the game hall. The other players quietly climb down from their game stools. Assistants study the board. Hushed discussions.

INT. KLAFF CORRIDOR - CONTINUOUS

Flere-Imsaho waits for Gurgeh to join him. They walk down the hall together.

GURGEH

They were at each other's throats. Virtually ignored me.

FLERE-IMSAHO

Old family rivalries.

INT. OBERVATION GALLERY - DAY

Flere-Imsaho and Gurgeh watch Nicosar as he plays his semi final game, against two other players. Nicosar is in absolute control.

FLERE-IMSAHO

According to the media you were knocked out a month ago. Pretty convincing fabrication they did too.

GURGEH

Nicosar's the complete player. He's got everything.

FLERE-IMSAHO

They're also demanding the annihilation of the Culture.

Gurgeh snaps out of it for a second.

FLERE-IMSAHO

If it was up to me I'd send in a militarised GSV. Sons of bitches.

GURGEH

My, aren't you in a combative mood.

FLERE-IMSAHO

So should you be. You're playing in the final.

Nicosar looks up at the gallery. They catch Gurgeh's eye.

INT. FINAL CORRIDOR - DAY

Gurgeh is walking down, alone. Thirty six masked IMPERIAL ELITE GUARDS stand at attention down the sacred corridor. Behind their masks, a few watch him walk.

Beyond the doorway ahead in the FINAL HALL, Nicosar waits, among an orderly line of the Adjudicator, assistants, holy priests and many others.

Gurgeh enters.

The huge door closes, with a *BOOM*.

ON-SCREEN TEXT

III: MACHINA EX MACHINA

INT. FINAL HALL - DAY

Ancient room and board. Nicosar and Gurgeh are playing. Hundreds of spectators and servants populate the room.

Nicosar completes a brilliant attack. The room applauds. Gurgeh is well behind.

ADJUDICATOR

Board of Form game over.  
Emperor Nicosar leads.

INT. GURGEH'S QUARTERS - NIGHT

Gurgeh walks in looking defeated. Flere-Imsaho speaks to him in Marain.

FLERE-IMSAHO

Trifya felur- not going well?

Gurgeh hesitates.

GURGEH

No. There's something I'm missing. Just a matter of time now. Why are you speaking Marain, Flere-Imsaho?

FLERE-IMSAHO

Finally managed to debug this room. We can speak Culture again.

INT. GURGEH'S QUARTERS - NIGHT

Gurgeh and Flere-Imsaho are talking. On the screen Echronedal is shown.

FLERE-IMSAHO (V.O.)

We talked in Marain for hours,  
I told him about the planet's  
sweeping fire. How every final  
would see the Incandescence  
wash over this sacred castle,  
the new Emperor rising from  
the ashes.

INT. GURGEH'S QUARTERS - DAY

Next day. Gurgeh rises from his bed.

FLERE-IMSAHO (V.O.)

He awoke the next day feeling  
strangely clean. He was  
thinking in the Culture  
language again.

INT. FINAL HALL - DAY

Nicosar's army continues to dominate. Gurgeh frowns, and his eyes WIDEN.

FLERE-IMSAHO (V.O.)

Gurgeh realised what he'd been  
missing. So obvious he was  
blind to it. And when he saw,  
it took his breath away.

INT. GURGEH'S QUARTERS - NIGHT

Gurgeh is looking at the holographic game board, Flere-Imsaho floating nearby. His army is coming back from the brink. He is EATING from a ROUND BOWL.

GURGEH

All this time, opponents have  
tried to play me on *my* terms.  
A network, with no hierarchy.  
Nicosar is going the other  
way.

He goes to place a piece and suddenly we're in-

INT. FINAL HALL - DAY

Gurgeh places the piece. Gurgeh is still well behind, but coming back. Nicosar acknowledges the strong move.

GURGEH (V.O.)

They're playing as the Empire.  
And they're not just trying to  
beat me. They're trying to  
beat the Culture.

The Board of Form game ends. The crowd disperses.  
Gurgeh's holds a decent section of the board - he's back  
from the brink.

INT. FINAL HALL - DAY

The hall is absolutely packed with spectators. The final  
showdown.

ADJUDICATOR

Main Series Final, Board of  
Becoming. Play.

Sped-up. The strategies and elements flow. Gurgeh and  
Nicosar are monuments. They break. They return. Days of  
play flit by. A great dance. It builds to a climax-

INT. FINAL HALL - DAY

Nicosar plays a move. The crowd looks at Gurgeh and  
waits. All eyes on him. Gurgeh looks away from the board.

FLERE-IMSAHO (V.O.)

For some reason, he thought of  
mirrors.

Gurgeh reaches down to move a piece.

FLERE-IMSAHO (V.O.)

He thought of a bolt of  
lightning.

He moves the piece.

FLERE-IMSAHO (V.O.)

He wasn't aware of it. But he  
had started what would become  
the greatest move ever made in  
the game of Azad.

INT. GURGEH'S QUARTERS BATHROOM - NIGHT

Gurgeh washes his face. Everything in the room is  
hexagonal. He stares vacantly.

(beat)

(beat)

(beat)

Gurgeh remembers where he is. Dries his face. Leaves.

INT. GAME HALL - DAY

Gurgeh stares at the board. The crowd is watching. High ranking, servants, females, males. All transfixed.

INT. GURGEH'S QUARTERS - DAY

Everything in the room is hexagonal. Gurgeh stares at the game board, eats from a HEXAGONAL BOWL.

INT. GURGEH'S QUARTERS

Gurgeh is in bed.

He rises. Puts on his clothes. Opens the door. He is in-

EXT. MEDIEVAL VILLAGE - DAY

HUMANS are everywhere. Organised, technologically advanced village of barbarians. Water mills, irrigation, farming. IMPERIAL INVADERS are capturing the village. They look at the buildings with awe.

GURGEH (V.O.)

The Empire invades the  
barbarians. Absorbs.

A FEMALE VILLAGER locks eyes with a male YOUNG INVADER.

INT. MEDIEVAL RIVER - DAY

BARBARIAN FEMALE VILLAGERS are washing clothes in the river with soap. IMPERIAL INVADERS wash their clothes with them.

The Female Villager locks eyes with the Young Invader again. She smiles and looks down. He smiles too. Shy. He's never been with a woman.

INT. MEDIEVAL BANQUET - NIGHT

A group of IMPERIAL INVADERS, including the Young Invader, are eating at a table. VILLAGERS are DANCING. The Female Villager PULLS the Young Invader to the dance floor, and they DANCE with the others, romantically.

GURGEH (V.O.)

The barbarian culture. It  
channels the invaders. Seduces  
them. Transforms them.

INT. MEDICINE HUT - DAY

The Female Villager and the Young Invader kiss each other, in love.

GURGEH (V.O.)

The Empire survives. The  
barbarians survive...

We see the Female Villager has just given birth. She cradles her beautiful BABY. The couple kisses their baby.

GURGEH (V.O.)

...but the Empire is no  
more... and the barbarians are  
nowhere to be found.

The reverie COLLAPSES in a HEXAGONAL DISINTEGRATION and we're suddenly in-

INT. FINAL HALL - DAY

Gurgeh is almost brought to his knees in the middle of the board. He STAGGERS to his game chair. The board is dominated by Nicosar, but Gurgeh knows he will win.

GURGEH (V.O.)

You fool! You've killed it!

He frantically tries to see if he's missed something. No. The game of his life is over. Nicosar catches Gurgeh's eye. Worried.

INT. GURGEH'S QUARTERS - NIGHT

Gurgeh is getting dressed to go out for a walk. He's depressed.

GURGEH

My water will extinguish their  
fire. There's much left to do,  
but it's over. I've won.

LIMITING FACTOR (O.S.)

I'm looking. I can't see it!

GURGEH

I can. It was the game of my  
life. And it's never coming  
back.

Gurgeh puts on his brown jacket and leaves.

EXT. CASTLE BATTLEMENTS

A stairway leads up to the high wall. The ancient stone battlements of the castle. Gurgeh stands looking out at the orange glowing horizon. The Incandescence approaches.

NICOSAR (O.S.)

Evening.

Gurgeh turns, and kneels on one knee.

GURGEH

Your Highness.

NICOSAR

Please. We're alone. No need for that now.

Nicosar joins Gurgeh and looks out to the horizon.

NICOSAR

That's quite a situation you've got me in.

GURGEH

Yes. I'm sorry. It's... over.

NICOSAR

Tell me. How long did you really take to learn Azad?

GURGEH

Two intensive years.

NICOSAR

Don't lie to me.

GURGEH

I would never lie to you.

Nicosar turns to face Gurgeh.

NICOSAR

You must be proud of your Culture.

GURGEH

I was just lucky to be born into it-

NICOSAR

I mean the pride of  
representing it.

Gurgeh turns to face Nicosar.

GURGEH

I am no champion. I represent  
myself.

NICOSAR

I suppose I must say you  
played well.

GURGEH

We haven't played. We've  
exchanged, we've explored and  
defined. We've done a great  
thing, friend.

Gurgeh goes to put his hand on Nicosar's shoulder.  
Nicosar lashes out a BACK SLAP with a ringed hand. Gurgeh  
falls. Nicosar wipes their hand on Gurgeh, disgusted.

NICOSAR

Don't touch me. What have you  
done to the holy battle game?!

Gurgeh is shocked. He nurses his bloody mouth.

NICOSAR

It is meant to be fought  
against. You've turned it into  
some filthy dance. You  
pathetic *male*.

GURGEH

No, no... what this game has  
shown. Language can't begin  
to...

Nicosar squats down.

NICOSAR

No, it can't. It can't express  
the disgust I feel for your  
Culture, Gurgeh. I've seen it.  
You know nothing of pride, or  
worship, or glory.

Nicosar stands over Gurgeh.

NICOSAR

Mongrel cross-breeds. The awesome machines you crawl within won't save you. You are weak and you will fall.

GURGEH

You're not being fair.

NICOSAR

Why does anything have to be fair?! Is life fair?!

Gurgeh stands up and faces Nicosar.

GURGEH

Inherently? No. No, it isn't. But it can be.

Nicosar goes back to standing at the wall, looking out.

NICOSAR

Be gone. I will see you in the morning.

Gurgeh leaves down a staircase. Nicosar stares out at the orange, fiery horizon.

NICOSAR

(to himself)

The Incandescence will be here by then.

EXT. GURGEH'S QUARTERS - DAY

Gurgeh leaves his quarters in his game robes.

Two MASKED IMPERIAL GUARDS are waiting for him in the corridor.

MASKED IMPERIAL GUARD 1

There has been a security alert. We will escort you.

MASKED IMPERIAL GUARD 2

Their Highness requests that you do not wear the holy robes. And that your machine accompany you.

INT. KRAFF CORRIDOR - DAY

MASKED IMPERIAL GUARDS escort Flere-Imsaho and Gurgeh, who is wearing his BROWN JACKET.

FLERE-IMSAHO

Something's wrong. I've told  
the ship to power up.

INT. FINAL HALL - DAY

Wind pummelling the windows. Packed with spectators. Masked imperial guards everywhere. Nicosar makes a move. The Adjudicator looks vacant - sweating. Terrified.

Gurgeh spots a FLAME lick up one of the windows.

GURGEH

(to Flere-  
Imsaho)

Shouldn't the shutters be  
down? And the water system?

Gurgeh makes a move.

Nicosar takes a WATER PIECE with a FIRE PIECE in high terrain. They nod at a MASKED IMPERIAL CHIEF, who speaks quietly into their wrist. A quiet, distant explosion.

FLERE-IMSAHO

(quietly)

Infrasound pulse. They've  
destroyed the viaduct.

Flames begin to whip at the windows.

GURGEH

The Limiting Factor?

FLERE-IMSAHO

ETA three hours.

Nicosar takes an EARTH PIECE with his FIRE PIECE.

The whole castle SHAKES. Muffled explosions everywhere. The shutters FALL outside, destroyed. The crowd screams.

Nicosar takes an AIR PIECE with his FIRE PIECE.

FLERE-IMSAHO

Neutrino bursts from orbit.  
Gurgeh, look ouuuuuuuu-

Flere-Imsaho glows red, green, blue, white, then SLAMS into the far wall, smouldering.

Nicosar drops the EFFECTOR GUN.

The GUARDS start SHOOTING everywhere. Massacring everyone. The crowd SCREAMS and tries to RUN for the exits. The Guards ignore Gurgeh and walk out through the corridors, killing.

Fire is CRAWLING up the large windows.

Nicosar walks towards Gurgeh, kicking over the board pieces, casually DRAWING their grandfather's SWORD. Gurgeh looks over to Flere-Imsaho for help. Just smouldering wreckage. Nicosar stands over Gurgeh.

Nicosar goes to say something, then decide against it. They RAISE the sword over their head, to execute the filthy alien. We FLASH for a second back to-

EXT. CHIARK FIELD - DAY

Yay and Gurgeh sit in the GRASS. A perfect day. Yay LAUGHS and rests her head on Gurgeh's shoulder. Gurgeh smiles. And after just a second we're back to-

INT. FINAL HALL - DAY

Nicosar brings the sword down. The sword's blade is CLIPPED OFF mid-air. A BLUR of motion over their heads. The metal blade CLANGS onto the floor.

Flere-Imsaho, in its tiny natural form, floats there.

FLERE-IMSAHO

Ha ha ha ha!

Nicosar RUSHES back to the DROPPED EFFECTOR WEAPON.

He slowly raises it, aims at Gurgeh's head.

For an instant, Gurgeh is looking at his own face in a MIRROR an inch from his. Surrounded by Flere-Imsaho's mirror field. The mirror field vanishes.

Nicosar stands weakly, with a small hole in their forehead. They drop to the floor, limp. Simultaneously-

The INCANDESCENCE FIRE SMASHES through the windows and starts to incinerate everything, for an instant WRAPPING AROUND the cowering Gurgeh and buffeting Flere-Imsaho.

Blackness.

INT. FINAL HALL - DAY

Gurgeh wakes up. The hall is scorched. Orange embers and ash drift down through the air - FIRE SNOW. There's a perfectly circular clearing around Gurgeh.

Gurgeh walks through the debris. He finds a pile of ASH near the remains of the effector weapon. He picks it up and looks at it.

FLERE-IMSAHO

Sorry for the brief scare.

The embers fall. Gurgeh POCKETS the ash absent-mindedly.

Flere-Imsaho hovers, looking at Gurgeh. Flere-Imsaho picks up and inspects the effector weapon, rotating it.

FLERE-IMSAHO

In case you haven't guessed,  
I'm not a library drone.  
Outside the marquee - I wasn't  
fleeing from those assassins.

GURGEH

You killed them.

FLERE-IMSAHO

Yes. I've been looking after  
you all the way.

Flere-Imsaho drops the weapon and looks at Gurgeh.

FLERE-IMSAHO

But the Minds wanted you to  
feel at risk, like an Azadian.  
Feel the desire to win.

GURGEH

The Minds...

Flere-Imsaho floats over to Gurgeh.

FLERE-IMSAHO

They knew that the right piece  
in the right place would make  
the Empire and all its cruelty  
come crashing down. And the  
right piece was you.

Gurgeh walks out onto the scorched balcony. The drone follows. Gurgeh looks up to the sky and sees faint FLASHES.

FLERE-IMSAHO

The Invincible is battling its own Navy. Nicosar's last blaze of glory. The truth is, Nicosar was playing for the Empire. And you were playing for the Culture.

GURGEH

What now? For the Azadians?

FLERE-IMSAHO

That's up to them. But they'll see your game. We'll show them.

Gurgeh feels three sharp jabs in his tongue. He winces.

FLERE-IMSAHO

What's wrong?

GURGEH

My tongue.

Then they both realise. Gurgeh JUMPS and tucks his legs and arms in, blinks out of existence with a SILVER SPHERE and a BOOM.

INT. LIMITING FACTOR PILOT ROOM - DAY

Gurgeh's SPHERE blinks into the room, and he LANDS on a FORM SEAT.

LIMITING FACTOR (V.O.)

I saw it eventually. Well played my boy. Don't worry, we're getting out of here.

Flere-Imsaho blinks into the room too.

The room starts FILLING UP with BLUE SHOCK FLUID. A jelly-like substance - the ultimate seat belt.

A BREATHING APPARATUS descends from the ceiling and attaches to Gurgeh's mouth.

LIMITING FACTOR (V.O.)

I need my agility.

The FLUID RISES over Gurgeh'S lap, arms, chest.

LIMITING FACTOR

The Invincible is falling! Oh,  
it's my turn! It's finally my  
turn!

The FLUID fills the room and SOLIDIFIES, locking in.

EXT. ECHRONEDAL - DAY

The Limiting Factor is HURTLING through the landscape.  
Three IMPERIAL FIGHTERS are chasing and FIRING at it.

It flies and dodges through mountains with stunning  
agility. Pulses MISS and PULVERISE mountain slopes.

The pursuit continues across a COASTAL PLAIN.

The huge INVINCIBLE falls through the clouds, on fire.

The LIMITING FACTOR fires three razor-thin EFFECTOR  
BURSTS at perfect angles, into the falling Invincible's  
folding, breaking hull. The three bursts start to eat  
tunnels through the immense craft's body.

The Invincible falls towards a BEACH. It HITS the ground,  
scraping into the OCEAN. It begins to explode.

The three tunnels ALIGN perfectly for an instant, the  
Limiting Factor having calculated the dynamics perfectly.

The Limiting Factor flies through the briefly existing  
tunnel, as the Invincible continues to explode. The three  
Imperial Fighters bank left, right, and pull up, to  
escape the greatest explosion you've ever seen.

Earth and furious fire erupt. Fifty billion screams  
through the centuries. The Empire's last snarl.

The Limiting Factor hurtles into the sky.

EXT. ECHRONEDAL ORBIT - NIGHT

The NAVY continues to battle IMPERIAL FIGHTERS left over  
from the Invincible. The Limiting Factor darts through  
the fleet at insane speed.

It approaches light speed. The colours change as the  
planet and the fleet and everything behind are RED  
SHIFTED. The stars in front are BLUE SHIFTED.

EXT. FARMHOUSE - NIGHT

Emotional final sequence. We see the WITHERED TREE and  
parched ground illuminated by the house's light through  
the windows.

INT. FARMHOUSE - CONTINUOUS

Jun is trying to see the TV. Jun's Mother and Jun's Male Father are watching in disbelief at the screen, displaying Gurgeh's game position. Water pieces transform the board in a cascade of blue. Jun stares at the screen.

INT. LIMITING FACTOR HYPERSLEEP ROOM

Eight SLEEP CHAMBERS line a wall. Gurgeh climbs into one. The door closes. He will sleep the whole return journey.

EXT. AZADIAN STREET - DAY

THOUSANDS OF AZADIANS MARCH down the street. Za sits on the shoulders of a LARGE MALE, waving a BLUE FLAG.

INT. AZADIAN FACTORY - DAY

AZADIAN FACTORY WORKERS watch a NON-SENTIENT DRONE engage its anti-gravity, and float off its DOCKING BAY.

EXT. FARMHOUSE - DAY

NON-SENTIENT DRONES fly overhead, releasing water over the dry field. Jun's Male Father collapses to his knees in happiness. Jun jumps up and down and waves at the drones, plays in the water.

EXT. FARMHOUSE - DAY

Years later. The field is green and fertile. The withered tree is now a beautiful explosion of green.

Jun is now a young woman, a determined pioneer. She is boarding an AIR DROPSHIP, loaded with FOOD PARCELS.

The AIR DROPSHIP takes off. Jun's Female Mother and Male Father wave goodbye. The DROPSHIP rises into the sky.

EXT. SPACE

The Orbital hangs in space. No more Plates under construction - a beautiful, full circle. COMPLETE.

The Limiting Factor drifts over the Orbital's landscape.

EXT. IKROH HOUSE - NIGHT

Light fluffy snow, WATER SNOW, drifts down. Gurgeh, dressed in the same BROWN JACKET, crumps through the pristine blanket of whiteness to his house. He's home.

Limiting Factor rises into the starry sky. The Green Lesser Cloud, home of Ea, is visible in the sky.

EXT. AZADIAN SLUMS - DAY

The DROPSHIP lands next to MEDICAL TENTS. POOR, SICK, STARVING AZADIANS are being treated by VOLUNTEERS. Jun disembarks, along with other volunteers. Hands out food.

She administers an INJECTION into a SICK ELDERLY MALE, who is overcome with disbelief, and offers her some COINS from a worn-out purse. Jun refuses them. The Elderly Male's FAMILY is also being cared for.

Nearby, a volunteer taps on a TOUCHSCREEN, laying out food allocations, in a hexagonal grid, like the game.

INT. IKROH HOUSE - NIGHT

Gurgeh enters. Home sweet home. The LIGHTS come on, and Yay and Chamlis JUMP OUT from behind the sofa. Gurgeh is surprised, then SMILES.

EXT. GROSNACHEK - DAY

The city transforms from the SPRAWLING SLUMS into a PARADISE; large, efficient, futuristic high-rises and greenery built by NON-SENTIENT DRONES. The new home of millions. Culture-like.

INT. IKROH HOUSE - LATER

The fire is going. Gurgeh sits with a drink, Yay sits opposite him with Chamlis. Gurgeh is talking and gesturing, telling his story. Yay and Chamlis are mesmerised, stunned.

INT. BEAUTIFUL AZADIAN APARTMENT - DAY

SICK ELDERLY MALE stands in the middle of the beautiful apartment, mid-morning light streaming in. He is surrounded by his family. He collapses to his knees and cries with happiness. His family HUG him.

IKROH HOUSE - NIGHT

Low lighting. Yay approaches Gurgeh and KISSES him gently, passionately. She has missed him too much.

EXT. GROSNACHEK - DAY

A FLEET of AZADIAN SHIPS take off into the sky.

INT. AZADIAN SHIP - CONTINUOUS

Jun is strapped into a seat, with other Azadians.

EXT. LITTLE RASCAL TERRACE - DAY

Flere-Imsaho is floating with a MYSTERIOUS MAN. We do not see the man's face, but we see he is well built. They

walk across a raised section of habitat with an epic view over the GSV's topside park.

MYSTERIOUS MAN

Congratulations. A cultural victory. And here they are.

The CROWD down below CHEERS, as TWO AZADIAN DROPSHIPS descend from the perfect GSV sky.

Music plays. Fireworks bloom. The DROPSHIPS land. Jun disembarks, along with other AZADIANS.

Jun and her companions are PICKED UP by a crowd of CULTURE CONTACT CITIZENS. The Azadians are smiling for the first time.

The Culture Contact Citizens THROW Jun and the others into the nearby LAKE. They JUMP IN with them. A few LEAP off the high CLIFF into the water.

Many different species are HUGGING, DANCING, LAUGHING.

MYSTERIOUS MAN

(regretfully)

It's a matter of knowing the best use of the weapons you have.

FLERE-IMSAHO

The Minds used the game player perfectly.

MYSTERIOUS MAN

Although, they acquired him through a stroke of luck, did they not?

The Azadians, the pan-humans, the drones and the aliens are FLYING into the sky on AG harnesses.

FLERE-IMSAHO

The Minds leave nothing to luck. See, for this operation, I had two codenames. One was Flere-Imsaho.

Jun watches them fly. She is playfully SPLASHED by a PAN HUMAN MALE. She SPLASHES BACK, smiles. The people in the sky FLY. A few BIRDS flutter past.

## MYSTERIOUS MAN

And your other codename?

Flere-Imsaho turns away from the beautiful scene and looks at the Mysterious Man.

## FLERE-IMSAHO

Mawhrin-Skel.

## INT. GURGEH'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Yay and Gurgeh are in bed. Yay is sleeping. Dead of night. Gurgeh rises carefully, shirtless. He watches Yay sleep. She is utterly at peace - unlike Ren, before.

Gurgeh grabs his BROWN JACKET and puts it on. He opens the door onto the balcony and steps out into the silent night.

## EXT. IKROH BALCONY - NIGHT

Light snow drifts down. Magical. Gurgeh pulls his jacket close against the chill. He looks up at the night sky, at the Green Lesser Cloud, above the galactic disc.

He puts his hand in his POCKET and STOPS. We FLASHBACK TO-

## INT. FINAL HALL - DAY

Embers, FIRE SNOW, drift down. Gurgeh pockets the ASH of the old Emperor, absent mindedly. Then we're back to-

## EXT. IKROH BALCONY - NIGHT

The sparkling WATER SNOW drifts down. Gurgeh looks down at his hand as he pulls it out, holding a handful of ASH.

Tears run down Gurgeh's face. He lets the ASH run through his fingers, as he did with the sand all those years ago. The Green Lesser Cloud glows in the sky.

We hear a stadium of billions, cheering. We can just make out the word "alee", chanted over and over. A rumbling, deafening boom. Like thunder.

FADE OUT

END