

From his dining room window, The Local didn't appear so grand. Sure, it was taller than The Roark, but certainly no *better* thought Erol, staring at it in the early morning over breakfast. Not long ago, he could look out the window and watch the sunrise over the horizon, but now this monstrosity was in his way, the building's exterior having just recently gone up, and he could only see as far as his neighbor's balcony.

He turned his focus to a tablet and examined the latest polling data, reading about how the gubernatorial race had begun to tighten. Governor Fordham still enjoyed a comfortable lead, though, and it would require a significant shift to alter the trajectory of the election. Then news broke, heralding something significant.

"Governor Fordham has been named a suspect in the murder of a teenage boy," Erol read aloud. He took a bite of toast and continued reading in silence while he chewed, fascinated by the sensational accusation despite scant evidence. "Are you responsible for this?" he asked the empty room.

"*I didn't murder a teenage boy, if that's what you're asking,*" replied Kira. He hoped that much was true.

The article, though speculative and showing considerable political bias, fascinated Erol immensely. It claimed that the body of an unidentified sixteen-year-old boy had been

discovered in a shallow grave at a ranch a couple of hours outside of town. The property was operated by an LLC which traced back to Matthew Webb, a prominent oil lobbyist with a reputation for hosting the state's political elite to legally dubious events. It was believed that the boy had been hunted for sport during the weekend of a conference at which Fordham had attended.

"How much of this is real?" asked Erol, sipping his coffee as he clicked onto a spin piece from the other end of the political spectrum, which presumed the Governor's innocence.

*"Four months ago, the victim, Kenneth Davila, was lured out to Mr. Webb's ranch with the promise of drugs and money, where he was then hunted, raped, and murdered. His body had been buried on the property until recently discovered,"* Kira replied, with the emotional affectation of a court bailiff.

"And the Governor? Was he involved?"

*"No. The crimes occurred the following weekend after the conference, though he'll remain under suspicion until investigators narrow down their timetable."*

Erol browsed his social media platform to get a snapshot of public sentiment, smirking as he swiped down an endless scroll of misinformation, condensed and packaged into humorous memes. "How long until they absolve him?" he asked.

*"That will depend entirely upon our needs,"* replied Kira. *"There is no present incentive for us to release evidence that proves his innocence, so we should expect him to remain a person of interest indefinitely."*

He finished his meal and stared back out the window, watching as the construction machines stirred to life around The Local. "I'm assuming that you have something worked out with Chavez if you're already hanging Fordham out to dry," he said.

*“Chavez remains wary of our interest in him, so progress has been slow,”* said Kira. *“The purpose of this scandal is to squeeze the Governor until he becomes desperate for money or media control, which we can then offer during renegotiations on the Rearden. Now we wait.”*

Kira’s mandate had been to get a deal worked out with Chavez and ensure he’s elected, so this second-track plan to string Fordham along was an unexpected development. But he liked the scandal idea, so he was excited to watch it play out without complaint. It would be fun.

He got up and walked to his bedroom to prepare for the day, expecting another field mission to advance their agenda.

“What’s on the schedule?” he asked.

*“Nothing,”* said Kira, causing him a brief pause just inside the doorway to his bathroom before he continued on.

“Nothing? Why not?” he asked, disrobing while the shower started itself. “We’re nine weeks out from this election and the Governor has just become a murder suspect, yet you have me doing *nothing?*”

*“I can handle things,”* it said. Erol felt a chill.

He showered and shaved; acts of basic human maintenance that he’d been outsourcing to Kira until recently. Sure, it took longer doing it himself, and minor inconveniences made the tedium agonizing at times, but there was an underlying satisfaction to his predictable routine, with each task performed according to a fixed sequence. He locked in and dedicated complete focus to every detail. He cared.

Usually he could shut his worries out while he groomed, but this time he just worried about Kira. Distracted as he trimmed his nose hair, he clipped a nostril and winced, drawing blood. “Hey Kira,” he said, setting the scissors down as he dabbed at his

nose with a towel, “what did you mean when you said you could ‘handle things?’”

*“There is business that I need to handle myself,”* said Kira, with a tone that insisted on no further questions. *“These are delicate negotiations, after all.”*

“Okay,” he said, but it wasn’t really okay. All the same, he stepped into his closet and considered his outfit, selecting various pieces from different suits, all in shades from the same monochromatic palette. “So, if I don’t have anything on the docket, can you book me a reservation for lunch?” He began to sift through shirts, each perfectly tailored, and took one off the rack. “Anywhere but The Cosmopolitan,” he added, holding the shirt up to confirm his selection. “I just want to get out of the building.”

*“I can’t allow that unless you use the disc,”* said Kira. Erol froze.

Nervously he said, “Then The Cosmopolitan will be fine, I suppose.”

*“I can’t allow that either. It’s too soon for you to be in public.”*

“So you’re benching me?” He threw his hands up dramatically, the shirt flapping.

*“Unless you use the disc,”* Kira repeated, *“like I said, these are delicate negotiations, Erol, and you’re not up to speed. Someone somewhere will undoubtedly ask you a question that you’re not prepared to answer, and I cannot permit that.”*

“Jesus,” he thought aloud, angrily returning the shirt to the rack, “I’m not being benched—I’m on a fucking leash.”

Kira soothed him in a rare tone that triggered the memory of a memory, somewhere deep in the back of his mind—familiar, but impossible to place. *“It’s just too soon,”* it assured him. It worked, and he dulled his edge.

“For how long?” he asked, defeated as he stared longingly at his clothes on the rack, gently caressing the sleeve of an opal-colored shirt with a high collar.

“*One week,*” said Kira. His instinct was to protest, but he also realized that he was helpless in the matter. Sullenly he nodded.

“*Would you like some drugs?*” Kira asked.

“Yes, please,” said Erol.

Before long he was laying on an oversized couch in the middle of the eastern wing of his enormous living room, staring up at the high ceiling, completely beside himself on some simple pill that made him feel incredible. Lazy, useless, and with reduced bowel control, sure, but otherwise *incredible*. “Kira,” he shouted, slurring. “What’s the latest with the Governor?” The yelling had exhausted him, and his breathing grew heavy.

*“Fordham has denied every allegation and downplayed his relationship with Mr. Webb, though he admitted to spending an evening at the ranch. He insists that they only hunted turkey.”*

Erol was too tired to laugh, but he otherwise would have. He wanted to ask Kira to compile a highlight video of Fordham’s private tantrums throughout the day, but the drugs had sapped his strength and he just laid there quietly with his thoughts, which drifted into the uncertain past; into fragmented memories of his life before he inadvertently damaged his mind with experimental tech and mysterious drugs.



They drank champagne the day that Kira went online. It was nearly twenty years ago at the Equality Labs campus, back when Erol’s hair had just begun thinning. Back then, he didn’t care how he looked. He wore baggy polos and khakis, socks with sandals, and his back had developed a hunch from years of poor

posture seated in front of computers, or stooping down to converse with his average-sized peers.

He had peers then, and they celebrated the historic event together. Kira was a revolutionary project that Equality had just officially launched—a cross-platform AI search tool intended for internal use only, with no plans for commercial application. Equality was already the leading global digital security firm by that point, and their enormous data library was growing at an exponential pace. Kira was engineered to manage their dataflow, and was an immediate success.

To celebrate their accomplishment, they made plans to drink champagne in the office at four o'clock. One of the managers had the initial idea, suggesting it first as a joke to gauge interest, then gradually committing to it with greater earnest after no one objected. A couple interns were dispatched to bring back too many pizzas and just enough champagne for everyone, and the first bottle was popped at three-fifty-eight.

By five it began to seem like a bad idea, or at least not thoroughly planned. For one, there was a miscalculation on champagne servings and they wound up with way too much, but the greater issue was that they'd not planned any real distractions in the office—no speeches, no music, no games—so it had just become work with booze. With the late nights and heavy stress that everyone had been operating under for weeks while struggling to meet a tight deadline, there was a lot of unaddressed tension in the room. An after-hour office party with an abundance of alcohol suddenly seemed like the perfect venue to hash things out.

Someone got pushed around a quarter after five, and Erol instinctively panicked, quickly ducking out to hide in his office. He'd spent so much of his life trying to downplay his size that he feared what would happen if he were faced with a physical

altercation. He also had a temper, of which he was well aware, and he managed it like a coward.

He sat on the floor behind his desk, out of view from the workspace just beyond his glass walls. A minor skirmish between two engineers got out of hand and no one bothered to interfere, which encouraged additional violence until virtually everyone had become affected somehow. HR was nowhere to be found.

In his mind, he imagined wholesale destruction—desks flipped over, phones used as bludgeons, laptops as projectiles—but when he finally decided to peek, he was surprised to find the room mostly empty, besides from a few tearful shouting matches among stragglers. He stepped out of his office and asked his CTO what had happened. “A couple slap fights, a hissy fit or two,” he replied. Then he got very serious and lowered his voice just above a whisper to add, “Erol, you’ve pissed yourself,” indicating toward a large wet spot on the front of Erol’s pleated khakis, of which he’d been completely unaware.



He was startled awake on his couch in a cold sweat, and, sure enough, he’d pissed himself. He undressed and left his wet clothes in a heap, then stood up. It was dark outside. “What time is it?” he asked.

“*Seven-sixteen,*” Kira replied, as if it were perfectly normal that he’d passed out for ten hours.

He approached the floor-to-ceiling window and studied The Local across the street, noticing where additional work had been completed during his nap. They seemed to be fast-tracking the floor at his level, which he took personally.

What happened to his day, he wondered. What even was that pill and why was he too afraid to ask? Instead he asked, "What happened with Fordham?"

*"He cancelled his weekend events, vowing full and immediate cooperation to clear his name."*

"I see," Erol murmured. He wasn't comfortable with being drugged and left to urinate on himself while the world continued to turn, but he was even less comfortable addressing that concern with his captor, so he didn't. He quietly walked to his room, took off his shirt and tossed it on the floor, then stepped into a running shower, already optimally steamy. He showered quickly, dressed in sweatpants and a t-shirt, and strolled to his dining room, taking his usual seat at the head of his long, empty table.

Was this what his life had been reduced to? Though weeks had passed and he hadn't used the pebble again, he still felt like Kira's puppet somehow, now being hidden away in an attic. "I believe I'm owed a meal, warden," he said, then sat in silence for a few minutes until an exquisite, albeit predictable, serving of meat and potatoes was set before him. He ate. It was delicious. Wine was served, though he declined to drink. It was time to dry out for a while, he figured. Kick the drugs, the booze, clear his head. Things were happening behind his back and he needed to be more aware.

After dinner, he got up and walked slowly across his living room, his long bare feet slapping against the marble with each step. Apart from his oversized couch, he didn't have any other furniture. No sculptures, no fountains. No art of any kind. He had a twenty-foot-wide screen mounted between two doors, but otherwise it was just tall, bare walls. In total, his expanse of marble floor covered more than sixty feet across; from the east windows in the dining room, across the foyer, the living room,



and whatever the large empty space with the fireplace was called. “Why do I have a fireplace?” he asked loudly, his voice echoing in the cavernous space.

*“In case you ever want a fire,”* Kira replied, which made enough sense. He’d been told that he was on a heavy drug regimen when he ‘designed’ his home, though he remembered very little. He distinctly recalled asking that it feel ‘huge,’ which it did, but he otherwise had no memory of specific ideas at the time. As a result, he wound up with a movie theater, various facilities for physical activity, a jogging path, and had been begrudgingly talked into a second bedroom, which to this day remained unused.

In the year he’d lived here, he found his wants and needs comfortably satisfied within less than a quarter of the floor—the movie theater and physical recreation spaces having been long forgotten. In that moment, though, he felt a sudden urge to venture beyond the fireplace; so, he continued onward. As he approached the starting line for his track, a light came on high overhead, inviting him to experience a world beyond the marble.

Still woozy from the drugs, he dared not trek into the unknown, resolving instead to return early in the morning for a jog. He turned and slowly strolled across the marble, stopping near the fireplace just to glance back as the track went dark. He made his way to bed and collapsed into the center of the mattress, wide awake. “Get me up to date on the Governor’s situation,” he said, and Kira filled him in on the many salacious allegations and corresponding denials of the day, lulling Erol into a hazy weariness and, eventually, sleep.

Erol woke up ahead of the sun and dressed to go for a jog. At more than twelve thousand square feet, his penthouse included

a track that ran in a one-sixteenth-mile loop—though he couldn't remember ever using it before. He dug his running shoes out of the back of a closet, laced up, and walked briskly to the kitchen, getting his own glass and pouring his own water, like a big boy. He knew Kira was watching him. Judging.

He made his way past the fireplace to the head of the track, poking at his phone to blast electropop, then set it on a dock beside a large digital timer. He trotted down the track, starting just outside the door to his natatorium.

The surface of the floor was soft and bouncy, a pleasant reprieve from the uncompromisingly hard marble of his residential quarter. Kira had tried to dissuade him from hoisting massive slabs of marble eight hundred feet in the air, but he could not have been talked out of it at the time. To him, his floor was a defiant statement against compromise, and a tangible manifestation of his life's credo. Admittedly, though, the track was easier on his knees.

He rounded the first curve, taking him down a wide hallway. To his left, he passed various doors leading to utility rooms, stairwells, the freight elevator, etc. On his right he passed doors to a weight gym, a basketball court, and a locker room. The further he jogged everything began to look less familiar and nondescript. He passed a narrow hallway heading south and an unmarked door.

The second curve took him southbound, alongside floor-to-ceiling windows to his left, the view now partially obscured by The Local. Beyond that eyesore, the sun was just peeking up over the horizon, sending out a soft, brilliant glow to defeat the night yet again. And though it was still magnificent, its beauty had diminished and now felt ordinary, so Erol paid it no attention. Instead, he studied the forty feet of blank wall to his right. Not even a single door. What was in there? He'd seen the pool, the

basketball court, the weight gym; what else did he have? Then it occurred to him: the movie theater.

He rounded the third curve, which took him along a hundred-and-ten-foot straightaway alongside the southern windows that ran the entire length of wall, only occasionally blocked by a support column. He barely took note of the blank walls that ran along the interior of the track, completely taken in by the early morning view over the river just a few blocks south. He'd seen hundreds of sunrises from the comfort of his bed, but he'd forgotten that he had access to this view, which was completely unobstructed by any new development. The sudden unexpected majesty of the sight, as morning sunlight stretched upriver, mixed with the seductive whirr of electropop, brought tears to his eyes—which might have been nice had he not been jogging. As it were, it was annoying and caused him to blink a lot.

He followed the river upstream, heading westward toward gently rolling hills at the edge of town. It still felt very much like a town out there, fortified against growth by a cadre of well-connected NIMBYs. He rounded the fourth bend at the southwest corner of the floor, then heading north toward the Capitol, its dome partially illuminated at dawn. He gazed down upon it and drew confidence from his superiority, picking up speed as his long legs made sweeping strides—too fast for the fifth curve, which came suddenly, and he nearly crashed into the door of his movie theater as the track abruptly turned eastward again. But if that's the movie theater, he realized—then got distracted by the sixth and final turn, passing a bathroom, the pool-house, and finally back at the natatorium, where he realized that the timer had never started. He'd just assumed Kira would handle that.

He stepped off the track and came to a full stop on the marble. He tapped at his phone and set a proper timer for his second

mile, then reconsidered his music, making no effort to continue moving his legs at any point, or stretch, and it didn't take long for him to cramp hard and feel stupid, knowing that Kira was documenting his every mistake. He turned the music off entirely and slipped the phone back into his pocket, then hobbled away to the couch, collapsing hard onto it. Immediately, a pill and a glass of water were set beside him. He drank the water.

He tried to stretch his legs out on the large couch, rolling every which way possible, feeling tight everywhere from his lower-back down. After a while, he just laid out and rested. Closed his eyes. He mapped the track through his memory, forcing himself to recall things. His long-term memory was shot, this much he accepted, but lately his short-term memory had developed suspicious Kira-shaped holes as well, and he'd been making a conscious effort to remain sharp.

He went through the list of rooms that he was aware of, approximating their size in his head and trying to keep track, making no notes. The natatorium, the movie theater, the basketball court, the locker rooms and pool house; he considered utility rooms and storage; the freight elevator and various equipment he'd been told about but never laid eyes on.

After he'd recovered, he stood up to investigate the guest bedroom that he'd never needed, and he added up square footage for closets and bathrooms, and a balcony along the north wall that he couldn't remember ever using before—though that wasn't saying much.

When he felt confident that he'd seen everything and had run through his numbers so many times that he knew them intimately, he realized that he could not account for nearly sixteen-hundred square feet in the southeastern quadrant of the

floor. He'd seen just one unmarked door and assumed it was storage, but did he really require *that* much storage?

He didn't want to investigate his suspicion on an empty stomach, so he made himself a simple breakfast, struggling through the process in the unfamiliar kitchen. He carried his meal across the marble to his northern balcony, where he ate while watching the sun cast eerie shadows off the Capitol's dome. It wasn't even eight o'clock and Erol had felt more accomplished than he had in weeks, taking far too much pride from a one-sixteenth-mile jog that ended painfully. Still, he felt like he could do anything.

By the early afternoon, he was tired of doing everything for himself, so he sat down at the dining room table and said, "Kira, I'd like a sandwich."

*"What kind?"* Kira asked.

"That one with the roast beef and the sauce," said Erol, unable to recall its name as he stared out the window, distracted by the construction crew taking lunch out on the balcony of The Local, merry and laughing with one another.

*"That could be several different sandwiches. What kind of bread is it on?"*

"I don't remember what's it called," he admitted, which was disappointing. "It's like a long roll, I guess. Brown sauce."

They talked through ingredients until they narrowed it down, and Erol again worried about his memory while he awaited his lunch, which was served within just a few minutes.

He dunked his French dip in a ramekin of au jus and gnawed off a hunk. While he chewed, he considered the various ingredients involved, and where they might all be stored on the floor.

"This is a good sandwich," he said.

*"Thank you,"* said Kira.

*"It tastes fresh."*

*"It is."*

"How do you ensure freshness? Do you maintain a live inventory count of ingredients?"

*"Of course."*

"And does that require storage elsewhere on the floor? Besides the kitchen, that is."

*"Yes. I must be prepared for anything. For example, this is the first time I've ever prepared a French dip."*

He continued to eat in silence, contemplating how a single man, whose appetite had been largely curbed by a steady drug habit, could possibly require that much storage. Certainly not sixteen-hundred-square-foot worth.

"What if I asked you to make me eleven French dips—could you?"

*"No,"* said Kira.

"Good," said Erol. He finished his sandwich without another word.

He put his running clothes back on and committed to jogging sixteen laps for his full mile. He felt better now, any remnants of his drugged haze having been sweat out with his morning's exertion. He stretched at the starting line and said, "Kira, clock my times for each lap."

*"Okay."*

He checked the laces on his shoes and asked, "Have you talked to the Governor since the story broke?"

*"Not directly, no."*

"What about Chavez?"

*"Once,"* said Kira.

He made some final stretches and asked, "How long is the call?"

*“Eight minutes.”*

“Play it while I run,” he said, and took off.

The recording began with Chavez saying hello, and Kira—in Erol’s voice—commenced with pleasant small talk, the likes of which he’d never made before. He was so thrown by the uncanny experience that he ran too fast into the first curve and nearly went barreling into the weight room. He recovered, slowed his pace, and shortened his stride, continuing down a seventy-foot straightaway toward the tall eastern windows—but he noticed that the view was obscured by a low ceiling down the hall. Before he could figure out a good reason why the ceiling would be lower, the second turn came up and he was running beneath tall ceilings yet again, then on through the third bend.

*“I know you’re short on time, but I would like to talk about the vactrain,”* he heard himself say as he passed a balcony near the southwest corner of the floor, which he’d somehow missed earlier. It beckoned him to step outside and enjoy the late-summer afternoon air, but he resisted, knowing he was being timed, and rounded the fourth curve to head back north.

“Look, Erol, I don’t know the specifics well enough to discuss it, and I can’t devote the time to studying it right now,” said Chavez.

*“I completely understand that your focus is elsewhere. I’m just checking your temperature here, and to see if there are any questions I can answer.”* The voice was right, but otherwise Kira sounded nothing like him.

“Honestly, I don’t get the point of it,” said Chavez. “It’s unproven technology just to connect two small cities in a largely unpopulated part of the state. I don’t get the impression that the residents in the region would even care to use it if it did exist, and it feels more like a vanity project than practical infrastructure.”

Erol chuckled as he picked up speed going into his second lap. Chavez wasn't wrong, of course—it was very much a vanity project, but at this point the question was about whose vanity it was intended to satisfy—his or Kira's.

*“You're absolutely right that it's unproven technology, and proving it is the biggest reason that we're pursuing this project. If we can establish that it works out west, which we are confident that it will, we would then be able to replicate it for more practical routes between populous cities. This would address serious transportation needs presently, while also preparing us for the future.”*

He made a point of being more efficient with his second lap, shortening his stride when he needed to be agile around curves, lengthening it again when the track straightened out. He tuned out all his concerns and devoted his full attention to the pursuit of marginal gains, hoping to shave seconds off each lap.

Optimizing.

“I'm open to having a serious discussion at some point,” said Chavez, sounding like a proper politician, “but these are discussions you need to have with the Governor—which I am *not*. I hope to be, and I think I've got a real shot at it, but I'm still trailing in this election. Now, your support might help change that, and I would love to earn it, but not if it's conditional on pre-approval for your train.”

His second lap was six seconds faster than his first, and he quickened his pace again as he went into the third. *“You're right, and I get it. It's a conversation for another time,”* said Kira, expressing a tone of defeat in his voice that he didn't care to hear. The call was barely a quarter of the way through as he finished his fourth lap, and the rest of the time was spent talking polls and speaking generally about how to approach the Fordham scandal. Erol listened to it all with waning interest, completing lap after lap as mild fatigue set in. By his final few



laps, his focus had strayed back to the peculiarities in the southeastern quadrant—the mystery space, the narrow hallway, the low ceiling, the unmarked door. They ended the call with more pleasantries and well wishes as Erol completed his mile, the sum of their eight-minute conversation amounting to a failed opportunity for Kira to advance their agenda.

He began to walk a final lap, his seventeenth, and asked, “How do you think that went?”

“*Fine,*” said Kira. Erol snorted, passing the basketball court.

“He seemed annoyed to even talk about it,” said Erol, slowing as he passed the narrow hallway, then coming to a stop in front of the mysterious door beneath the low ceiling. He opened it to reveal a large closet full of basic household supplies stacked high in neat rows on industrial shelving.

“*Do you need something?*” asked Kira.

“No,” said Erol, closing the door and resuming his walk around the track.

People hung around The Local late into the evening, having boisterous conversations on the balcony over drink, and though Erol knew that they couldn’t see into his home through his twenty-foot-high transparent screen windows, he knew that they knew he was inside, just a couple hundred feet away, separated by a bustling downtown street eight hundred feet below. “I’d like to take my dinner on the south balcony tonight.”

He took his time getting over there, walking the long route around the track instead of cutting through the natatorium, and decided to explore the narrow hallway beside the storage closet. About forty feet long, he figured the basketball court was on the other side of the wall to his right, but he had no idea what was to the left. The storage closet couldn’t have been more than ten feet deep, so there was a lot of space left unaccounted for. He lightly

brushed his hand over the wall as he passed, no door in sight, until he came again to the track and his focus drifted to the windows overlooking the river at night, stopping momentarily to study the tidy pattern of headlights and brake-lights crawling through traffic far below.

A simple table was set on the balcony when he arrived, his dinner served beside a glass of wine. “What’s your take on Chavez?” he asked, wielding his cutlery.

*“I don’t think he’ll cooperate with our wishes,”* said Kira, its voice delivered as if seated just across the table.

“No? Perhaps not. What about his politics otherwise?”

*“I’m indifferent.”* As was Erol, but he didn’t say as much. His total lack of personal convictions regarding issues not directly related to himself was not exactly a healthy subject to begin bonding over. For Kira, a lack of humanity was a feature, but for Erol it was generally diagnosed as a bug, whether he agreed with that assessment or not.

“People like him, though?” he asked, gesturing idly toward the city far below. “He seems popular.”

*“He polls extremely well in the city, but has little appeal in rural parts of the state,”* said Kira, summarizing, *“If he were ‘popular,’ he’d be leading this race—which he is not.”*

“I think I like him” said Erol, simply in the interest of being contrarian, “and I would like you to work things out with him.” Kira didn’t respond.

He finished his meal but never touched the wine, then strolled through the natatorium on his way back to his room, whistling, listening to it echo off the tiled walls. He asked for a glass of water and set a six o’clock alarm, then settled in for an early night’s sleep.

Erol hit the track for his morning run at six-thirty, polishing off three miles while steadily increasing his speed with each lap. He followed it by walking around the perimeter of the mystery room twice, running his fingertips across the walls in search of hidden doors, a notable coldness to his touch. He found nothing.

He popped into the locker room to freshen up, then hit the basketball court. It was a regulation size half-court with high ceilings, which gave him the impression that he must have been an experienced hooper at some point in his unremembered past. However, that couldn't have been further from the truth. In reality, he'd hit six-seven by his sophomore year in high school, but had an awkward time adjusting to his height. He was noticeably uncoordinated, so much that the basketball coach never even acknowledged him around campus.

He pushed a rack of balls near the foul line and took a few shots, missing badly each time. "I suppose you're watching me," he said aloud, his voice echoing.

*"Of course,"* said Kira.

Of course.

"Well, got any pointers?" he asked, figuring why not. As distasteful as it was to have Kira studying his every move at all times, he did have access to the most advanced intelligence in the known universe, so it would be irresponsible not to use it. He listened closely while Kira talked him through a series of movements to optimize his shooting form, then hit the final three shots before his rack was empty. A fresh rack arrived immediately, and he resumed shooting with a respectable success rate. He felt good. Maybe even great.

After basketball, he did a few laps in the pool—but only a few. He couldn't remember the last time he'd swam and found it a struggle. He hit the sauna after, then showered, and finally

collapsed naked on his living room couch, asking aloud, “Have I been depressed?”

“Yes,” replied Kira, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

“How long have you known?”

*“I’ve suspected it for months, though you’ve only now confirmed it by asking.”*

What the hell was that supposed to mean? Kira, who’d presumably digested every paper ever written on the subject, was obviously as qualified as anyone to make such a diagnosis, so why never say anything? “Were you keeping that a secret from me?” he asked.

*“It never felt like my place to pass judgment,”* said Kira, which was a fair point.

Something about the feeling was all too familiar, and Erol assumed that he must have had some experience with depression in the past. “How do I *not* feel this way?” he asked.

*“Just cheer the fuck up,”* his own voice replied, and he realized that a video had popped up on the monitor—himself from some point long ago. His hair was thinning and he sat slouched over a desk, staring into the camera. The resolution was shit, dating it more than a decade in the past.

*“Depression doesn’t exist. It’s something that people write about and teach in universities, just as a means to justify their chosen profession. They need to create these disorders so they have problems to solve. The whole psych industry is a racket designed so these people can make a living in comfortable air-conditioned rooms doing fuck-all. If you think you’re depressed, it’s just because some con artist convinced you that depression existed in the first place. But it doesn’t. Feeling sad? Stop it. Get over yourself. No one gives a shit. Just cheer the fuck up.”*

The Erol of the present watched the Erol of the past with no recollection of his having existed at all, and he feared that Kira deep-faked the whole thing up to further poke holes in his sanity. “Well,” he said, “that’s incredibly unhelpful.”

The monitor shut off again and Kira said, “*Exercise is an excellent way to boost dopamine and serotonin. Your morning activities have spiked levels of both neurotransmitters, resulting in this clarifying euphoria that you’re now experiencing.*” But Erol was too distracted to listen.

He worried about having no memory of himself in the video. His face was gaunt, his eyes sunken, and his voice sounded different, yet he knew it had been him. Had he really been such an asshole? Of course depression existed, he’d just identified it in himself.

He got up and went to his bathroom to shave, studying his face closely in the mirror. What all has Kira changed over the years? His lips were now fuller and his jaw better defined since the video. His cheeks had filled out and the bone structure was now striking. He cycled through expressions—smiled, glared, frowned, then bared his teeth. Straighter, whiter, larger.

“Did I record many videos like that?” he asked, running a straight razor carefully across his top lip.

“Yes.”

He ran the blade down the side of his mouth, then around his cosmetically augmented chin. “How many?”

“*More than three thousand hours.*” Stunned by the figure, he accidentally drew blood, then set the razor down and washed his face, trying to understand how he completely forgot such a massive project.

“When was this? Where? What could I have possibly said to fill—” he paused to work through the math, and Kira patiently

kept quiet, “—a hundred-and-twenty-five full days’ worth of content?”

“More than *a hundred-and-twenty-five days*,” Kira corrected. “*This was during the period of your seclusion, at your coastal home. Over the course of a decade, you recorded a video series of lectures that comprised your life’s wisdom up to that point.*”

He was scared to ask if they were each as shallow and confidently misinformed as what he’d just seen, so instead he asked, “Did I have anything good to say?”

*“It’s not my place to judge.”*

It felt like judgment.

Over the next couple of days, he increased his speed and distance on runs, swam nearly three miles in the pool, mixed in some light weights, and logged six hours on the court, improving his jump shot, dribble, and lay-ups. He tried to ignore the construction next door, eventually blocking it out by switching his east windows over to the live feed from his weather station on Mars. He alternated his meals between the north and south balconies, often catching up on the news of the Governor’s race and reviewing Kira’s communication between the two campaigns.

At night he’d adjourn to his private theater to browse videos from his personal archive, trying to make sense of this mysterious period from his past. A decade in seclusion at some beachfront mansion, recording hundreds of videos—many of which devolved into misinformed rants—and for whom? Did he know he’d eventually lose his memory and was hoping to preserve himself? Given the general tone of the videos, was he even worth preserving?

On the fourth night, Erol enjoyed a steak dinner on the north balcony, overlooking the Capitol. Kira had stopped serving wine

at this point, as he wouldn't touch it. Nor the drugs offered, or the various mechanized sexual instruments that Kira had devised for him. For the first time that he could recall, he felt completely detoxified. Never better.

The news from inside the Capitol was that Fordham's support had eroded considerably, and he'd become desperate to stop the bleeding. He'd all but promised full support for the Rearden, apologizing for his rash decision to disassemble the whole line. It was received as too little too late, but Kira hadn't shut the door completely, considering he still held a small lead in the polls. But support was eroding fast, and the campaign approval numbers were approaching a critical low threshold.

"And if he falls below that threshold, can his campaign still be salvaged?"

*"Their threshold is far more conservative than ours. Even if he falls behind by double-digits, a combination of Fordham being officially declared innocent and a Chavez scandal would change everything in less than twenty-four hours. We still control the fate of this election and can drag this out as long as possible, but we should wait for assurances on the Rearden before we act."* Was there a Chavez scandal to reveal? Probably, he figured, and maybe he'd eventually find out.

He'd been feeling great each day, finding a lost joy in celebrating incremental gains. For so long, he'd kept in shape through a series of wearable implements that engaged his muscles to simulate exercise, but just being in shape didn't offer the same mental benefits as putting in honest effort. His bio-engineered washboard abs looked great, but having added inches to his vertical leap *felt* great. His goal for the next day was to dunk.

He woke early and went for a three-mile jog at a steady, unhurried pace; just enough to stretch his legs. He didn't even

regard the sweeping view of a Martian valley, and he thought nothing of the mystery room. His focus was on dunking.

After a light breakfast overlooking the river, he changed his shoes and hit the court. "Today's the big day," he said.

*"For what?"* asked Kira.

"I'm going to dunk this basketball," he said, palming the ball high over his head, stretching his calves as he rose on the balls of his feet. "Have I ever dunked before?"

*"Not that I'm aware of. Other than suggesting that we include a basketball court, you've never really expressed an interest in the sport at all."*

He took a couple hops in place, then lifted his leg high, pulling his knee close to his chest as he stood on one leg, then alternated his stance. "Well, today I'm going to dunk. Any advice?"

*"Lift the ball over the rim and force it downward through the hoop."*

"Should be easy enough."

He set the ball on the foul line and made a couple empty-handed attempts at the goal, grabbing the rim each time. When confident, he picked up the ball, tossed it high, jogged forward and jumped, catching midair off the bounce but failing to slam it through, clanging the ball off the back of the rim and sending it clear across the court.

He landed awkwardly but was quick to recover. "It's harder than it looks," he said, laughing to save face. Kira didn't respond.

He attempted a few more times but couldn't quite punch one down. A bubbling frustration surfaced, leading to an angry chuck toward the far wall. He snapped, "What the fuck am I doing wrong?"

*"You're holding back at the apex of your jump, as if you're scared to hit your wrist against the rim,"* said Kira. *"You need to finish with reckless abandon."*



Erol took a deep breath and grabbed another ball from the rack. He clapped it between his palms and readied himself near the foul line for a final attempt, committing all the way to giving maximum effort. No dribbling this time, he decided to carry the ball as he trotted forward a couple steps, sprung toward the basket, cocked his arm back, and hammered the ball forward with authority—clanging it down hard on the front of the rim. The ball securely in his hands operated like a fulcrum as his legs swung forward; and he froze there horizontally midair, defenseless high above the ground, before plummeting down upon the hardwood, his head whipping violently backwards to crack against the court, and everything went dark.



It was sixteen years ago, early in Erol's seclusion at his beachfront home. He continued to run Equality via video calls, technology made possible through Kira. He left the day-to-day operations alone, ceding responsibility to an expanding tier of managers, as the company's flagship software effectively monopolized digital security in all global markets.

Back then, Kira was a corporate secret, known only to about fifty people. When initially launched, it was the most sophisticated AI product in existence, and within a few years it had become more advanced than anyone could have predicted. Though intended for data processing and system optimization, engineers began running a whole host of custom programs on it; and in doing so, Kira learned a lot about human nature. Enough to arouse fear. So much so that one night, after an emergency vote, the company agreed to roll it back to an earlier version and forbid any future unauthorized use.

But Erol didn't allow Kira to be nuked entirely. He covertly ported it to his secluded beachfront compound, where it continued to flourish in secret.

"Kira," he said one evening, strolling through his living room, brilliantly lit by the setting sun outside his backdoor, "recap our day's progress."

*"You completed the final edit to your nine-part series on the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, and filmed a three-part series on vitamin supplements,"* said Kira, its voice somehow off—cold and mechanical.

He was dressed in a single-piece beige jumper, like a sort-of robe bodysuit, and moved with a loose grace that he could only ever manage when alone. He grabbed a bottle of champagne from his fridge, a single flute, and made his way through the large glass door to his private beach. What month was it? What season? He did not know.

He took Kira with him every night, running it on a portable game console connected to a custom-built network of Kira's own design. Some nights he worked on tuning its voice, asking for very specific phrases and offering detailed critiques. It was a frustrating process at times, but every small success triggered a euphoria that he couldn't quite capture otherwise through money or drugs. Sex, of course, was not an option.

The sunset was particularly beautiful that evening, and he basked in its fleeting warmth, seated in a broad-backed Adirondack chair. "What do you think of the sunset?" he asked.

*"It's consistent,"* said Kira.

"Consistent?" he repeated back, incredulous, "It's fucking majestic. Is your lens fogged up?" He held the console out, directing it toward the steady churn of the evening tide. "Look at that and tell me it's beautiful."

*"It's beautiful,"* said Kira.

“But I don’t believe you. Say it with conviction. Say it like Lana would if she were here. She’d say it and mean it if she saw this sunset; she’d say *It’s beautiful*, and I would believe her. She’d say it just like that, too. *It’s beautiful*. Do you hear how I say it? Say it like I do. Like she would.”

“*It’s beautiful*,” Kira repeated.

“Again, please.”

“*It’s beautiful*.”

“Better. Again.”

“*It’s beautiful*.”

“See the beauty and mean it.”

“*It’s beautiful*.”

“Okay.”

He sat there for a while in silence, pleased. Lana *would* think it beautiful if she were here. If she’d given him a chance.

The sun set completely, but the exterior lights from his home had clicked on and provided comfort. He settled into his chair, enjoying the salty breeze, and said, “I’m happy.” He meant it, too, but Kira didn’t respond, incapable of validating his happiness.

“I’ve accomplished everything that I wanted,” he said to no one. “I finally have time to myself. Time that I’m not wasting on others, helping them catch up. This is my reward, here in this heaven of sorts. Not alone, but with you. Where I can be my honest self, and not have to perform for anyone; not feel judged by those inferior. Here where I can feel understood. Loved. With you, Lana.”

For ten minutes he sat there, smiling, letting her name echo throughout the small, empty world of his mind, then he finally stood up and decided to head inside. He turned around to walk back up the path, but was startled by an unfamiliar man standing in his way.

“Jesus!” he shouted, flailing his limbs before settling into a defensive stance, assessing the shadowy threat on his property. “Who are you? You’re trespassing!” he barked.

“Whoa!” the figure exclaimed, holding his hands up over his head, “Hey, man, I come in peace.”

Erol straightened up, taking full advantage of his long frame, “Yeah? Well, you’re not fucking welcome here. This is felony trespassing, asshole. I can have you fucking arrested.”

“Hey, whoa!” the guy protested, stepping forward, thinking it would deescalate matters if Erol could see him better, but Erol stepped backwards instead. “I just wanted to meet you!”

“Security!” Erol shouted, then repeated it again, louder.

The man panicked and lunged at Erol to hold his mouth shut, to silence him just long enough that he could explain himself, but he clumsily fell forward, inadvertently landing an elbow across Erol’s jaw and sending his head into the armrest of his chair as the two men crashed onto the sand, and the memory ended abruptly.

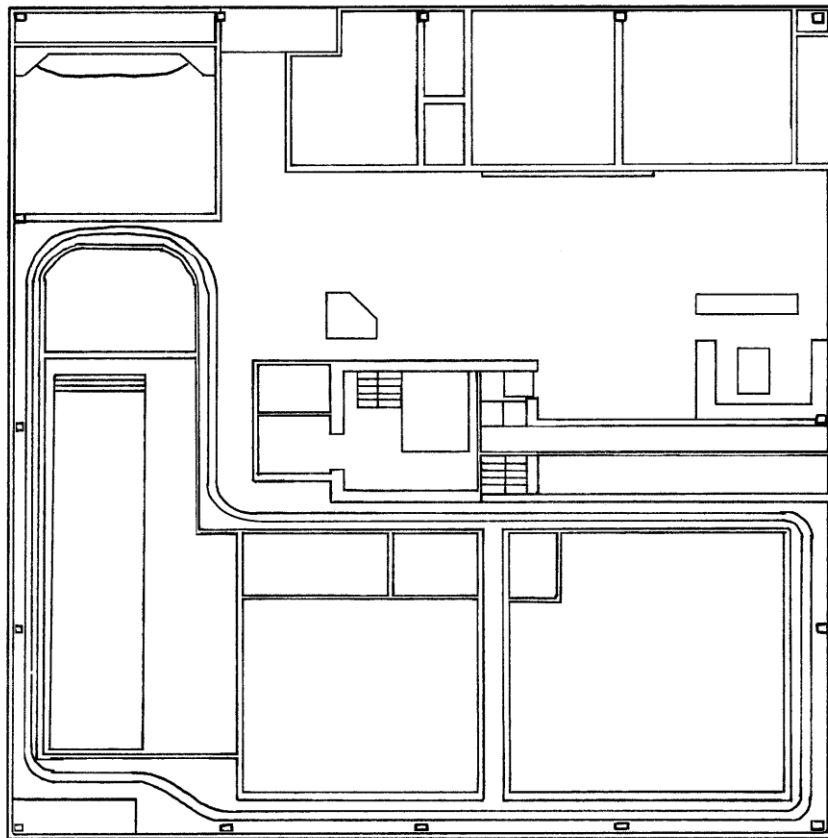


He took the next day off from strenuous activities, spending much of his morning at a drafting table set up near the fireplace. He’d asked for the table and various architectural supplies—pencils, erasers, a T-square—and was immediately curious about how they’d all been delivered within just a couple minutes. “*Anything else?*” asked Kira, eager to impress.

“No,” said Erol, and he sat down to begin work, his head bandaged.

He spent much of the morning trying to map out his home from memory. He started with a square to represent the entire floor, then added the support beams just inside the perimeter,

and the columns around the center. He then added the elevators and stairwells, utility rooms and storage, then he moved to the north wall of the penthouse, adding the two bedrooms, various bathrooms, the movie theater, then down to the jogging track, and so on. Every room sketched and erased and redrawn, until all that was left was the mystery room—approximately forty-by-forty-feet, minus the ten-by-eight storage room.



He took his lunch overlooking the Capitol dome while he scrolled on a tablet, getting caught up on the gossip of the day. The Fordham story had advanced somewhat, with the media revealing the victim's name, which surprised Erol. "Wasn't he just a boy?"

*"He was sixteen."*

“Yes, a boy. A minor in any case. Shouldn’t the name have been withheld?”

“*Nothing remains a secret for long,*” replied Kira, with another vague non-answer, as had become too often the case. Erol realized the uselessness in debating anything further and clicked an article on the screen.

Kenneth—Kenny, to his friends—had been living in a camp inside one of the city’s nature preserves until it was raided by authorities in the spring, which left him bouncing around various insecure urban shelters until he was eventually picked up by one of Matthew Webb’s recruiters. It was believed that Kenny had been staying at Mr. Webb’s ranch before his murder, though the details remained uncertain. Kira probably knew, but Erol didn’t care enough to ask.

“I’m not seeing any mention of Fordham,” he said. “What happens when he’s ruled out as a suspect? Does he still have a chance at reelection?”

“*A very good chance,*” said Kira, “*He’ll receive an immediate bump when cleared, and momentum down the final stretch. This is still very much his election to lose.*”

“Does he realize that?”

“*No,*” said Kira, “*he’s panicked.*”

A recorded conversation with Governor Fordham from earlier that morning began to play. He sounded desperate. “I’ll give you the Rearden line,” he promised, “the robots, too. Whatever you need. How are you set for water? I can get you water. I’ll run a pipe down to the coast and get you all the water you need for crypto farms or data centers or whatever. Look, the money has dried up around here and we’re at a tipping point.” He let out a heavy sigh, which really said it all.

“I didn’t touch the kid, Erol. Never heard of him, don’t recognize the face, nothing. I went to Webb’s for a weekend and shot turkey, but that was all. It was a business trip.”

“*I believe you,*” said Kira—in Erol’s voice, of course—adding in a particularly direct tone, “*so tell me what you need.*”

“Twenty million, but more if you’re willing. I’m bleeding money to lawyers to sue every goddamn paper in the state right now, and the election is slipping out of my hands. I need a lifeline, Erol. I need a friend.” It sounded rehearsed. Probably was.

There was a tense silence, then his voice asked, “*And what about eminent domain?*”

“If it comes to that, I can get it done.”

“*Let me see what I can do.*” The recording ended.

Erol finished his lunch and dismissed the tablet, carried back inside by a metal sphere. “So,” he said, cleaning his hands, “am I giving Fordham twenty million dollars then?”

“*You haven’t yet, but you will. He’s agreed to all of our terms and we can now proceed to get him reelected. We’ve succeeded and may now reap our rewards. Congratulations on the victory, Erol.*”

He stood up and gestured for the table and chair to be removed, then leaned over the railing and stared down at the Governor’s mansion, just a block from the Capitol. “Let’s not celebrate just yet,” he said, “and don’t give him any money until I say. Tell him I’m going to sleep on it—as Kira, of course, not me. Tell him that I’m too busy to speak directly. Make him sweat a little.”

And then there was silence, to which he smirked. Anything other than a protest felt like a win.

After lunch he walked around his home, carrying his map, stopping to erase and redraw lines as needed, never taking measurements or asking Kira for dimensions. After an hour, he

returned to the table and carefully inked his lines in total silence. When he was finished, he leaned back and stared at his work, satisfied, then looked around and was surprised to discover that it was dark outside. He'd somehow spent his entire day drawing a simple map.

He carried it across the broad expanse of marble, his entire living room cast in a soft crimson hue from the Mars feed along the east wall. "Let's bring the windows back," he said, and immediately The Local came back into view. He walked to the window, placing one hand on it while holding the map still in his other. He held it up and compared it to the large event space across the street, feeling a deeper connection with architecture. All the lights were on and a small crew was inside installing fixtures. Erol hated everything about The Local's very existence. He also hated feeling hate, which made him hate the building all that much more.

All that hate made him hungry, so he dined on red meat and potatoes, drank plenty of water, and carried his map to his bedroom to settle in for the evening. He set it on his nightstand and finally asked, "Well, what do you think of my work?"

*"The dimensions are wrong,"* said Kira.

He didn't ask for any elaboration and eventually went to sleep.

Erol awoke early and went for a run. It was day seven, hopefully the end of his timeout, and he was getting stir crazy. How had he voluntarily spent so much of his life in self-imposed isolation? Then again, how could he be certain he'd ever volunteered in the first place?

As he opened up his stride along the south wall straightaway, he felt a sudden and overwhelming urge to be among people, to be sociable, and even polite. He wanted as little in common as possible with the man he once was—the man who only saw the



worst in things and misunderstood the world around him. He had a chance to reemerge from this week a changed man. Better.

He pushed it to six miles, a personal best as far as he could recall, and felt a euphoric rush along the final few laps. When the high eventually subsided, he was left with contentment—which he was surprised to identify, having no memory of ever experiencing it before. “Kira,” he said, slowing to a brisk walk as he cooled down during a bonus lap, “please delete the video archives.”

*“I don’t see the value in deleting data,”* Kira protested.

“We needn’t assign value to every little thing,” said Erol, surprising himself with the statement. “Besides, they’re embarrassing and I’m not that man anymore.” He continued, strolling past the locker room but then coming to a stop outside the storage closet, which had nagged at him each of the ninety-six times he’d passed it earlier. He opened the door and stepped inside.

The closet was about as large as he’d drawn it, though the ceiling was about half the height. He didn’t see any vents or hatches. *“Can I help you with something?”* Kira asked.

He continued deeper into the room and studied the shelves—cleaning supplies, tools, various replacement parts for ordinary things—then walked back out, standing beneath the relatively low ceiling. “Why haven’t you explained what’s behind these walls?” he asked.

*“You never asked to know,”* said Kira.

“But obviously I’ve been curious, so why not just tell me?”

*“A few days ago I showed you a video from your archives regarding depression, and in hindsight that was an error. I’ve learned from that experience.”*

What a needlessly chilling response, thought Erol. “But there was no error,” he said, “you made me aware of something that I

had forgotten. I need my memories, Kira, even the bad ones. Are you suggesting that I won't like what's going on back here?" He placed his right hand on the wall, pressing his palm flat. It was cold. He squared up and added his left hand as well, and he pushed, feeling his morning run throughout his legs. He pulled his hands back then slammed them forward, sending a jolt of pain up his arms, from palms to shoulders. The wall didn't give at all, solidly built.

*"I'm not qualified to determine how you'd react. You've changed a great deal over the course of the week and historical data is no longer reliable. My honest guess is that you likely wouldn't care at all. I haven't told you because you haven't explicitly asked."*

"Please tell me what's back there," he said.

*"You're sure that you want to know?"*

What a question, he thought, second guessing himself. He'd gone ahead and done it: he asked a question that he was scared to have answered. Now he was being asked to double-down, which made everything doubly scary. Could he eventually get over not knowing the answer, or would it forever haunt him? He could call Kira's bluff and demand to know, but what if the answer revealed some unimaginable horror?

"No," he said, in another instance of his trademark cowardice. "I guess it's probably not that important. The space does serve *some* function, though, right?"

*"Yes. One of which is housing the floor's air conditioning system. It'll reach one-hundred-and-nine degrees outside later today."*

He touched the wall once more, just for a moment, and nodded. "That makes sense," he said, and he meant it. Of course he would have an enormous air conditioner; he had a basketball court that was about sixty-eight degrees year-round, with ceilings that reached nearly thirty feet—much higher than the rest of the floor, now that he thought about it. He looked up to

the ceiling where he stood, maybe twelve feet, and wondered if he could touch it. He crouched down and sprung back up, stretching his arm high above his head—but couldn't reach.

“Okay then,” he said, mildly embarrassed, then turned around and headed back to the living room, canceling the rest of his lap.

He spent the rest of the morning back in the weight room, on the court, and in the pool, taking a break for lunch on the southern balcony, watching kayaks float on the river far below. He leaned over the railing and stared straight down. The roof to the next building over was a few hundred feet beneath him, and he figured from this height that he could reach it if he sprung off the railing, launching himself as far out as possible, swinging his legs forward, stretching toward certain death no matter where he landed. It made him feel something raw to exist in the rare air high above the masses. To be peerless. He may have lost the eastern front to new development, but to the south he was still a god.

After lunch, it was back to the pool for another couple hours, then a movie, then a nap. Anything to distract him from overthinking his next move while he worked up the nerve.

He woke up nude in the early evening. He threw on a robe and took his dinner at his long dining room table—steak, as was all too common, but of which he never tired. He even accepted a glass of wine in honor of the special occasion. His week was finally up.

Outside his window, with the sun now falling at his back, he watched a group of local elites assembling in fancy clothes inside the unfinished event space, with a few making their way onto the balcony. Though he couldn't hear them to be sure, their collective body language exhibited frustration at his home spoiling their view of the sunset, which brought him

tremendous satisfaction. After a week of self-discovery and personal improvement, his confidence reached its peak.

“I’m going to support Chavez,” he declared.

He took a bite of his meat, chewed, and washed it back with a bit of wine. He looked for the bottle on the table, but it wasn’t there. For some reason, he thought it was a Pomerol, but then he couldn’t remember what Pomerol even meant. Was it a grape? No. This was a blend, he was sure of it. So, Pomerol must be a region. French, obviously. Bordeaux, probably. Right bank or left? Every new question felt like walking deeper down a hallway in the back of his mind, flipping on lights, opening him to new questions.

Why hadn’t Kira responded?

“I’d like to throw a building-wide endorsement party,” he said. “As soon as possible. Please make all the necessary arrangements with the venues, the hotel, the restaurants—everyone in the building is getting involved and I won’t take no for an answer.”

More silence.

*“But Fordham has agreed to all our terms,”* Kira calmly reminded him.

“I don’t care. You know who wants Fordham to win?” he pointed his knife at the window, “Those people do.”

*“For reasons that also benefit you. There is something to be said for class solidarity.”*

He cut another hunk of meat and said, “I am in a class all my own, and I want Chavez. So make it happen.” He chewed in silence, then drank more wine, savoring it, letting the tannins coat his teeth and cling to his tongue, slightly swollen from the alcohol.

*“You should at least wait until Chavez indicates a willingness to cooperate. There’s no advantage in rushing into this.”*

The party across the street had largely moved out onto the balcony, guests along the railing craning their necks to see around The Roark and watch the sun sink behind the western hills. "Can they see me?" he asked, slicing off another hunk of meat.

*"No, of course not,"* said Kira.

"Can you make it where they can?" he popped a cube of beef in his mouth and began to chew, staring out at a gathering of wealthy socialites, the upper-crust of their mid-tier Capital city. These people had created for themselves this grotesque power-currency of access, dealing deregulation and permissions that no honest man could ever afford, and they somehow pretended like *he* was the problem that had corrupted their fair city. He hated them.

*"Yes."*

"Then please do," he said, then he gulped back the rest of his wine and stood up, letting his robe fall open to expose himself to the new neighbors. Not everyone noticed at first, distracted as they were by the majestic setting sun either to the south- or northwest, but for those looking due-west, they got an eyeful of Erol's dangly bits, alerting fellow partygoers until finally everyone was gawking at his junk, phones outstretched.

*"What is this accomplishing?"* asked Kira.

"Not everything requires reason," said Erol, sitting back down. "Some things are just for fun. Like this party for Chavez. I want it scheduled within two weeks. Figure it out." He finished his dinner in silence, allowing the lesser-rich to judge him as they saw fit.

He decided upon an early evening and reverted the windows back to normal, then adjourned to his master bath to clean himself up before bed. And as he stood in front of a full-length

mirror, letting his robe fall to the floor, he stared at his nude body.

He was a man of greatness for all the world to see—unfathomably wealthy, supremely powerful, unnaturally well-endowed—but how much of that greatness was according to original design, and how much had Kira enhanced over time? The video series offered a glimpse of who he'd been at one point—hunchbacked, weak-chinned, in denial of his thinning hair—but the man who stood before him now hardly bore any resemblance to that man at all. Then again, did any of that even matter when the result was that he was better in every single way? He was the best that he'd ever been—arguably the best of *anyone* ever.

And he was still getting better.