

Avatar (2009)

by James Cameron.
Unproduced script.

Welcome to JOSH SULLY'S world.

It is a century from now, and the population of our tired planet has tripled. Finally, drowning in its own toxic waste, starvation and poverty, the population has topped out at a nice even 20 billion.

The Earth is dying, covered with a gray mold of human civilization. Even the moon is spiderwebbed with city lights on its dark side. Overpopulation, overdevelopment, nuclear terrorism, environmental warfare tactics, radiation leakage from power plants and waste dumps, toxic waste, air pollution, deforestation, pollution and overfishing of the oceans, global warming, ozone depletion, loss of biodiversity through extinction... all of these have combined to make the once green and beautiful planet a terminal cess-pool.

Josh lives in the urban sprawl which has grown like kudzu over the whole eastern US.

His particular part of this undifferentiated concrete rat-warren is Charlotte, NC, but you could be anywhere. Its the same crowded, gray, trash-strewn high-tech squalor. The walls are gray, the sky is gray... the people are gray.

They shuffle past each other in dense crowds, shoulder to shoulder, unwashed because of the water shortages, and sickly looking from the bankrupt diet of cheap carbohydrates and synthetic proteins. It looks like a cross between THX-1138 and a Calcutta train station.

Josh has it a little worse than most because of his involvement in a stupid little war people barely remember. He is paralyzed from the waist down, and his useless legs hang twisted and shrunken down the front of his wheelchair. Josh still wears his army jacket, and with his unkempt beard and hair, and surly eyes, he is pretty much ignored by the crowds which buffet him like surf. Just another angry vet, a piece of discarded human trash.

Josh fights his way to work every day on the crowded subway. And every night he goes home to a tiny cubicle of an apartment in a vast government housing project. The room is reminiscent of a cell at a federal prison, which is pretty much what it is. The amenities look like they are from a 747, which is to say they are efficient, space conscious, and are about a hundred years old.

There is a single fluorescent fixture, which casts a sterile light over the grimy walls. It flickers constantly.

One entire wall (all seven feet of it) is a TV screen. On it we get a wider view of the world, and it's nothing to write home about. There is a breaking story about a fire in a Boston subway which asphyxiated over a hundred people. Not unusual these days. This is followed by a feature about the death, in Kenya, of the last lion living outside captivity. This leads to a recap of the state of the environment overall, and it's grim.

The oceans are overfished and barren, poisoned by toxic runoff. All whales and at least half the Earth's fish species are extinct. On land over half the species extant at the beginning of the century are now gone forever, with most of the remaining endangered.

The human race, using its technical ingenuity, has learned to keep itself alive, but it has lost almost all contact with the natural world, which it has strangled and crushed out of existence. There are no national parks left, only housing projects and protein farms. Yosemite is an upscale condo development. Most ocean-front property is used for mari-culture, since the only food source efficient enough to feed everyone these days is spirulina. It's amazing the things you can do with algal protein concentrate if you know your spices.

Josh Sully is a hopeless guy in a hopeless world, a little guy whom the big machine has ground up and spit out.

Josh gets a call from a computer at the municipal admin complex. The automated voice tells him politely that his brother, Thomas Sully, has been killed in a transit system accident in Boston, and he is required to claim the body by 1200 tomorrow. His brother died choking in the smoke of the subway fire which Sully had seen on the news.

CUT TO SULLY at the Boston municipal crematorium. He sits next to a large cardboard box, about seven feet long, sitting on the rollers waiting to go into the furnace. In the box is his brother's body.

We see that they are identical twins.

There is no other family there.

Josh watches the attendant cover his brother's body with the top of the cardboard box, then efficiently band it with two plastic straps, like he's getting ready to ship it somewhere. Then the box is rolled into the furnace, and the burners are lit.

As he is wheeling himself through the crowded halls of the municipal complex, Sully hears someone calling his name and sees two guys in suits working their way through the crowd to catch up with him. He is immediately suspicious, wondering what collection agency they are from. His brother must have died with some debts.

They tell him they are with the RDA, the RESOURCES DEVELOPMENT ALLIANCE. This is an international consortium of major corporations whose purpose is to find and exploit resources on other planets, both within the solar system, and in the last 25 years, among the nearer star systems. Imagine the Dutch West India Company funded by Microsoft, Matsushita and a dozen or so of their megacorporation buddies. Everyone just calls it "THE CONSORTIUM".

The RDA has an official charter from the ICA, the Interplanetary Commerce Administration (pronounced eye-kah), an international trade-regulating body run much like the EC is today. The charter allows them to exploit the resources of planets, moons, asteroids... whatever they find... as long as they follow the International Space Resources Treaty, and the other treaties which prohibit weapons of mass destruction and limit military power in space.

These two guys ask Josh if he knows anything about what his brother was doing in the last year. He says they weren't that close. He knows that Tom had made some deal to work in space, but he couldn't talk about it because he'd signed some kind of non-disclosure agreement.

It turns out the suits are interested in Josh because of his genes. Tom Sully had signed up to something called the Avatar Program. In the Avatar Program you sign a ten year contract to work on Pandora, a planet of the Alpha

Centauri starsystem.

Like everyone, Josh has heard of Pandora, or more properly Alpha Centauri B-4. Discovered by the first interstellar expedition twenty five years ago, Pandora has been the single most interesting thing to happen to the human race in ages. The news services love to run clips of the wild scenery on Pandora, and its bizarre flora and fauna. To a culture which has lost all contact with the natural world, Pandora is mysterious, primal, and terrifying.

So what the hell was Tom doing going to Pandora? The suits take Josh to dinner, and he even gets to order real steak. They explain what's going on.

There is, of course, a primitive humanoid species on Pandora, as anybody who watches the news would know. They are called the NA'VI, using their word for themselves. The humans usually refer to them clinically as the Pandorans, and colloquially as "the locals". Humans cannot live on Pandora without breathing gear, because the atmosphere is toxic. Lethal levels of ammonia, methane and chlorine.

The Consortium is trying to bridge the cultural gap with the aboriginal population, which has been difficult to communicate and negotiate with. They have recently started a program called AVATAR. They take DNA from a Na'vi, and from a selected human volunteer. On Earth, in company genetics labs, they create an in-vitro embryo, which is a genetic composite of the alien and human donor.

The recombinant embryo is grown in-vitro during the flight to Pandora, which takes 3 years (ship-time/ 5 years Earth time... it's a relativity thing). In that time it reaches near adult size, since the locals mature fast. When it is "born" (or more properly de-canted) as a post-adolescent, it looks like a Na'vi, and can live comfortably on Pandora, but it has enough human neurophysiology to be used as an Avatar, or surrogate body.

The human volunteer then becomes a CONTROLLER. Using PSIONIC LINK technology, the human controller can remotely control the avatar body out in the wilds of Pandora. The controller receives all sensory input, and provides all motor control to the body. Essentially, the controller lives through the avatar, and is completely unaware of his own body while linked. Each avatar is genetically keyed to its respective human controller.

By communicating with the locals through these avatars, which are less alien to them, the RDA has had some success teaching them English and basic skills.

So Tom was going to be one of these controller guys? That's right, they tell him. His embryo has been growing in vitro at the lab for several months. This is significant since only one in a hundred volunteers actually produces a viable composite. Each viable embryo represents an investment of over 20 million dollars.

So they are offering Josh the same contract they gave his brother. Since he is genetically identical, he can step into his brother's shoes, and become a controller. The next mission leaves in three weeks, so he will have to go through a crash training course, but it's still better than wasting a good avatar.

The agents grin like jackals. The pay is great, and it's a chance to be part of the great adventure.

Josh tells them he went for that line about it's not a job, it's an adventure once already, and it cost him the use of his legs. And ten years is too long a stint to sign up for. The army taught him a couple things. He tells them to take a hike.

One of the Consortium agents leans close to him. He says that as an avatar he will have legs. Long powerful legs, and he can run again.

PUSH IN ON JOSH, thinking about that. And you see in his eyes... he's going to go for it.

SPACE/ALPHA CENTAURI SYSTEM, 2103 AD.
The I.S.V. PROMETHEUS flies backwards through the void, blasting out the fire of the gods like a cosmic blowtorch. Its hybrid fusion/antimatter engines hurl out incandescent plasma a million times brighter than a welding arc, with an exhaust plume twenty miles long which stretches out ahead of it, slowing it as it nears Alpha Centauri.

INTERSTELLAR VEHICLE PROMETHEUS is finishing up a month long deceleration from its peak velocity of over nine tenths the speed of light, still pulling 5 gees.

It's a big bastard... half a mile long. Most of that is engine and fuel, though the fuel tanks are almost empty.

Alpha Centauri is the nearest starsystem to Earth, at 4.5 lightyears away. A lightyear is the distance light travels in a year, and since light travels 186,000 miles a second, this is a long way. To get an idea how far this is, imagine the Earth is a grain of sand in my driveway in Malibu. On that scale the sun is a cantaloupe 50 feet away. And Alpha Centauri is in New York.

I'm pointing this out because it's necessary to understand the kind of energies it takes to get there in any reasonable amount of time. You have to go really fast. Almost as fast as the absolute laws of physics permit. And you have to use more energy to reach that speed (and then slow back down) than all of human civilization is currently using in a year. So the bottom line is... the bottom line. Money. A lot of money.

About a million dollars a pound, to get something from Pandora back to Earth. The object of the game is not to go there and mine coal. You want to find things that don't exist in our solar system at all or are incredibly rare, and then you want to refine and process those raw materials, so that what you send back is the finished product. The least mass for the most buck. So what you want to do is build up an industrial infrastructure on Pandora... you want to tame it. You want to civilize it. And you need workers to do that. Only you can't use humans, because:

- A) They cost too much to bring.
- B) They die in 30 seconds without a breathing mask.

So colonization, in the classical sense, won't work. But wait... you have an indigenous population there. They're primitive, but they have brains and hands, and maybe they can be taught to do the things we need done. We can teach them, and give them cool technology to improve their lives, so they can be healthy and smart, and can all have TV, and in return they will be so grateful they'll not only work in our factories, they'll even build them for us. Groovy.

These are the basic principles of interstellar imperialism, circa 2100 A.D.

Ahead of Prometheus we can see the trinary system of Alpha Centauri... three stars orbiting each other. In the middle, close together, are Alpha Centauri A and B, two

yellow main-sequence stars very much like our own star. About 900 billion miles away (a mere stone's throw by interstellar standards... a couple of light-months) is the third star, Proxima Centauri, a runty little red-dwarf.

Standing on Pandora (as you will soon) you can see two disks of light on the horizon at sunset, but never the third, since Proxima is too far away and just looks like a star.

Inside Prometheus, everybody's asleep except for a four man flightcrew who look very haggard. The rest, a hundred or so passengers, are all in medically induced hibernation. With certain drugs people can be caused to hibernate like bears and other mammals, dozing away the years at low temperature, and with minimal mental activity.

We see Josh in his hibernaculum, his skin a bloodless blue-white. To combat the sustained brutal acceleration and deceleration, he is suspended in liquid, like a fetus in the womb. A cold womb of dreamless sleep between worlds.

His head is fitted into a helmet-like device... a PSIONIC LINK INTERFACE which senses and transmits his mental energy, as well as filling his brain with the return signal. This is usually called, simply, the LINK.

He is under the link because he is spending the voyage linked to his avatar body which is nearby in its own container. Like two twins in the womb they are communing at a deep level of pre-conscious intimacy, with the results that the avatar's brain has been imprinted with the patterns of Josh's cerebral cortex. The biological equivalent of initializing the hard-drive in a computer.

Josh's AVATAR BODY floats in its plastic womb, curled in a fetal position. The avatar is bigger than a human. It would stand about eight feet tall, if it uncurled. Its skin is blue... two shades of blue in a banded pattern like a snake of lizard (though the skin is smooth, not scaly). An iridescent cyan blue, almost robin's egg, is contrasted with a deep ultramarine which borders on purple. The darker color is almost solid on the back, and down the backs of the legs.

The body is, strangely, almost human in most ways. The waist is narrow and elongated, the shoulders very wide,

giving a V shaped upper back. The neck is long (maybe twice as long as an average human, or a little longer than some Vogue models) and, we will see, can turn almost 180 degrees, like an owl. The body overall is more slender, proportionately, than the average human, reminiscent of a Masai or Watusi. The musculature is sharply defined, given no sense of emaciation despite the thin proportions.

The avatars in their womb-like environment are at their normal metabolic rate and grow rapidly. Their muscles are constantly electrostimulated, so that they develop normally.

The hands are graceful, with three very long fingers, and one opposed thumb. The fingers curve smoothly, bending without joints. This sounds off-putting, but it is really quite beautiful.

The faces are exquisite... with cheekbones high as any Pharaoh's and large wise eyes, maybe twice the size of ours. When open they dominate the face, like those of a cat, or a lemur. The mouth is also large, but essentially human, with a faint cat-like bifurcation of the upper lip, and a coloration like permanent deep purple lipstick. The teeth are white, with pronounced canines, upper and lower. These guys are clearly carnivores, or at least omnivores.

Did I mention the tail? They have a tail. Long and slightly prehensile, but more like the tail of a panther than a monkey.

A complex pattern of iridescent dots and lines, perfectly symmetrical, runs over the body, almost following the lines of the nervous or circulatory system. These are bioluminescent chromatophores, and they glow in the dark like fireflies. The alien can communicate with these, and in fact they usually are shifting and changing color to indicate mood and emotion, without conscious control.

The body has no hair whatsoever, though there is what looks like a black pony tail, or queue, originating in the back of the head and hanging down almost to the waist. This is not hair, but actually an external part of the nervous system, and more on this later.

ON THE FLIGHT DECK the haggard pilots start the shutdown of the fusion/antimatter engines.

OUTSIDE, the arc-light ceases abruptly. The entire drive

module glows cherry red with radiant heat, and the exhaust nozzles are almost white. The ship creaks and groans as it begins to cool.

Prometheus drifts against the stars, nearing the surprisingly Earth-like Pandora.

INSIDE, in weightlessness, the passengers begin to emerge from their hibernacula. They look like handmade shit... hungover badly from the hibernation drugs.

Josh sits up groggily and looks around. His hair has been cropped back to a brush-cut, and he is cleanshaven.

An announcement is telling them what to do and where to go, and that they will soon be entering orbit around Pandora. Josh pulls himself out of his capsule, maneuvering nearly as well as the other passengers in zero-g, even with his inert legs.

Moving hand over hand, Josh floats over to the tank containing his alter ego, the avatar body. He is amazed to see the growth in the three years which have elapsed on the ship.

The avatar stretches, catlike, extending to its full height, dwarfing Josh. And as it turns in the amniotic fluid, Josh sees the face of his avatar... and it looks like him. Despite the alien proportions, the features are definitely reminiscent of his.

A tech tells him he has time to get some breakfast and still make it back to "see himself born".

THE BIRTH. Technicians in plastic suits and breathing equipment enter a bright sterile chamber through an airlock. Josh, similarly attired, follows them in. They seal the door. One of them tells him that the air is a match for Pandora's... a poisonous brew of ammonia, methane, CO₂, oxygen and nitrogen. Even a little hydrogen cyanide. In the center of the chamber is the tank housing Josh's avatar. Josh is nervous and unsure what to do, but they tell him it's always best for the controller to be present at the birth.

Using a flexible collar, like a synthetic sphincter, to retain the amniotic fluid in zero gravity, they ease the body out of the tank into the birthing room. It looks exactly like a giant baby being born from a glass and

rubber womb.

The avatar kicks feebly, and everybody is grappling with the slimy newborn body. The technicians ask Josh to help hold it. Like an overwhelmed father, he looks like he is about to faint. The pure raw shock of life, struggling into existence, effects him far more than he would have thought.

Josh struggles to help give birth to himself.

They suction its mouth and it coughs, taking its first breath. Josh looks on in wonder as the avatar starts to wail, clenching its fists, its face contorting at the terror and pain of the outer world. It grabs Josh's arm and he winces in pain at the strength of the thing. It opens its eyes and looks right at him. He stares into its eyes, which are his own eyes. Its terror passes. It stares blankly at him, taking in shuddering breaths of the poisonous air.

Josh pulls his arm free.

TECH

Congratulations. It's a boy.

Josh glances down along the avatar's body, his expression growing even more amazed.

ISV PROMETHEUS goes into a low orbit around Pandora. We get our first good look at the new world. It is magnificent. Almost another Earth, at first glance, with white cloud whorls over a blue and brown surface. But the continents are all wrong, and the proportion of land to sea is much greater. The blue is a little different too, with a cyan tinge to it, suggesting the different air. But you can just tell, even from orbit... this is a planet that has life. It's got the look.

The most amazing thing about Pandora is that it doesn't actually orbit its sun directly, but is actually in orbit around an enormous planet, a gas giant almost twice the size of Jupiter, which in turn orbits the yellow sun of Alpha Centauri B. This monster planet has been named POLYPHEMIS, for the great cyclops of Greek myth. This is because, like Jupiter with its Great Red Spot, Polyphemis has a vast cyclonic storm like a great dark pupil in its vast disk.

The eye of an angry god looking down on Pandora. Pandora, despite being almost as big as Earth, is technically a moon of the giant planet.

Polyphemis has thirteen other moons, some closer in, some farther out. Depending on what's where in its orbit, Pandora can have two or even three moons in its sky at once. Pandora and the other moons cast large black shadow dots on the parent planet, like beauty marks.

DESCENT. Tiny relative to Prometheus, one of the trans-atmospheric shuttles separates and drops down toward the planet. The LOCKHEED-SAAB TAV-37 "VALKYRIE" CLASS SHUTTLE is actually a heavy lifter, a workhorse several times larger and many times more powerful than today's space shuttle.

As the shuttle plunges through high-altitude cloud formations, Josh presses his face against the tiny viewport, eager for a look at the new world. Below he can see mist-shrouded mountains, growing as they descend. The pilot tells them they are over the so-called "Horn" of Australis, the great southern continent, which juts up into the Equatorial Sea.

Josh can see volcanic buttes and mesas towering above a lower cloud blanket, like the Tepuis of Peru. Streamers and whorls of shredded cloud swirl around the mesa tops. Then the pilot tells them that they may get a glimpse of the MONTES VOLANS, the famous "flying mountains", which planetologists say are the rarest phenomena in known space.

Also called the HALLELUJAH MOUNTAINS, they are like floating islands among the clouds.

Literally floating. Mountainous chunks of rock, some over ten miles across, hovering thousands of feet above the ground.

Here's how it works: Polyphemis (the massive planet around which Pandora revolves) has a mother of magnetosphere... a naturally occurring magnetic field a million times more powerful than Earth's. As Pandora rotates and revolves through this field, its molten iron core generates its own field, with "cells" or vortices which are small regions of intensely powerful magnetic force at the surface.

Added to this unique phenomenon is another... Pandora is

blessed with a naturally occurring substance a million times more precious than gold. Its joke name of "unobtainium" has stuck, over the years. Unobtainium is a rare-earth mineral, formed volcanically, which is a room-temperature superconductor.

The room temperature superconductor has been the "snark" of modern materials science... a substance which transmits electricity with zero resistance, but at normal temperatures, rather than the liquid-helium cooled superconductors of human science.

Unobtainium does not exist in our solar system. It is unique to Pandora. And it is the reason to go there... the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow bridge.

Another interesting property of superconducting materials is that they will levitate in a powerful magnetic field. This magnetic levitation, or maglev, effect has been used to lift trains and run them without wheels since the late 1980's. On Pandora the effect causes huge outcroppings of unobtainium to rip loose from the surface and float in the magnetic vortices. These floating islands circulate slowly in the magnetic currents, like icebergs at sea, scraping against each other and the towering mesa-like mountains of the region. The Pandorans call them the Thundering Rocks, and the entire area is sacred to them.

Which could be a problem, since the humans have come to mine these mountains and get rich. Which is why they are called the Hallelujah Mountains.

Josh stares in awe as they pass over a few of the floating mountains, less than ten miles away on his side of the ship. They float like clouds made of rock, amongst the fixed mountains and swirling cloud structures. Where they are in clear sunlight, they cast hard shadows on the land below.

They are overgrown with foliage at the top, and a straggly beard of vines hangs down beneath them like the roots of an air-fern. The sides are sheer cliffs. Waterfalls, originating on the mesa-like tops, stream down the sides and dissolve into spray at the bottoms like upside-down geysers. The local peaks and mesas actually project above the level of the craggy underside of the few floating mountains Josh can see, so it's obvious that collisions are inevitable.

Twinkling like tiny flecks of ash on the wind are what look like birds... manta-like flying creatures of various sizes. Josh doesn't get too close a look at these.

Standing like a wall behind some of the smaller islands is MONS PROMETHEUS, the largest of the floating mountains. Known colloquially as THE BIG ROCK-CANDY MOUNTAIN, it alone is worth hundreds of billions in revenue to the Consortium. Its flanks and top are wreathed in streamers of clouds... cloaked in mystery.

He sees it for only a few seconds before a thunderhead blocks the view, and the shuttle plunges into gray murk.

Now the shuttle is passing lower and lower over the highland rainforest. Just as the plants on Earth are green with chlorophyl, the plants of Pandora, based on a different biochemistry, are mostly purple. The tones range from purple-blue, through violet to magenta.

Josh catches glimpses of the rainforest through the clouds as they skim over the endless purple carpet. Other than the color the trees look like trees. They have trunks and branches and leaves... though some of the shapes are strange, and the proportions are wrong. There are waterfalls feeding highland rivers, and Josh sees more flocks of the bird-like things.

They pass a few small patches of open grassland. The magenta grass ripples in the wind like wheat. Josh sees some moving shapes... large herd-beasts running. Then clouds again.

Josh, coming from his gray concrete urban sprawl, is amazed by the sheer scale of this lush, virgin world.

Finally he starts to see the hand of man. They fly over what looks like a small refinery. This is the DEUTERIUM PLANT, an automated facility for extracting the heavy isotope of hydrogen from the local water supply. The deuterium is used to fuel the fusion engines of the starships for their homeward flight, as well as to run the base generators and the shuttles.

The shuttle makes its turn on final approach. We get our first look at the human colony, called HELL'S GATE. It looks like a giant cookie cutter took a chunk out of the rainforest... a disk of naked ground two miles across where the trees were razed and the earth scraped bare.

Nearby, connected by a broad gravel road, is a gaping wound in the earth, a strip mine where metal ores for construction are extracted.

At the center of the cleared circle of Hell's Gate is a cluster of squat concrete and steel structures. Surrounding the central complex are two high fences of thick chainlink, one within the other, with concertina wire at the top. The whole thing is electrified. At the corners of the complex are concrete towers, their tops bristling with searchlights, scanning gear, and automated SENTRY GUNS. The reason for the no-man's land between the fences and the dark wall of forest is clear... it is a killing ground.

The shuttle lands and Josh dons his full-face exomask and rebreather pack. There is a hiss and a popping sensation in his ears as the pressure equalizes to the outside, and then the doors open.

Josh struggles with his wheelchair on the steep loading ramp of the shuttle. When he gets to the ground, he moves with the others toward the nearest building. His mask fogs with his exertion, and he feels a tickle of fear knowing how deadly the atmosphere is. If he took his exomask off he would be unconscious after the first few breaths, with irreversible lung damage in less than a minute.

Josh sees the new avatars being unloaded. They are brought down the ramp on gurneys, unconscious, getting their first lungfuls of real Pandoran air. They are taken to a holding compound outside the Science Module (SCIMOD).

Around him is the roar of equipment as huge tractor-like machines thunder past. There is loading equipment, and massive earth movers, mining equipment, and bulldozers almost two stories high. He sees construction workers in heavy environment suits. A tractor, its wheels as big as a house, rumbles past, dwarfing the new arrivals. Beyond it, two VTOL vehicles take off. Armored and heavily armed, they are KAWASAKI AH-19 SCORPION gunships.

Nearby Josh sees several TROOPERS of SECFOR, the RDA security force, a kind of private army operated by the Consortium. The troopers wear full helmets, rebreathers, and body armor, and carry heavy AUTOMATIC WEAPONS. They look constantly outward, toward the perimeter. They are a hardened bunch of men and women, who live by the

philosophy that sharp eyes, fast hands and a warm gun are the keys to survival on Pandora, the most badass bush in history.

Among the arriving passengers are twenty new troopers. They double time down the ramp, carrying their huge packs and kit bags. They smartly salute the hardened SECFOR troopers, who eye the new meat with smirking disdain.

Josh sees more of the troopers, and realizes they are forming a loosely deployed guard around the new arrivals. There is a sudden ROAR as the sentry gun in the nearest tower opens fire. A stream of bright tracers arc out to the no-man's land of bare earth beyond the fences, and there is an ungodly shriek. Josh cranes to see, but his view is blocked by the shuttle.

There is a sense that the place is under siege. The dark line of the forest is suddenly more ominous. Above the functional concrete bunker of the nearest building, the crescent shape of Polyphemus looms like a malevolent eye, seeming to cover half the sky. Another sentry gun thunders briefly as Josh goes into the complex. Josh's expression says it all.

My God, what have I gotten myself into?

INSIDE THE BASE they hold the arrival briefing. Station supervisor CARTER SELFRIDGE welcomes them to Pandora and Hell's Gate, then quickly lays down the rules of survival here. He says the local ecosystem is a minefield of toxic plants, lethal stinging insects, and large venomous carnivores. Everyone must be armed at all times when outside the structure, and firearms training and drilling are scheduled for all base personnel. All forays outside the perimeter must be accompanied by one or more SECFOR troopers, and must be authorized by his office, and scheduled with the head of security.

He tells them the stiff penalties for any violation of the base security rules, as well as for the use of illegal drugs, fighting, misuse of firearms and so on. There is a frontier town mentality, as well as an overwhelming sense of us against them. Us being the humans, and them being anything that draws breath on Pandora.

It's not all grim here, he says. As of today you will never get another cold or flu. We don't get them here. Pandora has somehow reacted to the introduction of our viruses by creating a countervirus for each which wipes

them out. In fact, the Consortium has the patents on these counterviruses, and when the FDA approves them, everybody on Earth will be buying them. That's the sort of thing we're looking for here. So please stay alert to the commercial possibilities of your research.

Selfridge is a smart, forceful, charismatic man who is utterly focused on the success of the operation on Pandora. His calm, almost breezy style belies an absolute ruthlessness in the pursuit of his goals. Like his historical prototypes, the governors of Spanish and English colonies in the Americas, his mission is to overcome all obstacles to gain a foothold in the new world, and more importantly, show a return on the staggering investment.

Selfridge introduces ROB PARRISH, the BIOETHICS OFFICER. He works for the Environmental Protection Department of the ICA, and is therefore usually called the "EP guy". On the dying home planet the environmental parties have grown strong as the Earth has grown weak, so these officers are sent to make sure that the new worlds are not ravaged by the economic imperative of the megacorporations.

Rob looks the very image of a studious, concerned "green" activists, with his beard and birkenstocks. In fact, the EP guys are all bent, deeply on the take and making a killing by turning in token reports of infractions while turning a blind eye to the greater violations.

Josh notices a woman using a stereocam to record the meeting. She pans the crowd of new faces like a documentary film-maker. Selfridge introduces her as MARCIA DE LOS SANTOS, the FREEMEDIA OFFICER. It is her job to send home the inspiring footage used for corporate advertising and recruiting, though technically she is keeping a full and impartial record of the operation at Hell's Gate. Selfridge heavily edits her downlinks to Earth, claiming the "expense" of data transmission, but really it is ironfisted censorship.

Selfridge introduces COLONEL MILES QUARITCH, the SECFOR commander. Quaritch is a humorless man, thicknecked and barrel-chested, with one side of his face twisted by the scars from an encounter with some Pandoran predator. He hates Pandora, but loves the fight. Quaritch epitomizes the antipathy between humans and the world they have come to conquer.

Quaritch adjourns the briefing, to the chagrin of DR. BRANTLEY GIESE, the base XENOANTHROPOLOGIST and the head of the Avatar Program. He scrambles to the front of the room as the meeting breaks up, calling for the new controllers to report to him in SCIMOD. Quaritch sneers as he pushes past Giese, and we see that there is no love lost between these two.

Quaritch stops next to Josh and says he read Josh was marines. Josh confirms it, and Quaritch wants to know if he was wounded in combat.

Fell out a window, drunk, at a base party, Josh tells him. Quaritch is a little put off by Josh's attitude, but tells him that when he is done wasting his time with Giese and his meat puppets, he can use him in SECFOR. The ops center and the armory are understaffed.

ON HIS WAY TO SCIMOD Josh gets a look at the base from the inside. There are six primary modules, laid out along a central trunk called the UTILIDOR, through which all foot traffic, and all utility lines and conduits run. This has two levels, the subterranean one being narrower and primarily an access-way for maintenance.

CONMOD is the control module, containing communications, administration, flight control, dispatch, and SECFOR command.

HABMOD is the quarters, and also contains the laundry, food services, gym, and recreation areas. Josh finds his room and throws his bag on the bunk.

In the upper Utilidor, Josh bumps into NORM CHEESEMAN, a spindly guy who is one of the new controllers Josh recognizes from the ship. Norm pushes Josh down the corridor as they look for SCIMOD.

They pass GENMOD (power) and STORMOD (storage), as well as the vehicle maintenance module, called simply the GARAGE. They reach SCIMOD which is a multistory building, full of labs and arcane equipment. None of it means anything to Josh.

They catch up with the tour, just as Giese is showing the new controllers into the LINK ROOM.

Here we see the veteran controllers in a long row of what look like high-tech dental chairs. They have the link

gear over their heads, and are tied into the distant bodies of their respective avatars. They seem to be sleeping, or in a trance state.

It actually resembles REM sleep, with the eyeballs tracking rapidly under the lids, and the fingers twitching occasionally. Technicians monitor the body functions of the controllers, and track the positions of the avatars on screens. Giese shows them how the same implanted chip which allows the remote link to the avatars also gives them a minute by minute position on them out in the bush, or around the base of the mine, wherever they might be.

Giese tells the new arrivals that they will each be assigned to a veteran controller, who will supervise their first link-up with their avatars.

One of the working controllers breaks her link contact, and lifts the hood, climbing wearily out of her chair. It is the end of a long work day, and her body is stiff with disuse.

Giese calls Josh forward and introduces DR. GRACE SHIPLEY, the controller he is assigned to. Grace Shipley is a gruff xenobotanist in her mid forties, somewhat dumpy, and gravel-voiced from too much smoking.

She scowls at Josh, telling him to meet her in her lab at 0800 tomorrow. She ignores Josh's proffered hand, wheeling around to yell at the monitor techs that she needs a goddamn cigarette.

The next morning Josh is waiting in the biology lab at five to eight. One wall of the lab is observation windows, beyond which are large terrariums holding some Pandoran flora and fauna. Josh peers into a chamber filled with fern-like violet plants, unable to see if there is anything else in there.

He moves to the next chamber, which is an aquarium filled with murky water. The window is huge, but he can see nothing in the gloom. He turns as Grace Shipley comes into the lab. With shocking suddenness a dark shape, much bigger than him, materializes out of the murk and slams against the glass. BOOM!! Josh whips around to see the head of a hideous armored fish, its huge jaws snapping shut, clacking razor-sharp teeth against the glass.

GRACE

I see you've met our Dinicthys. She loves to do that.

Grace goes to the glass and looks the big fish in the eye. It swims away.

GRACE

Just a baby, but at the rate she's growing, we're going to have to put her back in the lake by next week.

OVER THE NEXT FEW SCENES it will become clear that Grace is to be Josh's reluctant mentor.

Reluctant, since they are so understaffed that she was really counting on the trained skills of his brother. Josh isn't really qualified for anything on the base except kitchen staff. She needs a real assistant, a scientist. Hell, even an undergrad. She's pissed off at the situation and sees it as just another way the company is screwing the biologists and the Avatar Program. They don't really want to know what's going on here, they just want to strip mine the goddamn place. They'll have it all plowed under before they even know what's out in that bush... and they'll miss the real treasure. The Earth is doomed because its biodiversity has been killed. It may take centuries to die, but it's only a matter of time. Out there are wonders they can't even imagine, and all they do is cut funds, and send her useless assistants.

Josh interrupts her rant and tells her that he didn't come lightyears out into space, didn't get shot up with drugs, inoculated against god-knows-what, and frozen for three years, just to come here and be her punching bag. If she's got a problem with him, tell the base supervisor, otherwise take a pill, lady.

Grace looks at him for a long moment. Finally she cracks a wicked grin.

GRACE

So. A live one, huh?

Having lodged her complaint and put Josh on notice, she takes him to the linkroom for his first session.

JOSH'S FIRST LINK SESSION. In this scene we see Josh go under the link for the first time, and take over control of his avatar body.

We cut to the JOSH/AVATAR in the training compound, an enclosure behind SCIMOD in which the fledgling avatars are taught to function and survive. It looks like a kids' playground, with parallel bars, hanging rings, balls to throw, monkey bars, and various other structures that will be used in his physical patterning. He is watched by techs behind a glass wall.

Josh/Avatar opens his eyes, and looks around with amazed awareness. He blinks, the strange hues of the alien vision flooding his brain.

He moves awkwardly, sitting up. He takes a deep breath and smells the air. His nostrils flare with the flood of new alien smells.

He looks at his hand, staring at it, working the fingers. He looks down and stares at his body, then touches it with one hand. Feels the skin. Smooth. Warm.

A tech tells him over the PA to check his motor control. Try to touch his fingertips together. He does, missing like a drunk at a sobriety checkpoint. He tries again, face screwed up in concentration. His fingertips touch clumsily, shaking slightly.

Can he see, the voice asks. He nods yes. Breathing okay? Yes. Speech check. Try to talk.

Josh/Avatar's throat works, and an inarticulate croak emerges. He tries again, and it sounds like a baby trying to imitate speech. The tech tells him to try crawling.

He rolls to his stomach. Pushing up with his arms, he gets his knees under him. He is unsteady as a newborn antelope, his arms and body shaking as muscles clench and nerves fire spasmodically. He crawls clumsily, like a baby, to a plastic chair nearby. Josh/Avatar gets one hand on the chair and tries to pull himself up. After a lot of effort, he is almost standing... hunched over like an ancient man.

Finally, he is standing on shaking legs. He lets go of the chair. Swaying, he stands free. He grins, baring slightly pointy teeth.

Then falls right on his ass. Hearing laughter, he looks up.

A statuesque female avatar walks up, standing over him. The first female he has seen. She is magnificent, with powerful panther thighs, a flat muscular stomach and small but firm athlete's breasts. She is wearing shorts and a T-shirt, and in human years would be about 25. Her face looks somewhat familiar... Josh manages to croak out his first sentence.

JOSH/AVATAR

Whooo... are... yu-you?

FEMALE AVATAR

Who do you think, dumbshit? How quickly they forget.

The voice is very recognizable. It is Grace. Now that we know, we see her face in the alien features. She grins at him, and cocks one hip.

GRACE/AVATAR

Ain't I a babe?

Grace/Avatar helps him to his feet, and supports his weight while he tries to walk, just like a mom holding a baby's hands. She faces him, holding his hands, and steps backward. Josh, the toddler, takes his first steps. She slowly lets go of his fingers, letting him balance himself. He takes another step.

Josh stares down in amazement at his feet. His face holds a childlike wonder.

JOSH/AVATAR

I'm walking.

GRACE/AVATAR

You sure are, kid.

Josh's eyes fill with tears. Grace sees one running down the blue skin of his cheek.

GRACE/AVATAR

Yup, looks like everything's working just fine.

CUT TO Josh being interviewed by Marcia de Los Santos, the Freemedia Officer. Josh is explaining how his training is going. He's walking fine, and has started running and

climbing exercises. His coordination is already equal to a human five year old. She asks him a question she has asked all of them... what it's like to wake up in another body. Josh tries to tell her, but he can't. Just that it is a wonder. And in his case, a great gift. He says the air smells like cinnamon.

JOSH, under the link. In CU we see his eyes tracking, like he is dreaming.

JOSH/AVATAR runs to catch a ball thrown by one of the other trainee avatars, Norm Cheeseman. We barely recognize skinny Norm, since his avatar body, like all of them, is powerfully muscled.

MONTAGE:

Josh/Avatar taking a drink of some green liquid, which spills down his chin. By his expression it obviously tastes great.

Norm/Avatar showing off to the techs, using the window like a mirror to shoot bodybuilder poses.

Josh doing a running cartwheel, jumping up and catching the monkey bars, and pulling himself rapidly across hand-over-hand.

Grace/Avatar, taking a picture of him with an instamatic camera as he eats an unfamiliar Pandoran fruit, getting the juice all over himself.

Josh/Avatar drawing and firing a large pistol, blowing big holes in paper targets.

Josh/Avatar lies down to sleep for the night on a futon in the training compound. Some of the other avatars are already asleep nearby. We can see their bioluminescent spot patterns glowing in the dark.

Josh/Avatar stares up at the alien sky, seeing mighty Polyphemis rise against the stars. His catlike eyes are wide with the wonder of this new world. He hears the chatters and shrieks from the forest, that black wall out beyond the compound. The sentry guns fire and there is a piercing scream, shortlived. Soon he will be out there. His eyes close, as sleep takes him.

The human Josh opens his eyes in the linkroom a moment

later. He climbs stiffly from his chair, pushing himself across to his wheelchair. He sits rubbing his temples with fatigue. Even in the lesser gravity of Pandora, his human body feels like a deadweight after his exhilarating hours in the other body. Grace, looking tired and ruffled, climbs out of her seat nearby. She looks down at her doughy body.

GRACE

At midnight I always turn back into
a pumpkin. Come on, let me buy you
a drink.

IN SELFRIDGE'S OFFICE, Quaritch is complaining that he doesn't have enough men to escort all the scientific sorties, cover the mine, the base and also the new construction. Selfridge tells him he will cut the escorts on the scientific teams back to one man per sortie. Quaritch nods, but says that the number of major predator attacks on the perimeter has steadily increased, and there have been five major breaches of the outer fence this year. One of his men was killed by a SLINGER last Tuesday, and two are on medical report because of HELLFIRE WASPS. One of his gunships was attacked by a LEONOPTERYX near the deuterium plant, and almost crashed.

He's lost six people already this year, twice the number for the same time last year, and is already over his ammo budget. It's getting worse, not better.

Selfridge says he will order more men and weapons on the next starship, and cut back on the scientific package. They just have to make it to then. He orders Quaritch to clearcut a wider safety zone around the new construction.

CUT TO the clearcutting operation, out at the edge of the safety zone. Massive tractors and bulldozers are ripping into the treeline, toppling the huge trees. Now we see why the equipment is so big... the trees are enormous. The dozers have plasma cutters which rip into the trees, slashing through their gargantuan bases in a spray of fierce light and burning wood-shrapnel.

The larger trees are blasted with high explosives, raining kindling down for hundreds of yards. The tractor drivers are safe in armored cages, and Scorpion gunships prowl over the tree-line, looking for large predators which might be approaching.

ANGLE FROM INSIDE THE RAINFOREST, as the tractors relentlessly approach. It is the POV of somebody or something watching.

REVERSE, tight on a pair of eyes. The catlike eyes of one of the humanoid PANDORANS, FILLING FRAME.

A GLIMPSE of figures moving through the foliage, their skin-markings acting as almost perfect camouflage. We can barely see them. Just an impression of graceful, lithe forms. Then nothing.

A MASSIVE METAL FOOT crashes down into frame.

CUT WIDER to see that it belongs to Miles Quaritch wearing a POWERSUIT. This is a robotic walking machine, bipedal, about 4 meters tall. Though massive, it is gyroscopically balanced and quite agile, able to duplicate most human motion. It is heavily armored, and armed with a huge rotary cannon, a GAU 90, built into one forearm. Quaritch uses a psionic link to control the machine.

Under his bubble canopy, the Colonel scans the gloom of the forest. He glances up as two Scorpions fly overhead. One opens fire on something, its tracers streaming down into the trees. The Scorpion pilot tells Quaritch that a pack of VIPERWOLVES are heading his way.

Quaritch scans among the trees, seeing vague infrared shapes moving on his screens. Ahead, in the gloom, he sees black shapes squirting from shadow to shadow like blobs of living ink. They seem to dart across the ground, then move through the trees from limb to limb... sometimes seeming doglike, other times more like monkeys.

Quaritch opens fire with the GAU 90. It hogs a horizontal swath through the forest, splintering everything in its path into wood chips. Trees crash to earth, and flapping things called STINGBATS rise into the sky with shrill calls. We hear a horrible yelping whine, which goes on and on, getting more distant... Satisfied, Quaritch crashes forward through the bush, scanning.

A one-meter stingbat smacks into his canopy, its tail-stinger screeching on the glass. He crushes it, with one hydraulic hand, almost unconsciously, like someone swatting a mosquito.

A shrieking BANSHEERAY hurtles at him from above the

trees. It is a small one, less than a three meter wingspan. Shaped like a manta ray, it swoops through the trees on translucent wing membranes. We get a glimpse of glassy fangs unfolding from its mouth like cat-claws, then the cannon blows it into chunks. Quaritch's canopy is showered with blue Pandoran blood.

He passes a large platform called PHALANXIA which fires nettle-like projectiles at him. They ricochet off the armor, leaving drops of glistening venom. The Pandoran fauna and flora clearly share the philosophy of us versus them. This is one nasty place.

Behind Quaritch two troopers in powersuits follow him into the bush ahead of the wall-like blades of the bulldozers. Quaritch blasts something else. We see that he enjoys his work. Takes a personal interest that things are done right.

IN THE UTILIDOR Rob Parrish is walking with Carter Selfridge. Parrish is complaining that Quaritch and SECFOR are going too far. Now they want to burn large sections of the forest, to clear it of predators. How can he be expected not to report that?! Selfridge tells him that he should just do what he always does... shut up and take the money.

IN THE COMMISSARY Josh is eating with some of the other controllers. You can see definite territories staked out by the various groups. The SECFOR troopers stay on their side of the room, and don't mingle with the civilians much. And the scientists have their own area. Within that, the controllers have a little corner reserved for them, but whether they are the elite, or the pariahs, is not clear. A little of both, actually.

The controllers are a scruffy, smelly lot. They generally spend as many hours a day as they are allowed to (up to 16) under the link, and as their stint goes on, they get less and less interested in personal hygiene. They are like junkies, with unkempt hair and beards, bad skin and poor appetites.

There's a crazy guy bussing the table named HEGNER. Moving slow and vacant-eyed, he's obviously doped up on something prescribed by the base psychtech. Grace tells them that Hegner used to be head of Xenobiology until his avatar got killed... ripped apart by a SLINTH. The slinth is a large predator, fast as a cheetah, that spears its

prey with its head, which is like a venomous lance. The prey wobbles off and collapses, alive and conscious but unable to move because of the neurotoxin. The slinth eats it alive. Hegner felt himself die, and he hasn't been right since. Added to the trauma is the loss... the loss of his other life, the one lived in his avatar body.

Like many of the controllers, he came to see it as his real life, with his human life taking on the feeling of a boring dream.

Grace tells Josh that they are going out to her worksite tomorrow, and he'll be meeting a local, named N'DEH, who is her guide. Giese says N'deh is one of the few who will still work with them, after what those SECFOR jarheads did.

Apparently there was an incident, a year ago, between the nearby aboriginal people and some SECFOR troopers who were trying to clear them out of the construction site for the new deuterium plant. It seems the site was sacred ground to the TSUMONGWI.

Josh says he thought they were called the NA'VI. Giese says that's right, the whole Pandoran race is called the Na'vi. They are all Na'vi, all around the planet, because they all seem to have the same root language. It translates, approximately, as "The Seeing People".

Their word for Pandora is NA'AT, "The People's Mother". Curiously, it is the same word they have for forest. So to them, the forest is the world. Which is nearly right, since there are no deserts or veldts, and all the landmasses are uniformly covered with forest, right up to the permanent polar ice.

The local clan is called the Tsumongwi, "The Blue Flute Clan". Anyway, Giese and his avatar group were having some success with the local clan, teaching them some English, and how to use some of our power tools. Their own technology is neolithic... bows and spears, clay pots, animal skins, that sort of thing. No written language.

They were helping to build a school in the forest, near their home villages, when SECFOR pissed in the soup.

The clan patriarch has protested against the "Sky People"... us... clearing the trees at one of their sacred sites. They have never liked us cutting down the trees

anywhere, and it was all I could do to get Selfridge to stop his safety zone at the size it is... he was just heading for the horizon with it. They mourn the spirit of a tree when it dies. It's quite touching.

Anyway, when the tractors showed up at the sacred site, which was just a clearing in the woods, the Na'vi attacked. They attacked the tractors, not the men. Set the tires on fire. Shot a few poison darts at the engines.

Quaritch ordered his men to fire into the forest, knowing the Na'vi were there. Show them who's boss. Five Na'vi were killed. Since then we haven't seen hide nor hair of them around here. They will meet with us in the forest, sometimes, but never here. And things are very strained. N'deh has been invaluable, and there are a couple of others. It's almost like they drew straws to see who would get the shit-detail of dealing with us hairy sky people. And N'deh drew short.

AT DUSK, OUT IN THE COMPOUND, the tractors are returning from the construction site. Troopers keep a loose guard cordon between the gravel road through the rainforest and the compound fence. A couple of Powersuits stride among them, dwarfing the troopers and the civilian construction workers in their masks and hardhats.

The twin suns of Alpha Centauri A and B are fat red disks just above the treeline. Stingbats, bansheerays and other flyers are silhouetted against the orange sky.

Josh/Avatar, inside the compound, walks to the fence and watches the machines returning. Behind him they are loading up a VTOL utility vehicle about the size of a Huey helicopter. It is an AEROSPATIALE SA-2 SAMSON. The Samsons are armed only with a door gun, and are the prime-movers of air operations here. They are used by the scientists to reach their remote worksites, and by the construction and mining teams to move personnel and supplies. Hell's Gate operates ten of these workhorses, and they are under civilian command.

Josh looks up. Silhouetted against the twin suns, sitting on top of a cargo container nearby, is a real honest-to-God alien... a Na'vi. He looks like the avatars, of course, but the difference is in the details. He is wearing a beaded loincloth of animal skin, and has a leather tube slung across his back. He is squatting,

still as a statue, holding what looks like a long spear, which stands upright against the sky. Josh sees that it is actually a bundle of long fishing arrows, with the unstrung bow held alongside them.

The Na'vi turns his head all the way around, like an owl's, and the eyes bore into Josh.

JOSH/AVATAR

N'deh?

The Na'vi rises, then steps off the container, dropping to the ground like some kind of liquid, and almost silently. He regards Josh with curiosity, coming quite close to him. He walks around him, looking him up and down. Sniffs him slowly.

Grace walks up and introduces them formally, using N'deh's complete name: N'deh Hermequeftewa. N'deh makes a curious gesture with his hand, touching one finger to his forehead and flicking it gracefully toward Josh. Josh nods.

N'deh is older than Josh. In human terms we would guess him to be in his late thirties. Next to him, we realize that Josh's avatar body is very young... a boy in his teens. Maybe 17.

Grace quietly speaks to N'deh in the Na'vi language, surprising Josh. It is the first time he has heard it spoken. It is musical and lilting, and by the sound of it very complex. Grace seems quite fluent.

By subtitles we understand that she is asking him to help her load the sampling equipment into the Samson.

N'deh closes his eyes for a half second, which we will come to see means the same as our nod of agreement. They walk toward the Aerospatiale together.

Josh hears shots and turns. There is a commotion out on the killing ground. Near the tractors, an enormous animal has burst from the treeline and is charging for the fence. In the dust raised by the giant machines, and with the number of men around, it is difficult for the troopers to get a shot. To make matters worse, the sentry guns have been deactivated in that sector while they bring in the heavy equipment.

Almost twice the size of an elephant, the beast is called

a HAMMERHEAD TITANOTHERE, and it is like a six-legged rhinoceros. It has a massive, low-slung head with blunt transverse projections of solid bone which give it the look of a hammerhead shark. It is a herbivore, but like the rhino, elephant and hippopotamus, it can be aggressive and deadly. Troopers fire their rifles at the monstrous silhouette charging through the dust clouds, but the rounds have no effect on the armored head and shoulders.

A trooper in a powersuit strides between the tractors, trying to get a shot with the GAU 90. Suddenly the beast appears out of the dust at a full thundering charge, and the powersuit is knocked down before the cannon can swing to bear. The bull hammerhead smashes the canopy with one foot as it charges right over the powersuit, pulping the trooper inside.

Josh sees the hammerhead close the final distance to the compound fence. It is coming straight toward him. Everyone is firing at once, trying to bring down the twenty ton creature. The ground is shaking in time with its galloping gait.

It hits the outer fence, smashing right through it. A powersuit runs forward, striking a firing position, and opens up with its cannon. The GAU 90 rips into the hammerhead, blowing divots out of its shoulder and head. The creature bellows in pain and rage and keeps on coming. Josh pulls his pistol and adds his firing to the general thunder of guns.

The hammerhead hits the inner fence. In a blaze of high-voltage arcing, it bulldozes through the chain-link. It stumbles, tripping on the wreckage of the fence, then rises and thunders forward again, filling Josh's vision.

BOOM!!! The cannon roars again and the titanothera topples forward, plowing into the ground. It flips and skids, coming to rest in a cloud of dust ten meters from Josh. There is a beat, then...

Over the creature's body flows a cat-like shape, big as a tiger. It hits the ground in a ripple of muscle and bounds straight toward Josh. It is a SLINTH. Its venom-injecting spear-like head is cocked back on its powerful neck, ready to strike. Josh raises the pistol, which CLICKS. Empty.

He faces his death.

Suddenly beside him is N'deh, drawing and aiming his bow in one swift move. The two meter long arrow flies straight into the slinth's throat. It coils over itself in agony like a snake. N'deh knocks another arrow and lets fly. The slinth shudders and lies twitching.

N'deh walks forward, stepping on the needle-like head while he removes his arrows.

JOSH/AVATAR

N'deh. Thank you.

N'DEH

Luck.

(he holds up an
arrow)

Fishing points not good for killing
slinth.

The high tech troopers stand around with their blasters, looking at the stone-age arrow that killed the beast. N'deh looks at the dead slinth, then at the body of the titanother which cleared a path for it all the way into the inner compound. His expression is enigmatic.

N'deh takes the blood of the slinth on his finger and draws a line under one eye, then under the other. Honoring the slinth, and its purpose for existence. He starts dragging the carcass to the Samson.

Nearby somebody screams. Several hideous insects, almost a foot across, are leaping from the body of the titanother and trying to fasten their hook-like legs into some of the troopers. With the host dead, the parasitic WOLF-TICKS are looking for a new ride. A frantic burst of firing breaks out, as the soldiers jump around, trying to kill the fast-moving parasites.

Nasty place.

THAT NIGHT Josh/Avatar stands at the compound fence, looking out at the forest primeval. Tomorrow he is going out there for the first time, and he is scared. There are light moving out there, single flitting ones, and larger patterns indicating big creatures. Some of the trees glow very faintly, or have phosphorescent patterns in their foliage.

Josh sees eyes, low to the ground, moving just behind the

treeline. Several pairs. And then an unearthly wailing cry. Viperwolves. Christ, what am I doing here?

IN THE SAMSON, the next day, they thunder over the treetops with a roar of turbofans. Below them the purple rainforest unrolls. The human pilot and the trooper escort sit in a sealed front cabin, while Josh/Avatar, Grace/Avatar and N'deh ride in the back compartment with the side doors open.

They land at Grace's direction, in a grassy meadow. They get out as the pilot shuts down the turbines. Their escort, CORPORAL LYLE WAINFLEET, steps out wearing mask, helmet, armor and rebreather. He is carrying an almighty big automatic rifle. Josh is wearing shorts and a T-shirt. Grace insists that he go barefoot, so his baby-blue feeties will toughen up with thick callouses like hers.

Josh stares at the wall of trees surrounding them. Up close, the trees are enormous, as big as sequoias at the base, and even taller because the gravity on Pandora is less than Earth. Lesser trees, the size of mature oaks, are like underbrush in between the colossi.

Lyle is like a bird dog on point, hyperalert, scanning the gloom beyond the meadow. A flock of stingbats crosses far above them. He tracks them with the rifle, but they ignore the strangers.

GRACE

Lyle, stay with the ship.

LYLE

I'm supposed to escort you.

GRACE

Lyle, you're supposed to escort my party. The ship is part of my party. And we need it to get back, so if you don't want to walk thirty clicks through the bush...

LYLE

I'll stay with the ship.

Grace hates the troopers clomping through the woods with her. They disrupt the animals, and smash the plants, and make too much noise. And they tend to attract the larger

predators, to whom they appear to be injured or defective animals.

They grab the cases of equipment and N'deh leads them into the trees. Josh stares all around like a tourist in hell... rubbernecking and fascinated, but scared shitless. Josh expects every dappled shadow to hide a razor-fanged predator, but their entry into the forest is uneventful.

Josh is jumpy and on guard. Swatting at insects. Soon he has gathered quite a cloud of buzzing attackers.

Grace uses a machete to hack open the bole of a low, cycad-like plant. She takes the viscous sap from the inside and starts briskly rubbing it all over her exposed skin. She recommends that he do the same, unless he wants his bones picked clean by every insect in the forest. He quickly complies.

The insects move off, like magic. Grace explains that the Na'vi use plant extracts for all sorts of things... to relieve pain, purify water, reduce fever, limit or improve fertility, promote wound healing, counteract stings and poisons, attract useful insects, kill external and internal parasites, prevent sunburn, and repel or attract larger animals. As a xenobotanist, her work has been vastly accelerated with their guidance as they help her see the greater relationship between things in the forest.

Josh gazes around him in wonder as they move deeper into the primeval gloom.

The bark of the giant trees is alien, like big hexagonal fishscales. Moss covers the lower parts of the trunks, and lanas and other vine-like structures lace around them, and hang between them like fallen power lines.

The roots of the greater trees are like mangroves, and they form clusters of pillars, each thick as a normal tree trunk, which join far above their heads into a single massive trunk. These root-trunks actually wind around each other, forming a kind of braided cylinder, which then rises a hundred feet above the ground before it forms branches.

They move on. Grace starts giving him survival pointers. How to avoid the things that bite and sting and suck.

Phalanxia, the deadly projectile plant, shows up bright as

a neon sign in the ultraviolet-sensitive avatar vision. No problem. Give it a wide berth. She shows him the nests of Hellfire Wasps... the wasps don't like the sap they have rubbed on, but don't push your luck by coming near the nest.

She sees a SNAKETREE and brings him as close as she can. It is a hydra-like, ambulatory plant twice Josh's height. It moves into place, then freezes so that it resembles a gnarled, dead tree. When prey moves within range, it comes suddenly alive and strikes with one of six fanged heads. The animal is digested in a pitcher-like bole, and the half-stripped bones ejected to lure more prey.

Josh sees the bones lying around the base of the tree. Some of them are from animals at least as large as a man... or an avatar. Grace, the xenobotanist, is very excited to share the snake tree with him.

They move on. Josh has never been in a forest before, since they are mostly gone on Earth. He is scared, but dealing. It's kind of interesting.

She continues to give Josh pointers... touch this, don't touch that. They startle a small creature which crashes away into the underbrush.

Further up the trail, N'deh signals them to stop. Grace motions, and they crouch down, watching through the leaves as something moves through the woods parallel to them. It is a small six-legged herbivore called a HEXAPEDE, about the size of a tapir.

N'deh points at something else, and Grace whispers to Josh.

GRACE

Look. A slinger. It's stalking the hexapede.

Josh doesn't see anything at first... then he spots it. A camouflaged shape moving through the sun-dappled shadows. The predator moving into the glade, is splashed by hard slashes of sunlight, which combine with its cammo pattern making it hard to see.

The SLINGER is smaller than a slinth, but just as deadly. It moves silently, like liquid, through the ferns. It pauses, rearing up, and like the slinth its muscular neck

cocks back into a striking position...

GRACE

Watch this.

The slinger's neck snaps forward, and its long, pointed head detaches, flying through the woods as a self-guiding venomous glider... a smart-dart. The hexapede senses the dart and bolts, bounding in evasive zigzags. The dart tracks it unerringly through the trees and buries itself in its flank. The hexapede staggers. It stands, its muscles spasming, then falls over. The dart starts emitting a series of high-pitched squeals, which allow the body to home in on it blindly. The neck bends down, and is rejoined to the dart. Josh catches a glimpse of hair-like tendrils lacing together... some kind of neural interface. Then the slinger starts to rip the hexapede apart.

Grace explains that the slinth, with its striking head, is the evolutionary precursor of the slinger. The slinger's primary brain is in the dart, so if the body and the dart are ever permanently separated, they both die. The dart cannot feed itself.

The body and dart are actually mother and child... the dart is an immature form. When it grows too big to fly, it will mate, then drop off and metamorphose into a small complete slinger, with its offspring already in place, forming the new dart. Each new generation is the brain for the previous one. Sounds backward, but it works.

Josh watches the feeding slinger in awe. He has never seen anything like this... so raw and primal.

GRACE

Welcome to the food chain.

N'deh leads them past the feeding slinger, which is preoccupied with its kill. Josh's heart is pounding. He's still scared shitless, but this stuff is amazing. He feels more alive than he has ever felt.

They enter a clearing with a partially built structure in the middle. It is made of heavy timbers, cut from the local wood. This is the school and meeting center that Grace and Dr. Giese were trying to build. They had gotten the Na'vi to build this much, working alongside them, before they had retreated from human contact. Now the

vines and moss are reclaiming it. Stingbats roost under the eaves.

N'deh makes a high-pitched clicking sound between tongue and teeth, and several of the stingbats flutter down toward him. He holds out some small fruits he has picked on the trail, and the stingbats perch on his arm and shoulders, munching noisily.

Josh knows that the stinging tail spines are lethal. He gives the stingbats a wide berth as he helps Grace with her sampling equipment. Grace goes to work on some equipment that has been left here for remote sensing. She changes power cells, collects data disks, and does other housekeeping chores.

Grace chops through a thick liana with her machete and drinks from the dangling vine. Josh tastes it. Water... clear and slightly sweet. Like drinking from the teat of the rainforest.

Back at the Samson Lyle is idly tracking a bansheeray circling far above him with the scope of his rifle. The bored pilot is betting him ten bucks he can't hit it.

He is about to fire when he catches sight of some movement out of the corner of his eye. He motions to the pilot to keep still, and they watch as three DIREHORSES emerge from the trees to munch grass in the meadow.

DIREHORSE are herbivores, vaguely horse-like in design, with very long necks and tiny heads. They have long, moth-like antennae with feathery tips, which are constantly moving, touching the tips of other direhorses' antennae as they move near each other. They stand about three meters at the shoulders, or about half as big again as the largest Clydesdale. They have bold striped patterns on their bodies, and glinting, chitinous armor over shoulders and along the back of the neck and head.

Lyle moves forward in a predatory crouch and rests his rifle across the fuselage of the Samson. The direhorse munch unconcerned. Fifty bucks says I nail all three, Lyle says. You're on, says the pilot.

POOM! The lead horse, the male, drops like it was pole-axed. The other two spook, rearing... POOM! One of the females drops, kicking its legs in the air as it writhes on the ground. The third one bolts. Lyle tracks with

it... POOM! It crashes forward, it neck bending back double as it goes end over end.

The second direhorse struggles to regain its footing. It pathetically tries to drag itself toward the sheltering forest with a severed spine, its back legs useless. POOM! A blast of dirt, next to it. It hobbles further, honking like a Canadian goose, its signal for distress. Lyle fires again, rushing the shot. Misses.

LYLE

Shit!

PILOT

(laughing)

Doesn't count if it makes it to the treeline.

LYLE

Start reachin' for your wallet.

He flips the weapon to full auto.
P-P-P-P-POOM!!

The crippled direhorse disappears in a cloud of dust as gouts of earth explode all around it. Treetrunks are blasted, foliage and underbrush ripped into confetti. When the dust clears, the direhorse is an inert carcass.

ON LYLE, turning toward camera, grinning... the three dead animals BG.

A blue hand slams into frame, grabbing his rifle. Grace rips the gun out of his hand and flings it cartwheeling over the Samson, then twists his arm behind his back. She viciously torques it almost to the breaking point, doubling him over. She forces him to his knees, jamming his facemask into the mud.

GRACE

Little boys shouldn't play with guns.

Lyle is cursing a blue streak.
Grace kneels on his back and grabs his breathing mask.

GRACE

I oughta rip this thing right off.
Give you some fresh air.

Lyle squawks and pleads with her not to. She disgustedly gets off him. She is already walking away, toward the felled creatures, as Lyle gets up.

Josh sees him going for his sidearm. Lyle has it aimed at Grace's back and is about to pull the trigger when Josh hits him like a freight train. He slams the trooper against the cowl of the ship, twists the pistol out of his hand in one lightning move, and then picks him up bodily.

Josh is amazed at how easy it is to hurl the human twenty feet away, even weighted down by his full battle dress. Lyle crashes in a heap, breaking his arm, and lies there moaning. Josh picks him up with one hand and leans close to his mask.

JOSH

Lyle, look at me. Lyle! You looking? You do that again, I'll bite your throat out.

Josh bares his pointy teeth in a vicious snarl. Lyle's eyes go wide with primal fear.

JOSH

Understand?

Lyle nods, and Josh shoves him into the Samson. Grace is staring at her new assistant. He is a fighter. There's hope for him yet.

Meanwhile, N'deh has gone to the bodies of the direhorses. A foal, only a few days old, has been hiding in the ferns nearby. It emerges and honks for its mother to get up. It licks her face and honks again, pitifully.

N'deh pulls something from the tube across his back. It is a piece of gut-twine with something on the end... a carved wooden cylinder. He starts to whirl it round and round, above his head and as it builds speed, it emits a powerful ululating wail, like a siren. It works like the "bullroarer" of the Australian aborigines, though the pitch is different and N'deh is somehow able to modulate it into a more complex sound.

The sound of the bullroarer echoes off through the trees for miles.

CUT TO THE SAMSON lifting, banking away above the treeline. Its turbofan roar fades. Then there is only the sound of the forest. We see shapes among the trees... figures which blend with the foliage. The banded patterns on their bodies make them hard to see in the dappled light.

Close on one of the dead direhorses. A blue hand enters frame, stroking its face. The foal is lifted, still honking feebly, and carried away on strong blue shoulders.

BACK AT HELL'S GATE Brantley Giese is on the carpet in Selfridge's office. The incident with trooper Wainfleet couldn't have come at a worse time. The Avatar Program is on shaky enough ground, without this sort of thing. Now Quaritch is out for blood, and Carter Selfridge is considering restricting the number of scientific sorties he approves, and confining the avatars to base. Giese is barely able to get him to loosen up, reminding him of all the things they've learned about Pandora from the Na'vi, and how much money there is to be made from the drugs and biochemical compounds as yet undiscovered in the forest. He reminds him of the money the Consortium has made from the countervirus.

Think how great it would be if they could get the Na'vi back to the table, trusting us again. And how it's the troopers running around blasting everything in sight that caused the rift with them in the first place.

Selfridge and Quaritch don't understand a primitive culture which lives close to the soil, close to the daily cycle of birth and death. They don't understand, and they don't want to. Quaritch thinks the natives are lazy and stupid. You give them a gun so they can hunt better, and they give it back. How smart is that?

Giese tried to explain that the Na'vi consider it unfair and obscene to hunt with a gun... a dishonor to the spirit of the animal and its purpose for existence. They believe that everything has a purpose, and sometimes the animal's purpose is to feed the Na'vi, and sometimes the Na'vi's purpose is to feed the animal, and determining which is which is what makes them both strong, fast and perfect. They don't want to change.

Selfridge says that if that is true, the Na'vi will never help them build factories and strip-mine their own planet. They are useless to us. And Giese knows he has said too

much. He is trapped in his own argument. He tries to buy time, saying he can get the Na'vi to cooperate.

NEXT WE SEE Giese raking (human) Grace and Josh over the coals in her lab. Josh says he had to do something, that jarhead was going to blow Grace's avatar away. Giese holds his head in his hands. Would any court, anywhere, let him get away with equating a human life to that of a genetic construct... a living artifact created in a lab?

Giese says he knows what it feels like... he's spent enough hours in the bush, in avatar form. It's intoxicating, it's the greatest experience imaginable... but they have to remember what they are here for.

And what is that? Grace yells, challenging him. To get the Na'vi to trust us? So we can use them? So we can harness them to the yoke? So we can make them slaves, and teach them to participate in the rape of their own home planet? You're an anthropologist, Brantley! How did it turn into this? You're no better than Selfridge and his goon squad. Are you getting a nice fat payoff like Parrish?

Giese is furious.

He tells them both he doesn't want them around the base for a while, until things cool down. He wants them to go out to SITE 26. They can spend a couple of weeks in the boonies collecting, up in the Hallelujah Mountains, while he tries to get things patched up.

He warns Grace that she is "going native" and dragging her assistant into it as well. And that way can lie madness. Look what happened to Hegner.

A SAMSON roars high above the rainforest, climbing into the mountains. Josh and Grace are sitting up front with the pilot, TRUDY CHACON. N'deh rides in the open back compartment with a single trooper, CORPORAL BILL ONOZUKI, and the unconscious avatars of Josh and his boss.

JOSH

So what happened to Hegner?

Grace tells him that Hegner's avatar was not just killed by a slinth. He let the slinth take him. Suicide. He was dying of a broken heart, and being in the avatar body without his loved one was just too painful. He managed to fall in love with a Na'vi girl, some say they were

married... and she was killed. She was one of the five killed by the SECFOR troopers in the incident which caused the big rift between the two species. And Hegner went crazy.

Her name was Li Na.

There are many dangers on Pandora, Grace says, and one of the subtlest is that you may come to love it too much.

JOSH

Not so far.

CUT TO SITE 26, a remote research station. It consists of a "shack"... a single air-lift module, about the size of a Winnebago, which is perched on the flank of a mountain, near the Montes Volans. Here the trees are gnarly and much shorter, their roots gripping the rocks like arthritic hands. In the clear space around the shack are packing cases and instrument packages left by previous research groups. The station is uninhabited.

A few of the nearer flying mountains are visible a few miles off, among the clouds.

A Samson lands near the shack. Grace and the pilot get out, wearing masks and rebreathers. They get Josh's chair out of the back, then help him out of the ship and into it. Their trooper escort does nothing to help unload, merely scans the area, his gun held at the ready.

N'deh stays in the back compartment of the aircraft with the unconscious avatars of Josh and Grace.

They enter the shack, which is dark and musty. Grace starts the genny and turns on the lights and equipment. There are bunkbeds, a cramped clutter of scientific gear, and two link chairs.

Trudy jokes about being alone in the mountains for a couple of weeks with two men in such cramped quarters. Josh says the only threat he poses is body odor, indicating his useless lower body.

Once Grace has checked out the link transmitters, she and Josh go straight to the chairs. Outside, at the ship, their avatars blink and sit up. They get out of the Samson and stand, breathing the cold mountain air. Streamers of cloud wreath the nearby mesa-tops, and partially obscure the floating mountains nearby.

They go out the next day to place instrument packages among the floating mountains. Josh and Grace go under the link in the shack at Site 26, while N'deh and the avatars ride out in the Samson. The reason a mobile controller station was set up in the first place is that the magnetic flux around the Montes Volans interferes with the link signal from Hell's Gate. They need to be closer.

The Samson is tiny moving among the vast floating islands of rock. Bansheerays and other smaller flying species circle next to the cliffs in the sunlit shafting between the clouds. Waterfalls plunge thousands of feet down the sheer walls, then dissolve into nothingness below the bottoms of the mountains.

Trudy pilots the Samson under one of the floating mountains, and we see the upside down forest of vines dangling from the underside. They pass between falling streams of water. It is dreamlike and surreal.

Josh, sitting in the wind in the open door of the Samson, sees a bansheeray cruising near them. It studies them a moment, beating its huge wing membranes to keep up. It lets out a piercing shriek (hence the name) and then banks away, diving like a jet fighter. Trooper Onozuki, wearing mask and armor, sits in the other doorway, leaning on the sling of the door-gun.

Grace names the floating mountains as they pass. Mons Veritatis... Truth Mountain. Mons Tiburon. Mons Damocles. Icarus. Daedalus. And finally, the biggest of the superconductor mountains, Mons Prometheus... The Big Rock-Candy Mountain. A hundred billion dollars worth of pure unobtanium.

They land on the mesa-top of the Big Rock-Candy Mountain. Trooper Onozuki deploys rapidly, scanning, his rifle ready. The others get out and go to work.

The mountaintop is shrouded in a blowing cloud bank. Occasional shafts of sunlight play across it, but it is mostly gray mist.

Josh carries his instrument package away from the ship. He sets it up at the edge of a cliff, per Grace's instructions. Below, through gaps in the clouds, he can see purple forested slopes, half a mile down.

Josh sees more bansheerays circling below. A couple pass nearby, giving him the eye. Like reef sharks they will size you up, but seldom attack something their own size unless it is in distress.

Mist closes around Josh as he walks back to the Samson. Visibility is only a few meters. Without warning, a curtain of what looks like slimy ropes emerges out of the mist. They are hanging down from above, their source unseen, and are dragging over the ground with a faint swish. Josh whirls in time to see them, but he is enveloped.

They are translucent tentacles, only a couple of inches in diameter. But they react instantly on contact with him, curling around his limbs and body, and zapping the hell out of him with electric shocks. Josh is entangled and dragged, struggling, across the mountaintop. He shouts, and the others run toward him. The trooper aims his gun up into the mist above Josh, hoping to hit the source of the tentacles, but Grace stops him from firing. We don't know why yet.

N'deh sprints toward him, drawing his machete. Josh sees the cliff edge approaching, beyond it nothing. N'deh won't reach Josh in time. Josh is swept off the edge, his feet dangling over space.

N'deh throws him the machete, and Josh catches it by the handle. N'deh almost falls, but Grace grabs him, pulling him back from the edge. They watch helplessly as Josh is carried away. Then Grace runs like hell toward the Samson, yelling to Trudy to fire it up.

Josh, still getting zapped by electric shocks, tries to get a look at what is holding him. The cloud bank falls away, and he sees an enormous transparent canopy above him, glistening in the sunlight. It looks like an impossibly huge jellyfish, like a cross between a Portuguese man o' war and a blimp. Its clear membranous sac, or bell, is filled with hydrogen, produced by an internal biochemical process. The bell is 15 meters across, and the tentacles over 30 meters long.

The bell pulses to give some directional control, but mostly they drift with the wind. It expels gas to descend, and expels water from trim bladders to rise.

Josh sees a whole school of these things, like a fleet of

ships, emerging from the clouds on both sides of him. Apparently they sweep the tops of the mountains for prey, stunning it with their electric shocks. Josh looks up and sees that the contracting tentacles are bringing him much closer to the pulpy mouth.

In the Samson, Grace and the others search the clouds for Josh. They see the fleet of gas-bags, and move toward them. Grace says they are AEROCOELENTERATES, genus MEDUSA. These are X. Medusa gigans, not too common this far east. She tells Onozuki not to fire because they are full of hydrogen and will explode like the Hindenburg.

Josh is hacking at the tentacles with the machete. They are tough and rubbery, hard to cut. His distress encourages some circling bansheerays to attack. As they dive toward him, we see the distensible jaws unfold, revealing glassy dagger-like teeth several inches long. Josh hacks at the first one, slashing it right across the face. With a shriek it veers off. The jaws of another snap inches from his leg, and he chops into it with the machete. It flutters off in a descending spiral, the shoulder of one wing hacked open. Some of the others follow it down, ripping it apart.

Trudy maneuvers the Samson closer. WHAM!!! They are slammed by something from above. The ship drops and she fights for control. Onozuki is almost pitched out. They pull him back in. A huge shadow... then they see it.

Like a bansheeray, only several times larger. It is the king predator of the air... the GREAT LEONOPTERYX. Striped scarlet, yellow and black, with a midnight blue head... it is iridescent and beautiful. It feeds on bansheerays, munching them like salted peanuts, and the occasional medusa when it's really hungry... but this fight isn't about hunger, it's about territory. It sees the Samson as a competing predator, and it's pissed.

The great leonopteryx swoops away, climbing with unbelievable speed, disappearing up into the sun. Trudy loses sight of it. Grace tells her to take evasive action. Fast! Trudy banks and dives. And we see the leonopteryx plummeting right behind her in a full delta tuck, like a hawk stooping. They build up airspeed and Trudy jinks left, then right, trying to throw it off.

Josh sees them go out of sight behind the flank of the Big Rock Candy Mountain, and knows he's screwed. He chops harder at the tentacles, hacking through another one in a spray of violet blood.

As he gets nearer to the pulsing sphincter of a mouth, he starts to hack at the gas bag overhead. He chops through the membrane, and hydrogen whooshes out, spraying him with a mist of blood. Josh hacks again, widening the tear. With a thin scream, like a tea-kettle whistle, the medusa starts to descend.

The great leonopteryx outmaneuvers the Samson, slamming into it with a bone-jarring crash. It flaps away with a piece of the engine cowl, and the Samson plunges, smoking, toward the ground.

Amid alarms and flashing lights Trudy fights for control. The cabin is full of smoke. The ship hits the treetops with a series of splintering crashes, and sails out over a clearing, crossed up and spinning. It plops down into a huge gray mud-spot. It has come to rest in the middle of an area of volcanic springs, where terraced pools of mud plop with steam from below, and geysers shoot up nearby. Visualize Yellowstone with purple trees, and a few floating mountains in the background.

Everyone inside is okay, though shaken. Bloody noses, bashed knees. Onozuki jumps out into the mud, in a rage, and slogs his way to rocky ground. He runs up a rise, screaming at the leonopteryx, which is a crimson kite banking away. He opens fire with his rifle. Grace has come out, shouting something to him, which he can't hear over the thundercrack of his weapon.

FROM A HIGH ANGLE we see the trooper as a tiny dot on the rocks below. The POV rushes downward. A huge shadow can be seen, rippling over the ground, rushing toward Onozuki, who is firing in the other direction, his backed turned.

We rush right down to him, meeting our shadow... the shadow of wings 15 meters across.

WHAM!! Angle on Onozuki as he is jerked up out of frame. His gun and helmet plop into the mud near Grace, and a terrifying shriek echoes across the landscape.

GRACE

I tried to tell him they always hunt

in pairs.

SEVERAL MILES AWAY, Josh is plummeting toward the rainforest, still wrapped in the tentacles of the deflating medusa.

The trees claw up toward him, and he enters a snapping, slashing hell of purple foliage. He is jerked to a stop, the wind knocked out of him, and his machete clatters down into the forest below him.

He finds himself hanging ten meters above the ground. The tentacles go limp as it dies, and he slips down, trying to hold onto them now. But they are too slick. He slides down this greased rope, falling the last two meters to the ground, where he lands on his butt.

He jumps to his feet and scrambles away from beneath the medusa. Panting, he looks up at it. It's still dead.

He finds his machete and stands surveying the gloomy forest around him. Alone in the bush, miles from nowhere. Great. He feels an overwhelming sense of doom. Josh backs away from the medusa, then turns to look behind him. CHOMP!! The striking head of a snake-tree snaps its jaws shut inches from him. He jumps back as several of the other heads lunge. CHOMP! CHOMP! CHOMP! He stands there panting, just out of range of the hydra heads.

JOSH

This place is like a goddamned
Roadrunner cartoon.

At the downed Samson Trudy has called the base. She tells Grace that they can't send a ship for a couple of hours, everything's committed. And Quaritch won't send one of his gunships to pick up civilians. Prick. Grace picks up Onozuki's rifle and tells Trudy to get back to the ship.

Josh is walking through the forest, moving in and out of patches of sunlight. He slaps at bugs. He finds the plant Grace used for insect repellent and cuts it open, smearing it on himself.

POV FROM NEARBY. Something is watching him from behind a curtain of leaves.

REVERSE... TWO EYES watch from the dappled shadows. Na'vi eyes. Piercing gaze, FILLING FRAME. A soundless motion, the eyes are gone.

Josh walks on through the forest, skittish and hyperalert. He keeps his machete gripped tightly. Something small rustles away through the ferns near him. He hears distant shrieks, chirps, grunts.

There is a crash and an explosion of splintered wood and flying leaves. A BULL HAMMERHEAD TITANOTHERE emerges into the clearing ahead of him in a shower of foliage. Its baleful eyes lock onto him. Josh is frozen. The titanotheres bellows and lowers its ten foot wide sledgehammer of a head. It charges. The ground shakes.

Josh, in desperation, screams at the top of his lungs, spreads his arms wide and runs straight at the thing.

It stops its charge abruptly, with an oversized bleat.

ANGLE ON JOSH. He is amazed the gambit worked. He grins. Makes a face at the titanotheres. Something rises up behind him out of focus... RACK FOCUS to it, revealing... A MANTICORE. This is what really stopped the Titanotheres' charge.

The manticore is the most fearsome of Pandoran predators, and by the look of it might be the toughest carnivore in the known universe. This thing could eat a T-rex and have the Alien for desert.

It is a black six-limbed panther from Hell, the size of a tractor trailer, with an armored head, a venomous striking tail, and massive distensible armored jaws. Its shiny black skin looks like polished leather, and is banded with thin stripes of yellow and scarlet.

It has four powerful legs forming a base for a torso which angles up, centaur-like, to a powerful shoulder girdle. Folded against its chest are two long forearms like the striking limbs of a praying mantis. Curving up over the back is a muscular scorpion tail which ends in a scythe-like stinger, over a foot long.

The locals call it "Palulukan", which translates as "Dry Mouth Bringer of Fear".

Josh, still unaware of the silently advancing manticore,

yells "boo!" to the Titanothere. It wheels around, trumpeting in fear, and thunders off down the trail.

Imagine Josh's surprise when there is an earsplitting snarl behind him and seven tons of rippling manticore launches over him, landing between him and the titanothere. The hammerhead is shaking the ground at a full gallop, but the manticore runs it down in half a dozen powerful bounds.

It leaps to the titanothere's shoulder, seizing it in the powerful front limbs, and then the muscular tail arches over, slamming the foot long stinger through the beast's armored neck. The neurotoxin venom is pumped in with one contraction of the muscular tail, and the titanothere topples to the ground with a crash, shaking the forest.

Josh gapes as the manticore rips into its prey with massive jaws lined with distending fangs 9 inches long. Josh backs slowly away, trying to be invisible. He slips behind some foliage, then runs like hell.

CUT TO JOSH chopping at a sapling he has cut down, fashioning it into a long spear. He hacks at the end, forming a crude but sharp tip. His motions are jerky and manic with fear. He sticks the machete through his belt and carries the spear two-handed as he moves through the forest like it's a minefield.

THE POV AGAIN, through the leaves.

And the eyes, bright in a slash of sunlight. Golden irises like a cat, in a feral blue face. They duck away as Josh approaches.

Josh passes a tree, and on our side of the tree we see a figure, standing utterly still, listening to him pass.

A NA'VI WOMAN. She is young, and lithe as a cat, with a long, slender neck, muscular shoulders, and nubile breasts... a statuesque vision. Let's not mince words here... she is devastatingly beautiful. For a girl with a tail. In human age she would be in her late teens.

In the sun dappled shadows, her banded markings make her invisible. Josh passes less than a meter from her and never knows she is there. She watches him, frozen, only her eyes moving.

CLOSEUP on the Na'vi girl. She sniffs the scent Josh has left behind him in the air.

AT THE CRASH SITE the rescue ship as arrived. Trudy climbs aboard the hovering Samson, but Grace and N'deh say there are going to look for Josh. The VTOL craft banks away. Grace looks to the west as she walks to the treeline. The twin suns are setting behind a black wall of alien trees.

DUSK IN THE RAINFOREST. Josh, moving through the quickly darkening forest, has got problems. In the deepening gloom he sees black shapes moving with liquid grace among the shadows behind him.

He is being stalked by a pack of VIPERWOLVES. Josh catches movement out of the corner of his eye and realizes one of the things is moving up to a flanking position. He sees a glint of eyes, a slinking black movement... then nothing. Darkness. And behind him more glints... pairs of eyes. Then a hideous sound, more like a hyena's maniacal laugh than a dog growl.

Josh starts to run along a game trail he has been following. He catches glimpses of the viperwolves bounding through the woods, staying with him.

His running has made them bolder. They sense his fear and they are closing in. He sees another on his opposite flank now.

The forest has come alive with bioluminescence as the day fades. Spots and patterns, ghosts and galaxies of blue-green light dance before his eyes, disorienting him... seeming to surround him with the glowing cat-eyes of the viperwolves. Their psychotic laughing barks become more intense as they signal each other, getting excited. He can see the shadows of the viperwolves moving through the undergrowth, leaving a tell-tale trail of flashes as they brush against the sensitive plants.

Finally one makes a run at him. He senses it angling in on his legs from behind and he whirls, whopping it with the flat of the spear. It yips and goes past him, but instantly another moves in. He jabs it with the business end of the spear and it yelps, retreating, baring its fangs. Josh realizes that he is making his final stand.

The viperwolves circle and Josh gets his first good look

at them. He doesn't like what he sees. They are like wolves painted by Francis Bacon...

Hairless, with shiny skin that looks like overlapped leather armor. They are mostly black, banded with vermilion and thin lines of iridescent blue. Earless low-slung heads, with chitinous neck shields like a triceratops. Bright, intelligent eyes. And the same distending, snake-like jaws as the bansheerays, glistening with fangs that look like they are made of glass. Most disturbing are the creature's paws, which are like leathery black hands... almost human in shape, with a thumb for gripping. These things can hunt in the trees as well as on the ground.

There are half a dozen of them, maybe more in the shadows.

Josh feels a rush of adrenaline, or whatever does the same thing in his avatar body, like he has never felt in his life. It goes through him like a lightning bolt and the fear is gone.

JOSH

(shouting)

You want me? Come on! Come and get some!

With sharp snarls and a blur of motion they attack. Josh plants the spear in one, striking true, but the speed of its attack wrenches it from his hands. He draws the machete and chops at another, just as a third sinks its teeth into his arm. He yells in pain and fury, slashing across with the machete. It cuts deep into the throat of the one on his arm, and it lets go.

He sprints, trying to escape, but one of the viperwolves grabs him by the ankle with its powerful fore-hand. Josh tears away, but goes sprawling. He looks up in time to see four viperwolves lunging toward him. The nearest leaps at his throat. THUNK!! An arrow appears in its chest. It lands on him, already a dead weight. He pushes it off in time to see a blue figure wade in among the remaining wolves. It is the Na'vi girl.

She cracks her bow down on the skull of one of the wolves. Then grabs another and picks it up bodily, hurling it against a tree. The last one leaps at her and she drops under its weight, but rolls somehow, coming up on top of it with a knife in her hand. The knife flashes down,

buried to the hilt in its heart.

The last two viperwolves, stunned by her blows, retreat yipping into the black woods.

Josh gets up, amazed to be alive... amazed by this girl... this vision. She recovers her arrow from one of the dead wolves. He speaks to her, not knowing if she understands him. Finally she speaks, in halting English. He knows she must be one of the Tsumongwi clan, the ones taught by Giese's people how to speak English.

Her name is ZULEIKA TE KAHA POLENOMA.

Josh thanks her for killing the viperwolves. Zuleika's eyes flash with anger. This is not a thing to thank someone for, she says. It is a sad thing, and it is his fault.

She blames him for the unnecessary deaths of the wolves. If he had known what he was doing they wouldn't have attacked. But he is clumsy and stupid as a baby. These are unnecessary deaths. She touches the fangs of the wolves respectfully. She murmurs to them in her language, asking them to forgive her. And to forgive this stupid alien man.

What should I have done? He wants to know. She explains how sap from a certain leaf imitates the smell of a slinger dart... you rub it on your face... and it scares them. They think you are a slinger. They won't attack you.

Zuleika stands, walking away as if nothing has happened. Josh grabs his machete and sprints to catch up with her. She scowls at him, and says that you alien people do not understand this forest. You should not come here. You only cause problems.

Josh asks why she saved him, then. Why not let her wolves have a nice meal, if she loves them so much? What's the deal?

She stops, meeting his eyes for the first time.

ZULEIKA

Because you are brave.

He grins at the complement.
She scowls, turning away again.

ZULEIKA

But you are ignorant as a child.

JOSH

Teach me, then.

She looks at him again.

JOSH

You don't want to leave me out here alone to harm more animals. I'm a menace. I need to be taught what to do.

ZULEIKA

You aliens do not see. Never see.

JOSH

Teach me to see.

ZULEIKA

No one can teach to see.

Needless to say, she lets him go with her. First she binds his wound with some plant dressing that stops the bleeding and the pain.

As they walk he asks her questions. The first lesson is silence. They walk on. The sky is black and full of stars. There are two moons providing more than enough light for his large cat-eyes. The bioluminescence is everywhere.

A GHOSTBIRD flies through the trees above them. A glowing, transparent membrane, delicate as a blown-glass figurine. Elegant and insubstantial. Its song is eerie but quiet melodic.

There are other things wafting through the high branches, little points of light like fireflies. A couple drift near him and he sees that they are like glowing dandelion seeds, about the size of large butterflies, waving their silky cilia to move gracefully through the night air.

They cross a large bed of moss, which reacts to the pressure of their footsteps. Rings of blue-green light, like water ripples on a pond, expand outward from each footfall.

Josh sees movement in the trees ahead. Suddenly a glowing manta-shape banks toward them... a bansheeray. Josh raises his machete, bracing for a chop. He slashes at the shape and...

It dissolves. Into a swarm of MOONWRAITHS. These insects fly in a tightly patterned swarm, imitating the shape of a bansheeray to discourage insect-eating predators. The moonwraiths disperse like a mist and reform further on.

ZULEIKA

You do not see.

They pass through a grove of trees like willows. A fountain of gossamer tendrils from each central stalk. The long tendrils hang down like straight hair, and they glow faintly. They sway hypnotically, as if in a breeze, but there is no breeze. They reach out, gently caressing them as they pass through. Zuleika runs her fingers through the tendrils as she walks. She murmurs to them in her language. Josh listens to her, talking to the trees as they walk through the suddenly magical night.

Zuleika breaks into a loping run. Josh catches up, and soon they are running silently together through the dappled moonlight. His body is powerful, and this is effortless. He feels almost like he is flying. Looking down, he sees exploding rings of light where his feet touch down.

They approach a waterfall, a wide curtain shimmering in the moonlight.

Zuleika runs agilely over a fallen trunk, across a broad pool at the base of the waterfall.

LOOKING DOWN we see glowing, gently moving shapes covering the bottom of the pool. They are giant anemones. Zuleika and Josh are silhouettes sprinting over a garden of blue, cyan and salmon colored living starbursts, some over three meters across.

They run on in silence.

Josh breathes in deeply, smelling a thousand things he never noticed before. He feels like he knows what they are, at some cellular level. Something, deep in his brain, deep in the fabric of this alien body, is awakening.

They enter a clearing filled with chest-high ferns. She signals him to stop, then shows him a creature perched on a nearby fern.

Josh sees a black, stick-like lizard thing perched on a frond ahead of him. It is about a foot long and ugly as a toad. As he approaches it goes SNAP!

A long spine lying along its back snaps around in a circle, unfurling a bioluminescent membrane of bright orange and blue... a perfect disk almost a meter across, opening like a Chinese fan. The rapidly distending fan-wing imparts enough angular movement to spin the creature like a frisbee. It glides, spinning, through the darkness. It floats across the clearing to another branch where the wing furls, vanishing as suddenly as it appeared.

Zuleika runs forward with a sharp cry, plunging into a large patch of ferns. With an explosion of color, two dozen FAN LIZARDS snap into motion, and Josh is suddenly surrounded by luminous floating disks, which spin away between the glowing trees.

The ugly little lizards become one of the most beautiful things he's ever seen. In fact, this world which seemed so ugly has become one of awesome beauty.

Josh's face fills with childlike wonder. He looks at Zuleika, and sees her smiling. Josh notices that the chromatophores on her body have brightened and changed color. He looks down. His have too. His own skin pulsing with colors he has never seen before. He doesn't know what it means. But Zuleika does.

Several of the dandelion-seed things float near him. The humans call them WILLATHEWISPS, and they are more plant than animal. But right now they seem to be acting with purpose. Now there are more, circling around him. Some alighting on him. He laughs as more of them come. Soon Josh is a pulsing, glowing, fluttering mass of light, standing in the clearing.

Zuleika is very impressed by this. She takes it as a sign that he is accepted by the willathewisps. The forest is giving him a blessing. Why, she does not know. But she knows not to question it. And she is secretly glad. Because she is fascinated by this alien, and now she has

an excuse to bring them to...

THE VILLAGE.

Josh follows Zuleika into the village of her clan. They live inside the bases of three of the enormous mangrove-like trees. Cookfires are visible through the pillars of the roots, and people move past them as tall silhouettes.

Zuleika calls to them and they come out to look at Josh. The PATRIARCH and MATRIARCH stand waiting for Zuleika to explain what she is doing. She goes into a long, uninterrupted explanation, in rapidfire bursts of her lilting, musical language, accompanied by lots of hand gestures which fascinate Josh with their eloquence. Her jointless fingers are hypnotic to watch as she talks.

The Matriarch, MO'AT POHATSUA examines Josh closely. She looks at the viperwolf bite on his arm. She says something to the Patriarch, MATO'A TE KAHA NAHGOITEWA, and they confer briefly.

As we will come to find out, Mo'at and Mato'a are Zuleika's parents. She is what you might call a princess... destined herself to be the Matriarch of the clan someday. So they cut her some slack. Future Matriarchs are expected to have good instincts.

Mato'a invites Josh in for dinner, and they go inside the base of the tree. Josh is amazed at the size of the thing inside. By the light of the cookfires he can see up into a cylindrical gallery, which goes off into darkness. It is like a biological cathedral, held up by pillars and flying buttresses of living wood.

We see the people of the tribe, and how they live. Mothers with babies, old ladies, young hunters. The Matriarch and Patriarch rule equally, though each with their own area of responsibility and expertise. The Patriarch is the hunt leader, and is also in charge of the making of things, including pottery, clothing and art.

The Matriarch, Mo'at, governs the tribe's relationships to the forest, and is also responsible for their verbal history, medicine and musical teaching. Her skills could be compared to those of a shaman. Her name means "Dream Catcher". It is her job to petition the forest for guidance, and to make requests of it.

Together they determine when they must move to allow the area they have dwelt in to recover from their stay, and where they will go next. Their lifestyle is semi-nomadic, and the movements are somewhat seasonal, having to do with the migration of some prey animals, and the gathering of certain plants and fruits.

One of the hunters is TSU TE RONGLOA, whose name means "Eats the Heart". He is the alpha male, or dominant young male, under the Matriarch and Patriarch. Josh sees right away that Tsu Te is not happy about him being here. He suspects that it has more to do with Zuleika than with a general mistrust of "aliens". And he's right.

Josh is shocked to see Grace and N'deh here... seated and already eating. Grace waves jauntily and grins at him, licking her fingers.

It's nice to be among her old friends again, she says. They came to us in the forest and told us Zuleika had found you.

It seems the whole village knew Josh was coming... Zuleika let her mother, Mo'at, know while they were still out in the bush.

Josh wonders how the hell she did that? She wasn't packing a cellular phone. Grace just smiles.

Josh eats dinner with them, and is made welcome. He is served some cooked fish, and some hexapede meat. It's delicious. Zuleika offers him some steamed grubs, and he doesn't want to be rude, especially not with her, so...

They turn out to be sweet, with a consistency a bit like shrimp. He has a second helping, making a show of learning the Na'vi word for it.

Across the fire, he sees Grace grinning at him. She says something to N'deh, leaning close to him, and he closes his eyes in agreement.

CUT TO LATER. The fires are burning low. The clan is bedding down for the night, in fiber hammocks slung about the inside of the mighty tree. Josh is given a place to sleep. He stares at the fire, its flickering light reflecting in his eyes. What is happening to him? He feels so... right... here. Josh closes his eyes, and...

He opens his eyes. The inside of the shack at site 26 is momentarily disorienting. Human Josh lifts the link rig and rubs his temples. He has been under for almost sixteen hours.

Grace wakes up in the next chair. She gets up, stretching and rubbing her numbed butt. Cracks her neck.

GRACE

Gawwd!! What a day. I need to get some rack. I recommend you do the same. Village life starts early.

Josh is reeling. That's it? "What a day"? He realizes he's lost all sense of what they are doing here, if he ever had it.

Grace crashes down onto her bunk with a mighty groan. He pulls himself out of his chair and into his bunk. A beat. Then...

GRACE

You did good today, Josh. Really good. I'm proud of you.

THE NEXT MORNING Josh awakens early to hear Grace talking to Giese at the base. Giese is saying that Selfridge is cutting off their work. After the crash he can't spare a ship to ferry them around every day. And Quaritch is pissed off about losing another man. They are being recalled.

Grace tells him to forget about the sampling up in the mountains, they're onto something. They're in the Tsumongwi village, and Josh has made friends with the Patriarch's daughter. This could be a breakthrough. And they don't need a Samson. Giese tells them to stay on it, he'll deal with Selfridge and SECFOR.

Grace hands Josh a cup of coffee.

GRACE

Let's go amigo. Time to take flesh and walk the earth.

JOSH/AVATAR blinks awake, looking up at the inside of the cathedral tree. Shafts of sunlight stream down into the high vault above him through gaps in the "braided" trunks.

Flying stingbats twinkle silently high up in a shaft of light.

Grace comes by, snapping her fingers.

GRACE

Another beautiful day in hell.

Josh walks outside, looking for Zuleika. We see village life among the Tsumongwi... kids playing, people cooking, cleaning fish. Mo'at tells Josh where to find her daughter.

CUT TO Zuleika bowfishing from a rock in the pool below a large waterfall. Josh emerges from the trees nearby and freezes, watching her.

With deep concentration she stands still as a statue. Then the spear-like arrow shoots into the water, and Zuleika jumps in waistdeep to retrieve it. She holds up a good sized fish, and grins at Josh.

She comes up out of the water, a dripping primeval beauty. She pulls the arrow out of the fish and hands it and the bow to Josh. His turn.

CUT TO JOSH. Flailing about in the pool, trying to shoot a fish. It's a lot harder than it looks. Zuleika has to turn away, she's laughing so much. Finally Josh nails a fish about four inches long, and holds it up proudly.

JOSH

Anybody can hit the big ones.

TSU TE and another young hunter, TRI COOCHYESTEWA, come out of the forest leading TWO DOMESTICATED DIREHORSES. They control the huge animals with a leather nose-ring, but there is no sign of bridle, reins or saddle... only a woven grass surcingle around the animal's chest. The direhorses drink from the edge of the pool.

Tsu Te disdainfully watches Josh slogging out of the pool with his tiny prize.

ZULEIKA

This is Tsu Te.

JOSH

Gezundheit. Pleased to meet ya.

TSU

When are you going away?

JOSH

Direct. I like that. It's fresh.
Actually, I hoped to stay awhile.
Pick up a few hunting tips from
Zuleika.

Zuleika speaks to Tsu Te in their language. In subtitles we learn that the Matriarch has instructed her to teach the alien the ways of the forest, to see if it can be done. Tsu Te sneers at that, and says something which needs no translation.

Tsu Te flips his head and catches the end of his long queue in one hand. With the other hand he gently takes one moth-like antennae of his direhorse, and bends it down toward him. Next, he does an amazing thing... he touches the end of his hair to the end of the antenna, which looks like a feather. The "hair" comes alive, rapidly interweaving with the feather-like tendrils. They knit together, forming what Josh realizes is a neural interface, a direct plug-in to the horse's nervous system.

In one fluid move, Tsu Te hooks his bare foot into the bottom of the surcingle and vaults up onto the back of his direhorse. He grips the horse's flanks with his legs, and guides it with direct motor commands from the neural hookup. The animal has become an extension of his own body. And his hands are free to fire a bow.

The two hunters wheel around and ride into the woods along a game trail. Josh realizes how much he has to learn.

MONTAGE OF ZULEIKA TEACHING:

We see a sequence of vignettes over the next few days, of Josh and Zuleika together, in the village and the forest. She is teaching him their ways.

We see her pointing out different plants, and how they can be used. Which juices or saps or leaves can be used to attract, or repel certain animals. Which plant poisons are good for the arrows. What to avoid. How to walk. How to be invisible.

ZULEIKA stands behind him, correcting his position as he

draws a longbow. Her hands move on his arm, his shoulders, correcting his stance. Aware of her touch, Josh finds it hard to concentrate.

NEAR A TRAIL we see them crouching behind concealing foliage as a herd of Hammerhead Titanotheres walk past. We see only the legs, huge as tree trunks. In the middle of the herd, a couple of babies walk, sheltered from predators among their parents legs.

ZULEIKA whirls a bolo round and round above her head. She hurls it and the two balls, connected by a leather thong, whistle through the air. They wrap around a sapling being used as a target. Josh tries it. The bolo winds up wrapped around his head, with one of the balls hitting him painfully in the nose. Zuleika has to lean against a tree she's laughing so hard.

NIGHT SHOT, from overhead... we see Josh and Zuleika bowfishing from a dugout canoe over the glowing anemones at the bottom of a pool. A large fish swims silhouetted against the glow. ZAP! Josh spears it.

SHOT OF ZULEIKA backlit by the sun. She is talking a mile a minute, gesturing rapidly, explaining something. We don't hear the words. Like Josh, we are just spellbound watching her.

JOSH nervously grips the woven surcingle on the back of an old, swaybacked direhorse. Zuleika holds its nose ring, keeping it steady, while she instructs Josh to bend its antenna, strong and shiny as a garden hose, down to him. He hesitantly touches the tip of his queue to the antenna. The tendrils interweave. Josh's eyes get big and his mouth drops open. Wow!! He feels the power of the massive legs under him. The horse's eyes also go wide. Zuleika strokes its muzzle, calming it. It twitches and stumbles as Josh learns how to control it.

IN THE VILLAGE Josh and Zuleika feed a direhorse foal with a gourd shaped like a nipple. It is the survivor of Lyle Wainfleet's casual slaughter, picked up by Zuleika's people when N'deh signaled them with the bullroarer. The foal gulps its meal.

SOME OF THE VILLAGE KIDS squeal with delight as Josh shows them how to play baseball. He pitches a leather bolo ball to a kid with a hand-carved bat. The kid makes a strong hit but when Josh yells "run!" in Na'vi, the kid bolts

into the forest. Everyone cheers, thinking this is the game.

IN THE FOREST, ZULEIKA gently reaches up and bends a large flower toward her. From the pitcher-like flower she sips the nectar, which is sweet and thick as honey. An incredibly sensuous image.

JOSH, ZULEIKA AND N'DEH have come upon the body of a slinger killed by a powersuit trooper. The flying dart is hovering around the parent body like a hummingbird, whimpering pitifully. Zuleika gently captures the starving dart. N'deh chews up some food from his pouch and feeds it from his mouth to the dart's beak. It swallows hungrily, crying for more. We will see what a captive dart is used for later.

A STREAMBED completely overgrown by a tightly woven thicket. Josh and Zuleika hear a thundering sound and around the bend ahead of them comes a solid wall of stampeding STURMBEEST. Visualize an indigo and orange wildebeest five meters tall, weighing ten tons and moving like a locomotive. Then multiply it by several dozen.

Josh and Zuleika sprint down the overgrown tunnel as fast as they can, with the thundering wall of Sturmbeest overtaking them. He leaps to an overhanging limb and scrambles up. She leaps, grabs it, and he pulls her up just as the sturmbeest thunder underneath them like a train.

Zuleika laughs breathlessly. So does he, giving her a mock push. Off balance, she grabs him... and he likes that just fine.

NIGHT HUNTING.

Zuleika and Josh run through the forest by moonlight like two human panthers. He is more surefooted, now. As agile as she is. Galaxies of bioluminescence surround them. The foliage is a blur, whipping past. They move gracefully, soundlessly, and in perfect unison... two forest spirits. Above them, mighty Polyphemus is a crescent half-filling the sky, casting its special light over the landscape.

Zuleika takes him up a fallen trunk, and soon they are running along branches that are 30 meters above the ground. Josh can't think. He has to trust his body. He

sprints with her through the trees, occasionally climbing and leaping as she does with the ease of a spidermonkey.

Now creeping stealthily, Josh stalks a large male hexapede. He is at one with the night forest, with its thousand bio-sources glowing like the milkyway through the dark branches, its strange sounds and smells, water dripping off the unfamiliar leaves. The danger and excitement of the primeval world suffuses his soul.

Zuleika flushes the prey, from nearby, and the hexapede bolts. Josh rapidly nocks an arrow and tracks it. THWAP! It tumbles and lies still, with the shaft of Josh's arrow sticking up out of its chest. A clean kill.

Josh and Zuleika kneel over the body. She cuts its throat, and daubs the blood on her finger tip. She draws a line under each of his eyes, symbolizing that he "sees" the hexapede, or honors its reason for existence. He is a hunter now. Just in time for...

THE BIG HUNT.

The annual STURMBEEST MIGRATION is the time of the biggest event in the lives of the Tsumongwi and the neighboring clans.

HUMAN JOSH is on the line with Giese, telling him excitedly that he has been asked to join the big hunt... the annual sturmbeest hunt. Giese is impressed. This has never happened before. He's going to come out there with Marcia and see if they can get some of it on film, to show the folks back home.

Josh tells him he has to go... he has to get back under the link. They have to make some kind of pilgrimage to the Hallelujah Mountains today, he's not sure what it's all about.

CUT TO MOUNTAIN TRAIL as Tsu Te leads a small group of hunters, mounted on direhorses, up the slope. Josh, riding well enough to keep up, looks up at something ahead. Tsu Te signals a stop.

REVERSE, LOOKING UPSLOPE... they are at a strange site. The mangrove-like trees rise arthritically out of the rock. Some large boulders of unobtanium have been trapped in their gnarled grip, and hang suspended far above. Farther up, almost five hundred feet above them, more of

the boulders are woven into the twisted tree trunks. This is some sort of freak natural occurrence, but the result is spectacular. It is like the mythical beanstalk, going up into the clouds.

There is a THUNDERING ROAR, like an artillery barrage, and the ground shakes. Josh looks around, and sees one of the superconductor mountains grinding against the flank of a mesa near them. A huge rockfall is set loose, tumbling down the side of the mesa.

The Thundering Rocks.

By its motion, Josh can see that this mountain, MONS VERITATIS, will pass over or near the beanstalk in less than an hour. The hunters dismount... Josh a little clumsily. Zuleika steps up next to him.

JOSH

Now what?

ZULEIKA

Now we climb.

JOSH

I was afraid you were going to say that.

FOUR HUNDRED FEET up the beanstalk, the hunters clamber among the gargantuan vine-trunks. They pass one of the trapped unobtanium boulders which is providing the lift for this incredible tree. Josh looks down and can't believe how the massive trunk dwindles to the apparent size of a licorice stick before it gets to the ground. A chunk breaks off the unobtanium boulder as they climb over it... and it floats upwards. They reach the upper branches of the beanstalk tree.

Above them, Mons Veritatis fills the sky with its craggy underbelly. They are close now. Spray from one of the waterfalls hits them. Some of the vines hanging down are brushing over the upper branches of the beanstalk with a crackling hiss.

One by one the hunters grab onto vines as they pass. Josh grins at Zuleika and leaps to a passing vine. She follows and they climb rapidly up toward the bottom of the floating mountain.

They work their way up into the grotto from which a

waterfall is thundering down into the void like a faucet of the gods. The hunters assemble in the grotto. Josh peers down, through a rocky window on the world below. Surreal. Tsu Te leads them through the cave until they emerge at the...

CLIFF FACE. The sheer side of Mons Veritatis. And Josh sees where they are going. It is the bansheeray rookery. Scores of bansheerays huddle on the rock outcroppings, some hanging almost like bats.

Zuleika explains that this is the only place they land... never on the ground below... and the only way to approach a bansheeray is when it has landed.

JOSH

Why would you want to approach a bansheeray?

He's about to find out.

Tsu Te creeps up behind a large specimen. As graceful and deadly as it is in the air, it looks clumsy on the rocky perch. Its wing membranes are folded and ugly, and it hugs the rock to keep from slipping off. It is almost comical. It can't look behind itself, which is where Tsu Te approaches from.

Tsu Te works his way up to it and plugs the end of his queue into the tip of the big ray's antenna. It shrieks and tenses up, but Tsu Te strokes its back with his palm, and is able to climb onto it now that he has motor control.

Tsu Te locks himself to its body with his arms and legs, and shouts a loud, whooping cry. The bansheeray leaps from its perch and drops, pulling out of a dive and gliding away. Tsu Te guides it back toward the others, and it banks past with a whoosh of air. Raising one hand in an exultant salute, he shrieks and the bansheeray shrieks with him.

Zuleika gestures for Josh to go first, pointing to a nice, healthy specimen with a 10 meter wingspan.

Josh does it just like Tsu Te did, and manages to make the hookup. His ray flaps its wings, spooking... but he gets it calmed down. He climbs on its back and...

THWAP! THWAP! The ray is off like a shot. Josh screams in terror, and the ray shrieks, drowning him out. They fall together, spiraling out of control, and he is almost tossed lose. The thing is squawking and shrieking so much he can't think.

JOSH
Shut the hell up!!

It does.

JOSH
Level out! Fly straight!

It does. To say it, he had to think the command, and by thinking it, he made the big ray do it. He thinks "bank left" and it does. He starts to get the hang of flying a bansheeray.

In a world of wonders, this may be the most exhilarating thing yet. He looks beside him as Zuleika falls into formation with him. We see the approval in her expression. She signals to him with a hand gesture, and banks away.

JOSH
I'm your wingman, baby.

He banks after her in a steep turn, joining the rest of the flying hunters. They all fall into formation, ten of them in a delta pattern like migrating geese. They dive together toward the rainforest far below.

VIDEO VIEW OF THE RAINFOREST from above. There is an undulating river below... a river of sturmbeest. Thousands of them on the move. Their indigo and orange stripes merge into a rippling moire, a living rapids of thundering muscle.

Marcia De Los Santos points her stereocam down from the rear door of a Samson flown by Trudy Chacon. Dr. Giese stares down, transfixed by the sight, as he is every year. Giese tells Trudy to get lower.

Giese sees something and his jaw drops in amazement. A bansheeray pulls up alongside the Samson. Josh/Avatar waves at them, then peels off and dives toward the herd below, catching up to the other Na'vi hunters.

The sturmbeest follow the same trail, and have done so for millennia. There are no large trees here, and the year's worth of undergrowth is pulverized under the thundering hooves in seconds. Dust rises from this living river like steam from a python's back.

AT GROUND LEVEL, the camera vibrates like its in a paint-shaker. The roar is sustained thunder. We track with the herd as they gallop over the rolling ground, dividing like a flow of water around rocks.

Suddenly a blueskinned Na'vi hunter appears in FG, astride a direhorse at full gallop. The sight is breathtaking. The hunter, even on his enormous mount, is dwarfed by the sturmbeest, which are like freight engines. The Na'vi has a huge spear, 3 meters long.

FROM ABOVE we see the herd filling frame. Bansheerays, ridden by Na'vi hunters, come into shot diving like hawks toward the sturmbeest herd. The ray-mounted hunters have long spears as well. Lashed to the business end of each is a living SLINGER DART, making it a venomous harpoon. If you're getting the impression that sturmbeest are hard to kill, you're right.

WHAT FOLLOWS IS AN EPIC HUNT.

Horse mounter Na'vi plunge fearlessly in amongst the galloping sturmbeest, whose shoulders are above their heads. It's like riding next to a thundering wall of rippling muscle.

The mounted hunters try to isolate one animal, carving it out from the herd, so that the flying riders can make the kill. But this is hairy stuff, as the sturmbeest go into evasive action, turning unpredictably, and kicking out with their back hooves as they crash through underbrush and decimate anything in their path.

When the sturmbeest feel threatened the stream divides, branching out into smaller trails through higher trees. This makes staying with them, whether on horseback or rayback an obstacle course.

Josh skims low over the herd with the other flying hunters. He zigs and zags through the trees, trying to make a shot with his spear. The dust from the sturmbeest herd is sometimes blinding. He dodges trunks and branches as the herd pours like a torrent through narrow channels

in the brush.

Two direhorse mounted warriors gallop through the herd, targeting a single animal. They jab it with their spears, and it turns outward from the herd. The riders stay between it and the main mass of the herd, forcing it further away.

Tsu Te swoops in on the isolated animal, coming up behind it. He crouches far forward on the back of the big bansheeray, his dart-tipped spear held back and high for the thrust.

Tsu Te goes for the shot. The dart strikes home, in the vulnerable spot between the armored shoulders, just at the base of the neck... the only place the dart can penetrate.

The dart hits the nerve plexus there and the beast crashes forward, flipping twice from the speed of its run. The herd thunders past it, a few meters away as Tsu Te swoops off, his arms raised in triumph.

A direhorse mounted rider leaps a fallen log, staying with the herd. A moment later he is hit by a zigzagging sturmbeest, and knocked into some brush. His mount tumbles and he is thrown clear. He scrambles up and runs like hell as the river of sturmbeest bears down on him. He makes it out of the path by inches, the enormous hooves thundering past him.

Josh and Zuleika fly among the trees in a hairy display of aerobatics.

Trudy Chacon, in the Samson, tries to keep up with him and can't make the tight turns. Marcia is cussing her out, trying to get a good shot of Josh.

He homes in on a single animal, flying up behind it, closer and closer, poised for a strike.

He hurls the spear and it misses the mark, sticking harmlessly in the thickly armored shoulder.

He switches to his bow for another shot when he is knocked clean off the back of his ray by a tree branch. He tumbles to the ground and gets up running. His ray shrieks and flaps away.

A sturmbeest is charging toward him like a living

Kenworth. Zuleika swoops down, and hurls her spear... missing the plexus. It sticks in the beast's shoulder. The sturmbeest roars and bucks, shaking off the spear, just as it passes Josh. Then it wheels in a rage, stopping in a cloud of dust. It lowers its head and charges Josh.

Josh dives for the fallen spear as the sturmbeest thunders toward him. He plants the blunt end of the spear in the ground, and angles the sharp end up toward the thing's muscular chest. He leaps aside at the last microsecond.

The spear is driven deep into the sturmbeest's chest, piercing its heart. Josh is knocked aside by its armored shoulder, and kicked by one of the legs as the beast collapses. It crashes to the ground and skids to a stop in a cloud of dust.

Josh staggers to his feet, shaken. Two direhorse riders pull up to a stop at Josh's kill, whooping and waving their herding spears.

N'deh, one of the riders, salutes Josh with a formal gesture of honor. Josh runs up an incline to a rocky outcropping. Zuleika swoops in to an expert landing with her bansheeray, and Josh jumps on behind her. With a powerful take-off stroke the ray leaps into the air. Zuleika grins and whoops, ecstatic that Josh is not only alive but has killed a sturmbeest. He has the heart of a mighty hunter. Who knew?

Tsu Te, flying above, sees this and isn't nearly so happy.

BACK AT THE VILLAGE, that night, the festival of the hunt is in full swing... a feast with music, dancing and lots of sturmbeest steaks. The huge bonfires illuminate the happy faces of the clan members.

The music and dance are surprisingly sophisticated for a technically primitive culture. Expressive and emotional, the sinuous movements are a celebration of the body, a celebration of life, movement, breath.

We see an epic "song" which is a complex performance by several members of the group which involves dance, rhythmic ethnic music, chanting and singing, and incredibly agile "hand-dancing" where the long, tendril-like fingers of the singers weave a poetic narrative of

their own, on harmony or counterpoint to the other elements of the dance. Rapid controlled shifts of the dancers' bioluminescent spots add to the magical beauty of the performance.

When the song ends, a new beat begins and a dozen people rush in to dance in a circle. Zuleika grabs Josh's hand and pulls him into the circle of dancers. He is a little clumsy but game to try, and he puts some variations on their classic forms that are definitely inspired by MTV.

We see him shedding civilization and inhibition, letting himself go and dancing wild and free with the Na'vi people. Grace watches him with approval. She slips her hand into N'deh's, and he puts his arm around her. We realize that they are much closer than we thought.

Josh and Zuleika flow amongst the dancers, but they are looking only at each other. A couple of the young girls watching from outside the circle are giggling and talking about Josh and Zuleika. The Matriarch follows their look, and sees that the connection is being made. She and the Patriarch confer.

They are not sure if it is a good or a bad thing that their daughter and the alien seem to be coming together.

Mato'a is against the Matriarch's idea of teaching Josh too much of their knowledge. He thinks it is wrong to trust the aliens. It will only bring sorrow. The Na'vi see us as emotionally disturbed children, smart but out of control... violent, intolerant, uncentered.

Mo'at's instinct is to trust this one.

IN THE FOREST Zuleika leads Josh along a moonlit path. The sound of the festival is distant. She is taking him to her special place. They pass along the base of a waterfall and come to a basin, or pond, completely surrounded by the luminous weeping willows.

Zuleika dives from a rock, swimming across the pond, which glows from beneath. Josh swims with her, and they pass over beautiful glowing anemoids, in a fantastic variety of pastel colors. Josh and Zuleika, swimming slowly under the surface, seem to float in some cosmic dance above a luminous garden of waving, hypnotic shapes. Tiny purple fish swim around them, darting away and swirling back.

Zuleika emerges from the water at the edge of a small glade. Josh joins her and she leads him by the hand to the center of the stand of willows. It is an exquisitely beautiful spot. Surrounding them are patterns of glowing pastels, blues and cyans, slashes of purple, and brilliant accents of scarlet. Underfoot, a rolling bed of moss glows faintly. It reacts to their footsteps with expanding rings of light. A flock of fanlizards flick into spinning flight, like a blizzard of brightly colored frisbees.

The willows stir, responding to the presence of Josh and Zuleika. She holds up her hands and speaks softly, in the Na'vi language. The tendrils sway as if in a soft breeze, and seem to caress her. Josh puts out his hands and the tendrils play over his fingers, his palms, his forearms. He feels something... a faint tingling, barely there.

Some willathewisps circle around them, some alighting on their shoulders and arms. She tells him that the willathewisps are the seeds of the willows and that they are an important part of the soul of the forest. They have accepted Josh, and that is why the Matriarch gave him a chance. Josh is not like the other aliens. Except for Grace, who is as close to a Na'vi as any alien has ever been. But even with her years here, she still holds back. She has never thrown herself completely into the forest, into their life, the way he has.

Josh has embraced the animistic forest, which is alive with invisible dynamic forces, spirits. Things which he doesn't understand, but accepts, in a way a scientist could not without taking it apart and finding out how it worked. He deeply respects these primal people who are in touch with forces we no longer see and feel.

Josh puts his hands on Zuleika's shoulders and turns her around, to face him. He tells her that he thinks he is starting to see. She smiles. Closes her eyes and opens them. Yes.

He puts his face close to hers. She rubs her cheek against his. They kiss. She pulls him down until they are kneeling, facing each other in the sacred glade.

Zuleika unbinds her queue, letting her hair tendrils float freely in a glossy mane. Like the willows they seem to stir gently in a breeze that isn't there. Her supple

fingers slowly, lovingly, unbind Josh's queue and his hair flows out around his shoulders. They come together in another lingering kiss.

With its own life, their hair floats together, intertwining with gentle undulations. Josh rocks with the power of the direct contact between his nervous system and hers. It is how the Na'vi make love (or a part of it), and it is the ultimate intimacy.

He falls into the infinite pool of her. They sink down on the bed of moss, and ripples of light spread out under them.

DAWN BREAKS in the sacred glade. Shafts of orange morning light, like a Maxfield Parrish painting. Josh and Zuleika asleep in each others arms.

And a roar of engines which wakens them. They move back into concealment as the splintering, crackling sound of the forest being crushed under enormous treads gets louder. In hiding, they watch as the blade of a gigantic bulldozer becomes a dark wall behind the sheltering ring of willows. The willows begin to fall before the blade, to be ground under the treads. The bulldozer pushes inexorably into the glade, splintering the trees, plowing the earth before it.

Josh and Zuleika reel back, stunned by the destruction they are witnessing. Josh runs out into the path of the bulldozer, waving his arms. The bulldozer is unmanned... driven by remote control from back at the base. A metal juggernaut version of the avatars.

BACK AT HELL'S GATE, in the control room of the tractors, the operator sees a Na'vi in front of his machine. He asks for direction from his supervisor. Selfridge, who is directing the clearing operation, is walking by the guy's workstation at that moment. He tells him to push on. The native will move. They have to learn to get out of the way. Some things are just inevitable.

Josh gives up trying to stop the unmanned tractor. It grinds past the tiny figures of Zuleika and Josh, obliterating the sacred site, leaving only mud and wood splinters in the morning sunlight. Zuleika's eyes stream tears, watching the willows die.

HUMAN JOSH AND GRACE are on the video-link to Parrish.

They are furious that the clearcutting has destroyed another sacred site of the Na'vi, just when they were making real progress with them. Parrish is obviously disturbed by this, torn by his conscience, but he offers some pathetic blandishments, and hangs up. Grace swears. Goddamn weasel. Totally on the take. He is Selfridge's lapdog.

Giese calls then to tell them that they are being recalled. A ship will be sent to pick them up. It's over. Selfridge is giving up on the avatar program. The construction is too important to the economic survival of the whole colony. Blah. Blah.

Josh says he's not coming in. They need to stay and help the Na'vi, somehow. Get them to move... or at least understand what is happening. They won't understand. Josh snaps off the transmitter and goes right to the link chair. Grace says they should go in. Talk to Selfridge. Try to get him to see reason. Josh ignores her and pulls the helmet down.

IN THE VILLAGE, Zuleika has been waiting for Josh to wake up. He rises, and in his eyes she sees that something terrible is happening, and his pain.

He goes to Mo'at and Mato'a, to try to explain to them that the aliens mean harm to the forest. He says he was sent here to get their trust, but that the humans don't care about them. It is a lie. They don't see. They will never see.
The Tsumongwi must move far away.

Tsu Te charges forward, screaming at Josh. He is crazed by the loss of the glade, the horror of what is being done by Josh's people. He says the aliens are insane people, that they are a poison. And Josh is one of them, even though he wears the disguise of a Na'vi body. Crying and screaming at him, he yells at Josh to go.

Josh refuses. He says he loves Zuleika, and he is going to stay somehow.

Grace grabs his arm. She hisses in his ear that he is crazy. How can he stay? They're pulling the plug back at base. He's just making things worse.

Josh shrugs her off. Says he's staying.
Tsu Te challenges him to a fight.

Mato'a yells for the weapons to be brought, and Mo'at is silent. Her disappointment and anger obvious.

The Na'vi never kill each other, but they will fight, and the fights can be brutal. The weapons are long staves, thick and solid, made from some very dense wood.

Josh and Tsu Te square off.

Tsu Te leaps at him with a sharp cry and Josh parries with his staff. The staves clack off each other as the two combatants leap and duck. Tsu Te sweeps Josh off his feet with a roundhouse hit to the ankles, but Josh rolls out and catches Tsu Te in the belly with the blunt end of the stick.

AT SITE 26, a Scorpion gunship lands and four troopers in full armor jump out, led by Corporal Lyle Wainfleet.

TSU TE wades in with a series of short, sharp blows. Josh swings with equal fury. They are both fighting from the heart.

INSIDE THE SHACK at Site 26 the door bangs open and the troopers clomp inside. They cross to the link chairs and Lyle jerks the helmet off Grace's head.

In the village, standing next to N'deh, Grace/Avatar's eyes roll back and she keels over. N'deh barely catches her before she hits the ground.

Josh, in the heat of battle doesn't see it. He stands, panting, facing Tsu Te. Tsu Te leaps forward and-- Josh's eyes go blank. They roll back and K-RACK!!

Tsu Te puts one alongside his head.

Josh sprawls, completely inert.

Tsu Te approaches, staring at the still figure. Zuleika rushes in, shoving him back, screaming at him. She goes to Josh and cradles his head. Tsu Te is afraid now that he might have killed Josh. His rage is gone, replaced by remorse. He drops his stick and runs into the forest. Zuleika strokes Josh's head.

HUMAN JOSH come out of the link in a rage. Coming from the fight, he is amped to the max. This added to the outrage of the troopers interrupting a link in progress (which is potentially lethal to the avatar if it is in the middle of something dangerous).

He lunges at Lyle, forgetting he has no legs in this world. He falls onto the floor. Lyle laughs and kicks him in the stomach.

LYLE

Aren't you gonna bite my throat out?

Lyle kicks him again. The troopers grab Josh and he struggles. They twist his arms behind him and cuff him, roughly throw him in his chair and slap a mask over his face. They drag Josh and Grace out to the Scorpion.

AT HELL'S GATE the two wayward controllers confront Selfridge and Quaritch. Giese can't help them. They've stepped over the line.

Josh yells that we are going to destroy these people before we even understand them. Selfridge accuses Josh of "going native". Says he has forgotten who he works for. Why he is here. Josh says he never knew why he was here until now. Selfridge doesn't get what that might mean.

Grace says the irony is that the greatest treasure on this planet is not the precious minerals to be ripped out of the earth. Not the Big Rock Candy Mountain. It's the bio-diversity in the forest. There are things in that forest of value they cannot imagine. But they will bulldoze it before they know.

There are mysteries here... like how the Na'vi communicate over long distances. Like why their language is the same all over the planet. How is that possible? Like how the cold and flu viruses were wiped out.

Selfridge is not impressed. Sure they've made a lot of money off the Pandoran counter-viruses. What's that got to do with clearing a construction site in one spot on a virgin planet? They have to get a foothold here. It's vital. And he's not about to let a few bleeding hearts and a bunch of primitive mud-men stand in his way. It's a big planet. The Na'vi can move.

Giese tries to explain that what happens to one Na'vi clan is somehow known soon by all of them, and if they destroy this opportunity for cultural contact, they may destroy it for all time, planet-wide.

Selfridge says he'll take that chance. He wants Josh and Grace suspended, without pay, and returned to Earth on

Prometheus, which leaves in a few days as soon as it is done fueling. And the other controllers are to cease all contact between their avatars and the aboriginal population.

If the locals won't cooperate, he'll just have to breed his own workforce population here from among the avatars. It'll take longer, but at least we can raise them with our language and some values that make sense. Safer and more reliable in the long run.

God help you, Grace says.

THE TRACTORS AND BULLDOZERS crush the forest before them. Trees are slashed down by the plasma cutters, or dynamited into kindling. Terrified animals flee before the onslaught. Troopers in powersuits stride through the ravaged forest, blasting anything that moves.

Now we see what the machines are doing... cutting a firebreak. When the swath of destruction reaches full circle, the forest in the center is ignited. The animals have no place to go. The black smoke spreads cancerously over the rainforest. The Na'vi watch in horror from a hillside as the flames burn like a funeral pyre below.

AT HELL'S GATE Josh goes to the linkroom and makes an impassioned speech to the controllers when their shift ends. He says that they know the truth, in their hearts if not in their minds... that Pandora is not Hell, it is Eden. And Eden is being bulldozed and stripmined and raped. We have no right. We are the aliens here. We are the space monsters.

The Na'vi don't understand what is happening. They trusted us and we betrayed them. And people like Selfridge, with their corruption and deceit, are going to turn this place into another Earth. Suck the life out of it, and kill it like a cancer.

We blew it on Earth. We lost the most precious thing we had. And now we want to take that precious thing away from someone else. The controllers won't meet his eyes. They know he's right. But they're making good money here, and it's going to happen anyway, with or without them. What does he expect them to do?

TRACTOR YARD, NIGHT. In the newly clearcut zone, amidst the blackened stubble, the tractors stand in the moonlight

like idols to harsh gods. The troopers have returned to Hell's Gate, far down the gravel road.

Out of the treeline come ghostlike figures on horseback. Led by Tsu Te, the Na'vi hunters ride among the giant tractors, tiny amongst the giant hulking shapes.

From skin bags slung over their direhorses, the Na'vi raiding party pours something over the tires and engines of the machines. It is the sap they use for torches... highly flammable and long burning. Tsu Te pulls a matchstone from a pouch on the surcingle of his horse. He strikes it fiercely, and it blazes like thermite. It arcs through the air.

WHOOSH. Flames roar up around the vehicles, engulfing them. The tires burn, and within seconds one fuel tank explodes. Then others. Silhouettes of men and direhorses cross against the wall of fire, back toward the blackness of the forest.

THE NEXT DAY the human base reacts to the destruction of the tractors. Selfridge is furious. This is going to look bad in his next report. They're going to be behind schedule now. Goddamnit!

QUARITCH finally has the opportunity he has been looking for. Selfridge authorizes a retaliatory raid against the Na'vi. There are millions of Na'vi around the planet, and the signal must be sent immediately and clearly that human property is not to be messed with.

Marcia De Los Santos comes to Josh's room. She has some important information. Some big SECFOR operation is under way and when she asked permission to ride along, she was denied. Since she and Trudy Chacon have gotten to be friends, she asked the pilot what was going on. Apparently Quaritch is conducting a raid on the Na'vi village. When?

Now. It's happening right now!

Josh tells Marcia to find Grace and meet him in the linkroom. He pumps the wheels of his chair, racing down the corridor.

SCORPION GUNSHIPS darken the sky as they come over the tops of the trees. At the head of the formation is one much larger ship, a monster over a hundred feet long which

seems to block out the suns. The GENERAL DYNAMICS C-21 DRAGON gunship looks like a giant predatory insect, with multiple canopies at the front for pilots and gunners. Quaritch, next to the pilot of the Dragon, surveys the world below like Napoleon astride his horse overlooking the battlefield.

Josh wheels into the linkroom. The FLOOR SUPERVISOR protests, but he pushes past him, yelling that it's an emergency. Josh goes to a link chair and starts to get in. The supervisor runs up with a SECFOR trooper who grabs Josh.

Josh surprises the guy by grabbing his lapels and jerking him down into a vicious head-butt. The guy reels back with a broken nose, and Josh grabs his sidearm out of its holster. He fires three rounds into the ceiling. All movement stops. Josh sweeps the gun in an arc, covering everyone in the room.

Marcia and Grace run in, taking in the situation. Marcia starts videoing the proceedings.

GRACE

What are we doing, Josh?

JOSH

I'm not sure.

(yelling)

Uh... okay!! Everyone out, now.

Move!

The trooper and all the technicians clear out, leaving the room empty except for the controllers who are under the link, tranced out. At Josh's instructions Marcia locks the heavy steel firedoor.

GRACE

Not exactly the impartial journalist
any more, are you?

MARCIA

Screw it.

Josh and Grace go under the link, leaving Marcia to guard the door.

JOSH/AVATAR waked up inside the central tree of the village. His head is bandaged. Zuleika comes to him.

Seeing that he is alright, she embraces him.

He runs to Mato'a and Mo'at, to warn them about the impending raid. Before he can finish the roar of turbofans shakes the jungle. They look up as the Dragon and its escort of Scorpion gunships come over the trees. The downblast from their engines beats the foliage, turning the space below into a maelstrom of flying leaves and debris. Josh yells at them all to run, but can't be heard over the thunder of the jets.

The Na'vi bravely fire at the gunships with their longbows and spears, which bounce harmlessly off the armored ships.

Quaritch laughs, then fires an incendiary rocket into the roots of the central tree. It explodes with a fireball, setting the interior on fire. The Na'vi flee into the forest.

The gunships fire more incendiary rounds, setting the whole village on fire. When the Na'vi have cleared the village center, Quaritch fires high-explosives into the base of the central tree. The massive roots explode into matchsticks, and the tree topples slowly, crashing down with a thunderous sound.

The Na'vi watch from a distance as the other two enormous trees which made up their home are blown up and felled. A number of Na'vi have been wounded... burned by the incendiary bombs, or hit by flying debris. Three are dead. Mato'a, the Patriarch, is one of them.

From the aft bay of the Dragon, six powersuits leap out, using steel cables to rappel down through the trees to ground level. The troopers detach from the cables, and stomp hydraulically toward the village. Lyle Wainfleet leads the powersuit squad.

The powersuit troopers spread out, and on command from Quaritch, open fire with flamethrowers, sweeping them back and forth through the woods, systematically setting the forest on fire. The downblast from the gunships fans the flames through the trees like a firestorm. The Na'vi retreat as a wall of fire moves toward them. Josh, running with Grace and N'deh through the smoke and sparks, finds the body of a child, killed by one of the explosions.

The powersuits stride unimpeded and unchallenged through

the trees, turning the forest into an inferno.

In the burning wreckage of the village Zuleika finds her father's body. She collapses over him sobbing. She hears clomping footsteps and looks up. Trooper Lyle Wainfleet, 14 feet tall in his powersuit, stands over her. He reaches down and grabs her by the queue with one hydraulic hand, which causes her to scream with shock. He jerks her to her feet and walks her toward his rendezvous point.

Josh, Grace and N'deh are running through the inferno, trying to find Zuleika.

IN THE LINKROOM Marcia leaps back as an explosive charge shatters the lock and the door is kicked in from the other side. Armored SECFOR troopers pour inside, with guns leveled. They grab Marcia and the lead trooper moves to the control console and pulls the master breaker to the link system.

IN THE JUNGLE Josh has spotted Wainfleet dragging Zuleika toward a landed gunship. He is running after the powersuit when-- The strings are cut. He flops to the ground, limp and inert. N'deh catches Grace as she falls.

Through the trees N'deh watches Zuleika loaded into the ship, along with four other Na'vi rounded up by other troopers.

AT HELL'S GATE the compound is littered with the bodies of unconscious avatars who dropped in their tracks, whatever they were doing.

IN THE LINK ROOM the disoriented controllers are coming out of their chairs. They gape as the armed troopers close in on Josh and Grace, who are arrested at gunpoint. Josh yells to the controllers to help. He says they are killing the Na'vi! They're burning the forest! Everything you've worked for is being destroyed. The other controllers just watch, paralyzed.

IN SELFRIDGE'S OFFICE, Parrish is flipping out. Wholesale burning of the forest? Mass destruction? How can he sweep this under the rug? There isn't enough money in the world. Selfridge warns him he may be the next endangered species.

CUT TO THE BRIG, LATER. Josh, Grace and Marcia are in a

common holding cell, usually used for drunk and rowdy construction workers.

Hegner comes up to the guard desk with a trolley. Tells the guard he has meals for the prisoners. When the guard looks into the hot cart, Hegner clubs him heartily with a steel pipe wrapped in a towel. He moves twitchily to the cells. He opens the cell door and lets the prisoners out.

Josh takes the guard's gun and then picks up the phone. He calls Trudy Chacon, waking her up. Tells her to meet him at the airfield, with a Samson running, in ten minutes. She scrambles, swearing. Josh tells Hegner there's some stuff he wants him to get from the labs.

CUT TO THE UTILIDOR which runs under the base. Josh and the others move along the narrow service tunnel toward the airfield. Hegner meets them at the airlock, handing Josh a bag, presumably the stuff he requested.

Hegner wants to come along. Whatever Josh is doing, he knows it'll be payback time. Josh thanks Hegner and tells him to go back. He needs someone on the inside, and nobody knows Hegner is involved yet.

They don breathing gear and make a dash for the airfield (not easy in a wheelchair). They make it to the Samson, which Trudy is already revving up.

But as they are boarding they are challenged by two SECFOR troopers and Josh is forced to pull the pistol. The Samson takes off amid a hail of shots, with Josh blasting back at the troopers. Trudy banks the ship away across the forest.

Grace has been hit by a bullet from one of the troopers. She tries to laugh it off, but it's serious.

THE SHACK at Site 26, seen from the outside. Marcia, in the doorway, gives a thumbs up sign. The shack lifts straight up out of frame.

CUT TO the Samson, with the shack hanging under it on a long-line. Trudy expertly turns and heads up into the Hallelujah Mountains.

QUARITCH AND SELFRIDGE are in the latter's office. They are assessing the danger posed by two loose-cannon controllers running around out there, stirring up the

natives. Selfridge wants them found, and he wants them eliminated. He wants some control around here. This is ridiculous. Quaritch calls for an airsearch by all his gunships. He tells Selfridge to relax. He doesn't believe the Na'vi will attack humans as long as they have the prisoners. One of the native girls says she is the daughter of a clan Patriarch, so she gives us a pretty good chip.

Na'vi of the Tsumongwi clan are waiting in a densely wooded gorge deep in the Hallelujah Mountains. They watch as the shack is lowered to the ground. Trudy uncouples the long-line, waves, and banks away.

Grace tells Josh that this spot is the most sacred place of the Tsumongwi. She believes they will defend this place to the death, and it is the best stronghold they could hope for.

Josh takes her hand. She is white from loss of blood and shock. She's dying, and there's nothing Josh can do. He asks if the Na'vi can do anything.

Grace says there is one thing they can try. They must take her to the WELL OF SOULS. She tells him to hurry... N'deh will tell him what to do. Josh rolls himself to his link chair and climbs in.

IN THE JUNGLE, LATER. Josh/Avatar walks with a small band of Na'vi. N'deh carries Human Grace, wearing breathing gear, lightly in his arms like a child. She looks up at him, smiling weakly. He smiles back.

GRACE

You look bigger in person.

The other Tsumongwi, including Tsu Te and a grieving Mo'at, follow behind.

THE WELL OF SOULS is an enormous grotto, into which a waterfall thunders... the water falling down a sheer cliff from thousands of feet above. A dark pit, the grotto is ringed with willows... though these are much larger than anything we have seen. They are so densely packed that their roots form a solid woven surface wrapping over the edge and down the walls of the grotto below. The roots braid together, covering the floor of the grotto. A single large willow grows in the middle of the well.

The small party works their way down to the bottom of the Well of Souls. Grace is murmuring to N'deh in Na'vi, holding onto him. He looks at her with love. Josh thinks it must be strange for him to hold her real body, something he probably has never done.

Grace is laid gently among the roots at the foot of the willow at the center of the Well of Souls. Josh watches as fine, hairlike tendrils emerge from the roots and begin to cover her. The Na'vi stand solemnly in a circle, chanting. Mo'at, the matriarch, stands among the willows above, leading the chant. Her unbound queue mingles with the tendrils of the willow trees, which caress her upraised arms.

SHOT OF THE TWIN SUNS SETTING.

IN THE WELL OF SOULS the chant continues. The grotto is dark except for the light of the willows, a faint spectral glow. Mo'at still stands in a kind of trance amongst the tendrils of the central tree. She opens her eyes and says something to N'deh, who kneels down next to Grace. Grace is utterly still in her shroud of fine silk threads, like a moth in its cocoon.

N'DEH

(in Na'vi/subtitled)

The Mother Tree could not save her
body.

He gently removes her breathing mask. She doesn't need it anymore. Josh feels the tears welling. They are so respectful of her, and she is not even one of them. N'deh kisses Grace on her human mouth for the first, and last, time.

N'deh says to Josh that there is no death, only change. Grace will feed the roots of the Mother Tree. A great honor.

LATER, in the Tsumongwi's temporary camp, Josh asks Tsu Te to help him get Zuleika back. He needs the best hunters for a raid on the human base. He needs a strong leader, like Tsu Te.

TSU TE

You know how to get in?

JOSH

I've got a couple ideas.

Tsu Te eyes him coldly, studying him. Then he closes his eyes, once. Opens them. They're on.

JOSH

Can you get help from the other clans?

TSU TE

They are coming now.

Josh sees N'deh pass by, carrying Grace's unconscious avatar. What will they do with it... a body without a mind? Knowing the Na'vi, they will probably keep it alive.

DUSK, THE NEXT DAY. Crouched in the foliage at the treeline, the raiding party studies Hell's Gate. Josh opens the bag given to him by Hegner. He passes out ID badges to each of the hunters, telling them to keep them on their bodies. The sentry guns will not fire at anyone wearing a badge transponder.

The raid begins.

The tractors returning from the construction site provide perfect cover. The hunters, led by Josh and Tsu Te, slip out of the trees through the dust clouds and grab onto the undercarriages. The escort troopers in their powersuits miss it.

They ride in through the double gates of the compound, then roll out and sprint for cover among some storage containers. They make their way to the avatar compound. Josh leaves the others in concealment and slips into the compound. He is dressed like a Na'vi, so he goes to his old locker and gets out shorts and a T-shirt, the on-base uniform of the avatars. He dons these quickly and then walks out boldly into the compound.

Zuleika and three other Na'vi are held in a chainlink cage, under guard. Josh walks by, nodding to the guard. Avatars all look the same to the troopers. Zuleika sees him, and her eyes go wide.

He signals her to get the others ready.

Josh easily overpowers the guard, knocking him out cold. He gives a trilling call and the other hunters join him. With a steel bar he and two others pry the gate open, shattering the lock.

Josh grabs Zuleika, kissing her fiercely. The other Na'vi stop to check out that action for a second.

Suddenly two SECFOR troopers see them and come running. They aim their rifles but-- THWAP. Arrows appear suddenly, stuck in the throat of one, and through the plastic mask of the other.

Josh leads the escaping group the other way, toward the incoming convoy of tractors.

They run along the line of tractors, staying in the shadows and amongst the dust clouds. A trooper sees them and opens fire, sounding the alarm. A siren goes off in the compound. Josh puts two rounds from his pistol into the trooper, and the hunters dodge between the tractors as more soldiers start firing.

Suddenly a powersuit appears, backlit by the sun. A 14 foot tall juggernaut. It opens fire with the GAU 90, blasting up huge geysers of earth as it tries to hit the running hunters, who are fast as cheetahs. The powersuited trooper breaks into a run, trying to keep his targets in sight.

ON JOSH, who has doubled back along a tractor. He whirls a bolo around his head with intense concentration. He lets it fly, and it whistles out, tangling around the powersuit's massive feet. It crashes down, skidding in the dirt. It starts to rise and Josh sprints toward it. He shoulder-slams it from the side at full run, and it rolls onto its back.

Josh leaps onto the big machine's chest. He fires the pistol two-handed into the canopy at point-blank range. The rounds whine off the lexan without effect. The trooper slams Josh with one hydraulic hand, sending him flying.

ON THE POWERSUIT, rolling ponderously to its knees as-- Out of the dust behind it the wheel of a tractor emerges, filling the frame-- The trooper turns, seeing it, and just has time to scream-- The enormous tire rolls over the suit, crushing it.

Zuleika pulls Josh to his feet and the two of them sprint full out as rounds hit the ground all around them.

INSIDE THE SECFOR HANGER there is a full-tilt scramble. Sirens blaring. Flashing lights. Troopers running to a row of powersuits standing in their gantries. Pilots running to power up the Scorpions.

VARIOUS ANGLES: Running feet. Troopers rapidly donning their armor. Leaping into the cockpits of powersuits and strapping in. Canopies closing. Gantries pulling back.

Quaritch, barking orders, runs to a powersuit and leaps into it. He slams the canopy and powers up. He is in such a hurry he doesn't wait for the boarding gantry to pull back. He surges out of the slot, knocking it aside with a powerful sweep of one hydraulic arm. It topples with a crash.

Josh picks up an automatic weapon from a fallen trooper who is stuck full of arrows. He spins and rakes it across the ranks of the advancing SECFOR troopers. They scatter like pigeons. Nobody's ever shot back at them before.

Josh empties the rifle, buying the group enough time to reach the treeline. He sees several Scorpions rising like black, angry hornets from the compound. Half a dozen powersuits are charging toward him. Josh grabs a couple of grenades from the fallen troopers as rounds stitch toward him. He turns and sprints for the trees.

WHAT FOLLOWS is a hairball, all-stops-pulled chase through the forest as the rolling thunder of war machines relentlessly pursues the Na'vi and the renegade avatar.

The gunships roar into the forest, the ballsier pilots searching below the canopy. They maneuver their thundering ships between the huge trunks. The trees are so big you can actually fly through them between the canopy and the forest floor.

And the powersuits crash through the underbrush at a full run, fanning out through the jungle. When one of the gunships spots a running Na'vi on the down-looking infrared, the pilot tells the powersuit troopers and they converge.

The forest is riddled by fire from the GAU 90 cannons. Josh and the hunters duck behind the mighty trunks, which shelter them from the hellacious fire. Then they run on, zigzagging.

Josh runs from a powersuit which pounds through the forest behind him. He leaps and rolls, dodging behind trees as the cannon rips up the foliage.

Zuleika runs along beneath a fallen tree trunk while a gunship tries to hit her with its cannon. It fires rockets and she dives into a pond as the jungle explodes. She surfaces amid burning debris as the gunship flies on.

The powersuit chasing Josh is catching up. It follows him into a narrow rocky cleft. It turns out to be a cul-de-sac, and Josh is trapped. The powersuit closes in for the kill.

Then tons of rock come crashing down, smashing it into junk. Josh whoops and waves to the Na'vi hunters poised above. They wave back.

And then twenty mounted Na'vi charge into the battle, the hooves of their direhorses thundering. With a shriek, two dozen bansheerays flash down out of the sky, Na'vi on their backs.

The horsemen scoop up the rescued Na'vi and gallop off into the woods. The gunships dive to give chase, dodging and weaving through the trunks.

Josh, running from a powersuit, leads it between a stand of trees.

Hidden hunters hit it with their bolos. The powersuit goes down and the hunters set upon it, four of them pinning it. Josh runs up and trips the rescue-release on the canopy. He rips the lid open. The trooper screams as the toxic air whooshes in. Josh pulls him out like a ragdoll, tossing him away with one hand.

He and the hunters lift the heavy arm, aiming the GAU 90 at an approaching gunship. Josh reaches into the cockpit of the powersuit and hits the fire control button. The GAU 90 roars. Its solid tongue of tracers rips into the Scorpion which cants over, plummets to the ground and explodes.

Striding through the jungle in his hydraulic seven league boots, Quaritch goes apeshit. What the hell is going on? He watches as another Scorpion is riddled from below. On fire, it banks over him, careening into the jungle.

Quaritch wheels at the sound of hooves in time to blast a

direhorse and rider. He pivots, firing at a running Na'vi. The hunter disappears in a gout of earth and foliage.

Tsu Te runs along a horizontal bough. A gunship moves slowly through the woods below, looking for a victim. Tsu Te leaps. Lands on the back of the thing. He runs along its spine, clutching a rock about the size of a football. When he reaches the turbofan intakes, he hurls it down into the turbine blades full force. There is a clattering shriek, and the turbine blows apart, sending shrapnel outward through the sides of the fuselage. The gunship tilts and heads for the ground. Tsu Te leaps for a liana and swings to safety. The ship explodes below him.

Two bansheerays swoop in behind a gunship. The first rider drops a thirty pound rock, which hits the Scorpion squarely. The pilot hears the clunk, and looks around.

The second rider guides his ray over the center of the ship. Zuleika is riding behind him on the ray's back. She rolls off onto the gunship, then runs to the rock and picks it up... pounding it down into the turbine. The turbine explodes. Zuleika runs as the gunship goes out of control. She dives out into space... and a third bansheeray plucks her out of the air with its claws.

A trooper in a powersuit hears hooves and turns, His eyes widen as he sees-- Two direhorses, with a heavy log slung between them like a battering ram. At a full gallop the riders guide the log right into the canopy of the powersuit, shattering it. The suit flips onto its back, and doesn't move.

Tsu Te pulls out his bullroarer and starts to swing it. The sound wails through the forest like a siren. The Na'vi retreat as one, disappearing into the forest.

PUSH IN ON QUARITCH calling to his men. The gunships aren't answering. The suits aren't answering. He sees burning wreckage on his right, and a powersuit lying still on his left. The forest is silent, except for the usual hoots and screeches. What the fuck is happening? They just got their asses kicked by bows and arrows!? Night is falling, and the forest is dark and deep around him.

He swears and rakes the jungle with his gatling gun until the ammo paniards are empty.

IN THE MOUNTAIN STRONGHOLD the Na'vi are gathered. There are several hundred of them. All the nearby clans have come to join the battle. It is full night, and the stars blaze overhead. Polyphemus stares down at them with his one bloody eye. Torches, as well as a galaxy of bioluminescence, light the gathering.

Josh, Zuleika and Tsu Te stand before the gathered clans... the alien warrior, the daughter of the Patriarch, and the Patriarch's successor. Josh speaks to the assembly, and Zuleika translates for him into the Na'vi language.

He tells them they are not just fighting for this part of the forest, or these few trees, but for the very future of their world. He says the history of the aliens they call the sky people is one of blood. For as long as can be remembered, they take what is not theirs. They take the land and hunting grounds of other people, and kill them, or put them in places they cannot live. They call this progress, and it has led them down a path to sickness and death. Their world, their forest, is a dying place. A poisoned place. They have killed their mother. And they will do the same here. They must be driven away.

When they come again they will come with all their force, and we must be ready. We must fight, to our last breath, or they will rape and kill our mother as they did their own.

Josh hears a familiar voice behind him.

GRACE

Nice speech, kid.

Josh spins around, seeing Grace's avatar stepping up behind him. She is bright-eyed and as alive as he ever saw her. He is dumbfounded. She walks up to him, grinning.

JOSH

Grace! Grace... It's you!

GRACE

Of course it's me. Moron.

Finally, he whoops and picks her up, spinning her around.

JOSH

Is it going to hurt my brain if you
tell me how...?

Grace says she's not sure exactly how it works.
Scientifically that is. But the short version is that
under certain circumstances, the Na'vi can do this
thing... call it a soul transfer. When I was dying, the
trees stored... well, they stored my mind, my emotions, my
memories... me. Then they downloaded it all to this body.
No more turning into a pumpkin. I get to be Cinderella
all the time, now.

Josh is lost. The trees stored you?
Grace laughs, and puts her arm around him. Josh, she
says, this may take a bit of explaining.

Back home we called it Gaia. A single being made up of
all that's living on the whole planet. The only problem
is, back home it's a myth. There is no Gaia. If she ever
lived, she's been long dead.

But it's not a myth here. On Pandora there is only one
entity. The forest is its brain. Like a vast neural net,
with every tree being a single brain cell, or dendrite.
And all the roots co-mingling... those are the synapses.
One vast sentience, covering all the land. And everything
that walks and breaths and lives within it is a part of
it. It is like a government, which keeps everything in
balance. That's why the Na'vi don't kill, or make war.
No ownership, no territory. They are given all they
need... a place to live, a part in the great pageant of
life here.

Is she intelligent, this Gaia? This Mother Forest? Sort
of. But she's almost more like a kind of bio-internet.
The willows are access points, the Well of Souls and other
places like it around the planet are like big servers,
storage centers. A place of memories. The Gaia mind can
be accessed from anywhere. It can be used to communicate
over long distances. That's how the clan knew Zuleika had
found you. She accessed the willows. And that's why the
Na'vi only have one language all over the planet, with
regional dialects of course, just for fun.

But more than a network, she has a will. An ego. She
guides, she shapes... she protects. Sometimes she
sacrifices something she loves for the greater good. And
sometimes she is very strict. Gaia does not take sides.
Gaia will not necessarily save you... her role is to

protect all life, and the balance of life... and to protect that balance, death is necessary. She is, quite literally, Mother Nature. And it's not nice to fool with Mother Nature.

But she can be petitioned... by a process surprisingly like prayer. Gaia listens, and reacts as she sees fit, sometimes in your favor... sometimes not. But you have to really get her attention if you want her to do something big... it takes a lot of people plugging in and petitioning... they cannot forceably will Gaia to do anything, and Gaia does not answer directly. But she listens.

Since the Na'vi are the highest form of ambulatory life, they are valued for their input, and have a special relationship with Gaia. In the case of this infection of aliens, they are the best source of insight into what is going on, because they can communicate directly with the aliens.

Gaia knows instinctively that the humans are a disease, an organism from outside. This is a new thing for her, unprecedented, and there are no guidelines for what to do. The first and most obvious thing to do is fight the infection, try to contain it. So she sent attacking flora and fauna to surround the alien infection and keep it from spreading. Gaia was functioning like an immune system, sending antibodies to the infection site. Gaia was doing chemotherapy and we were the tumor.

That's why Hell's Gate was under constant attack... a bio-barrage of predators and poisonous plants which was an ecological cartoon. We just thought we'd landed at a particularly bad spot. And that's why, once we got deep into the forest, we saw a balanced ecosystem.

But we could never have seen the mindless attacks as a coordinated, systematic effort. Like the slinth following the titanotheres through the fence... when did a slinth and a titanotheres ever work together? They're mortal enemies. But when Gaia speaks, people listen. At least if you're born on Pandora.

We didn't see it. We literally couldn't see the forest for the trees.

Josh reels from these revelations. But more amazingly, he knows them to be true, and the explanation fits so well

he's amazed he didn't see it already. At some level he already sensed it.

He asks if Gaia can be made aware of the severity of the threat... the fact that the current infection is nothing compared to what's coming. If the Navaho and the Sioux had known what was coming for them, they never would have made those treaties. They would have fought to the last man.

Zuleika tells her mother that Josh wants to speak to Gaia... to tell her about the aliens. Mo'at looks at Josh a long time. She knows he is here for a reason. And this must be it. She closes her eyes. And opens them.

THE WELL OF SOULS. All the clans are gathered, filling the place, and spilling out into the forest surrounding it. They sit cross legged, in concentric circles... like growth rings in a tree. From the great convoluted brain of twisted roots beneath them, silken tendrils reach up, seeking the ends of the long queues hanging down the backs of the Na'vi. Josh sits with Mo'at under the central willow. The entire congregation is chanting slowly, and somebody is beating a drum in a steady rhythm.

Soon they are all connected and plugged into the Gaia mind. Josh feels it... like falling into a vast radiant sea.

He starts to talk.

AT HELL'S GATE there is a total mobilization. Selfridge and Quaritch have gone to a state of full emergency martial law. The shuttles have been called down from the starship in orbit, and are being used as troop carriers. The Samsons are being fitted with cannons, and all Scorpions are fully loaded... maximum weapons payload. They cannot wait for an attack by an organized enemy, led by a renegade controller who is giving them inside information. They must take the fight to the rebels, and route them in their mountain stronghold.

They were caught by surprise last time, but they won't underestimate the enemy this time. Quaritch is determined to blast the forest to kindling, if necessary, to reclaim the planet.

The Scorpions are lined up, ready to fly. Behind them a squadron of Samsons, and two Valkyrie shuttles... 30

armored powersuits... 100 regular SECFOR troopers... 100 volunteers from amongst the construction and mining crews. And Quaritch in his Dragon command ship.

AT THE WELL OF SOULS the people wait in silence for Gaia's answer. Then, slowly, the trees around them begin to pulse with a faint radiant energy. The bioluminescence spreads throughout the roots, until they glow like a vast system of fiberoptics. They blaze white hot in the night. The Na'vi respond, their own bioluminescent spots growing brighter, until they are radiant beings in a sea of white light.

WIDE SHOT as the glow spreads through the forest like a vast nervous system. In an aerial shot, it almost looks like a city at night, with arteries of light like freeways. The wave of luminosity spreads to the horizon in all directions.

FROM THE PROMETHEUS in orbit, we see the night side of the planet transformed into a vast reticulated lacework of faint luminosity. The continent... then the whole planet... is united in one vast energy field... terrifying in its scale as Gaia marshals her strength.

AT DAWN THE GUNSHIPS fill the sky like bloated death beetles. They sweep toward the Hallelujah mountains in a thundering wave. The Valkyrie shuttles are the heavy transports of the operation, packed with troops, volunteers, and powersuits. The ships enter the shadow of Mons Veritatis. The Mountain of Truth.

The Valkyries land on Quaritch's order, disgorging their troops into the forest. The powersuits spread out and advance in a cordon, with the armored troopers behind. They scan the forest with infrared. Lyle Wainfleet, walking point in his hydraulic suit, sees movement on his FLIR display, and reports it to Quaritch. Na'vi horsemen, advancing on them through the trees, 200 meters out.

The Na'vi attack, mounted on direhorses. The battle, which historians of two planets will call, in their separate tongues, THE BATTLE OF BIG ROCK-CANDY MOUNTAIN, has begun.

The troopers target the horsemen on infrared, and they fire through the foliage. The direhorses are cut down even before they get within bow range.

Quaritch orders the gunships to rocket the jungle. Advancing in formation, the gunships fire streamers of fire ahead of them. The jungle explodes with fire bursts. The pounding is merciless. Enormous trees topple, and acres of rainforest are left burning.

The troopers advance, firing flamethrowers and GAU 90 gatling guns. The Na'vi are scattered or cut down. It seems a total rout when--

Quaritch glances up. Out of the sun come winged shapes. A whole squadron of them. The bansheerays, invisible on radar, dive out of the morning glare like birds of prey.

Leading the dive is one winged shape three times the size of the others. A GREAT LEONOPTERYX, a demon straight from Hell, blazing with scarlet, yellow and black stripes backlit by the morning sun. On its back, reining it by neural link, is Josh.

The rayriders slam into the gunships and Samsons like falcons hitting fat turkeys. The air battle is joined.

The Scorpions are not seriously damaged by the bansheeray strikes. They separate out of formation to pursue individual rayriders, trying to hit them with cannons and rockets.

The Scorpions bank after the rays as they head for cover among the floating mountains, or dive down into the trees. Banking and jinking furiously, the rays use obstacles like the flanks of the floating mountains to slow the gunships, which are faster than they are.

A gunship, in a tight bank, fires its cannon. The rounds rip along a cliff face as the targeted ray swoops across it.

Two rays in full delta dives slam into a Samson, shattering the canopy. The Samson spins out of control.

A Scorpion gunship gets on the tail of a ray. They wank and bank together, threading the needle between two floating islands. The gunship fires an air-to-air missile and the ray vanishes in an explosion.

Another rayrider takes to the sheltering forest, zipping between the tree trunks as a pursuing Scorpion rockets the

jungle from above. The ray is hit by flying chunks of wood from an exploding tree, and the rider cartwheels off.

The Scorpion, having scored a hit, pulls around looking for another mark. K-WHAM!! A huge red shape slams down on it, knocking it tumbling. The Great Leonopteryx coils around it, slashing furiously, as the ship tries to right itself. Josh can barely hang on, all his avatar muscles strained to the limit gripping the gyrating creature.

The pilot of the Scorpion sees nothing but the jaws of the king predator of the air slamming into his lexan canopy. Josh releases the gunship moments before they careen into a cliff. The pilot can't recover. His ship hits the face of the floating mountain and skids along it, crippling the lifting turbines. The craft plummets toward the rainforest below, and there is a satisfying fireball.

The cliff face near Josh explodes with cannon rounds and he tucks and dives. Screaming down on him is another Scorpion. They spiral downward, and Josh can feel the rounds splitting the air around him. He rolls inverted and dives under the edge of Mons Veritatis, then rolls out and zig zags through the dangling vines.

The gunship stays on him. It rips through the vines, and tracers light the darkness under the floating mountain. Josh jinks the leonopteryx around a thundering waterfall. The gunship explodes right through the curtain of water. It launches an air-to-air missile. Josh jinks hard, diving. The missile hits a rock outcropping. The gunship follows Josh through a narrow slit between Mons Veritatis and a smaller floating island. They run this slot rolled up on their sides to make the clearance. The gunship comes around a tight corner and breaks into the clear. The pilot has lost sight of the giant ray. A shadow crosses his canopy. Out of the sun comes a crimson demon, shrieking over the roar of his own turbines. K-WHAMMM!! The Leo slams the canopy of the ship. The Scorpion is driven downward in a dive. The leonopteryx lashes at it, keeping a grip with claws and teeth. They spiral out of control. The powerful jaws rip open the canopy, breaking the latching mechanism. The pilot gags on Pandoran air. Josh kicks the gunship loose and it falls like a brick, breaking its back on a rocky promontory and exploding.

Two bansheeray riders fall in beside Josh. He signals, pointing to a target, and they bank together out of shot.

Trudy Chacon flies the stolen Samson over the battle zone while Marcia De Los Santos videos the action with her stereocam. She is sending a live feed to the human base... pirate video journalism.

In the lab complex, the controllers watch the battle on a large screen, complete with Marcia's breathless narration. Freemedia forever!

Back in the battle the gunships and the rays are still corkscrewing all over the sky.

A volunteer gunner fires his doorgun out the side of a Samson. There is a CRASH and the ship is driven downward. The head of a bansheeray lunges into the open door from above, grabbing the gunner in its fanged mouth and jerking him out.

Another Samson dives after a ray. The pilot is a hotdog, following the ray down into the trees, under the canopy. They slalom through the tree trunks at high speed. The gunners hang half out the doors, firing their machine guns. Bark and leaves explode around the ray as it jinks through the jungle. The ray dives under a huge tree limb, and the pilot follows. He looks up at the last second, catching a glimpse of blue-skinned figures. The Na'vi hunters on the bough drop a net of woven vines after the rayrider has gone through.

The Samson hits it. The net fouls the ship, causing it to flip over backwards. It crashes upside down to the forest floor. KABOOM!! The Na'vi cheer. A moment later they scatter as cannon fire rips into the tree around them.

Powersuit troopers advance across the forest floor, firing their cannons and flamethrowers. The GAU 90s rip the forest to shreds. Hydraulic feet pass the bodies of direhorses and Na'vi hunters. The troopers easily track the Na'vi through the brush on infrared. Running Pandorans are cut down, disappearing in gouts of earth and splintering wood.

The trooper on the far right of the firing line yells something. Out of the woods next to him a monstrous shape explodes in a shower of broken branches.

As the troopers pivot, a WALL OF CHARGING HAMMERHEAD TITANOTHERES crashes out of the foliage beside them.

Charging in from the flank, the titanotheres scatter the troopers like bowling pins. Only a couple even have time to fire.

Several are pounded under the stampeding giants. The tree-trunk-like feet shatter the powersuit cockpits, and the troopers are crushed or asphyxiated. The stampede thunders past, leaving the powersuits scattered and disorganized. They are left in a murky cloud of dust and floating leaf confetti.

Lyle is yelling orders, trying to get some control back. He tells them to spread out.

Two powersuits are charging together through the dusty, sun-dappled gloom, pursuing some running Na'vi hunters.

Something slams into one of the suits, tackling it out of frame. The other trooper whirls and sees--

The most awesome land predator the universe has ever conceived. The MANTICORE crouches over the fallen powersuit, growling like a panther the size of a switch engine. Its mantis-like front limbs grip the struggling powersuit trooper like a vice.

The standing trooper can't fire without hitting his buddy. He can only stare. And so he has time to see the figure on the back of the beast. A blueskinned woman. The manticore rips the powersuit's gun arm off with its massive distensible jaws. Then the scorpion tail arcs through the air, driving the stinger down like a piledriver. It punches through the canopy. The struggling suit goes still.

The standing trooper raises his cannon but-- The manticore leaps, blindingly fast...impossibly fast for something that size and-- WHAM!! It has him in its mantis grip. He is face to face with its nightmare jaws, right outside his canopy-- The tail rises, poised to strike-- K-CRACK!!

Zuleika drops the powersuit like a pile of junk and turns her demon mount. The manticore bounds into the foliage to stalk the other powersuits.

Nearby the armored footsoldiers see living shadows flow out of the gloom around them. The VIPERWOLVES race among them with flashing jaws. The troopers fire wildly as they

go down, hitting each other. The survivors break and run as more viperwolves come out of the shadows after them.

THE AIR BATTLE RAGES. Quaritch, directing operations from the Dragon, has lost track of a lot of his ships among the floating mountains. The Na'vi are fighting a dirty guerrilla war, luring his ships into single combat and ambushing them.

He snaps the targeting system down over his eyes and takes over the gun system of the Dragon. He tracks a banking rayrider and blows him out of the sky. Targets another. P-POOM!

Josh, flying his demon mount, looks around to see--

A FLOTILLA OF MEDUSAE emerging around the flank of Mons Prometheus. The enormous gas-jellyfish glitter in the sun, big as ships.

CLOSER ON THE MEDUSAE. A second leonopteryx sweeps into view, ridden by Tsu Te. He signals to a Na'vi hunter who rides the top of the lead medusa. The female hunter has her queue plugged into a nervecenter at top dead center of the thing's huge bell. She directs it to turn, and it pulses, coming slowly around. The other medusae are not ridden, but they follow mindlessly.

A Scorpion, banking around the flank of the Big Rock-Candy Mountain, finds itself tangled in a curtain of rubbery tentacles a hundred meters long. The pilot tries to pull free as he looks up-- In time to see more of the gas-bags converging, their bells pulsing vigorously. More stringy tentacles wind over the Scorpion. It twists and turns, trying to get free.

Tsu Te rides up near the unmanned medusas which are gripping the Scorpion. He waits until the tentacles have drawn it up near the gas bags, then fires a flaming arrow into the middle of them. KA-BOOM!!

They go up like the Hindenburg in an enormous fireball which engulfs the Scorpion. The gunship drops, bathed in fire and giant-jellyfish parts. It hits the rocks below and the fuel explodes.

A pair of Samsons pursue half a dozen rayriders through the intermittent clouds which wreath Big Rock-Candy Mountain. They suddenly find themselves in a swarm of medusae. The Samsons slow down, looking for a way out of

the pack of giant balloons. The rays peel away, disappearing.

The pilots see a flash of red wings, an arc of fire, and then the balloons around them explode... each detonating the one next to it. The Samsons are consumed in an inferno of exploding hydrogen.

IN THE LAB back at base, the controllers watch in amazement as the medusae explode. They see the Samsons fall like burning toys. A SECFOR trooper strides in, shutting down the big monitor. He tells them to go to quarters until the emergency is over.

Hegner clubs him from behind with a computer keyboard. The other controllers jump in, wrestling him down. Spindly Norm Cheeseman grabs the guy's gun and runs for the door, yelling.

THE LINKROOM door is hurled open and the controllers charge in, led by Cheeseman. Hegner barricades the door at the end of the connecting corridor, then falls back to the linkroom. He seals the door there, and pushes lab equipment against it. The controllers scramble into their link chairs, pulling the helmets down.

THE FOREST IS A SMOKY HELL. Fires seem to burn all around. The troopers are separated and disorganized. Shooting at shadows.

Na'vi run along massive tree boughs, like walkways through the canopy. They fire arrows down at two powersuits walking below. The arrows are tipped with bladders of sticky liquid, which break over the powersuits.

A beat, while the troopers inside try to figure out what's going on. Then a flock of stingbats descend on them, drawn to the attractant. They swarm so thickly around the bubble canopies that the troopers are blinded. One of them blunders into a ravine. The other fires around him wildly, panicking.

SPLAT!! Bladders of attractant burst among a squad of regular troopers and volunteers. Within seconds a swarm of HELLFIRE WASPS, big as sparrows, is zipping around them. The squad scatters, screaming. A couple of them fall and don't get up.

Lyle, nearby, is yelling on his intercom for a report.

Who's screaming? What's going on. A regular trooper near him jerks back as a SLINGER DART appears in his chest, piercing his ballistic armor.

A scream on his left and another man is taken down by a leaping SLINTH. Lyle sees its striking head snap forward into the man's chest and knows he is dead. Lyle fires his cannon. The slinth flips convulsively amid flying earth and splintered bark.

Lyle stands there panting, looking around wildly, wondering what's going to come out of the jungle next.

AT THE BASE Norm Cheeseman's avatar sprints with powerful strides across the compound.

Inside, a SECFOR security squad blasts open the door to the corridor connecting to the linkroom. They enter the corridor, advancing warily with their guns aimed.

K-RUNCH!! A bulldozer blade rips through the wall from outside. The corridor is flooded with lethal Pandoran air. The SECFOR guards are overcome, hacking and coughing. They retreat, staggering back the way they came.

OUTSIDE Norm pivots his bulldozer and advances on the SECFOR offices. He revs the giant machine and crashes straight into the wall. The SECFOR OPERATIONS CENTER, from which the battle was being coordinated, is breached. Selfridge gapes as toxic air swirls in. Alarms go off. The technicians flee their stations, abandoning the radar and communication equipment. They all make it out, sealing the door behind them. Selfridge stands in the corridor, gasping. His world unraveling. Norm, really enjoying this, gives it the gas and drives right into the Ops Center, turning the equipment to rubble.

IN THE JUNGLE regular troopers and volunteers run to the ramp of the Valkyrie shuttle which was their landing craft. They are pursued by viperwolves, some of which follow the last men into the ship.

The pilot hears screaming and yelling from the back compartment. He panics, and starts an emergency takeoff. The huge ship rises into a hover and accelerates forward. Out of the trees comes a shiny black shape which leaps onto the nose of the shuttle. The Manticore fills the ship's front windows. The pilot screams as the tail slams

right through the canopy, shattering it.

OUTSIDE we see Zuleika and the manticore drop off the accelerating ship from a height of 20 meters. The manticore crashes down through foliage and lands agilely. The shuttle accelerates out of control-- It climbs out of the forest--

Inside, the pilot is dead at the controls, the co-pilot gagging on the poisonous air.

The shuttle hits the underside of Mons Veritatis. It explodes, and hundreds of tons of flaming debris drop back into the forest.

Quaritch watches the wreckage falling. He orders the other shuttle to get out of the battle area. It is their only way of getting back to Prometheus... the ticket home. And then he turns back to the battle. And you see in his face that he is over the edge. There is no logic in his brain now. Only death.

Tsu Te glides his leonopteryx just beneath the cliffwall of the Big Rock-Candy Mountain. He passes a broad waterfall... a shimmering curtain.

The Dragon gunship explodes out of the veil of water, bearing down on Tsu Te with thundering turbines. Quaritch opens up with the cannon as Tsu Te banks his mount. The rounds rip across the leo's wing, and the dying animal flutters like a broken kite down into drifting clouds. Josh, circling above, sees Tsu Te get shot down.

The dying leonopteryx crashes down through the trees, lodging in branches high above the ground. Tsu Te falls the rest of the way, clutching at vines as he tries to break his fall. He hits the ground, and lies there... badly injured.

Josh's leonopteryx drops like a Mig 29, slamming into the Dragon with an earsplitting screech. The Dragon lurches, but is not toppled like the Scorpions. It shakes off the stunned leonopteryx, and banks around to fire.

Josh dives and the chase is on. They jink and turn, dive and climb. Josh dodges a fusillade of cannon fire and air-to-air missiles, more by luck than skill. He dives for the sheltering trees. They zigzag through the obstacle course under the canopy of foliage. Josh leads the Dragon into a net-trap.

The Na'vi drop the net after he passes-- And the Dragon rips right through it like lace.

Josh looks back. Uh oh. He climbs hard, and the Dragon follows, ripping up the jungle around him. Josh pushes the leo hard, climbing into a cloud bank. The Dragon follows. They bank along a cliff wall, almost brushing the rock. The pilot of the Dragon loses sight of Josh amongst a set of rocky spires. Quaritch is scanning, looking for his target.

Josh finishes his tight bank above the gunship and dives toward its broad back. He pulls out, skimming over the ship. Uncoupling his neural link, he rolls backward off the leonopteryx's back. Josh hits, skidding, on the hull of the Dragon.

Quaritch sees the leonopteryx zoom overhead and flap away from them. He sends a missile after it and the scarlet demon vanishes in a fireball.

The huge gunship hovers, pivoting slowly as it scans for another target. Josh runs along the back of the thing, pulling two grenades from the bandolier. He pulls the pins with his teeth. Then hurls them into the intakes. BOOM! BOOM!

The explosions rip through the gunship's guts. It drops like an elevator. Josh clings to a gunturret. Out the side of the bubble canopy, Quaritch sees Josh clinging to the ship ten feet from him. The pilot tries in vain to regain control.

The gunship blunders down through the treetops. Josh runs, diving out into space with everything he has-- Grabbing an armful of lianas-- He plunges down, ripping painfully along the vines as-- The gunship crashes down through the trees and-- Josh breaks his fall, hanging in a tangle of vines as-- The gunship slams down into a small lake with a white explosion of water far below.

BACK AT THE BASE Selfridge is at the end of his rope. He orders his ragged SECFOR guards to blow up the linkroom. Rob Parrish puts a gun to Selfridge's head and tells them all to drop their weapons.

Selfridge can't believe Parrish has suddenly decided to become a man of principle. Why start now? But Parrish has had enough of feeling sick at heart, and Selfridge has

gone way too far. He tells him to keep his money. The guards lower their guns on Selfridge's orders.

AT THE JUNGLE LAKE the Dragon gunship lies half submerged. Out of the water in the foreground. a shape rises. It is Quaritch, wearing a powersuit.

He strides up out of the water, covered with mud. His face, behind the canopy, is bloody and his eyes burn. Quaritch strides into the forest, looking for something to kill. He opens fire with the GAU 90, blasting the trees around him into kindling. He starts literally cutting a swath through the jungle in a killing rage.

TSU TE lies in a gasping heap. He has some broken bones. He looks up, grimacing, as a powersuit looms over him. It is Lyle.

Wainfleet looks down at the fallen hunter. He reaches down and grabs Tsu Te by his queue, lifting him painfully. Then he draws a huge knife with his other hydraulic hand.

He cuts Tsu Te's queue off near the base... scalping him. Tsu Te screams in agony, his nervous system exploding on overload. Lyle holds up the hair... Tsu Te's only connection to the world-consciousness which is his life's blood.

Lyle hears a chilling roar and a splintering crash. He looks around in time to see a blurred black shape leap toward him in an explosion of foliage.

Zuleika's manticore is on him in one bound. It grips him, and the stinging tail rises up. With blinding speed it strikes over and down. K-CRACK! Right through the bubble canopy.

Lyle is skewered, pinned to the back of his cockpit. The venom goes through him, locking all his muscles in agonizing contraction. Zuleika drops him. She looks down at Tsu Te who, mercifully, is dead.

Zuleika hears firing nearby. She charges forward to meet the alien enemy. On a collision course with--

QUARITCH, in his powersuit, moving relentlessly through the jungle. His hydraulic boots clomp past the bodies of Na'vi direhorses, a bansheeray.

He sees something through the dense foliage. Moves to get a better look. It is the SHACK. He is in the Na'vi

stronghold. The defenders are dead. Quaritch closes in on the shack.

INSIDE THE SHACK Josh is tranced out, under the link. Through a window we see Quaritch's powersuit step into the clearing outside.

QUARITCH levels his GAU 90 at the shack-- His finger goes to the firing button--

WHAM!!

A six-legged black demon tackles him.

Quaritch pivots as he falls, firing the cannon. It misses Zuleika by inches. He grapples with the manticore, keeping its mantis forelimbs from locking onto him.

The two titans twist and struggle.

Zuleika strikes with the tail. CRACK! It pierces the canopy but misses Quaritch. He grabs a quick breath, holding it before the Pandoran air comes in.

Quaritch slams the manticore back against a tree trunk, almost crushing Zuleika. Then he twists violently, hurling the manticore off. It lands, twisting back on itself almost like a snake--

Zuleika gathers for a leap as--

Quaritch raises the gatling gun and--

The manticore launches at him and--

P-P-P-POOM!! The GAU 90 rips into its belly. Quaritch holds the trigger down, drilling hundreds of rounds into the thing, all the way up its chest to the fearsome head.

The manticore slumps to the ground, pinning Zuleika's legs under its great bulk. She is trapped.

Quaritch grabs his breathing mask and takes a gulp of air. Then he looks down at Zuleika. He aims the cannon at her, but when he fires it rotates harmlessly, empty. He steps toward her and--

A figure drops from a limb above, between him and Zuleika. It is Josh.

The renegade avatar charges straight at the powersuit, which towers over him. In hand to hand combat Josh and Quaritch fight to the death.

It is a knockdown drag-out fight. Josh has the speed and agility, but Quaritch has the power, and he moves well in the suit. Josh is pummeled. At one point the battle

takes them near the shack. Josh swings a log like a club, knocking Quaritch back. The powersuit crashes against the shack, shaking it violently. Inside, Human Josh is jarred so hard the link is momentarily broken. Josh/Avatar drops like a puppet with the strings cut.

Human Josh pulls the headset back down and re-establishes the link. The avatar rolls away just as a hydraulic boot slams down. He springs to his feet only to duck a pile-driver punch.

Zuleika struggles to free herself from beneath the manticore's body. Josh and Quaritch grapple, and the powersuit finally pins Josh against a rock. Quaritch pulls back his arm for a crushing blow-- Zuleika leaps into shot, grabbing the arm-- Josh's hand flashes up, hitting the rescue-release-- The canopy pops and Josh forces it open-- He hits the power switch and the suit goes dead.

One powerful avatar arm grabs Quaritch and yanks him out like a soft oyster from a shell. Quaritch stares at him through his breathing mask. Waiting for the killing blow.

But Josh just cocks his head. Listening. He hears something in the forest nearby.

He sets Quaritch down, and the SECFOR commander staggers back. Josh motions for him to go. And Quaritch runs. He crashes through the foliage like the demons of Hell are after him.

Which, unfortunately, they are.

Quaritch sees the viperwolves flowing from shadow to shadow behind him, around him. Two come out onto the trail ahead of him. The circle closes in. The viperwolves bare their glass-like distending fangs. Hideous hyena laughter, then a blur of motion.

Josh and Zuleika hear the scream through the trees. Then silence, except for the normal sounds of the forest. They hug each other. The battle is over. They have won.

AT HELL'S GATE the avatars have secured the base and established control. They stand guard with weapons as the human survivors of the battle are marched onto the shuttle.

HUMAN JOSH watches as Selfridge and his whole corrupt

outfit board the shuttle.

Josh has given as edict:

The base is being closed. When the humans are all back on Prometheus the last shuttle will be destroyed so no-one can come back. Prometheus will go back to Earth.

So it is a time for goodbyes. And decisions. Josh has decided to stay, and so have several of the other controllers. Giese is leaving. And all the other humans are being told to leave. Thanks. Don't let the door hit you in the ass on the way out.

Marcia does her last downlink to Earth. Josh, on camera, tells whoever is watching that the natural defenses, the immune system, of Pandora will not allow humans to set foot here again. Just like the cold and flu counterviruses were created, a new virus will be created.

It will be a virus lethal to humans. An airborne hemorrhagic fever. A flesheating virus from Hell. If it gets back to Earth as a result of future expeditions here, the whole human race will die screaming. Pandora is off-limits for all time.

Marcia and Trudy hug Josh and head for the airfield. The shuttle takes off, its sun-bright lance of fire climbing into the evening sky.

NORMAN CHEESEMAN

There's not really a virus like that
is there?

JOSH

(with a little smile)

It could happen.

NIGHT AT THE WELL OF SOULS.

The willows glow softly. Hundreds of torches light the gathered congregation of clans. Mo'at stands at the central willow, in communion with Gaia. The Na'vi sit in their concentric rings, also connected.

The camera starts wide, seeing the hundreds of softly chanting figures in the great circle. It swoops in toward the center, until it is hovering... looking down at two figures lying on the ground.

Josh and his avatar lie head to head. Human Josh is

wearing a mask, connected to a rebreather which is lying beside him. Both figures are still, with hands folded on their chests. The silken threads cover them both. They lie cocooned like moths.

We see Zuleika, Grace and N'deh standing near the bodies. At the edge of the inner circle, the other controllers sit, crosslegged, watching intently.

As the camera moves in Zuleika moves forward, kneeling next to Josh's human form. Now we see only Zuleika and the two Joshes. She gently removes the mask from the human Josh's face. He is not breathing. She bends and kisses him.

The camera drifts down past her, centering on Josh's avatar.

Moving in to full close-up.

Zuleika moves next to Josh's avatar. Her hand comes into frame, stroking his cheek.

TIGHTENING slowly to extreme closeup until--

His eyes open.

CUT TO BLACK.