THE ONLY WAY

A Short Film By

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FADE IN:

EXT. CITY PLAZA - AFTERNOON

SUPER: Calgary, 2097

Good friends and co-workers, DAN and STELLA, play chess at an outdoor table. They are mid-game. Stella gazes off at the nearby flowers.

STELLA
I'll never get tired of looking at those.

Dan glances at the flowers then at Stella.

DAN
Must have been tough, growing up in an irradiated zone.

STELLA
Yeah. I don't like thinking about it.

Dan makes his chess move, and Stella refocuses on the game. They look mostly at the board as they make their moves, not hurried.

DAN
Higgs or graviton? Go.

STELLA
Most influential discovery in particle physics?

DAN
No, just... favourite.

STELLA
Come on, that's like asking to pick between children.

DAN
Well our names are only on the graviton paper, not the Higgs, so we can really only claim parentage to one of them.

STELLA
True.

DAN
I hadn't thought about it before but it appears we have had a child together. Scandalous, what would Scott say?

STELLA
Yes, us, and about 15 others too.

DAN
Very scandalous... How are things going with Scott?

Stella lets out a quiet but derisive laugh suggesting Scott is not in her good books right now.

STELLA
A relationship with him is like a quantum particle - at any given time you can only tell the direction he's going... or where he even is...

Dan looks at Stella, hesitates, then says it.

DAN
Maybe you can do better.

Stella is mildly offended and Dan sees it.

DAN (CONT'D)
I- in my brain-

STELLA
Dan, some things you need to keep in your brain.

DAN
I know - I'm sorry.

STELLA
It's okay. You're just being you. Just play.

Dan doesn't know how to take this. He goes back to concentrating on the game. He sees something.

DAN
Checkmate in 12 moves.

STELLA
12 moves… I'm not sure if I trust you.

DAN
I'll show you.

Dan begins to move pieces. Stella doesn't wait for him to finish, begrudgingly laying her king on its side.

STELLA
Never mind, it's okay.

EXT. DOWNTOWN CITY STREET - AFTERNOON

Dan and Stella walk together down the street. Various futuristic media screens and holographic ads are on the sidewalk and on storefront windows that they walk past.

STELLA
How many moves can that brain of yours see in advance?

DAN
I don't know. Never tried to go as far as I can.

STELLA
One of my physics professors said the best human players in existence can only think 35 moves in advance.

DAN
Seems low.

Stella chuckles, thinking Dan is joking. She sees he isn't.

They stop at a screen showing a news report with text "Another System Falls to Kingdom Of Stars." It includes a grainy picture of giant starships surrounding a planet.

STELLA
They're now saying K.O.S. could be here in as soon as a decade.

She looks at Dan.

STELLA (CONT'D)
The defense committee is looking for people in all disciplines you know, even physics. Maybe we could help.

DAN
The government already has the best minds

Stella looks at Dan, she's not so sure. They continue walking. They see more news footage and headlines.

STELLA (CON'T)
(mild disgust)
It's just so unbelievable - some reports say that K.O.S. started as just one alien who somehow gained control over the whole of his planet's military production of autonomous tech. One guy - destroying whole civilizations. Can you imagine?

DAN
I guess Earth may not be the only planet with Hitlers.

They continue walking.

STELLA
Scott thinks we're all gonna die.
(looks at Dan)
What do you think?

Dan looks into Stella's eyes.

DAN
I think there's always hope.

STELLA
How?

DAN
I don't know, I just do.

Stella, looks a moment longer at Dan, uncertain. Dan absorbs her gaze. Stella looks forward again as they continue walking.

INT. DAN'S HOUSE - BEDROOM - NIGHT

An alarm clock showing 3:33 A.M. Dan sleeps, and then… GASPS, AS HE SITS BOLT UPRIGHT IN BED. He breathes heavily, eyes wide, catching his breath.

He jumps out of bed and rapidly pulls on a pair of pants laying on the floor, then slows... and looks at his PHONE on the night stand, pauses.

He rubs his face in frustration, pauses again. He picks up the phone and taps, pulls up Stella's contact - his finger hovers over the dial button. He taps to call.

STELLA (O.S.)
(filtered)
Dan? What's going on?

DAN
We need to meet. Now. Casper's.
It's important

STELLA (O.S.)
(filtered)
Now?

INT. CASPER'S DINER - NIGHT

Dan is seated at a booth in an otherwise empty diner. He is looking both nervous and sheepish as Stella, calm, rubbing her eyes, walks up. Two cups of coffee are on the table - one for each of them.

DAN
Turn off your phone.

Stella pauses slightly, doubtful.

STELLA
Okay.

Stella takes out her phone, swipes to power it down as she sits. Dan nudges her coffee closer to her.

DAN
Got you a coffee. Want anything to
eat?

Dan taps the base of a disc at the edge of the table - a futuristic holographic menu pops up.

STELLA
Why are we here, Dan?

Dan taps the base and the menu disappears.

DAN
My brain had a dream.

STELLA
(yawning)
Did it? That's... wonderful.

DAN
And I wanted you to track with me.

STELLA
What?

DAN
Like chess - we're going to look at the moves in advance. I need you to track them with me to make sure they check out.

STELLA
Dan, you know I like chess but I don't need to study it at four A.M.

DAN
It's not about chess. I may have found something... unique.

STELLA
If it's not chess, what is this about?

DAN
Hope.

Stella looks unconvinced. Dan bashfully pleads with his eyes.

STELLA
Fine, sure, go ahead.

Dan leans in and prepares to deliver his weighty idea.

DAN
What if Kingdom of Stars had a defector? One that had all of the plans needed to defeat the psycho galactic alien Hitler guy at the top?

STELLA
I thought all the K.O.S. soldiers were androids. Androids don't defect.

DAN
Let's say it's one of galactic Hitler's inner circle.

STELLA
We don't even know if this guy has an inner circle. All we can tell is that he's crazy, and wants to rule and/or exterminate the universe.

DAN
You're right, it could be that it's just one lonely guy. If it is, we can only pray that God intervenes. But leaders tend to have inner circles. Let's speculate that he does too. The number of planets - whole civilizations - that they are annihilating - it has got to weigh on any sentient being - hardcore.

STELLA
So then one of his friends just slips a pill in his drink. Done. Easy.

DAN
Maybe it's not so easy. Galactic Hitler protects himself from any harm, even from internal threats. He's anal about it. But, one of his trusted advisors has a crisis of conscience and wants to stop everything - but there's no way to kill the top dog on his own and he can't risk exposing his change of heart to any of the other advisors. What does he do?

STELLA
He sabotages the whole operation - plants a bomb or uploads a computer virus.

DAN
There would be too many fail-safes for one person alone to bring down an operation of that size. Every operation has weaknesses but they don't have an ultra-convenient death-star energy core - and there's too much computer security to get a virus in that effective. What does he do?

Stella thinks but can't come up with an answer.

MONTAGE - ENEMY PLANET

A shadowy figure at a computer terminal, downloading information onto a data storage unit.

An industrial production facility.

An alien satellite, orbiting the planet.

A large concrete bunker or stone-walled fortress.

DAN (V.O.)
He leaves. He downloads all the schematics he can. All of the details on the production facilities, the defenses of those facilities, the defenses of the planet, and even the facility, bunker...

END MONTAGE

DAN (CON'T)
...or freakin' castle, whatever, that galactic Hitler uses to hide his sorry, cowardly ass. This defector takes all of the data and figures out a way to slip out. This much he can sabotage.

STELLA
But that doesn't work - if he leaves with the schematics, they change everything - the codes, the defenses, locations- They close all the gaps in their security.

DAN
True, unless he was smart enough…

MONTAGE - ESCAPE

A crematorium furnace, flames blazing.

His clothes and a picture of his wife on the floor in front of the furnace.

A futuristic transport spaceship.

A subtle ripple of air over an evening sky (a cloaked ship flying off into the horizon).

DAN (V.O.)
…and this guy is smart. He can do it so they don't even know he left - fakes his own death, does it right - he has enough access to the computers to steal a transport ship without it being traced - one that cloaks - he leaves the planet, knowing how to remain undetected. Look, we're speculating right?

END MONTAGE

STELLA
Would make a great movie.

DAN (CON'T)
I get that this whole idea is low probability but given our best guess on the initial conditions, nothing else is even possible, right? Again, outside of divine intervention, if the universe was going to offer up a crack in the armor of K.O.S., this may be the only way so why not play out what happens?... Unless, you want to go home... It's fine...

STELLA
I'm already here, Dan.

Dan smiles.

DAN
This defector, he knows what he has to do to make sure there is no suspicion, and he does it. He makes it off the planet. Then what?

STELLA
So... He finds the nearest planet and gives the plans to its government.

DAN
The nearest planet?

Stella rethinks.

STELLA
The nearest planet that they haven't captured or destroyed, and that still has a government.

DAN
How many planets, even with the full disclosure of all of the enemy's weaknesses, have the capacity to defeat K.O.S.? This has to be a group effort.

STELLA
Right...

MONTAGE - JOURNEY

A ship traveling through space. It shoots past a planet.

A data storage unit lying in the ship.

A reflection in the ship's window of a shadowy figure looking out into space.

DAN (V.O.)
So he has to go further. K.O.S. is always advancing, so he's got to go deep. He can't afford to waste the plans - the only thing that has even a slim chance of bringing down the empire. The fate of the galaxy rests on him finding the most safe *and viable* hands for them.

END MONTAGE

DAN (CON'T)
By most viable, I mean He needs a star system with the best possible combination of two things: the strongest space-based military force, and the greatest ability to amass the allegiance from other star systems.

STELLA
Sol. That's us.

Dan gives a knowing look. Stella starting to get pulled in.

STELLA (CONT'D)
He doesn't go anywhere else. He knows we've stayed politically neutral in most inter-system conflicts. He knows we have the most allies while having one of the largest fleets.

DAN
It's Earth or nothing.

STELLA
Well, it sure hasn't happened yet. As far as the news says, there are only defensive plans against K.O.S.

DAN
And it may never happen, but are we tracking? If there is a hope of a defector, do we have a plausible, if not the most plausible, path that this guy takes?

STELLA
Yeah, I guess... What's next?

MONTAGE - PROBE

An alien probe rocketing into the atmosphere of a planet.

Smaller robotic probe with antennas on top of a building.

Futuristic communication network.

Futuristic government buildings.

DAN (V.O.)
Well, the going theory is that K.O.S. has a network of probes and drones that travel to planets way ahead of the coming attack, and they use these to infiltrate the planetary networks. It's the perfect attack strategy.

END MONTAGE.

STELLA
So the defector can't just speak openly to try to lay the plans on the government.

DAN
His hands are tied, even once he gets here.

STELLA
So he just tells the nightly news. Blows it wide open.

DAN
KOS hears any publicly broadcast details, they change all of the defenses. All is lost.

STELLA
Ok, so he's got to keep it secret - talk with officials in person and never let the details get recorded.

DAN
It's true, the government supposedly has an ironclad, closed-circuit network - no connection to the primary planetary or interplanetary web. Regardless, talking with the government is the only way that any sort of interplanetary coordination can happen. That has to be the end goal.

STELLA
And we'd never know if it happens. It would be kept secret. Right up until the moment we hear of victory or defeat.

DAN
Right, but how easy is it to get an audience with the government when all of the public networks are compromised? He can't send any direct message and he can't just walk up to the capitol and say - 'Hey, got some really important information here, but I can only share it with your top officials' - Say hello to jail.

STELLA
He'd need to know someone who already has a trusted government connection like the one we have with the science minister - but even just inquiring about a government connection, could get flagged by the probes... If he can't get anything through to the government, it's a dead end. It's over - it's...

Stella looks at Dan. An expression of disappointment turns to a faint smile.

DAN
What?

STELLA
It's four in the morning and we're talking about hypothetical clandestine plans to save the galaxy. I'm gonna be a zombie at work tomorrow, and I'll probably fall asleep at dinner with Scott.

Dan smiles, but he's ashamed. He lowers his gaze. Stella sees this.

STELLA (CONT'D)
He deserves it... this is exactly where I need to be.

Dan lets a small smile cross his lips. Stella pushes onward.

STELLA (CONT'D)
Your brain saw something more, didn't it?

DAN
Yes... Yes. Look, if he gets here, he might be able to bide his time to figure out a way to get to the government, but perhaps he can't. Let's say he's got a limited timetable and no opportunities are presenting themselves. Perhaps he's dying or a probe is getting too close, and he doesn't know if he'll have enough time to see his plan through.

STELLA
Why assume that?

DAN
Just stick with me - it's plausible and it leads to a unique outcome.

STELLA
Okay, so, what - he hides his work somewhere, keeping it secret for someone else to find in case he doesn't make it?

DAN
Exactly, but how does he do it? It could be lost forever if it's too hard to find. Too easy, then some random person finds it. We're still in major risk territory here.

STELLA
(thinking)
He has to hide it in the open - in such a way that it can be found by someone who's looking for it, predicting his moves - who knows how serious it is to keep quiet to anyone except the government... But how?

MONTAGE - COMPUTER SCAN

Computer screen showing hundreds of files and folders being scanned rapidly.

Computer screen showing an encrypted file being decrypted.

DAN (V.O.)
Okay, so he can't make the content digital and put it anywhere on the web. It'll get scanned even if it's encrypted. We have to assume that K.O.S. has the most powerful encryption breaking protocols ever known. So if it can't be digital...

END MONTAGE.

STELLA
-Hardcopy.

Dan raises his eyebrows and smiles.

DAN
Right. It's a lot of information so it's gotta be carefully organized and collected.

STELLA
Loose papers are too risky. It's gotta be bound so nothing is lost - a book.

DAN
(nodding)
And where's the best place to hide a book, in the open, but completely unassuming so that it will stay in place for the long term?

Stella Thinks.

STELLA
A library?

DAN
(knowing smile)
Which Library?

STELLA
(in disbelief)
The Central Library? Here in Calgary?

Dan nods.

STELLA (CONT'D)
Wait - is it-?

DAN
Flowers aren't the only thing that Calgary has that are sparse in other cities... Ever since big war four, we have the biggest library network of physical books out of any city on the planet. Afterwards, they mostly only built libraries with digital files... If he wants someone on this planet to predict his moves to hide a physical book, he picks the library that's the most obvious choice.

STELLA
But a library isn't safe. Anyone could pick it up, realize it's legit, and expose it.
(MORE)

STELLA (CONT'D)
BZZ, plan fails. Why not a private library? Fewer people go through those.

DAN
How many private libraries are there on Earth? Most have no database. How would you check them all?

STELLA
Database? You think he'd just make a book and title it 'A Defector's Plans to Defeat the Kingdom of Stars?' Again, some random person will read it and miss the part about keeping it quiet.

DAN
You're right, there would be a chance of accidental discovery, but think of how many rows of old volumes are in the library that never get touched? But more than that - and here's the key - he doesn't write it at face value, for this very reason. He encodes it all into a work of fiction, or maybe abstract art, you know, so he can work in schematics easier. Accidental discoveries are safe from causing exposure because whoever picks it up thinks they're just reading a regular, speculative or artistic book.

STELLA
But all published books are digitized right? If it's digitized, it can be analyzed, like you said. The K.O.S. computers still might make sense of the content.

Dan is impressed.

MONTAGE - BOOK BINDING

A shadowy man working at a book binding machine.

Pages of a single book being arranged and bound.

DAN (V.O.)
He doesn't publish mainstream. He self publishes, at a local shop that does binding. He technically only needs one copy - probably wants it this way to minimize risk of exposure... He's trusting someone will figure it out.

END MONTAGE.

Stella looks at Dan for a moment.

DAN
Of course you can't just get any self- published book into the library. It doesn't work that way, unless-

STELLA
-He puts it in himself.

Dan, proud of her.

STELLA (CONT'D)
So he plants it... But, all those books, how is anyone supposed to find it?

DAN
It's got to be searchable on the wider library network database. He wants it to be found by the right person, someone who has thought this out and looks for it. He wants the best chance of that happening.

STELLA
But what you're talking about is an ability for someone from any of the greater arm planets doing a network search for a book - that means it's got to be officially registered in the system... Oh.

MONTAGE - HACK JOB

A shadowy figure at a computer terminal.

Two stacks of books at a librarian's desk. A gloved hand sliding a book onto the lower of the stacks.

Gloved fingers typing on a keyboard.

DAN (V.O.)
Exactly. So he hacks in, logs it, or slips it in with the other books getting logged in - Relatively simple to do actually.

END MONTAGE.

STELLA
Okay but even so, he's not the only person in over a hundred planets to write a book about the defeat of K.O.S. There's got to be hundreds, maybe even thousands, of them. That's a lot of reading to do on such a thin longshot.

Dan smiles.

DAN
Remember, I said it leads to a unique possibility? There's just one more move to anticipate, Stella. Don't forget we can view all the information on these books in the database. His is the only one that comes from a publishing company that doesn't actually exist - that there's no record of anywhere. He would make sure of it when he enters the record. It's the easiest way to make his searchable entry stand out to a person who's looking for it, but look normal to everyone else.

STELLA
Even though he self-publishes, he leaves a signpost..

She looks at Dan, under the spell of it all.

STELLA (CONT'D)
(slowly)
So what you're saying is: We go to the Public Library here in Calgary, and perform a search - for a lone fiction or art book about the defeat of K.O.S.
(MORE)

STELLA (CONT'D)
We cross reference the publishing companies, and if a book turns up that has a non-existent publishing company... We have the very real plans to defeat the greatest existential threat to the free galaxy - that were smuggled out of the lion's den by a rogue member of Galactic Hitler's inner circle?

DAN
Want to find out?

EXT. PUBLIC LIBRARY - FRONT STEPS - EVENING

Dan and Stella walk up the steps to the library front entrance. Holographic library-style signs line the steps.

INT. LIBRARY CONCOURSE - HELP DESK - EVENING

A smiling HELP ANDROID (20s) in the form of a young, well-kempt woman, with slight plastic-like skin, stands under a futuristic holographic sign saying "Help" hovering above. She speaks calmly and fluidly, but slight mannerisms suggest an android.

Dan and Stella walk up to her.

ANDROID
Welcome to the Calgary Central Library. How can I assist you today?

STELLA
We'd like to find a book.

ANDROID
Of course. Do you know the name of the book you're looking for?

DAN
No, we'd like to do a topical search.

ANDROID
Ok. And what is the topic?

DAN
Let's start broad - anything on the Kingdom of Stars.

ANDROID
Searching... There are 13,945 books on this topic in all libraries in the greater arm library network.

DAN
What about in this library only?

ANDROID
Searching… 1,863 of them are at this location.

DAN
How many of those are published by a publishing company that has published no other books on record, in any library, or anywhere else?

The android looks away as it searches.

HELP DESK ANDROID
Searching...

Dan and Stella look at each other. The tension is palpable.

The android looks back at them.

ANDROID (CON'T)
One... Would you like to know where to find it?

Dan and Stella turn back to each other. *

Dan pulls out his phone, and holds it up in front of him. It gets wirelessly "loaded" with directions to find the book.

INT. LIBRARY - 7TH FLOOR ELEVATORS - NIGHT

The elevator door opens. Dan holds up his phone and the two walk toward the specified section and row. As they walk, Dan rechecks the info transferred to his smart phone.

They find the section... and then the row.

They slowly walk down the row, watching the book numbers...

THEY SEE IT...

They stop and look at each other.

Stella pulls it out. Title says "Feces on Canvas: Abstract Visual Poetry Inspired by the Dirtbag Leader of the Kingdom of Stars". She pages through as Dan looks over her shoulder.

STELLA
It's only images. Looks like paintings made with real shit... classy.
(continues paging)
Nothing that looks like technical specifications on defenses… And if these are the methods needed to defeat him, I'm not sure the plan will work.
(more paging)
What if he digitally embedded the information, at the pixel level?

DAN
Possible. Printing doesn't usually retain that level of resolution... but we could scan it - see if we find something...

Dan looks like he's thinking.

STELLA
What is it?

DAN
We got excited. There's one thing we didn't ask in our search.

Dan taps his phone, swipes and taps again - it chimes.

DAN (CONT'D)
(to phone)
Were more than one copy of this book printed?

The phone chimes.

PHONE ASSISTANT
Yes, 50 copies were printed.

DAN
(to phone)
Are there digital copies available?

PHONE ASSISTANT
Yes. I have provided the link.

Dan lowers his phone. It's not the jackpot they were looking for. Stella looks intently at Dan who is disappointed but still processing.

STELLA
Hey, it was a good thought - an amazing thought.

She smiles.

Dan forces a smile through his disappointment.

Stella looks at Dan differently.

STELLA (CONT'D)
We should keep checking back.

DAN
(still thinking)
I doubt there will be anything. I mean with how long their reign of terror has been going - if there was a defector, there's a good chance he would have reached this side of the galaxy a long time ago. Any book should have been here already, logged in, even if someone else beat us to it...

Dan looks at Stella.

DAN (CONT'D)
And why would I assume that I'd be the one to find something this big? Kind of presumptuous really...

Dan smiles at Stella.

DAN (CONT'D)
I should just keep these things inside my brain - I'd bother fewer people.

Stella looks deeply at Dan.

STELLA
Sometimes you do have to let out what's going on in there.

What does she mean? Dan breaks the gaze, retreats to safety.

DAN
(smiles)
We should go. It's almost time for work… I can't believe I kept you up this long.

STELLA
(showing book)
It's no problem. I found a really good book. *

Dan chuckles as they start walking back towards the elevator, book in hand. They approach the elevator.

STELLA (CONT'D)
You know the worst part about this?

DAN
What?

STELLA
I am never playing chess with you again.

They approach the elevator.

STELLA (CONT'D)
Dan - you knew where to go - you could have just came here and checked yourself.

Dan looks nervous as they enter the elevator and he presses the floor button.

As the doors close, DAN SLOWLY REACHES OVER AND GRASPS STELLA'S HAND, SHE SMILES, ACCEPTS - the door closes.

Immediately, the adjacent elevator door opens and an ELDERLY EMPLOYEE (70s) exits, pushing a cart of books.

He wheels it over to the row directly behind the one Dan and Stella were in.

He stops at the end of the row, and from his cart, he picks up a thick book with a plain cover and new registration sticker on the spine. The book is called "The Only Way".

He holds it in both hands and gazes at it with tired eyes that begin to tear up. He kneels down and slides it into the bottom corner of the row, beside a set of other books of a similar design and color on the bottom shelf.

He waits a few moments longer, looking at it.

He stands up and walks away, wheeling the cart.

FADE OUT.

THE END