

ROM

Written by

Evan Tarver

evan@evantarver.com
1411 N Mansfield Ave.
Los Angeles, CA, 90028

BLACK SCREEN:

We open to the sound of a blaring siren and heavy panting.

FADE IN:

INT. OFFICE BUILDING - NIGHT

A MAN (30s) scampers down an ominous hallway, fluorescent lights flickering overhead.

He runs like he's being followed - loose backpack bouncing up and down, sweat dripping from his brow.

The man skids to a halt outside a nondescript office door, takes a deep breath, thrusts it open.

Inside, the office is sparse. We see a bulky computer terminal sitting on a loan desk, a dinosaur from the 1980s.

INT. OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

The man locks the door behind him, approaching the old terminal with near-religious reverence.

HOWL! The siren wails. Snapping out of his trance, the man switches on the computer, fingers flying across its keyboard.

The screen lights up with the classic look of an archaic operating system. The man smiles, relieved.

JAKE WATTS (V.O.)

Some say they only start chasing you after they find out what you really are. Others say they've always been chasing you.

(beat)

All I know is, you don't wanna get caught.

The man pulls a floppy disk out of his backpack, inserts it into the computer with care.

Bursts of text scroll across the terminal's screen.

The man glances at the closed door, taps his fingers, encouraging the program to finish its protocol.

After a long pause, the computer emits a happy **ding!** The screen reads, "*Protocol Uploaded.*"

The man smiles, relaxes. Everything is calm. Even the siren seems to fade.

BOOM! The office door splinters.

Through the smoke rushes a SWAT TEAM, wearing the black uniform of ROOT SECTOR DEFENSE.

The man is surrounded, hands bound, the terminal destroyed.

The team's leader (JOCKO, 30s) approaches in black fatigues. Square-jawed and military-precise, he sneers.

The man spits in his face.

Jocko smiles, waits a beat, then punches the man in the teeth, knocking him out cold.

CUT TO:

MAIN TITLES.

CUT TO BLACK:

We hear car tires on gravel.

NATHAN RENCO (O.S.)
Take it off.

INT. LIMOUSINE (MOVING) - EARLY MORNING

Jocko pulls a hood off the man's head. He's battered and bruised, blood leaking from his mouth.

Across from him, an impeccably-dressed NATHAN RENCO (40s) considers his manicured nails.

NATHAN
Can I get you anything? Water?

Nathan speaks with a measured, dangerous tone.

The man drools on the limousine floor, bloody mucus.

NATHAN (CONT'D)
A napkin, perhaps?
(off the man's look)
You know it's futile, don't you?

MAN
You're wrong. It's already done.

NATHAN

Already done. Now there's something
on which we can both agree.

The limo stops. The privacy screen rolls down, TWO SECTOR
DEFENSE OFFICERS sitting in front. They signal to Jocko.

JOCKO

We're here, sir.

Nathan nods.

Jocko grabs the man, wrestling him out of the vehicle.

Nathan exits, casual.

EXT. ABANDONED CONSTRUCTION SITE - CONTINUOUS

An old commercial building on the edge of collapse, rusty
equipment everywhere - a project long forgotten.

Jocko drags the man over to Nathan, kicks his legs out from
under him. The man falls hard at Nathan's feet.

Jocko puts a gun to his temple. The man whimpers.

MAN

Please, don't do this.

NATHAN

Don't do this? You've always been
dead, you just never knew it.

Nathan gives Jocko a disinterested look.

Without hesitation Jocko pulls the trigger, killing the man.

The shot echoes, and then silence. Blood pools on the ground.

NATHAN (CONT'D)

(shaking his head)
They never learn.

Nathan walks to his limo. Jocko follows.

Two Sector Defense officers carry the body to an incinerator,
toss it onto a conveyor belt moving towards the flame.

They walk over to a second body, previously unseen. Together,
they drag the limp form to the incinerator and dispose of it.

We slowly zoom out to birds-eye view, see a pile of dead
bodies next to the machine, mangled forms intertwined.

The officers walk back and forth, grabbing people from the pile, one by one, tossing them into the incinerator.

CUT TO BLACK:

INT. CYPHER CORPORATION - DAY

An idle computer, screen black, waiting for a command.

JAKE WATTS (late 20s) sits at a desk, plain-clothed and unassuming, staring at the blank screen with a vapid face.

RONNIE (O.S.)
Just delete them all. Trash 'em.

JAKE
(startled)
What?

Jake reflexively wakes the computer, acts like he's working.

Behind him is RONNIE (40s), his superior at CYPHER CORPORATION, a cutting-edge government defense contractor.

RONNIE
The NASDA files, delete them.

JAKE
But government protocol --

RONNIE
Just delete them, please.

Jake nods, shrugging. Ronnie doesn't leave.

JAKE
Anything else?

Ronnie slides a small thumb drive across his desk.

JAKE (CONT'D)
What's this?

RONNIE
Your new project. There's been an increase in anomalous activity across the Destiny framework. Nothing's been compromised, but the Joint Chiefs are upgrading conditions to INFOCON three.

Jake's posture straightens. Finally, something interesting.

JAKE

Anomalies? That doesn't make sense.
Maybe --

RONNIE

We've got people working on it.

JAKE

So what do you want me to do, then?

RONNIE

All unclassified government dial-up connections are disconnected. Non-essential networks are next. And because we're a government contractor, we're considered non-essential...

Ronnie's voice trails, hoping Jake gets the hint.

JAKE

...So?

RONNIE

So, the boys at the D.O.D are getting skittish. I told 'em it was nothing to worry about, but they won't listen. They want all Destiny files zipped and moved to the High-Security Vault. Obviously, we can't connect our network to the fed's, so you'll have to manually scrub and upload them.

Jake's jaw drops.

JAKE

There have to be a thousand files on that flash drive. This is admin work, get Charlie to do it.

CHARLIE (late 20s) overhears from an adjacent desk and sticks her head up, tattoos and piercings - a wicked programmer with a wicked attitude.

CHARLIE

Fuck you, Jake.

RONNIE

Nice try, but sorry.

JAKE

(under his breath)
Shit really does roll downhill.

RONNIE
What was that?

JAKE
I'll get right on it.

Ronnie smiles. He pats Jake on the back, earnest and hard.

RONNIE
Thanks, I appreciate it.

Ronnie walks away, calling over his shoulder.

RONNIE (CONT'D)
A-sap, Jake, on the double.

Jake shakes his head, returns to his computer - a tedious task ahead of him.

Ding! A message appears before he can start.

He opens it. It reads:

JAKE - Have you received the Destiny files yet? We need them zipped and moved to the Vault ASAP.

Jake rolls his eyes, unable to handle the bureaucracy. He checks his coffee. Empty. He gets up for more.

A COWORKER abruptly stops him.

COWORKER
Jake, glad I found you. Have you gotten those files --

JAKE
I'm on it.

SERIES OF SHOTS:

- Jake sitting at his desk with a steaming cup of coffee.
- Jake moving digital files from one folder to another.
- Charlie saying goodbye, leaving for the night.
- Jake getting a second cup of coffee.
- Jake finishing his long task, shutting down his computer.

EXT. DOWNTOWN SAN FRANCISCO (MOVING) - NIGHT

Jake leaves work, fights his way through pedestrian traffic.

INT. BART STATION - CONTINUOUS

Jake descends the steps of the station into the underbelly of the city, barely noticing a HOMELESS MAN (50s) on his way.

The homeless man is unkempt but not dirty, sitting with his back straight, alert, shrouded in an oversized coat and cap.

He has a sign that reads, "*Time Traveler - Help! Need Money for Flux Capacitor.*"

He calls to Jake:

HOMELESS MAN
Spare some change, McFly?

Jake chuckles, checks his wallet.

JAKE
Sorry, card only.

The train arrives.

Jake rushes to the platform, hops on the nearest car.

The homeless man watches him go.

EXT. THE MISSION NEIGHBORHOOD (MOVING) - LATER

Jake exits the BART stop near his apartment, walks home on autopilot.

EXT. JAKE'S APARTMENT COMPLEX - CONTINUOUS

Arriving, he glances across the street, spotting the same homeless man with the same sign, watching.

JAKE
How the...

Distracted and confused, Jake turns to cross the road.

DING DING! A messenger bike whizzes past, ringing its bell.

Jake jumps out of the way.

When he looks again, the homeless man is gone.

CUT TO:

INT. JAKE'S STUDIO APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

The space is small, sparsely decorated with bare walls.

Jake opens the front door. He's immediately met by a German Shepard, licking his face.

JAKE

(laughing)

Calm down, buddy. Ok, it's good to see you, too.

Jake pushes off his dog, grabs a beer from the fridge, sits on his couch - standard post-work routine.

Beat - silence. Jake powers on a video game console, mashes buttons for a second before stopping, disinterested.

He gets up, goes back to the fridge, looks inside - nothing there except for food stains and an empty case of beer.

He sighs, closes the door.

EXT. JAKE'S APARTMENT COMPLEX - CONTINUOUS

Jake exits his building, glancing across the street where the homeless man sat earlier - he's no longer there.

Jake shakes his head, tells himself he's not crazy.

INT. GROCERY STORE (MOVING) - A SHORT TIME LATER

Jake walks with a cart, back on autopilot.

He maneuvers through tight aisles and bustling shoppers, relying on muscle memory to locate his staple foods.

Jake stops at an end-cap, reaches for an item, when...

Screech! He's cut off by a fellow SHOPPER WITH A CART, grabbing the same item out from under him.

JAKE

Oh, sorry.

Jake waits for the shopper to leave, mild-mannered, grabs another item off the shelf, continues on his way.

Finished, Jake waits in line at the register, people around him sharing his blank, disengaged stare.

At the front, the CASHIER works like an automated robot, the consistent thrum of items being scanned in the background.

INT. JAKE'S STUDIO APARTMENT - A SHORT TIME LATER

Jake stocks his fridge, leaving the empty case of beer, placing a new one in front of it.

He cracks a brew, returns to his couch.

Buzz! His phone vibrates - a text message. Jake checks it.

CHESTER (TEXT MESSAGE)
*What are you up to? Meeting up with
 some friends - come hang.*

Jake shakes his head, tosses his phone aside.

Ring! Ring! His phone. He checks the screen. It's Chester.

Jake lets it go to voicemail.

Ring! Ring! Chester again, persistent. Jake finally answers.

JAKE
 What's up, man?

CUT TO:

INT. SAN FRANCISCO BAR - CONTINUOUS

CHESTER TAYLOR (early 30s), Jake's longtime friend, stands at the bar, finger in one ear, phone glued to the other.

An enterprise tech salesman by trade, his hair is gelled, dress shirt ironed, watch gleaming.

CHESTER
 What's up, bro! What are you up to?

INTERCUT - PHONE CONVERSATION

JAKE
 Nada, just chillin.

CHESTER
 Perfect. I'm out with some friends,
 come meet.

JAKE

I dunno man, it's been a long --

CHESTER

Don't give me that bullshit. It's Thursday! Weekend's almost here. Plus, I'm showing these potential clients a good time. I could use some...technical support.

JAKE

I thought you said you were out with friends?

CHESTER

By the end of the night, they will be.

(beat)

Come on man, it'll be fun. What do you have to lose?

Jake knows better than to debate a skilled salesman.

JAKE

Alright, I'll be there. Text me the address?

CHESTER

You got it, buddy. See ya soon!

INT. JAKE'S STUDIO APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

Jake hangs up, musters strength, peels himself off the couch.

CUT TO:

EXT. SAN FRANCISCO BAR - LATER

Nondescript watering hole in the Marina district of the city.

Millennial socialites crawl the streets, drunk and oblivious, weaving from raucous bar to raucous bar.

Jake arrives in an Uber, exits the car, his hair styled, clothing ironed - he knows how to play the game.

INT. SAN FRANCISCO BAR - CONTINUOUS

Jake enters, surveys the scene.

The space is dim and loud, packed with members of the city's tech culture - young, high-earners, but not yet rich.

JAKE (V.O.)

Everyone's chasing a thrill. A break from reality, the God damn monotony. A jolt that shocks them awake and makes them feel, if only for a second.

Jack pushes his way through the throng of patrons, scanning the booths and tables for his friend, squeezing by a WOMAN (STEPHANIE, late 20s), sharp eyes and artfully dressed.

STEPHANIE

Good luck.

Jake stops.

JAKE

With what?

STEPHANIE

Finding anyone back there. I lost my group ages ago.

Jake considers the loud, sweaty patrons, the tainted smell of spilled drinks.

JAKE

Maybe it's for the best.

Just then, Chester spots him from a table, flush with disinterested women and men vying for their attention.

CHESTER

Oye! Jake! Over here!

JAKE

(to Stephanie)
Too late. Wanna join?

She glances at Chester's table.

STEPHANIE

Thanks, but I'm going to do another lap, have fun with that.

Stephanie leaves.

Jake makes his way over to his friend's table.

CHESTER

What's up, dude?

Chester gives Jake a fist-bump, nods with his chiseled jaw.

JAKE

Not much man, just hangin'.

CHESTER

Thanks for meeting me. I'm one dick hair away from signing these guys.

JAKE

Who uses dick hair as a unit of measurement?

CHESTER

Guys who sign million-dollar enterprise deals, that's who.

Jake snorts, puts an arm around Chester, glances at the bar, where he sees Stephanie waiting.

JAKE

What'r you drinking? I got first round.

CHESTER

Oh, I'm good, actually. Hard to close deals when you're drunk. Call it sales impotence.

JAKE

(shrugging)
Suit yourself.

Jake walks to the bar, saddling up shoulder-to-shoulder with Stephanie. He motions to the bartender for a drink.

Beat - Jake musters up the confidence to talk.

JAKE (CONT'D)

(tentative)
I never caught your name.

STEPHANIE

You never asked for it.

Beat.

JAKE

So, should I?

STEPHANIE

Depends. Do you want to know?

The bartender returns with his drink - whiskey over rocks.

Jake picks it up, turns toward Stephanie, when...

WHAM! Someone runs right into him, spilling his glass.

It's the homeless man (MAX TAGGERT, 40s). A wallet falls out of the man's pocket in the commotion.

MAX
Oh, sorry friend.

Jake doesn't move, shocked, recognizing Max.

JAKE
Hey, it's you!

Max leaves, tipping his baseball cap as he goes.

Jake spots the wallet, picks it up, looks at the ID.

We see a mug shot of Max.

JAKE (CONT'D)
Hey, come back!

Jake follows in a hurry. Stephanie calls after him.

STEPHANIE
It's Stephanie, by the way...

EXT. SAN FRANCISCO BAR - CONTINUOUS

Jake bounds outside, spots Max scurrying away.

JAKE
Wait! I just want to talk.

Max doesn't listen, tattered brown coat billowing behind him, turning the corner down a dark alley.

Jake follows, stopping at the alley's entrance.

At the other end is Max, face covered by his ball cap, dark form oversized in the shadows.

JAKE (CONT'D)
Are you following me?

No answer. Jake waves the wallet.

JAKE (CONT'D)
Listen, I just want to talk. You dropped this.

MAX
That's not mine.

JAKE
Yes, it is. I checked myself.

MAX
I'd check again.

Jake glances at the wallet in his hands, unsure.
He looks up and Max is gone, another shadow in the night.
Jake checks the ID again, sees a picture of his own face.
He reaches into his back pocket. There's nothing there.

CUT TO:

INT. JAKE'S STUDIO APARTMENT - THE NEXT MORNING

Jake sits at his kitchen table, considering his wallet. He flips it open and closed, open again.

He leafs through it one last time. Inside one of the sections - previously unseen - is a keycard.

He pulls it out. It's heavy. Inscribed in retro lettering are the words, "*The Hideout, Inc.*"

Jake turns to his dog, sitting by his feet.

JAKE
Did you put this here?

His dog looks at him like he's crazy.

JAKE (CONT'D)
Sorry, didn't mean to accuse you.

Jake gets up and thrusts the card into the garbage, wanting no part of whatever the hell's going on.

He checks his wall clock - almost time for work.

Trying to forget last night, he gets ready, making himself presentable, the dull and repetitive routine palpable.

First a dress shirt, then gel in his hair, a careful part; a watch completes his ensemble.

He looks in the mirror, thinking himself acceptable by society's standards.

Finished, he exits, grabbing the trash on the way out.

EXT. STREETS OF SAN FRANCISCO - CONTINUOUS

Jake tosses the trash into a dumpster, walks away.

Beat - we stay with the garbage, then...

Jake rushes back, having second thoughts, digs for his bag.

He rips it open and finds the keycard, shoves it back into his wallet, walks away.

Across the street are TWO MEN IN BLACK SUITS, shaded in brimmed hats and sunglasses, watching Jake as he hops aboard an ELECTRIC MUNI, metal arms attached to cables overhead.

INT. MUNI (MOVING) - CONTINUOUS

Jake stands with other commuters, stares out the window.

He looks right past the two men as they recede from sight, the Muni lumbering away on metallic rails.

EXT. CYPHER CORPORATION - LATER

A tall and ominous building in the financial district, high-tech, sterile and gleaming; sign across the front:

CYPHER CORPORATION: Artificial Intelligence, Robotics, VR

INT. CYPHER CORPORATION - CONTINUOUS

Jake sits at his desk, again, surrounded by a sea of identical workstations, conference rooms filled with people.

He checks on the zipped Destiny files. They're safe, of course. Nothing can crack the Vault.

Satisfied, he whips out the keycard for the umpteenth time.

He runs his hand over its retro text. *The Hideout, Inc.*

RONNIE (O.S.)

What's the status of those Destiny files?

Jake's startled by the voice. He hastily puts his wallet away, turning to his computer.

JAKE
Uploaded and safely in the Vault.

RONNIE
Good man.

Ronnie slaps Jake on the back, hard, exits.

Charlie replaces him.

CHARLIE
What's up, flyboy. They're testing the newest version of Destiny. You want in?

JAKE
You sure Ronnie doesn't have an urgent task for me? Color-code his file cabinet, maybe?

CHARLIE
Come on, after all the work you just did, you deserve it.

JAKE
If you say so.

Charlie smiles, produces two VR headsets.

CHARLIE
Good, we can plug in from here.

Around Jake, employees tether to their computers via wireless VR headsets, eyes shielded, mouths agape.

Jake grabs a headset, connects, slides it over his face.

INT. DESTINY FRAMEWORK - CONTINUOUS

The VR program is still rudimentary. Vector lines create a basic world, green and black like an old operating system.

From Jake's vantage point, we see the framework extend to infinity, the program's world simple but interactive.

Materializing next to JAKE'S AVATAR is an AVATAR OF CHARLIE, green vector lines mimicking her body's basic structure.

CHARLIE
(looking at her arms)
You think they'd be able to simulate my tattoos by now.

JAKE

I dunno, green looks good on you.

CHARLIE

Right back at ya.

One by one, more AVATARS materialize, taking the basic forms of Cypher Corp employees. They disburse, exploring the world.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)

Better get going before they discover all the good stuff.

Charlie leaves, beckons Jake to follow.

Together, they walk on the simulated plane, interacting with rudimentary objects framed by vector lines.

Then, Jake sees it - a hole in the framework, a dark spot bending the vector lines around it.

JAKE

(to himself)
What are you?

Jake pulls up a window in the corner of his view - the program's source code. He scans the hole; it's normal.

In front of him, Charlie continues on, talking, not noticing.

Jake hesitates, then tries to enter the hole.

ERHH ERHH! A shrill alarm sounds in Jake's ears, red "X" flashing on his screen. He's stopped in his tracks.

Jake pulls up a virtual keyboard, plays with the source code.

INT. CYPHER CORPORATION - CONTINUOUS

Jake slumped in his chair, VR headset on, fingers reflexively tapping the armrests. Around him, the office is eerily quiet, the majority of employees plugged into the system.

INT. DESTINY FRAMEWORK - CONTINUOUS

Jake's avatar types away on the virtual keyboard, rewriting lines of code in the small window.

Finished, he discards the keyboard, takes a breath, enters the hole. This time, nothing stops him.

In the distance, Charlie realizes she's alone. She turns to look for Jake, who's disappeared - along with the black hole.

INT. BLACK HOLE - CONTINUOUS

A long, tunnel-like wormhole framed by the same vector lines.

Jake takes tentative steps forward, looks behind him, the hole gone - no exit. Cautious, he presses onward.

The tunnel continues in a straight line for what seems like infinity. Jake presses on, scanning his surroundings, checking the code as it scrolls across the corner window.

Then, the tunnel ends. The code stops scrolling, halting at a file titled, "*Time-Traveler.zip*"

Jake reaches to open it, when...

CUT TO BLACK:

INT. CYPHER CORPORATION - CONTINUOUS

The game powers down.

Disgruntled employees take off their VR headsets, look around in confusion, eyes adjusting to the fluorescent light.

CHARLIE
What happened?

JAKE
I dunno. Power surge, maybe?

CHARLIE
No, with you - where'd you go?

Jake considers explaining, decides against it.

JAKE
What do you mean, I was right
behind you the whole time.

CHARLIE
Are you --

Ronnie enters the room, cutting Charlie off. His face is white, his voice exasperated.

RONNIE
People, there's been another
anomaly with the network.
(MORE)

RONNIE (CONT'D)
Destiny's powered down until
further notice.
(to himself)
I need to call the D.O.D.

SECRETARY (O.S.)
Ronnie, the Department of Defense
is on line one.

RONNIE
Shit!
He scurries away.

CHARLIE
Incompetent prick.
(beat)
Hey, I'm gonna grab some brain
food. Want anything?

JAKE
Na, I'm good, thanks.

She shrugs, leaves.

Alone, Jake checks the zipped Destiny files.

Buried within is a text file named, "*Time-Traveler.zip*"

Jake opens the file, which reads:

The Hideout, Inc.

1745 Carnival Rd.

San Francisco, CA, 94928

Alarmed, he moves his cursor to delete the message, pauses,
one motion away from dragging it into the trash.

CUT TO:

EXT. CATHOLIC CHURCH (CHURCH OF THE UNIFIED WHOLE) - LATER

Beautiful stained glass wrapped around a tall steeple.

We hear a soft choir singing a haunting, beautiful hymnal.

INT. CHURCH OF THE UNIFIED WHOLE - CONTINUOUS

The Catholic Church is stunning and nearly deserted. A
CHILDREN'S CHOIR practices next to the Alter.

Max kneels in a pew, head down, hands clenched around his old baseball cap in half-hearted prayer.

A matronly nun (MATHILDA, 60s) walks up behind him, quiet, places a soft hand on his shoulder.

Max doesn't look up, unsurprised.

MAX

He did it.

MATHILDA

He passed?

MAX

He passed. He frickin' passed!

Max stands in triumph.

MATHILDA

Calm yourself. There's still much to be done. Maybe too much.

MAX

Mathilda --

MATHILDA

Please. Use my real name.

MAX

What? Root C-40-S? Doesn't really have the same ring to it, don't you think?

MATHILDA

Depends.

MAX

On what?

MATHILDA

Faith.

Beat.

MATHILDA (CONT'D)

He's not ready, you know.

MAX

Is anyone?

Max turns to go.

MATHILDA

What are you going to do, then? Go
find this boy?

Max smiles on his way out.

MAX

Find him? He's coming right to me.