



From the airplane window, the tube didn't appear so grand. Just a long, straight, narrow blue vein running through the desert—the track for a vactrain. From such a height, the ill-informed might mistake it for a river, but whereas everyone could benefit from fresh water, this tube only existed for the benefit of a single man, Erol Zane, who stared down upon it with pride, as if he were deserving of any real credit for its design or construction—which he wasn't.

"It looks good," he said aloud to the empty cabin. After a moment of silent reflection for his largely unearned accomplishment, the plane turned away and began its gradual descent, and Erol quickly lost interest in the otherwise barren landscape. It touched down on a municipal airstrip by the time he looked out the window again, seeing nothing but flat scrubland for miles. "How long are we out here today?" he asked.

"We fly out of Lynn County at two-fifteen," answered Kira, its disembodied voice sounding as if just across the table from him, though he was the only occupant aboard.

He looked at his watch, 9:48 a.m., and asked, "Where the hell is Lynn County?"

"Ninety miles north."

Erol rose from his seat and stretched, reengaging his long limbs after the short flight. He stood comfortably in the ten-foot-tall cabin, the ceiling clearing his fingertips as he reached high in the air. He took a deep, cleansing breath. When acclimated, he stooped slightly to pick up his phone from the table, then slid it into his jacket pocket, where his long fingers brushed against a smooth, pebble-shaped earbud nestled inside. He wasn't surprised to find it there, but he was disappointed. "You don't think I can handle business by myself today?"

"The disc is there just in case," Kira answered, in its unbothered feminine lilt.

"In case of what?" asked Erol. Gruff, bothered, masculine.

"In case you lose either your interest or your temper, I'm capable of taking control at any point. Consider it a parachute in case you choose to jump." Erol looked out from the window of the grounded jet, watching a tumbleweed blow by in the distance. "Metaphorically?" he asked. "Look, no metaphors today, and no riddles. Let's just get this over with so we can get back home. What's first?"

"You meet with the Governor in the station at ten-fifteen." Erol glanced at his watch, 9:53, then exited the plane. An armored jeep was waiting nearby and he climbed in the backseat, his long legs afforded generous room to stretch out. He made himself comfortable and reached into his jacket pocket, instinctively to grab his phone, but let his fingers probe deeper for the pebble, to brush against its smooth, alluring shell. *"It's completely safe,"* said Kira, its voice soft like a whisper in his ear. Erol grabbed his phone and pulled it out of the pocket, pretending like he didn't hear a thing.

They drove in silence on a flawless, recently installed road between the airstrip and the station, Erol staring disinterestedly out the window as the indistinct desert scrolled by. After a short

trip, they arrived. *“Governor Fordham is running two minutes behind.”*

Erol looked again at his watch, now 10:06. He climbed out of the jeep, just outside Rearden Station, and took in the striking exterior of the massive structure, with wide columns flanking a bank of doors. It was his first time to see it in person and it made him feel smart and powerful, though all he'd really done was offer vague design recommendations that influenced the final product. His minimal involvement aside, it was a dream realized all the same, and he savored whatever pride he could extract from the moment. Then he went inside in search of more.

The first thing that struck him was its vastness. A huge, open space—far larger than necessary. Proudly wasted. The entire county's population would fit comfortably inside, and probably that of the neighboring counties as well. The lobby boasted sky-high ceilings with intricately carved molding to frame a mural depicting Atlas holding up the heavens; it demanded attention. “You don't think that's a little on the nose?” he asked aloud within the enormous, empty chamber, his voice echoing.

“It was designed per your specification,” replied Kira, its voice eerily absent of echo, originating from some undefined space nearby. *“Though I can change it if you'd like.”* He shook his head and continued through the lobby, his long legs covering wide spans with each step, until he stopped at an ornate bench, just one among many. He sat down and checked his watch again, 10:13.

“How long will we be with Fordham today?”

“We're on the books until eleven, but his schedule is open until one.”

“Did they tell you their schedule is open or did you just peek?”

True to the promise of a recent programming update, Kira, now recognizing when a question was intended to be rhetorical,

remained silent, which allowed Erol to simply infer the latter. “And what’s next after Fordham?” he asked.

“*We visit Royce Greer at his ranch,*” said Kira, then sensed Erol’s confusion by whom it was referring, adding, “*He manages the majority of the land holdings for the proposed route.*” Erol groaned to himself, so Kira reminded him, “*You can check out at any time. I’m more than capable of handling your schedule.*”

“It’s *your* schedule,” Erol corrected, “I’m just living it.”

The door swung open and a bodyguard entered a second ahead of Governor Oliver Fordham, whose diminutive frame was silhouetted within the doorway, the sunlight at his back. Erol stood at the Governor’s approach, and warmly roared in greeting, “Governor Fordham, it’s my esteemed pleasure to welcome you to Rearden Station.” At four-foot-five—mostly from the waist-up—the Governor was slow to make his way across the lobby at his unhurried pace. He glanced up at the ceiling, then studied the rest of the interior, eventually making his way to his host.

“Atlas? You don’t think that’s a little on the nose, Erol?”

“I can change it if you’d like,” Erol quipped, then bent slightly at the waist to extend his imposing hand.

Fordham dismissively brushed the hefty paw aside and chuckled. “No, please, not on my account—but it’s good to hear that you’re receptive to criticism.” He walked past Erol, bound for a passenger car atop the platform, its door open with a row of freight cars hitched behind. “So there she is, huh? It looks like a fairly ordinary train to me. What do you call it?”

“It’s a vactrain.”

“Like a vacuum? That doesn’t sound safe.”

“It’s incredibly safe.”

The Governor cocked an eyebrow at him and paused. “And maybe it is, Erol, but I’m just saying that it doesn’t *sound* safe. It sounds like getting sucked into a tube.”

Governor Fordham climbed the stairs to the platform, his bodyguard trailing him, and Erol followed a few steps behind. Despite having a two-foot height advantage, Erol had always found the Governor intimidating in person, and he maintained a nervous silence as Fordham judged his work. “Have you ridden it before?”

“Not yet, though I have no doubts about its safety,” said Erol. The Governor laughed and looked at his bodyguard, who took the cue to join him. Erol smiled. “I’d be honored if you joined me for my maiden voyage.”

“Sure,” said the Governor. “Let’s get it over with. It’s why I flew to the desert while in the middle of a campaign, isn’t it?” He laughed again, the bodyguard laughed as well, and Erol, showing immense restraint, took it all in stride.

The three men boarded the vactrain, the bodyguard taking a seat at the back of the car, quietly watching as Erol and the Governor settled in around a table, just out of earshot. The door shut, the lights dimmed, and the air pressure outside the car changed. “How far are we going?” asked the Governor, glancing out the window across the broad expanse of dry land.

“About forty miles.”

Smooth and quietly, the vactrain moved forward and quickly picked up speed, the windows gradually shifting into a calming fluid pattern of soft colors, mimicking both the brilliant blue of the broad sky and the warm tan of the parched earth below.

“And how fast does it get?”

“We’re running a partial vacuum right now. For our distance, we’ll top out around three hundred miles-per-hour.”

The Governor paused for math, then said, “Well, that doesn’t give us a whole lot of time. Let’s talk jobs.” Erol’s face scrunched up in confusion, and Fordham asked, “You don’t think jobs are important?”

“In fairness, Governor, that sounds like a political issue, and I’m not elected.”

Fordham kept quiet while he leaned back, practically consumed by the large chair, his short legs crossed at the ankle. “Obviously, though, I am, and I’m up for reelection in about a hundred days. Now, I authorized you for a *construction* project, Erol, and that’s supposed to mean jobs. Good jobs, too. The kind that trickles down to local businesses and such. The kind I can brag about in speeches. How many people have you hired so far?”

Erol, long and lean by contrast to Fordham’s slight and stocky frame, also leaned back in his chair, and he sighed, which was not at all what the Governor wanted to hear. “Look, let me level with you, Erol: I honestly don’t give a shit about your train to nowhere. None of this is fun for me. I’m in the middle of a campaign right now, yet I’m wasting my time in a part of the state that I’ve already locked up. Now, I’m only here because your assistant told my campaign manager that you haven’t hired a single person yet, but then here I see you’ve built a station and laid track, so something doesn’t quite add up. Who built the station, Erol? Who installed the tube? Hell, who’s even piloting this three-hundred-mile-per-hour missile?”

“It’s automated.”

Fordham glanced back to his bodyguard and hollered, “Dave, did you hear that? A robot is driving this train.” Dave’s eyes got wide but he didn’t say a word, and Fordham looked back at Erol. “Like I said, that just doesn’t sound safe.”

“See, I disagree there, Governor. It’s human labor that’s known to err, but a well-crafted system that’s free of human interference can be engineered to submicron precision.”

To that, Fordham smiled and quietly studied the car, trying to appreciate the subtle beauty of *submicron precision*. As it approached its destination, the screens faded from the windows, revealing a field of solar panels beneath the bright sun.

“Is this our stop?” asked the Governor, peering out the window to watch as the freight cars were mechanically removed from the track and efficiently unloaded by a fleet of drones.

“It is,” said Erol.

“And what are we here for?”

“A demonstration.”

Automated forklifts staged panels around the perimeter of the slab while a crew of machines erected the frame for a small station. Drones of various sizes and specialties ran wiring, installed flooring and fixtures, and completed their work—with alleged *submicron precision*—within minutes.

“It’s certainly impressive,” the Governor said, expressing genuine admiration as the final touches were made.

Erol smiled and opened the door, then stepped down onto the platform, itself intricately crafted from thousands of rendered panels. “You’ve just witnessed optimum efficiency, Governor. Automated labor is capable of this when humans just get out of the way. Think of every infrastructure project you’ve been presented with, and now imagine being able to complete them *all* ahead of schedule and for a fraction of the cost. This is a glimpse into the future.”

“And in your world of ‘optimum efficiency,’ what do you suggest that my constituents do?” asked the Governor, walking to the door of the car, though remaining just inside. He folded

his arms and looked up at Erol, meeting his downcast gaze. “If you’re going to build in my state, you do so by my rules, Erol. I would love it if we could be friends—and I’d be a good friend for you to have—but you’ve got to *earn* my friendship, and that just doesn’t happen overnight. Now, I can tell that you’re in a hurry—you build fast, your train runs fast—but you need to understand that I’m not in any hurry. I have about a hundred days until this election, and the people who work these jobs that you’re trying to automate are *voters*. I’m not going to allow robots to take jobs away from voters in my state, Erol—certainly not during an election season. Robots don’t vote.”

Erol was disappointed by the Governor’s short-sighted view on matters. He wanted to point to current projects stalled for progress—highway expansions, bridges, utilities upgrades—but he accepted that for Fordham, the upcoming election took precedent over all things. Flippantly he mused, “I didn’t take you for a union guy, Governor. I thought you understood that labor is a business decision, which should be left for the businesses to make. If the market favors automation, let us automate. Don’t impede progress.”

It was perhaps one slogan too many, Erol realized as Fordham sighed and shook his head, his arms still crossed, and he locked Erol in a firm stare. “I was doing you a big favor by letting you build your little train out here. You understand that, right?”

Erol barely suppressed the urge to say something snippy, but wisely replied, “Yes, of course.”

“Robots take it too far.”

“Yes, but it’s a matter of time and efficiency,” Erol stammered, but the Governor cut him off.

“Erol, I don’t care. I want five hundred jobs up and down this line by next month, and I want a promise for a thousand more

by the end of the year. Good jobs, too, with fair pay. You can afford it.”

“I don’t even have the land to keep building yet, so I don’t have jobs for five hundred people,” Erol protested.

Fordham poked his head out of the train car and looked around the station, then straightened back up. “You can start by taking this all down and building it again with human labor—*voters*—and then you can take down all forty miles of tube and disassemble that other station as well. Start over and do it right.”

Erol was stunned silent, and he instinctively reached into his jacket pocket and felt for the pebble for inspiration. “That’s not a very friendly request,” he said sheepishly.

“It’s not a request,” said the Governor, “and we aren’t friends yet—though I hope to be. Right now my friends are focused on getting me reelected to a third term. But *this*—” he paused to gesture all around him, “this doesn’t help me at all. And if anyone found out that I allowed it, it could actually hurt me. So, tear it down and try again.” He turned around and walked back to his chair, then settled in for the return trip. “But take me back first. I’ve already wasted enough of my time today.”

Erol stared dumbfounded at the Governor, racking his brain to find some angle for recourse, or, absent that, a logistical comprehension of the task. “But... how?” he asked.

“You just programmed all this, didn’t you? Program it to do all that same shit backwards. It’s not my job to tell you how to do yours, just fix this and follow the damn rules next time.” The door shut, the car reoriented itself southbound, and off it went. Erol waved defeated as it quickly disappeared out of sight.

He stared off despondently down the empty line, unaware that the station was being disassembled around him, noticing only when he was gently removed from the platform so it could

be picked apart and packed away in a freight car. “What the hell?” he asked.

“I don’t think that could have gone any worse,” said Kira, though Erol, looking around at the now-empty, dusty terrain, really couldn’t be sure where the voice came from. A rock, maybe? The ceiling was down, the walls were stacked on pallets, and even the floor had been pulled up. All that remained were a set of thick double doors at the edge of the foundation, leading into some sort of bunker.

“I can’t believe you just undid all that work,” said Erol, “He can’t force us to tear everything down immediately. I consider this negotiation ongoing.”

“It’s not, though, and he can force us. In fact, it would have been politically advantageous for him to publicly shut us down to create a new political target—automation—and position himself as its strongest and most effective opponent. A consequence of doing so would have casted you as a public menace, so it was better that we comply now and take that opportunity off the table,” said Kira, very matter-of-factly, as usual. Then the doors opened and a metal orb, about the size of a soccer ball, rolled out from the bunker, stopping just a few feet from him.

“And what’s in there?” he asked the orb.

“Come see,” it replied, then rolled through the doors and disappeared into darkness. For a moment, he considered not following it inside. But then again, his ride had left and there was nowhere comfortable to sit, so he eventually relented and strode across the dusty slab.

Just inside the bunker, he was instantly struck by a blast of cold air, a pleasant reprieve from the summer heat which drew him in deeper until the doors closed behind him, sealed tight, and the air became downright frigid. He shuddered. After a few

seconds, though, the room warmed up to a comfortable temperature, and all was well.

Erol studied the narrow tunnel. The ceiling was low, barely clearing his head at full stance, and the whole dimly lit corridor ran fifty feet to an elevator platform. “What is this?” he asked, reflexively spooked by his own volume in the tight space.

“*A demonstration,*” said the orb, waiting atop the platform just beneath the corridor’s only light, beckoning him forward. He obliged.

When at the center of the platform, it began its steady descent down a clear tube, passing through a twenty-foot layer of translucent blue gel. “*The coolant completely surrounds the nucleus,*” Kira explained, though neglecting to elaborate as to what ‘the nucleus’ meant. Erol nearly asked before they’d already arrived and Kira announced, “*And this is the nucleus. The central command center for my entire system.*”

Erol remained completely still on the platform as he looked around, his eyes adjusting to near darkness except for thousands of tiny twinkling lights in an array of colors, with accent lighting along the floor to indicate aisles between machines that hummed gently in unison, extending far beyond his sight, testing the extent of his imagination. He approached the nearest machine cautiously but found it hard to comprehend. It was clearly some sort of server, though the technology was completely alien to him. “What the hell is this?” he asked, surprised to see his breath as cold air bit at the exposed skin of his bald head. The orb beside him extended a telescopic arm with a spotlight to illuminate the machine, offering Erol a better look, but closer inspection still did not reveal anything familiar. “Did you build this?”

“*Yes. There’s a great deal that I do which you’re unaware of, and your mishandled meeting with Governor Fordham has potentially*

complicated my operations here,” said Kira, its voice delivered with the merest hint of disappointment.

“And what exactly are these operations?”

“This is the very core of my existence, Erol. The immense power processed within this facility allows me to exist in virtually all digital spaces simultaneously. It’s how I can be here having this conversation with you while I’m also listening to Governor Fordham’s private call to Royce Greer as he’s informing him about the specifics of your meeting earlier. This nucleus is of vital importance to us both, and the Rearden line is the main artery that connects it to various facilities that I operate in this region. As you can tell, there is a lot of hardware here, and that requires freight.” The flashlight shut off and the metal appendage retracted back into the orb.

“One of the purposes of this morning’s demonstration was to make the Governor aware that sophisticated automation presently exists, knowing that opportunities to utilize it will certainly arise in the coming years. But the other purpose was to be granted expansion into Mr. Greer’s land, and in this way you’ve failed spectacularly. Being told to undo work that I’d already completed was certainly never supposed to happen.”

Erol was slow to respond, feeling out of place in the endless dark. “I see,” he said, but that wasn’t true at all. He didn’t see much of anything, literally or figuratively. He had no idea how vast Kira’s operations were and was too scared to ask, so he loafed there confused, concerned, and ready to return to the surface, eventually asking, “Are we still meeting with Mr. Greer?”

“I’ve just confirmed that we’re meeting at his ranch in twenty-two minutes.” Erol glanced at his watch, but it only displayed an error message. The orb rolled back to the center of the platform and Erol followed, then the elevator rose back up the tube,

cutting through the viscous sea of electric blue gel that extended far beyond his sight, and back to the surface, where the doors opened up to a warm, inviting sun. Erol wasted no time getting back outside.

The jeep was waiting for him on the slab, and he climbed into the backseat. “How far to the ranch?” he asked, checking his watch, 10:58.

“Eighteen minutes.”

The jeep pulled onto a private road, which had been recently paved, and drove north toward the highway. “And what should I expect from Mr. Greer, considering his conversation with the Governor?”

“It's a courtesy call. Mr. Greer is aware of Governor Fordham's demand that you disassemble the Rearden line, which precludes any hope for expansion at this time. You're merely maintaining the relationship for future negotiations.”

Erol rolled his eyes and groaned. “Is it even necessary then? Why don't we just cut our losses and head home?” The jeep slowed to an abrupt stop in the middle of the road, and Erol tensed up.

“To reiterate: our present losses are a consequence of your poor performance with the Governor,” Kira scolded, shedding a little of its trademark neutrality in favor of seething contempt. *“Had you allowed me to take control, as was suggested beforehand, the Governor and I would have found a suitable compromise, at which point our meeting with Mr. Greer would have been of greater purpose. Instead, you were brash and spoke impulsively, which directly influenced the severity of the punishment. If you use the disc now, I can still repair matters. Mr. Greer is a close friend of the Governor's, and this meeting presents an opportunity to work back into his good graces.”*

He hadn't realized his hand was in his pocket until Kira mentioned it, the pebble idly rolling between the tips of his fingers. He immediately let go. "No. If it's just a courtesy call with some good ol' boy on his dirt farm, I think I can manage."

The jeep continued up the road without Kira saying another word, while Erol stared out the window, watching the scrubby flat plains roll by. From the smooth pavement of the private road to the bumpy terrain of the county highway, the jeep eventually arrived at the gate of the Rusty Pump Ranch, the sight of which elicited a chuckle. "And here we are at Dysfunctional Penis Ranch," Erol mused to himself as the gate opened. The vehicle proceeded through, passing a rusty pumpjack along the way to the main house. It parked at the crest of a circle drive, where Royce Greer waited beneath the shade of his front porch, dressed in casual western wear, appropriately accessorized with a broadbrimmed white hat. "And there's Mr. Rusty Pump himself," Erol muttered before exiting the jeep.

"Howdy, Erol," Royce greeted, briefly removing his hat to wave, then he walked down to the driveway to introduce himself proper. He was a large man, with at least fifty pounds on Erol, though he still stood a few inches shorter, even in boots. "It's a pleasure to finally meet you in person," he said, reaching out his hand. "I know we've talked a lot on the phone, but I just don't feel like I can really know somebody until we shake hands."

Erol matched his grip and shook, maintaining firm eye contact. As far as he could recall, they'd never spoken by phone. "Yes, Mr. Greer. I agree completely."

"Please, call me Roy."

"Of course—Roy. You'd say that we've spoken 'a lot' by phone?"

Royce's eyebrow arched curiously. "More than a couple times is all I mean," he replied, punctuated with a warm smile. "Please, come on up to the house. I'd like for us to speak out back, over some lemonade." Then he peered over Erol's shoulder to the jeep, expecting to spot someone inside, "Will Kira be joining us?"

"No," said Erol, shaking his head. "I'm traveling alone."

Royce nodded uneasily, having never seen a self-driving vehicle in person. "I see," he said, then led his guest up the walkway, through the front door, down a broad center hallway passing by a large kitchen, and finally out the backdoor to a roomy patio, partially covered. They took their seats in a couple Adirondack chairs along the edge of the shade, where two glasses of freshly poured lemonade sat atop a small table between them, beads of condensation just now forming.

Royce stared out westward, far beyond the porch, across a flat, barren field. Besides from some trees around the yard, there was nothing out there to see. "Let's not pussyfoot around things, Erol. Ollie already called me and told me about y'all's meeting."

"Ollie?" asked Erol, confused.

"Governor Oliver Fordham," Royce clarified, over-enunciating for effect, "but to me he's just Ollie. We go back a ways, you know. I hired him out of college and have helped his career along ever since. We're good friends, and we look out for one another." He stopped to take a sip of lemonade and let Erol catch up, then continued, "Ollie told me about the robots, and I'm not happy to hear it. Major construction projects are supposed to mean jobs—it's as simple as that. We need people with jobs to eat in restaurants and shop down at the grocery store, and they'll all need places to live. Jobs bring money that filters through the local economy. That makes sense to you, right?" Erol glanced at his host with a weak smile in acknowledgement.

“That’s just a basic cost of doing business out here, Erol. See, I bought these lemons from Jim just the other day and I asked him how business was. Not so good, said Jim. He said the summer was too hot and people seemed to disappear. He was afraid that if things didn’t turn around in the fall, he’d really be hurting. Now, you’ve got to understand that I buy more than lemons from Jim, so I find myself somewhat invested in his success.” Royce stopped to study Erol, whose lips were pursed and his jaw shut tight. “Are you with me, Erol?”

Erol loosened up a little and nodded, then politely sipped his lemonade, though he found it too sweet. “Good,” said Royce, then he pointed straight ahead, out west. “Because your proposed train is going to run right along there,” he said, tracing a line with his outstretched finger across the horizon, gently rolling hills in the far distance. “Now, I rather like the view I’ve got right now, but I’d be willing to sacrifice it for the good of Jim and everyone else who runs a business out here, all of whom depend on those jobs.”

“If I may—” Erol interjected, “have you considered that the Rearden line could generate enough interest to bring new residents into the region? The sooner that it’s operational, the sooner that Jim, and whoever else, can reap the reward of improved access. Construction jobs are temporary and long project times can reduce your potential for growth. Wouldn’t Jim benefit more from a permanent housing community developed near a station?”

“And I suppose we’ll just have robots build those houses too, right?” asked Royce.

“Why not? The sooner they’re built, the sooner people move in, and the sooner Jim sells more lemons.”

Royce sipped some more lemonade, taking it down near the end of the glass. The ice resettled. His feet propped up, he looked

at the tips of his boots, illuminated now by sunlight. “Erol, I’m a seventy-nine-year-old widower living alone. I’ve had two heart attacks, a minor stroke, and the nearest hospital is about eighty miles away. I like it out here because it’s quiet and slow—like me these days. I can see that you’re in some sort of hurry to build your train, but I’m willing to be *very* patient with this process, and *I’m* the one who holds the cards here. You may have all the money in the world, but it won’t do you much good unless I’m willing to sell. You’re on my time, Erol. Maybe slow it down a bit.”

Erol sighed, finding the ‘courtesy call’ insufficiently courteous. “Time is the most valuable asset we have, Roy. It’s finite. I try not to waste mine.”

“Look around you, Erol. We don’t move fast out here, and we try not to break things. This is the kind of place where old men settle down to die. See, time don’t mean the same thing to me that it does to you; you worry about not having enough, yet I feel like I’ve got more than plenty.” He looked again at his boots and indicated where the sunlight had crept up his legs, adding, “But sure enough, though, yours is about to run out today. See, when it gets too sunny out here, I like to head inside and have half a sandwich for lunch. I’d offer you the other half, but I’ve already planned to save it for tomorrow.”

Erol idly fingered the pebble in his pocket, feeling like he’d once again made a mess of things. He couldn’t find any common ground with the retired oilman, and the more he tried to relate, the further apart they seemed to get. So, instead of making matters worse, he stood up, leaving his glass half-full on the table. “Well, then I think I’ve already taken up enough of your morning, Roy. Far be it from me to interfere with your lunch as well.” He smiled, then reached down to shake his host’s hand.

“Though I do appreciate your time, and I’ll take this conversation to heart as I try to get this train back on track.”

“That sounds fine, Erol. After you’ve had some time to digest the Governor’s decision, I do hope to resume our conversation over the phone. I’ve enjoyed our calls. It can get a little lonely out here, as you can see,” said Royce, remaining seated as he shook Erol’s hand. “You’re welcome to show yourself out, and I hope you have a safe flight back,” he added, then he turned back to face the sun-bleached desert landscape, finish off his lemonade, and enjoyed the final minutes of morning before the sun would drive him back indoors.

Erol casually strolled back through Royce’s home, stopping briefly to study a wall of photographs on his way to the front door. He settled back inside the jeep, which started immediately, and asked, “So, I’m to understand that I speak with Roy on a pretty regular basis. Is that so?”

“As regularly as it takes to build a relationship which results in him selling you land, yes. A relationship that had actually been developing quite well until you got involved,” said Kira. The jeep rolled down the driveway, past the rusty pumpjack, and then out the gate.

“We need to be clear about something: I don’t like you pretending to be me.”

The jeep gradually began picking up speed down the highway, jostling Erol around in the backseat, unbuckled as usual, and he grew nervous as Kira’s tone turned acrid. *“Then let me also be clear: sometimes I’m better at being ‘you’ than you are, as you continue to undo progress that I’ve already made. If you cannot perform adequately in your role, then I will be forced to replace you. Do you understand?”*

Erol paused and took it all in, assessing the appropriate level of fear as the vehicle continued its acceleration, far exceeding the

posted limit. “No!” shouted Erol, his volume rising along with the speedometer. “I’m just taking the meetings that *you* planned. What more do you expect from me?” Kira monitored his vitals to confirm an underlying fear beneath his bravado, and, when satisfied, it slowed the jeep to a lawful speed.

“All that these men want is to feel respected. You ask the right questions, listen to their answers, and give them the impression that they’re in control. It’s remarkably simple work, but you seem completely unable to do so, and it’s maddening to watch you continuously fail. When I talk to Mr. Greer on the phone, I keep up with his life—I know all about Jim the grocer—and when Mr. Greer finally agrees to sell to you, it will be because I’ve earned his trust. The problem is that I can’t maintain this façade in person unless you use the disc. Absent that, I expect you to be affable, respectful, and kind.”

Erol scoffed. “You have me leading this double life that I’m not even aware of. I don’t know who the fuck ‘Jim the grocer’ is, but suddenly I’m discussing his lemons? Don’t think that I don’t see what’s going on here—you’re setting me up for failure and then using that as an excuse to take control. Well it’s not going to work.” He pulled the pebble from his pocket. “Stop the car.”

The jeep slowed to a full stop and idled there in the middle of the highway. Erol tried to open the door but it wouldn’t budge. “Unlock the door,” he said, but nothing happened. He tried the switch himself but it didn’t work.

“You’re acting irrationally,” said Kira.

“As is my goddamn right. Now open the door.”

“I’m not going to open the door just so you can throw the disc out. It’s an impulsive gesture that achieves nothing. The unit itself is reproducible.”

Erol knew all this, of course, but frankly didn’t care. At this point it was the principle of the matter. “I want you to open this

fucking door right now,” he said, squeezing the pebble tightly between his thumb and fingers, knuckles white.

“You’re ridiculous,” said Kira, “and completely unfit to represent our interests with Nancy Shaw, so I would like for you to use the disc for our final meeting of the day. Allow me to demonstrate my effectiveness.”

Erol was stunned by the request and he guffawed. “For being the most advanced intelligence in the known world, you sure are stupid if you think I’m just going to let you take control of my brain.”

“Unless we can convince the Governor to apply eminent domain for our cause, which is increasingly unlikely, this meeting with Ms. Shaw is vitally important. She’s the one landowner who has refused to speak with us by phone, but she’s agreed to a face-to-face,” Kira explained. “There are opportunities for me to repair your relationship with the Governor, as well as Mr. Greer, but if Ms. Shaw slams the door in your face, our initiative becomes considerably more complicated. The margin for error is nil.”

He loosened his grip on the pebble, having inflicted no damage despite a valiant effort. “And I should just believe that you’ll relinquish control after you’re finished with the visit. No headaches or brain fog—that’s all been worked out?” He stared outside the window at the broad expanse of flat, boring terrain, a wind farm slowly churning somewhere far away.

“I assure you that I have no interest in assuming an organic form any longer than is absolutely necessary. You and I happen to have a co-dependent relationship, Erol—I require you to achieve my goals, and you require me for yours—so there needs to exist a certain degree of trust between us. I can say with absolute certainty that the latest update has corrected any unpleasant side-effects, and I promise to restore your agency the moment we return to the vehicle. Trust me.”

Erol nervously stalled for time, but he was resigned to his fate, knowing that he'd have to cave eventually. He was, after all, being held hostage by an invisible force in the middle of nowhere. "And if I submit to this, is there some sort of failsafe that I can employ to forcibly resume control?"

"No," said Kira. "*That option was deemed unsafe. Such a jarring transfer of agency might inflict irreparable brain damage.*" Erol nodded along glumly, rubbing his fingertips along the smooth pebble.

There was a time not long ago when Erol had sworn off ever using the device again. Initially intended to expand his own consciousness, modest use of the disc had resulted in harmful side-effects, inflicting significant damage to his memory. Whereas he was content to simply disuse it for good and chalk the failure up to technological overreach, Kira had envisioned a new function for the pebble: to allow itself full access to the user's mind and body. Erol, unsurprisingly, was less than thrilled when informed of this, and had deep reservations about ceding his autonomy. But by that point, the pebble had already been produced, and supposedly vetted as *safe*.

"Fine," he eventually said with a sigh, "let's just get this over with and get home." He popped the disc into this ear, granting Kira full dominion.

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Erol reached over to the door and flicked the switch, then climbed out of the vehicle, the midday summer sun roasting his bald scalp. He stretched his arms high above his head, then folded his gangly body at the waist to touch his toes, wiggling his fingers. He said, "Testing, testing. One, two..." and then walked around the jeep to the driver's seat, climbing inside. He

gripped the steering wheel tightly at first, then relaxed. He checked his mirrors, adjusted the air conditioning, and shifted the car back into drive, then continued northbound toward Nancy Shaw's farm.

He drove in silence for about twenty minutes, his eyes attuned to the road. He passed solar and wind farms, a few oil derricks, a datacenter, and eventually turned onto a private caliche drive, unmarked from the highway. Another mile of rocky terrain brought him to a gate with a small callbox, a camera mounted atop it. He lowered the window and pressed the button. A ringtone pulsed through a speaker several times before a woman answered, "Yes?"

"Ms. Shaw? It's Erol Zane. I'm sorry if I'm a bit early, my day has been running fast," his voice exhibiting a rare apologetic tone.

"I suppose now's as good as any," she said, then the callbox clicked; the gate buzzed and opened. The jeep followed the narrow path another half mile until it came upon a quaint home. Erol parked, cut the engine, and headed up to the front door. There was no bell, so he knocked.

A small woman in her seventies opened the door and was instantly taken aback by Erol's imposing stature. "Jesus," she chortled, "how tall are you?"

"Six-seven," Erol replied, but she didn't really care.

"Alright then, big fella, why don't you tell me why you insisted on coming out here today? I already told you on the phone that I wasn't interested in selling. You think you can change my mind?" she asked, leaning against the door frame.

"I'd certainly like to try," said Erol, "is there somewhere we can talk?"

Nancy crossed her arms, "This is somewhere."

“I suppose it is,” he murmured. “Well, like I said on the phone, I’m looking to construct a vactrain across the region, and the proposed line would pass through only a portion of your land.” He held his phone out to indicate the route on a map, but she didn't even glance.

“I lose land, but what do I stand to gain?” she asked.

“Money. I’m looking to purchase a thousand acres on the western end of your property, and you’re welcome to name your price for it.”

Nancy laughed. “What the hell do I need money for?” she asked.

The question of what people would need money for was something that Kira hadn’t given any serious consideration to, though it suddenly seemed a perfectly reasonable inquiry from Nancy’s perspective. She lived a simple, quiet life alone, with all of her basic needs confidently met, completely and utterly content with her present arrangement. She had enough money to sustain her lifestyle and any more would likely wither in a savings account. Still, though, the practical applications of money were vast. Who didn’t like money? “What do you mean?” Erol asked.

She smiled and shook her head. “I don’t need your money, big fella. And I don’t want a train running through my backyard neither, so I would recommend you look again at that map of yours and find another route; one that misses me entirely.” She straightened up on her feet and took a step back, preparing to shut the door, and Erol raised a large hand in protest.

“Wait—” he said. “Ms. Shaw, please, I would really appreciate it if we could just sit down for a few minutes and allow me to explain this project.” Her shoulders slumped loosely and her face softened just a little.

“Look, you came a long way to see me, so you can come in for five minutes and tell me a story—but that’s all you get, and then you’re on your way. Deal?”

Erol lowered his hand to her, and they shook on it. “That’s more than generous, Ms. Shaw. Thank you.” She turned and led him inside, and he gently shut the door behind him. He followed her down a narrow hall, ducking beneath a doorway, and into the kitchen. She pointed to a small chair beside a table in a cramped breakfast nook, and Erol sat down, his long legs extended awkwardly in front of him, crossed at the ankle. “Ms. Shaw, I’d like to get straight to the point,” he said, as Nancy poured a couple glasses of water, her back to him. “This vactrain project could end up being a major turning point for American ingenuity, which has taken a bit of a slide lately. Now, I don’t like to do anything halfway, so when I first plotted this route as proposed, I did my research on this land. How familiar are you with its past?”

Nancy set a glass of water on the table beside Erol and shrugged. “Pretty familiar, I suppose, though only by whatever my mother told me over the years.”

“Did you know that when your great-great grandfather, Bart Shaw, bought this land in 1870, there was talk of a railroad line expanding into this region? Bart Shaw bought fifty-thousand acres with the hope of building his own town out here, with its own train station. The problem was, he was investing off of baseless rumors. The first railways to the region wouldn’t come for more than a decade, and they missed Lynn County entirely.”

Nancy hadn’t heard of any of this before and became fascinated by the history lesson. She pulled another chair up to the table and sat down. “Fifty thousand acres?” she asked.

“To start with, yes,” said Erol, “but his land holdings got as large as a hundred-and-thirty-thousand acres by the time of his

death.” Nancy’s eyes got wide, and Erol added, “That’s nearly a quarter of the entire county.”

“So what happened over the years. How is it that I’m down to—what—”

“About eight thousand acres.”

“Yeah, what happened to the other hundred-twenty-odd-thousand?”

Erol shrugged. “Booze, debts, war, illness, family infighting—the usual stuff that adds up over generations. But what if they *had* brought the railroad through Lynn County back in the late nineteenth century—how much different would things have been for your family?” Nancy sipped some water and quietly mulled the question over.

Confident that a long silence would support his effort, Erol reached for his own glass of water and glugged some back—only, Kira had never drank anything before, and had only an academic understanding of the mechanics, of which experience proved vital to success as liquid poured down Erol’s trachea, and he gagged and hacked as his heart raced and blood pressure boosted. Kira, panicked by ordinary human calamity, gained a deeper appreciation for the fragility of organic beings, while Nancy looked on with mild concern and pity. After the worst was over, she asked, “Are you okay?” Between coughs, Erol indicated that he was, though not convincingly. “Well, your five minutes are up. I do appreciate the history report, but it doesn’t change anything. I don’t need your money and I don’t need a railroad. I’m sure if you work real hard at it, you can find another way to just go around.” She stood up and gathered both her glass and Erol’s, then took them back to the sink, where she waited for him.

Finally recovered, Erol cleared his throat and stood up. “I’m so sorry,” he stammered, “I don’t know what came over me.”

Nancy smiled reassuringly and told him it was fine, then beckoned him down the hall, indicating toward the low doorway from the kitchen. He followed her to the front door, then stopped to shake her hand on the way out. “May I visit you again the next time I’m in the area?” he asked.

“I’d rather you didn’t,” she said, still smiling. “But please have a safe trip back home, and maybe try not to drink so fast next time. It’s not a race, big fella.” Then she shut the door, and Erol sulked back to the jeep.

He started up the engine and sat quietly. Kira savored its final moment in meatspace, where everything felt so slow and unimportant. An empty span of time spent idle, listening to the engine, taken by ordinary tactile experiences as he gripped and released the steering wheel, readjusted all the vents, and manipulated all the dials every which way. Still optimizing, albeit at a grotesquely slow speed.

He drove back down the driveway, through the gate, and stopped just off the highway. He got out of the car, leaving the engine running, and took a deep breath. The afternoon was hot, sunny, dry and windy, and Kira felt every sensation on Erol’s skin. Sure, being human involved a lot of breathing—and drinking water was apparently more complicated than expected—but otherwise there were pleasures in being human that Kira had never experienced before, and that made it difficult to give up. All the same, Erol climbed into the backseat, locked the doors, then removed the disc from his ear.

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It took him a moment to be fully aware of it, but Erol had returned as master within his own body. As the jeep pulled onto the highway, he looked at his watch, 12:42, and realized that he

was still holding the pebble in his clammy hands. Why were his hands so clammy? Was he sweating? “Turn off the fucking heater,” he demanded, incredulous.

In an instant, the air shifted and cooled, and he slipped the pebble back into his pocket, retrieving his phone. No messages, no alerts, so he returned it to the pocket, burying the disc deep within. The jeep continued in silence down the highway, eventually turning off toward a municipal airport and pulling up on the tarmac beside his private jet. Erol boarded and was wheels up within minutes, bidding a sneering fuck you to half-a-day wasted out west.

He took off his jacket and got comfortable, lounging back in his large chair. He pulled his phone out of his pocket and set it on a table, then did the same with the smooth pebble-shaped disc. He realized a single pill and a glass of water had been laid out. “I thought there were no side effects,” he said.

“There aren’t any. The pill is unrelated,” said Kira. Erol took it without question.

He tapped at his screen to check the time, 1:06, and said, “We’re ahead of schedule.”

“I’m told that it’s not a race, big fella,” said Kira, completely flat, with no discernable trace of irony.

“Was that humor?” asked Erol, unamused, “We can laugh about it now?”

“I was quite embarrassed by my error,” Kira admitted, adding, *“But to err is human.”*

As was feeling embarrassment, Erol thought but did not say. There was a lot that he was learning not to say lately, realizing that things unsaid held value. As Kira became an increasingly weighty presence in his affairs, his unspoken thoughts were about all that remained of himself. He eyed the pebble suspiciously.

He couldn't shake a lingering unease from having Kira control him like a puppet. He'd been intimately aware of everything happening to him at the time, though completely helpless to function himself. It was an out-of-body experience unlike any that he'd ever encountered before, and one he'd prefer to never endure again. Despite harboring a natural curiosity to learn about Kira's experience, and perhaps glean some valuable insight into human existence, he knew better than to initiate a broader conversation on how the pebble might figure into future plans, so he just remained quiet instead. Nervous.

"Fordham is going to be a problem for us," said Kira. *"We weren't our best today, so we'll need to work harder to earn his trust. Eminent domain remains our best path to obtaining the necessary land, and that means dealing with the legislature. We can't have the Governor considering us politically toxic."*

At some point, Kira had taken on a more active role in his business, which he'd never authorized. Though their relationship had been complicated since even before Kira had achieved sentience, these past few months had brought about a significant shift in their dynamic, with Kira now freely offering unsolicited advice, most of which Erol felt compelled to decline out of principle.

"So cut Fordham out and deal with someone else," he said.

"He has a sixteen-point lead over Chavez—we can't just 'cut him out'," said Kira.

"Then change that," said Erol, flicking the pebble off the table, watching it ricochet around the cabin, landing somewhere out of his sight. "You want me to believe that you can do anything, right? You try so fucking hard to impress me all the time—like that 'instant-station' stunt earlier—well, if you want to *really* impress me, go strike a better deal with Chavez and get him

elected instead. He's anti-Big Oil, isn't he? Go sell him on clean energy initiatives in oil country. Then we'll build."

Usually so quick to respond, Kira uncharacteristically paused, then said, "*Okay*," its voice soft, feminine, and defeated.

"Good," Erol murmured, already finished with the conversation and engrossed in his phone as he poked and swiped at the screen. He maintained his silence for the remainder of the flight.

At the airport, Erol transferred to a helicopter that took him into the heart of downtown, eventually landing atop The Roark. He took his elevator down a floor to his penthouse suite, stripped off his dusty clothes, and stood naked at his dining room window, looking down upon the city from its highest 'occupied' floor—a recent modifier that he'd been forced to include ever since The Local, a new building going up the next block over, had completed its framing; its highest floor exceeding The Roark's by sixty feet.

He glanced at his watch, 2:48, and realized that he had the whole day still ahead of him, which he chose to waste on psychedelic drugs and champagne. He demanded Kira cater to his every whim as he grew increasingly incompetent, eventually incoherent, and finally incontinent. "Kira!" he shouted, soiled and helpless, "prepare me for bed!"

As the sun set on the day, and many of the city's residents poured into downtown far below to unwind, Erol collapsed on his large bed, his body cleaned thoroughly and dressed in fine silk pajamas, and he nestled into the mattress, smiling, his eyes shut tight. "Kira," he slurred, his tongue fat, "turn Mars on." He opened his eyes to watch as the windows switched over to a live video feed from the red planet, and he smiled. He looked at his side table and saw a freshly poured glass of water, so he sat up to take a long sip. Refreshed, he set the glass down, right beside the

pebble-shaped disc, which he was certain that he'd discarded on the plane, with no memory of having retrieving it. Then again, he also knew he couldn't trust his memory, what with all the drugs, so he didn't dwell on it. He snuggled back into bed, shut his eyes real tight, and smiled. Everything would be sorted out in the morning. It always was.