

GREENLIGHT

A sci-fi thriller satire

Written for a ~15-minute read

FADE IN:

INT. PARAMOUNT-LIKE BACKLOT – DAY

A crisp morning. Grips push carts. Extras in dusty tactical uniforms smoke and scroll their phones. A WRAP BANNER hangs high:

WRAP PARTY TONIGHT — *SHADOW DAWN* — A Film by Daniel Mercer

DANIEL MERCER (40s)—sharp suit over yesterday's shirt, producer swagger with a sleep-starved edge—hustles through, an iced coffee clutched like a talisman.

DANIEL (V.O.)

Producing's a gamble with better hair. You bet on people, on ideas, on money you don't have; then you smile like it was all a plan.

A PA jogs beside him.

PA

Ellie wants to see you before dailies.

DANIEL

It's "Ella." She likes it when you say it like it hurts.

The PA nods, sprints off.

Daniel stops at STAGE 14, peeks in. A "WAR ROOM" set stands—sleek consoles, holographic map, banners with alien glyphs. A VFX plate loops on a monitor: pale silver ships floating over Shanghai.

Daniel squints at a fluttering **BANNER** on the monitor—its symbols pulse like a heartbeat.

DANIEL

Hold up—pause that.

The VFX COORDINATOR (20s) freezes the frame.

DANIEL (CONT'D)

Zoom the banner.

Zoom. The glyphs animate—subtle, rhythmic.

VFX COORDINATOR

It's just ambient motion. Sci-fi sauce.

DANIEL

What language is that?

VFX COORDINATOR

Honestly? Marketing said it tested “mystical.”

Daniel forces a smile, continues on.

INT. STUDIO EXEC BOARDROOM – DAY

Bright glass, a view of the lot like a toy town. **ELLA CHO (50s)**, precise haircut, titanium smile; **SIMON HART (30s)**, marketing wunderkind in sneakers.

ELLA

We're locking the international cut today. And Daniel—you look like you lost an argument with a pillow.

DANIEL

We were making an allegory about colonialism. Now half the dialogue's in... Klingon's serious cousin. Who translated this?

Simon slides over a glossy deck: “GLOBAL STRATEGY: *SHADOW DAWN*”.

SIMON

Mystery converts to virality. People argue, we trend. We're pre-selling out Taiwan, Seoul, São Paulo—

Daniel notices **Ella's ring**—matte black, set with a thin band of dark glass. Embedded inside, tiny glyphs pulse.

DANIEL

New jewelry? It's... on brand.

Ella covers the ring with her thumb, amused.

ELLA

Welcome to the future. Go get your dailies. And for the wrap party? Smile. You made us a classic.

Daniel hesitates.

DANIEL

Remind me who our “science advisor” is again?

SIMON

Dr. Karl Venn. Smithsonian-adjacent. Or MIT-adjacent? The point is: adjacent to legitimacy.

Ella’s smile doesn’t move.

ELLA

Don’t overthink. Overdeliver.

INT. POST-PRODUCTION SUITE – AFTERNOON

Editors ride timelines like surfers. Alien towers rise from deserts, crowds cheer, banners ripple.

EDITOR #1

Daniel, want to see the “Ascension” montage?

DANIEL

Hit me.

Montage: kids learning a salute to the sky; politicians bow on a dais; soldiers lay down arms, staring upward. Subliminal flashes—half a frame, a glyph stuttering past.

DANIEL (gentle)

Freeze. Step back three frames. One. Two. There.

On screen: a glyph overlaid on a map. If you didn’t look, you wouldn’t see it.

EDITOR #1

You’re seeing ghosts, boss.

DANIEL

Maybe. Export me reel 17-B. Personal copy.

The editor shrugs, starts the render.

INT. WRAP PARTY – NIGHT

A soundstage transformed into a nebula—fog, lasers, a DJ mixing the movie's trailer theme into disco. CAST and CREW whoop as champagne cannons fire.

Onstage, **DR. KARL VENN (60s)**—bookish, pale, eyes like wet coins—accepts a commemorative clapper.

VENN

Your art... will open doors in the minds of millions. You have served... nobly.

Polite applause. Venn smiles a fraction too late.

Daniel's phone buzzes. ANONYMOUS TEXT:

Not fiction. Check reel 17-B.

He scans the room: Who sent—?

MAYA LUCERO (30s) bumps his shoulder—shaved head, leather jacket, eyes sharp. Independent journalist turned podcast star with a cult following.

MAYA

Nice party for an apocalypse.

DANIEL

We made a movie.

MAYA

You made a message.

Before he can reply, she melts into the crowd.

Daniel looks toward the DJ—laser lights catch **Ella's ring**. The band of dark glass glows.

INT. PRODUCTION STORAGE – LATER

Dark. Daniel punches in a code. Racks of labeled canisters and hard cases.

He finds **REEL 17-B** (digital drive), plugs it into a laptop balanced on a crate. He scrubs through footage: Venn standing with “background actors” in mottled grey. Seven of them, still as sculptures.

He pauses. Zooms.

Their **eyes** reflect like cats. Their wrists bear the same matte-black band as Ella's ring.

DANIEL (whisper)

What are you?

He scrubs again—one of the “extras” blurs, and for a single frame its jaw splits too wide.

He yanks out the drive, heart pounding.

INT. DANIEL’S APARTMENT – NIGHT

A clean modern box overlooking hazy city lights. He pours whiskey, runs the drive again.

SLOW MOTION: banners flutter; glyphs pulse; micro-frames of ships over monuments flash and vanish. He screen-captures, stacks, overlays. A pattern emerges: **a world map**, lattice of coordinates.

His phone buzzes. New text from the same unknown number:

They’re not extras. They’re “ahead.”

Coffee? 8 a.m. The Pike on La Brea. —M

He scrolls back to Maya’s face in his memory. He exhales.

DANIEL (V.O.)

You spend your career selling stories. One day you realize you sold space in your head.

He looks outside. Drones blink like aimless stars.

INT. COFFEE SHOP – MORNING

Small, crowded, the hush of caffeinated plotting. Maya sits with a battered laptop, cables like vines.

MAYA

I don’t do tinfoil. I do patterns. And your picture is repeating.

She slides him a tablet: ROTATING IMAGES of ancient petroglyphs, crop marks, magazine covers. The *Shadow Dawn* glyphs are cousins to all of them.

DANIEL

We... borrowed a vibe.

MAYA

You imported instructions.

She taps her screen. Software plays the movie trailer audio, splits frequencies. Beneath strings and drums, a low band pulses a precise rhythm.

MAYA (CONT'D)

Subliminal cadence. Not quite binaural. A primer.

DANIEL

Primer for what?

MAYA

Synchronization. Compliance. Call it... hospitality.

Daniel laughs, because it's either that or scream.

DANIEL

We can go to the FBI, the press—

MAYA

And say what? That the studio used pop science? Or that your “science advisor” is not exactly... locally sourced?

She swipes to a dossier: **Dr. Karl Venn**—thin academic trail, a raft of shell LLCs, a single photo older than the internet.

MAYA (CONT'D)

He's a hole wearing a name tag.

She meets Daniel's eyes, softening.

MAYA (CONT'D)

You didn't know. Now you do.

INT. STUDIO LOT – NIGHT

Daniel sneaks into STAGE 12—dark, cold. He follows the hum behind a fake bulkhead. Hidden door. Inside: a **SERVER FARM**, rows of matte black towers, each with a thin band of dark glass.

The servers pulse in sync. On a central screen: the **world map** from his overlays—red vectors branching from major cities.

Footsteps. Daniel ducks behind a rack.

VENN (O.S.)

We're fond of this world. Its music. Its hunger.

Venn steps into view, fingers gliding over a console. The map blooms brighter.

VENN (CONT'D)

Armies break bodies. Art opens doors. And you—Daniel—you open doors very well.

Daniel steps out, jaw tight.

DANIEL

You can't have it. You can't have us.

VENN

Possession is such a human word. We prefer... invitation. We present the future. You applaud.

DANIEL

And the ring? The bands? Your eyes?

Venn lifts his gaze. The glassy irises dilate like apertures.

VENN

Adapters. Translators. We speak through what you already worship.

DANIEL

Screens.

VENN

Premieres.

A faint smile.

VENN (CONT'D)

Opening weekend is landing day.

Venn turns, the servers dim. By the time Daniel lunges, Venn is gone—no door, no footfall.

EXT. ROOFTOP PARKING – NIGHT

Daniel calls. It rings once.

ELLA (V.O.)

Please tell me you're not about to ruin our quarter.

DANIEL

You knew. How long?

Silence. Then—

ELLA (V.O.)

Long enough to pick the winning side. You can be on it too.

DANIEL

By selling my species?

ELLA (V.O.)

By keeping them alive. Cooperation is survival. Resistance is... quaint.

He looks at the city. Billboards pulse with *Shadow Dawn* ads—glyphs nested in the glows.

DANIEL

I'll burn it before I let it play.

ELLA (V.O.)

Try. See which of us the world believes—the stable executive stewarding prosperity... or the erratic producer with a drinking problem.

She hangs up.

Daniel's hand shakes. He pockets the phone. He breathes.

INT. DANIEL'S APARTMENT – LATER

Maya paces while Daniel rips open a Pelican case: drives upon drives.

MAYA

If we leak now, they'll call it ARG marketing. If we go to agencies, the studio lobbies them. If we blow up a projector, you go to prison and they still stream it.

DANIEL

We don't stop it from playing. We change what plays.

He flips open a laptop, pulling up the **final DCP specs**.

DANIEL (CONT'D)

There's a window before the KDMs (keys) lock. We hijack the premiere with a counter-cut. A reveal.

MAYA

Subliminals for good.

DANIEL

Subliminals for truth.

MAYA

Do you have the cut?

DANIEL

I have the bones. I don't have time.

Maya sits, cracks her knuckles.

MAYA

Lucky for us, I edit my own exposés. And I don't sleep.

They share a grim grin and dive in.

MONTAGE – THE COUNTERCUT

— Daniel and Maya isolate the glyph pulses, invert their rhythm.

— Daniel overlays Venn's voice (scraped from speeches) underlined by captions: "ART OPENS DOORS." "LANDING DAY."

— Maya stitches the microframes into a red-lit **invasion schematic**.

— They layer **warnings** in every major language, no logo, no platform.

— At dawn, Daniel renders: **FINAL_PREMIERE_REEL_OVRD.mov**.

INT. PREMIERE THEATER – NIGHT

Red carpet flash-bulbs. Influencers. The studio's crown jewel. Inside, chandeliers glint over rows of velvet. Ella, perfect; Simon, giddy. Venn, a shadow near the back.

Daniel and Maya slip in through a service corridor, dressed as AV techs. Daniel carries a small **drive case** and a coil of cable like a lifeline.

INT. PROJECTION BOOTH – CONTINUOUS

A seasoned PROJECTIONIST tweaks aspect ratios.

PROJECTIONIST

KDMs check. DCP checks. Don't touch anything you didn't bring into this world.

Daniel sets down the case, unspools his cable, eyes on the **server rack**.

MAYA (whisper)

We have five minutes. Maybe three.

PROJECTIONIST

You two new?

DANIEL

Freelance.

PROJECTIONIST

Union?

MAYA

Emotionally.

The projectionist shrugs, heads for the door to yell about a masking issue. Daniel slides his **inline injector** onto the SDI path.

DANIEL

When the leader hits, we jam it. Then we pray nobody kills the feed.

He looks through the porthole: **A-list crowd** taking selfies; a row of CHILDREN in alien t-shirts practicing the salute.

MAYA (soft)

This is the part where the hero says something witty.

DANIEL

I produce other people's wit.

He swallows. Hits ARM on the injector.

INT. PREMIERE THEATER – MOMENTS LATER

Lights dim. The studio fanfare. The crowd hushes. The screen blooms: the alien leader lifts its arm in that now-ubiquitous salute—

The image **stutters**. A flicker. Then—

Daniel's counter-cut slams in.

The alien banners freeze, glyphs locking into schematic formations. Venn's voice, slowed and pitch-shifted:

VENN (V.O.)

—opening weekend is landing day—

Rapid cuts: the server farm map; coordinates; military bases; children saluting spliced with their hands lowering, confused.

TITLE CARD ON SCREEN:

YOU ARE BEING PRIMED.

LOOK AWAY.

LISTEN TO YOURSELF.

Gasps. Murmurs. Phones appear—first instinct: film it.

INT. PROJECTION BOOTH – CONTINUOUS

The injector's LEDs dance. Maya's fingers hover, ready.

Footsteps thunder up the stairs. Daniel locks the door.

VENN (O.S.)

(through the door, calm)

Such drama. Doorways closing.

The **house sound** warbles: the counter-audio inverts the cadence, fighting the theater's system.

MAYA

We're clipping. I need—

(she pulls the gain)

—headroom.

The doorknob twists; the lock strains.

INT. PREMIERE THEATER – CONTINUOUS

The crowd splinters: some shouting "PR STUNT," others sobbing. Ella stands, serene.

ELLA

Please remain calm. A demonstration of the film's deeper themes.

A MAN near her stares up, entranced, eyes reflecting the screen's beating cadence. He begins the salute again, tears rolling.

CHILD (to mother)

Mom? My head hurts.

Mother covers the kid's eyes. Around them, a handful of people do the same, instinctively breaking the rhythm.

INT. PROJECTION BOOTH – CONTINUOUS

The lock snaps. The door bursts. Two SECURITY GUARDS, and behind them—**Venn**, composed.

Maya steps between Venn and the gear.

MAYA

Don't. You shut this down, it only goes back to your cut. Let them see both.

VENN

Choice is a lovely myth. We simply preferred not to stress you with it.

He advances—Daniel blocks him.

DANIEL

You used us. You used me.

VENN

You begged to be used. "Pick me. Fund me. Like me."

He reaches for the cable. Daniel GRABS Venn's wrist—skin like cool glass. The **band** at Venn's wrist flares; Daniel's pupils dilate as a subsonic hum rattles his bones.

MAYA

Danny—

She rips a **gaffer's knife** from her boot, slices the inline cable casing to expose copper. She slaps it against Venn's **band**.

CRACK— a blue spark. Venn recoils, the band's glassy strip spider-webbing.

Venn's eyes flicker—camera shutters missing frames.

VENN (flat, glitching)

—careless—primitive—effective—

Security lunges; Maya slams the door with a rolling case; Daniel yanks the main cable, re-jams his injector.

ON SCREEN (through porthole): the counter-cut continues—now a **tone** threads under it, steady and simple, like a heartbeat that's yours and no one else's.

MAYA (hushed)

I added a disruptor. Rhythms from lullaby research. It's not mind control. It's... a reminder.

Daniel looks at her—astonished.

DANIEL

You're terrifying.

MAYA

I'm employed.

The projector stabilizes. The counter-message holds.

Outside, security pounds. Venn regains poise, smoothing his sleeve over the cracked band.

VENN

You are making a scene, Daniel. But you have made your scene. Opening weekend... will still open.

He gestures up, almost fondly.

VENN (CONT'D)

Look.

EXT. CITY SKY – SAME TIME

Above Los Angeles, **pale geometries** gather—like thin clouds arranging themselves with intention. They are *there* if you stare, *not there* if you blink.

Shimmering edges peel—but hesitate, as if meeting resistance.

INT. PREMIERE THEATER – SAME TIME

Some audience members—still locked—reach for the sky; others blink, shake their heads, cover eyes, hum to themselves, tug friends back to their seats.

The counter-message instructs, calmly:

CLOSE YOUR EYES. BREATHE. COUNT 4. LISTEN FOR YOUR OWN HEART.

The house lights rise slightly. The **spell cracks** in pockets.

Ella watches, expression unreadable. She touches her ring; the glass band now flickers out of sync.

ELLA

(to Simon, low)

We pivot. We call it interactive. We—

(she stops, feeling the ring buzz painfully)
—turn it off.

Simon isn't listening—he's staring at his hands, shaking.

INT. PROJECTION BOOTH – CONTINUOUS

Maya braces the door with a wedge.

MAYA

We can't hold forever.

DANIEL

We don't have to. We just have to teach them how to not watch us.

He toggles the **final card**.

ON SCREEN:

THIS IS NOT A BRAND.
THIS IS A WARNING.
TURN AWAY. TURN EACH OTHER ON.
(NOT LIKE THAT, PROBABLY.)
LOVE, YOUR SPECIES.

Laughter ripples—nervous but real. Laughter is breath's cousin.

Venn tilts his head, almost admiring.

VENN

You are a charming animal.

DANIEL

We're really annoying.

VENN

Yes.

He steps back. For the first time, something like calculation crosses his face. He looks to the porthole, to the room, to the ceiling.

VENN (CONT'D)

Another weekend, then.

And like a cut, he's **not there**—gone between blinks. Security jolts, confused.

MAYA

Did he—?

DANIEL

Edit himself out.

They share a breathless grin.

EXT. PREMIERE THEATER – LATER

The crowd spills into night. Some argue, some laugh, some cry. A few hum that steady four-count. Influencers record shaky videos confessing they covered their eyes and felt better.

A TEENAGER teaches his little sister the “close eyes, count four” trick like it’s a game.

Ella steps up to a press scrum, immaculate again.

ELLA

Art should challenge. Tonight, we were challenged. We’re proud to be at the center of a global conversation—

Daniel and Maya watch from the edge, invisible.

MAYA

They’ll spin it.

DANIEL

Let them. People felt something that wasn’t theirs. They’ll recognize it next time.

MAYA

Next time could be... now.

They look to the horizon. Those pale geometries thin out, pulling back, like a tide reconsidering the shore. Not defeated—**delayed**.

INT. SMALL SOUNDSTAGE – NIGHT (LATER)

An empty stage with a folding table. Daniel and Maya sit amid silence, the after-throb of adrenaline turning to fatigue.

MAYA

So. Producer. What’s our third act?

DANIEL

We put the cut everywhere. Mirrors of mirrors. Pirate bay, PTA meetings, sleep apps, airplane seatbacks. Not to scare. To inoculate.

MAYA

Truth vaccine.

DANIEL

Consent class.

He holds up a small matte **band**—Venn's broken wrist adapter, swiped in the chaos. Inside, a thread of dark glass.

MAYA

Souvenir?

DANIEL

Evidence. Or a prop. Maybe both.

(beat)

My investors are going to kill me.

MAYA

Only if they're still... them.

They sit with that.

DANIEL

I made a movie about hope once. Nobody bought tickets.

MAYA

Make a tutorial.

DANIEL

For what?

MAYA

How to be human when the story wants you hypnotized.

Daniel looks at the empty stage. He smiles—tired, real.

DANIEL

Greenlight.

EXT. HOLLYWOOD HILLS – DAWN

They stand on a ridge. The city yawns awake. For a heartbeat, faint **silver seams** ripple across the sunless sky—then fade with the first light.

MAYA

They'll be back.

DANIEL

So will we.

He pulls out his phone, starts a new note: "PROJECT: DOORSTOP — Public Domain." Beneath it, a line:

CLOSE YOUR EYES. COUNT FOUR. CHOOSE.

Maya watches him type. She hums the steady rhythm. He joins her. Their breath syncs—no magic, only two people deciding, beat by beat.

DANIEL (V.O.)

Turns out producing isn't gambling. It's consent. What gets made, what gets watched, what gets inside.

(beat)

We've sold so many tickets to other people's futures. Maybe it's time we comp our own.

The sun breaks. The city glitters like a million tiny projectors. For now, the picture is theirs.

FADE OUT.

TITLE CARD:

COMING SOON — OR MAYBE ALREADY HERE.

END