

KILL SWITCH

A computer engineer who is the last surviving member of a team that, decades ago, developed society-changing new industrial technology is presented with a unique opportunity for atonement.

FADE IN:

INT. A TINY MODULAR APARTMENT - MORNING

A looped recording of chirping birds. One wall of a 15-square-foot room illuminates with artificial sunrise. GABE WOODSON (late 50s), trim but weary-looking, with the beginning of a beard, lies in the fetal position on a narrow mattress. He stirs and stands to stretch, hands skimming the ceiling. He slides the bed into a recess in the wall and pushes a series of buttons. Coffee streams into a plain white cup. A soft chime sounds; a reminder.

FEMALE VOICE

You. Have an appointment. Lars Vander
Griend, Executive Director, Carter
Nielsen & Associates, Zone 7.

Gabe turns, steps on a small foot pedal to reveal a urinal the size of a cupholder, and relieves himself as the voice continues.

FEMALE VOICE (CONT'D)

Intercolony Transport departs at 0800
hours. Platform J.

CUT TO:

INT./EXT. APARTMENT - DAY

The door whooshes open and Gabe steps out. Before it closes we see that there are hundreds of identical doors, on hundreds of floors. The inhabitants come and go with blank faces, their meager possessions spilling out into the hallway. Music is heard from somewhere below, a loud crash, and shouting. A baby cries.

CUT TO:

EXT. HOUSING COMPLEX - DAY

Gabe walks quickly through the winding streets. The housing towers, wedged together like poorly fitted puzzle pieces, give way to teetering shanty towns and tents. Beyond that, past the shimmering pink dome that encloses the city, is nothing but hulking dark industrial equipment: showers of sparks as robotic arms weld beams and fit gears, burrowing hydraulic drills, and giant cranes. Gabe glances at the sign, "Carter Nielson & Assoc.," before descending the stairs to the transport station.

CUT TO:

INT. INTERCOLONY TRANSPORT - DAY

From the plush seat of a high-speed train, Gabe watches the domed

city and machinery recede. The train enters a tunnel.

CUT TO:

INT. CARTER NIELSEN HQ, LOBBY - DAY

A woman in a gray suit beckons to Gabe from across an echoing lobby. He walks toward her but is distracted. Two janitorial drones, standing ready with dusters and soapy rags, use a remote to lower a huge chandelier to waist level. The branching gold arms and scrollwork shudder as it comes to rest. A strange look comes over Gabe's face as he approaches it, running his fingers lightly through the tinkling crystal prisms.

WOMAN

(tersely)

This way, sir.

CUT TO:

INT. CARTER NIELSEN HQ, OFFICE OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR - DAY

VANDER GRIEND (in his early 40s, with olive skin, striking blue eyes, and close-cropped hair) sits behind an large steel desk.

VANDER GRIEND

Mr. Woodson.

The two share an awkward silence. Vander Griend's smile disappears.

VANDER GRIEND

Never much for small talk. I suppose you know this is important. What do you know about 21 Lutetia?

GABE

An asteroid. One of the large ones. Seventy-five miles wide. M-class, so it's full of hard metals. But unique. With softer surface layers and a mega-crater like no one had ever seen. It's what we were developing C-Suite for. As you must know.

VANDER GRIEND

(looking grim)

Indulge me. This was before my time. And you know how dry engineering reports can be.

GABE

It was 25 years ago. We were only starting to recognize the potential for computer systems with biological components. But we had high hopes. C-Suite was to be the first organic, self-reproducing computer system. We would program it and set it loose somewhere—on an asteroid, a far-off moon—and it would do everything. Mine the raw materials, refine them, 3-D print the component parts. It was going to be capable of building a whole infrastructure, somewhere out there in space, before the first humans even arrived.

VANDER GRIEND

Why C-Suite?

GABE

(shaking his head with a wry smile)

It was just a gimmick. A nomenclature. Each iteration of the project had a unique aesthetic, based on some ordinary object. A-Suite was rectilinear; it looked like a child's abacus. B-Suite was stacking, like a bento box. And C-Suite ... well, C-Suite was a mining program, branching, capable of suspending itself, through any number of configurations, into tight chasms and broad trenches. C stood for chandelier.

VANDER GRIEND

What you describe doesn't sound so different from the industrial packages we've been leasing to governments all over the world for two decades.

GABE

Oh, but it was. You know it was different, or you wouldn't have brought me here. To do everything that we needed it to, to be capable of not only building, but of designing things on such a grand scale, with no human oversight or intervention, C-Suite had to be a twitching, responsive, adaptive, *sentient* being. It had to be alive, Lars. It had to live.

Vander Griend leans back in his chair and studies Gabe through narrowed eyes.

GABE (CONT'D)

The lease packages, what you guys deal in now, are all D-Suite. Of course, we'd stopped calling them that before you joined the company.

VANDER GRIEND

And "D" stood for ...?

GABE

Dumb. We had to dumb them down.

VANDER GRIEND

That was around the time you left the company?

GABE

It was. As I explained in my exit memo, there should have been no market for the D-Suite technology. We were designing extraterrestrial mining equipment, for God's sake. It wasn't meant for Earth! Look at what's happened under your watch, Lars. The government's got people warehoused in domed cities while your machines tear the planet apart.

VANDER GRIEND

(silent)

GABE (CONT'D)

You haven't asked why we had to dumb down C-Suite.

VANDER GRIEND

I don't have to.

GABE

If I had to guess, I'd say some idiot sent the C-Suite prototype on to 21 Lutetia. Against my express instructions. I can picture it now. Your first batch of homesteaders, eager, awe-struck, stepping down onto the dusty surface of their new home for the first time. C-Suite would have seen them right away for what they were.

VANDER GRIEND

And what is that?

GABE

A threat. The single greatest threat, in fact, to everything C-Suite had worked so hard to build. They must have been massacred.

VANDER GRIEND

(swallowing audibly)

Is there a kill switch?

GABE

Yes.

VANDER GRIEND

(relieved, but disbelieving)

You're sure?

GABE

Of course I am. You don't design something that dangerous without a kill switch. You can stop holding your breath, Lars. I'll give it to you. It's a line of code. A self-destruct protocol. It's in this building.

CUT TO:

INT. CARTER NIELSEN HQ, LOBBY - DAY

With Vander Griend close behind him, Gabe walks across the lobby to where the drones are about to raise the chandelier, now sparkling clean, back into position. Gabe runs his hand against the crystal prisms, sending them rocking back and forth. But one doesn't move. He grasps it, with thumb and forefinger, and slowly unscrews it. A tiny curl of paper falls to the floor.

CUT TO:

INT. INTERCOLONY TRANSPORT - LATE EVENING

Gabe watches the sun set through the train window. Just as the transport draws near the pink-domed city, there is an explosion in the distance. The silhouette of a giant steel derrick topples against the orange sky, setting off a chain reaction of explosions that lasts well into the night.

FADE OUT.

THE END