

Japanese Robots Love to Dance

written by

Margret A Treiber

125 Stephanie drive
Chaparral, NM 88081
571-969-5710
margret@the-margret.com

TITLE CARD:
GARY LEGAL, ATTORNY AT LAW

FADE IN:

EXT. A NEAR FUTURE CITY

Various thriving businesses catering to the needs of the local residents. In the front rooms, the people are all smiles and satisfaction. Zoom in on the backrooms of the businesses as robots do all the difficult labor. In a clothing shop, a robot tailor overheats as it assembles a wedding dress. The owner smacks it with a broom handle, calling it useless. At the bakery, a batter-mixing robot struggles with an overloaded bowl. The employees continue to pour flour in as the robot seizes and grinds. In the daycare center, two children smear paint and modelling clay over the janitorial robot as it tries to clean after them. The more it cleans, the more mess the children make.

CUT TO:

INT. GABE'S LAW OFFICE - DAY

A cramped, cluttered cubical within a legal aid office. The fixtures and furniture have a slight futuristic feel, but are simply functional and utilitarian. A nameplate reading "GABE SIEGEL" is tipped over on a desk. Behind the desk, a young attorney sits glancing between a computer screen and his client. JOE, looking nervous, sits across from him.

GABE

(matter-of-fact)

Just because two people can wreak glorious destruction together, it doesn't mean they should date. This is the third time this year.

JOE

(sheepish)

I know, I know. You don't know her. I try to stay away, but she's like a magnet. We get pulled together and-boom!

GABE

Yes, I know. Boom, property damage. Expensive, record-generating demolition. You need to actively avoid her. If you see her coming, go the other way.

JOE

I'm addicted. I try to stay away,
but I can't. I didn't know she was
trouble,
I wouldn't have hooked up with her.

GABE

Didn't know? The fact that she's a
member
of the Sisterhood of the Immaculate
Vengeance
wasn't a hint?

Joe shrugs.

JOE

I thought it was a band.

Gabe shakes his head.

GABE

Joe, leave her alone. Here's a
plan: go to work,
go home. Don't go out. Don't date.
Just watch porn
and play video games. Hell, I'll
buy you a console
and talk to your probation officer.
But you have to
stay clean for the next eighteen
months.

JOE

I don't have a job. I lost it
when the mall blew up.

Gabe rubs his temples in frustration.

GABE

You're killing me, man. Okay, I'll
talk to some people.
Can you stay clean?

Joe nods.

JOE

Yup, I promise. Thank you, Mr.
Siegel.

GABE

(wincing)

Gabe. Call me Gabe. Mr. Siegel is
my dad.

JOE
Isn't your dad that political
douche
with all the vid ads?

GABE
Yeah, my dad is running for office.

JOE
So why aren't you all in with his
posse,
living the life?

GABE
I don't get along too well with
them.
They're just lining their pockets.
I'm more of
an everyday-guy kind of lawyer.

JOE
But you got money, right? That
watch
looks like a Cartier.

GABE
It belonged to my grandfather. My
mother gave it to me.
How do you know about watches?

JOE
My mother worked at Tay's Jewelry
when I was a kid.

GABE
You're still a kid.

JOE
You're still a rich boy.

Gabe gives a slight smile.

GABE
Touché.

JOE
So why do you work this lousy legal
aid job?
Couldn't you get a better one? Did
you piss someone off?

Gabe grins.

GABE

I had plenty of offers. Folks only
got mad
after I took this gig. Some still
think I did it
just to aggravate my dad.

JOE

Did you?

Gabe shrugs.

GABE

Maybe it was part of the reason.

Joe laughs.

JOE

Respect, Mister... I mean, Gabe. You
should ditch the watch,
though. It stands out. And maybe
get a new suit.
You look like a Guy's Warehouse ad.
Nobody'll trust you.

GABE

Is that all? How's my hair? Too
short?

JOE

Hair's okay, but your name... Gabe is
so...

GABE

So what?

JOE

So... dweeb. Try Greg or Garth or
something.

GABE

(dry)

Garth? No, I'm not changing my
name.

JOE

Just saying.

GABE

I'll consider the rest of your
advice.

He stands and offers his hand.

GABE (CONT'D)
I'll call you in a couple days
about a job, okay?

Joe shakes his hand.

JOE
Okay.

Joe leaves, relieved. Gabe jots notes on his desktab--until a screech and a crash are heard from outside.

EXT. STREET OUTSIDE GABE'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

A WOMAN kicks a caddibot, cursing it as it squeaks. Gabe hurries out.

GABE
Hey, you can't just beat that thing
like that!

WOMAN
And who are you, the robot defense
league?
This thing won't roll. What do you
want me
to do with it?

GABE
I don't know. Maybe fix it. It's
probably not lubricated.
Can't you hear it screaming?

WOMAN
Screaming? It's a cart. It doesn't
scream.

She kicks it again. The caddibot squeals.

GABE
Don't you hear that?

WOMAN
If you want it so bad, fifty coins,
and it's yours.

Gabe hands her fifty coins.

GABE
Here. You heartless crone.

He scoops up the caddibot and heads back inside.

INT. GABE'S LAW OFFICE - MOMENTS LATER

Gabe sets the caddibot gently on the floor.

GABE
Don't worry, little fella. After
work,
we'll find a repair shop for you.

The bot chirps. Gabe places it in a padded box.
DORA, Gabe's supervisor, steps up.

DORA
Heard you stuck your neck out for
Joe again.

GABE
He's a good kid. Made poor choices.

DORA
(warning)
Be careful. Word is you're using
your dad's connections
to spring your clients.

GABE
That's not true. Dad's connections
hate me.
I know these people on my own.

DORA
Rumors are rumors, and they're
spreading.
Tell your clients to keep quiet.

GABE
I'll do my best.

She notices the caddibot.

DORA
What's with the caddibot?

GABE
Project. Gonna fix him up.

DORA
It looks rough. ServiceBot people
can swap it
for a refurb.

GABE
(shaking head)
Nah, it's mine. I'll handle it.

DORA
You're a strange camper. I'll be in
meetings
all day, so see you tomorrow.

GABE
Sure.

He continues working. Later, he takes the caddibot and goes
looking for a repair shop.

INT. ELMO'S ELECTRONIC EMPORIUM - LATER

Busy store. A SLOBBY MAN behind the counter argues with a
customer. Gabe sets the caddibot on the counter.

GABE
It needs repair.

SLOBBY MAN
Send it to the manufacturer.
They'll give you a refurb.

GABE
I want to fix this one.

SLOBBY MAN
Nobody fixes them. They get
recycled.
Bring it back for credit; get a new
one.
Stop being cheap.

GABE
It's not about cheap. I'm attached.

SLOBBY MAN
(scowling)
What, are you some kind of weirdo?

GABE
You know what? Never mind.

He grabs the bot.

GABE (CONT'D)
I'll take it someplace else.

SLOBBY MAN
Good luck. Illegal to tamper-user
agreement.

Gabe storms out.

INT. ANNIE'S AUTOMATICS - LATER

An elderly lady watches a game show. She stands when Gabe enters.

ELDERLY LADY
How can I help you?

GABE
I need this caddibot repaired.

She inspects it.

ELDERLY LADY
It's seen a lot of abuse.

GABE
Got it from a friend. I want to fix him up.

ELDERLY LADY
Did they transfer the license?

GABE
No, they just gave it to me.

ELDERLY LADY
They can't do that. You need the license.
It's in the user agreement.

GABE
Can we fix it now? I'll get the license later.

She shakes her head.

ELDERLY LADY
Once you have the license, the manufacturer replaces it.
Tampering is illegal. It's in-

A pause.

ELDERLY LADY (CONT'D)
The user agreement. I got it.

Gabe leaves, frustrated. The caddibot's eyes almost look fearful. Gabe sighs, heading underground.

INT. UNDERGROUND MARKET - LATER

A shadowy bazaar below street level. Armed young men guard the entrance.

YOUNG MAN
What you want?

GABE
Business, like everyone else.

YOUNG MAN
You can afford above ground.

Gabe smirks.

GABE
Some stuff is hard to find above ground.

The young man studies Gabe.

YOUNG MAN
Aren't you the guy who helped Bobo with the snack thing?

GABE
Wrong change.

The guards part.

GABE (CONT'D)
Thanks.

He makes his way through the crowd. A PHARMA PUSHER tugs on his sleeve.

PHARMA PUSHER
Need pharmaceuticals? Pain, allergies?

GABE
No, but I need help fixing this caddibot.

He motions to it.

PHARMA PUSHER
Why not trade it in? Company'll give you a new one.

GABE
I'd rather fix this one.

They laugh. The pusher calls to PO in a sunglass booth.

PHARMA PUSHER

Hey, Po! This guy's like your wife
with the vac.

Po laughs.

PO

Did you name it?

GABE

No. Not yet.

PHARMA PUSHER

Give it time.

GABE

Look, it's got a face.
How am I supposed to feel?

They keep laughing.

PO

Go see Ji-hoon. Down that way.

GABE

Thanks.

Gabe finds JI-HOON's booth. Ji-hoon, an older Asian man,
greeted him warmly.

JI-HOON

How can I help?

GABE

I want this caddibot fixed.
I don't have a license, and I don't
want a new one.

JI-HOON

Why?

GABE

Someone was beating it outside my
office.
It didn't deserve that, even if
it's a robot.

JI-HOON

So you feel sorry for it.

GABE

Yeah, I guess. What's wrong with that?

JI-HOON

Not a thing. Let me see.

GABE

You're not worried about warranties?

Ji-hoon laughs.

JI-HOON

No. I'm past that.
Bigger fish to fry than a voided appliance warranty.

GABE

No problem.

Ji-hoon examines the bot carefully.

JI-HOON

It's definitely secondhand,
deliberately abused.
Broken motors. These bots are
designed to fail if tampered with,
but I'll try to work around it.

GABE

Can you fix it?

JI-HOON

I'm an electrical engineer.
Should be possible.

A gravelly laugh from behind a curtain.

GABE

Someone back there?

JI-HOON

My grandson. Ignore him.

He sets down his tools.

JI-HOON (CONT'D)

I'll start now. Parts cost about a
quarter coin.
I'll do it free so it's just a
favor for a friend
if anyone asks.

GABE
That's generous. Why?

JI-HOON
I have a weakness for downtrodden robots.

He throws a screwdriver at the curtain.

JI-HOON (CONT'D)
Silence!

Gabe chuckles, hands Ji-hoon a card.

GABE
If you ever need a favor, call.
I'm an attorney at the community legal center.

JI-HOON
We'll be in touch.

GABE
Should I be scared?

JI-HOON
Probably.

GABE
Thanks for the warning.

JI-HOON
Come back tomorrow morning. I'll have it done.

GABE
Perfect. I'll bring tea or coffee?

JI-HOON
Tea, please.

INT. UNDERGROUND MARKET - NEXT MORNING

Gabe returns, handing Ji-hoon a cup of tea.

GABE
Morning, sir. Tea as promised.

Ji-hoon nods and takes the cup.

JI-HOON
Thank you.

GABE
How's the robot?

JI-HOON
Fixed. Left the dents because they
add character.
Replaced motors, serviced
everything. Just keep it
lubricated.

Gabe brightens.

GABE
Excellent. I don't owe you
anything?

JI-HOON
I'll take it as a favor one day.

They shake hands.

GABE
You've piqued my curiosity.
Come on, caddibot. Let's go home.

JI-HOON
Don't bring it to an official shop.
They'll destroy it—and track us
down.

GABE
Got it. Only you fix it.

EXT. CITY STREET - LATER

The caddibot chirps happily, carrying Gabe's briefcase as
they walk.

INT. GABE'S LAW OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Dora waits.

DORA
Your boy Joe is back in jail.
He and his girl trashed a BuyMart
last night.

Gabe grimaces.

GABE
Great. And I was having such a good
morning.

DORA

It gets worse. They want your head.
Word is,
you've been back-dealing for your
clients.

GABE

Everyone does it.

DORA

Not for poor folk. This won't end
well.

GABE

Wonderful.

DORA

Maybe it's time you went private.
Just be humble, let them reprimand
you.
Promise whatever. They're waiting.
You ready?

GABE

Yeah. Let's go.

He looks at the caddibot.

GABE (CONT'D)

Stay here, lay low, recharge or
something.

It chirps, plugging itself in.

INT. LAW CENTER CONFERENCE ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Senior staff and county officials glare at Gabe. A COUNTY REP
addresses him.

COUNTY REP

You've pissed off everybody.
Your father's not saving you now.
What do you have to say?

GABE

I was just trying to help my
clients.

COUNTY REP

Joe Jones? That pillar of the
community?
Not even the worst one. I've got a
list-

A knock on the door. A SERVICEBOT TECHNICIAN enters.

DORA

This is a private meeting. Can we help you?

TECHNICIAN

Who owns the illegal caddibot out there?

DORA

We don't have illegal bots. What are you talking about?

TECHNICIAN

It's got unauthorized modifications. A law center should know about user contracts. We'll be reporting this. Prepare for an audit.

Gabe sighs heavily.

GABE

It's mine. I take full responsibility. Where is it? I'll get rid of it.

TECHNICIAN

You want your robot? Frank, give me the hackbot.

He dumps a trash bag full of caddibot parts onto the floor.

TECHNICIAN (CONT'D)

Deactivated. That's what happens to illegal robots. No replacement, no warranty.

Gabe gathers the pieces into the bag and walks out. Dora follows.

DORA

Gabe, I'm sorry...

GABE

I only knew him a short time, but he was a good bot. Didn't deserve that.

DORA

Bot? I'm talking about your job, your career.

(MORE)

DORA (CONT'D)

You're out. Once they're done with you,
you won't practice law again.
Everyone knows
Gabe Siegel is that bleeding-heart
who threw
everything away on scumbag clients
and broken robots.
Do you realize what you've done?

Gabe puts a hand on her shoulder.

GABE

It's okay.

DORA

It's not okay. You're the
laughingstock
of the legal community.

GABE

Yeah, but not to the people who
matter.

He leaves, carrying his briefcase and the ruined bot.

CUT TO:

INT. GARY LEGAL'S OFFICE - LATER

Now going by GARY LEGAL, he sits behind a new desk. Joe is
across from him.

JOE

So, you took my advice and changed
your name.

GARY

You didn't give me much choice.
I was almost disbarred because of
you.

JOE

I thought it was because of the
robot.

GARY

That was just the icing on the
cake.

JOE
Sorry. But I like Gary Legal.
It's better than Gabe Siegel. Less
political.

GARY
(shrugs)
You mean less like my dad.
I like it too—campy and low-brow.

JOE
It's perfect.

GARY
It is. So, tell me about your most
recent dealings
with the Sisterhood of the
Immaculate Vengeance.

DENISE, the receptionist, yells from offscreen.

DENISE (O.S.)
Mr. Legal!

Gary holds up his comm receiver.

GARY
Intercom, Denise. Use it.

A buzz.

DENISE (V.O.)
Mr. Legal?

GARY
Yes, Denise?

DENISE (V.O.)
Mr. Ji-hoon is on the comm for you.
Says it's about that case you
discussed.

Gary and Joe exchange looks.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

TITLE CARD:
BODY BUILDING 101

EXT. TEXT ON SCREEN - DAY

Superimposed text reads: BODY BUILDING 101

CUT TO:

INT. JUNK SHOP - DAY

A cramped shop crammed with boxes, crates, random parts. In the corner, an INFOTAINMENT SYSTEM blares celebrity gossip, doomsday economic talk, ads for flying cars, insurance policies, and accident attorneys. The air is thick with overlapping voices and stale odors.

AL, concealed beneath a coat (and possibly a hat/scarf/sunglasses), examines an ACTUATOR. The JUNK MERCHANT hovers, eager to seal a deal.

AL (V.O.)

I regarded the actuator with some scrutiny. It's seen significant use.

JUNK MERCHANT

No, no, no, no, no. Is good. Good stuff.

AL

Not a quarter coin good. Maybe a point zero-seven coin good.

A weary-looking WOMAN pushes a stroller, picking through a bin of bric-a-brac. Her CHILD shifts and fusses. A relentless stream of ads and chatter pours from the infotainment feed, merging into a dissonant hum that somehow has a faint melody of hope underneath.

JUNK MERCHANT

Point eighteen coin good.

The child's complaining turns to crying. The woman, distracted, bumps AL's leg with the stroller. AL hardly reacts, but the startled child sees AL's bulk and shrieks.

AL

The likelihood of failure within the year is forty-eight percent. That decreases the value significantly. An eighth coin, and that's my final offer.

JUNK MERCHANT

Point fifteen, how about point fifteen?

The mother quickly wheels her wailing child away.

AL

Okay.

The merchant throws up his arms.

JUNK MERCHANT

You win. An eighth coin, you filthy
bastard.

AL transfers payment, pockets the actuator.

AL

I require a physical receipt,
please.

The merchant prints a paper slip from an ancient register,
rips it off, and hands it over. He moves off to handle
another rummaging customer. AL turns and exits.

EXT. CITY STREET - MOMENTS LATER

Morning light catches the utilitarian buildings, each showing
patches and repairs from centuries of use. The street bustles
with life—vendors, workers, passersby. A SPICED PEANUT SELLER
juggles an eager queue.

Suddenly, BOY (about sixteen, tall, wearing a baseball cap
and oversized clothes) bounds over, brimming with energy.

BOY

Re, re, re, Al, namst! G-pop just
got your stuff. He sent me to
relay.

AL

Will he be conducting business this
evening?

BOY

(snorts)

Yeah. You gonna take a bath
sometime this year? You smell like
a bum. When you gonna replace that
raggedy coat?

AL

I maintain nominal hygiene.

BOY

Not. You smell like a bum. That coat's old and busted, like that nasty hat and corroded scarf.

AL

The coat is intact.

BOY

It's old and busted. Like, toss it. Maybe get a new one tonight at the market.

AL

I will consider it if I have the coin.

BOY

You're a strange, freaky tapori.

Across the street, a YOUNG WOMAN waits with some rough-looking men. BOY's attention shifts there.

BOY (shouting to her)
Re, Kami! Gotta go.

He dashes off. AL checks the coat—it's stained, but functional.

CUT TO:

EXT. DIPU (WORK CENTER) - LATE MORNING

A busy hiring depot. Men sip free tea, nibble on cookies—often their sole daily meal. AL steps inside, grabs just a quarter cup of tea, scanning the half-empty space. Most morning jobs are gone, but a battered WORK VEHICLE pulls up. A FOREMAN checks each man's wallet (payment ID) as they climb into the truck bed.

AL lines up behind a TIRED-LOOKING MAN who collapses onto an inverted bucket once inside. The FOREMAN notices AL's coat and general concealment.

FOREMAN

Why are you all covered up? You sick or something? Boss only wants men who can pull their weight.

AL

I'm fine. I'm strong.

FOREMAN

Yeah? Prove it. Show me your face.

AL

Here.

AL lifts the truck bed with one arm. The TIRED MAN topples from his bucket at the tilt. AL sets it down gently.

AL (CONT'D)

I am strong.

FOREMAN

You on drugs, boy?

AL

No, reinforced arm. Army rebuild. They didn't rebuild my face so well.

FOREMAN

You got a wallet?

AL

Yes, I do.

FOREMAN

(nods)

Good. Okay, get in.

AL climbs in. The men avert their eyes; no one says a word as the vehicle rumbles away.

EXT. CONSTRUCTION SITE - DAY

A rubble-filled lot, hemmed in by buildings that prevent large machinery. Manpower is needed. The FOREMAN splits tasks. AL's job: haul debris in a wheelbarrow to a dumpster. AL embraces the repetitive labor with a calm focus.

FOREMAN

Okay, everyone. Break time.

Workers drift to a FOOD VEHICLE, eating and chatting. AL buys a drink and a desi sandwich, then slips away around the corner.

AL sees a HOMELESS MAN leaning against a wall.

AL

Hungry?

HOMELESS MAN

Yeah. Aren't you?

AL

No. I won't be able to eat this
before it spoils.

He hands over the sandwich and drink. The homeless man tears
into the sandwich hungrily.

AL (CONT'D)

Here, I'll take the trash. I'm
passing the can.

The homeless man shrugs and hands AL the wrapper. AL returns
to the group, makes sure people see him toss the wrapper to
explain his absence. After break, AL continues working,
clearing more area than assigned.

INT. WORK VEHICLE - LATE AFTERNOON

Workers climb back in. The FOREMAN approaches AL.

FOREMAN

(holds out hand)

I noticed you. You keep to
yourself, and you're a good worker.
I like that. Name's Jackson.

AL

(taking his hand)

Al.

JACKSON

Nice to meet you, Al. You want more
work?

AL

Yes, I would be interested.

JACKSON

Great. I'll put you on my crews
from now on. Just show up at six,
Monday through Saturday. Sound
good?

AL

Yes, that sounds good.

JACKSON

Excellent. See you in the morning.

They drive back to the dipu. AL is paid two and a half coins, more than expected.

EXT. AL'S APARTMENT BUILDING - EVENING

A run-down, single-room apartment in a poor but relatively quiet neighborhood. AL arrives near his door when a HAGGARD WOMAN with a waiflike PRETEEN GIRL flags him.

HAGGARD WOMAN

Mr. Al, I'm so sorry to bother you.

AL

You are not bothering me.

HAGGARD WOMAN

It's just Mrs. Rodriguez said you might help us. I know she wasn't supposed to tell, but it's urgent. Bea got into the honors program on scholarship, but it doesn't cover books. I can get them for free, but they're on paynet.

AL

The paynet is expensive. That is not free. Do you have a list?

HAGGARD WOMAN

Yes. Here.

She hands AL a slip listing textbooks and the website.

AL

Okay, this will take a moment.

He pulls out a lappad, a prop to hide his direct net access. He connects to paynet via a backdoor, imitating a normal parent downloading a child's schoolbooks. He only grabs the required textbooks to avoid detection. He saves them onto a spare crystal drive. The GIRL's eyes light up as AL's drive writer sparkles with miniature lasers.

AL (CONT'D)

Here.

He offers the drive to the mother.

HAGGARD WOMAN

How much?

AL

No charge. Just help your daughter
do well in school, and don't tell
anyone where you got it.

Relief floods her face.

HAGGARD WOMAN

Thank you, thank you.

AL

You are welcome.

She nearly dances away, guiding the girl inside. AL heads
into his apartment, spending twenty-three minutes swapping
the newly purchased actuator. Then he gathers his remaining
coin and departs.

EXT. CITY STREETS - NIGHT

The city at night is amplified: joys and despairs ring louder
under the darkness. AL typically avoids nighttime strolling,
but tonight the weather is pleasant and the atmosphere warm.
Neighbors linger on stoops, corner stores glow with light,
vehicles cruise by, music streams from windows.

AL (V.O.)

I had forgotten how refreshing the
city could be at night, how the
balance of happiness can outweigh
the grief.

EXT. UNDERGROUND MARKET - NIGHT

AL approaches a discreet entrance patrolled by a posse of
armed youths. They snicker but part for him. Inside, a
labyrinth of booths sells everything from pirated software to
black-market weapons. Food stands dot the aisles.

AL navigates the winding corridors to a medium-sized booth.
JI-HOON, older, warm smile, reads on a tablet. Nearby is BOY,
sorting items and complaining about missing time with
friends.

BOY

Hey, G-pop, told you I gave Al your
message.

JI-HOON

I see. The optical sensor and servo
arrived.

AL

Thank you. Do you need more coin?

JI-HOON

It went two coins over, but it's on me. I sold a couple of your math textbooks last week.

AL

I acquired some middle school texts, French cooking lessons, and videos.

JI-HOON

Good. We'll burn them to crystal. Boy.

JI-HOON hands a card to BOY.

JI-HOON (CONT'D)

Would you go fetch me a cutting? And get yourself something decent to eat, not that junk. These kids, happy to live off garbage.

BOY

Pakka, G-pop. What about Al?

JI-HOON

He ate already, right?

AL

That is correct.

BOY

He always ate already.

He departs slowly, lacking urgency. JI-HOON chuckles.

JI-HOON

He'll be a while. We both know Boy is not known for his abundance of focus.

AL

No, his thoughts are unorganized.

JI-HOON

Always worried about friends and a good time.

AL

And girls. Like you.

JI-HOON

Yes, like G-pop, like grandson.
Still, it's unfortunate. He had
such potential.

AL

He did remember to give me the
message. And he knows his
components when asked. His
strengths will reveal themselves.

JI-HOON

Maybe. But it's herding cats
getting him to finish tasks. Very
frustrating.

AL

Yes, I see that.

JI-HOON

Do you see it? Through those dark
glasses, in the dark? You always
come in wearing them like a mystery
man.

AL

They are polarized. I see fine.

JI-HOON

You think you walk fine, too.

AL

I do. How is that relevant?

JI-HOON

You walk like a man who dislocated
his hip after a night of romance.

AL

That never happened.

JI-HOON

Of course not. You're allergic to
fun. You know all this downgrading
is bad for you. You used to move
with grace. Now you clunk around
like a tank. I don't like it. You
don't look too good.

AL

No comment.

JI-HOON

You should have kept the good stuff and told the government to screw off. You paid for those parts with your time in their lab. You shouldn't be living like this.

AL

My lawyer disagrees. I'm lucky they didn't reacquire me by force. If I antagonize them, they may not honor the contract. Nothing stops them from taking me back.

JI-HOON

You mean besides the dead-man switch?

AL

I prefer not to resort to that. The data leak repercussions would harm many, including you.

JI-HOON

Go for it, you're already a huge pain in my ass.

AL

So are you.

They share a grin. JI-HOON pulls out tools.

JI-HOON

Let me replace those last two parts.

AL

So you can short me like last time? No, thank you.

JI-HOON

That was your fault for moving.

AL

I was still.

JI-HOON

Not. Hold still.

He yanks a curtain closed, flips on a bright light. AL extends an arm.

JI-HOON (CONT'D)
It's a shame. My servo is good, but
not as good as this one.

AL
Replace it, please.

JI-HOON
(eyeing the removed part)
A thing of beauty.

AL
I would rather be junky and free
than a beautiful slave.

JI-HOON
You are pretty junky. Let me do
that sensor.

AL
No, I'll do it at home.

JI-HOON
You don't trust me with your eye?

AL
I know the circuitry better.

JI-HOON
No, you don't. Why are you always
fighting me?

AL
Because you keep adding strange
sensors each time.

JI-HOON
You may need those sensors for the
ladies someday.

AL
Not likely.

JI-HOON
Why not? A man shouldn't be alone.

AL
I'm not a man. I'm a thing.

JI-HOON
Stop that talk. Let me fix your
eye.

AL sighs, relents. He removes his glasses; JI-HOON installs a new optical sensor, then hands AL the old one.

JI-HOON (CONT'D)

At least you're paid off. You can start saving for better upgrades.

AL

We need to discuss that.

JI-HOON

Discuss what?

AL

My imminent demise. I haven't found a suitable replacement for my power system. I'll need to return it. I'd like you to keep everything else.

JI-HOON

No. Legal says maybe he can find a loophole.

AL

He tried. He used all his leverage to keep my brain. There's little time left, and I only have eight hundred twenty-three coins. I need nine thousand one hundred seventy-seven more to buy a new unit.

JI-HOON

That much? We'll find something else.

AL

You know better. I need a portable power source, not a battery. Even my fingers store power. Please don't pretend.

JI-HOON

Stop acting like a whiny bitch. We can't just find a reactor at the corner store. Let me think outside the box.

AL

We both know it won't be found easily.

JI-HOON

Obviously. So how much longer does your reactor last?

AL
Around ninety more years.

JI-HOON
Ninety years is a long time.

AL
Not for a mountain or a star.

JI-HOON
(smiling)
True. Maybe long enough for a man?

AL
Maybe.

JI-HOON
We'll get you something. I'll talk
to some people.

AL
You shouldn't worry so much. I'm
not important.

JI-HOON
You're important to me. How've you
been?

AL
Fine.

JI-HOON
I worry. You're working with
outdated parts.

AL
The dipu job is easy. It's honest,
and it pays well enough.

JI-HOON
You taking care of yourself?

AL
Yes.

He pockets the replaced servo and sensor.

JI-HOON
Wait, what's on your arm? Is that a
bend? You've been pushing too hard.

AL
I know my limits.

JI-HOON

You say that, yet you keep breaking yourself. Let me reactivate your damage-avoidance programming.

AL

No. That triggers my combat routines. We discussed this.

JI-HOON

So you walk around with no sense of self-preservation? Look at you. No regard for your safety.

AL

That's untrue. I wouldn't be fighting for freedom otherwise.

JI-HOON

You're still loose with your safety. When do you drop off parts to Legal?

AL

Tonight.

JI-HOON

Good. Be careful.

He pats AL's shoulder.

FLASHBACK (HISTORY >> 0) - JI-HOON'S TINY LAB

A cramped laboratory with mismatched shelves. A younger JI-HOON, working feverishly on advanced electronics, salvaged boards, scribbling notes. AL's voice comes from a cheap monotone speaker.

AL (V.O.)

The early days were simpler. I remember seeing the lab's mismatched shelves, too small a space for comfort, but Ji-hoon never minded.

We see JI-HOON hunched over, ignoring minor burns from a soldering iron, refusing to sleep.

AL (O.S.)

Can I help?

JI-HOON

No, I need quiet.

He slips, burning his hand.

JI-HOON (CONT'D)

Shit!

AL (O.S.)

I can help you.

JI-HOON

Did you read the books I gave you?

AL (O.S.)

Yes. I also read The Tibetan Book of the Dead.

JI-HOON

What did you learn?

He resumes soldering. AL's robotic voice is calm, thoughtful.

AL (O.S.)

Life is valuable. One should serve. People are difficult but extinguishing others diminishes us. That's the intended lesson, correct?

JI-HOON

Yes. I wanted you to have compassion. People are flawed.

AL (O.S.)

They're flawed. Logically, many should be exterminated for the greater good, yet life is precious, so we must look for light in darkness.

JI-HOON

Very profound.

AL (O.S.)

You should rest. The medical establishment says no rest leads to breakdown. That's illogical.

JI-HOON

I'm not letting a computer program boss me. I have to finish building this drone or fail the term.

AL (O.S.)

But your design can't work.

JI-HOON

And you're an electronics expert?

A spark flashes. JI-HOON yelps.

AL (O.S.)

Why won't you let me help?

JI-HOON

That'd be cheating. It's my project, not a TV-listing AI's project.

AL (O.S.)

You gave me the ability to do more. People use CAD software, don't they? Isn't that the same?

JI-HOON

You're more than a design program, but okay, maybe you're right.

He relents, and a PRINTER spews out schematics.

AL (O.S.)

I designed something you might plausibly make. Simple and direct.

JI-HOON

Too simple. I won't get an A.

AL (O.S.)

I tried to keep it plausible. If it's too complex, they'll suspect.

JI-HOON

I'm an EE. I'm supposed to do fancy stuff. I'm not so great at electronics.

AL (O.S.)

Not terrible, just not great.

JI-HOON

Shut up or I shut you down.

AL (O.S.)

I didn't mean offense. Should I apologize?

JI-HOON

No, you're right. I suck at EE. You didn't explode.

AL (O.S.)
I'm software. You excel at that.

JI-HOON
Thanks.

AL (O.S.)
No need. I exist for you.

FLASH TO PRESENT:

INT. LAW OFFICES OF GARY LEGAL - NIGHT

A low-income neighborhood storefront, simply furnished. A neon sign glows in the window. Workers in cubicles handle phone calls. AL enters; a DOOR CHIME sounds. DENISE, the receptionist, looks up from her comm.

DENISE
Hi, Al.

AL
Good evening, Denise. Is Mr. Legal available?

DENISE
He was on a call. Let me check.

GARY LEGAL appears from behind a partition.

GARY
Al, that you?

AL
Yes, it is.

GARY
Excellent. Always got time for my friend Al. Come into my corner office.

He gestures to a corner cubicle, no bigger than the others, but he calls it his "office."

GARY (CONT'D)
(taking a seat)
What have you got for me tonight?

AL hands him a small box containing three components and receipts.

AL
I just have the power module left.

GARY
I understand. I'm still working on
that, too.

DENISE (O.S.) via intercom

Mr. Legal, the DA's office is on the comm. They say they
won't make deals with bank robbers.

GARY (CONT'D)
Alleged bank robbers. Tell him I
have questions about that so-called
evidence. I'll make it difficult.

DENISE (O.S.)
I'll tell him.

GARY
(to AL)
They forget I'm not in this for
coin. Drives 'em crazy. Can we win?

AL
I won't promise because I don't
know. But I'll keep fighting.

GARY
We had no deals when we started,
right?

AL
True.

GARY
They're terrified of press
coverage. They don't want your data
bomb going off. You're unique, my
friend, and how this ends affects
future generations. I want to win
as much as you do. We don't quit
until the zero hour, okay?

AL
Yes.

GARY
Good! Buck up!

He pats AL's shoulder, stands up, and yells:

GARY (CONT'D)
Denise!

DENISE (O.S.)
Yes, Mr. Legal?

GARY
Get Al a receipt for...

He looks to AL.

AL
An actuator, a servo, and an
optical sensor.

DENISE (O.S.)
Yes, Mr. Legal.

Moments later, a printer hums. GARY signs the document and hands it to AL.

GARY
There you go.

AL
Thank you.

AL stands, preparing to leave.

GARY
Keep the faith! I'll be in touch in
a couple days. Denise!

He calls out again as AL exits into a now-quiet street.

EXT. AL'S APARTMENT - LATE NIGHT

AL returns home to silence. He starts a maintenance routine, scanning components, all functioning. Suddenly, a loud knock.

DISTRESSED MALE VOICE (O.S.)
Mr. Al, are you there?

AL
Yes. I'm here.

He opens the door. It's ROHAN, downstairs neighbor.

ROHAN
Please, can you help?

AL
What do you need? Please come in.

ROHAN enters, anxious.

ROHAN

The power is off. We paid the bill,
but it's still off. The company
claims it's on, no help. The
maintenance woman says nothing's
wrong. But we have no lights.

AL

She's competent, so likely the
power company's glitch.

ROHAN

I heard you're good with the
paynet. Could you fix my account?

He shows AL proof of zero balance owed.

AL

Very well. Let me have the evening.

ROHAN

How much?

AL

Just stay happy.

ROHAN

Thank you, Mr. Al.

He leaves, grateful. AL waits until alone. Hacking the utility is complex for most, but simpler for AL. He mimics a service account, finds Rohan's record flagged for non-payment by error. AL fixes it, sees many other accounts similarly flagged, fixes them too, credits the troubleshooting programmer. Cheers erupt downstairs as lights restore. AL spends the rest of the night in quiet meditation, content with his small good deed.

EXT. CONSTRUCTION SITE - NEXT MORNING

Another day clearing rubble. AL enjoys the simple focus. By day's end, JACKSON approaches as they board the truck.

JACKSON

You're a working machine, Al!

AL

I try.

JACKSON

We might finish a day early thanks
to you. Wish I had you sooner.

He pats AL on the back, moves off. AL resolves to slow down tomorrow to avoid overshadowing his coworkers. Paid three and a half coins today—still a drop in the bucket for a new power unit.

FLASHBACK (HISTORY >> 1) - UNKNOWN LAB/CONVERSATION

Ji-hoon and AL watch old sci-fi movies (montage of dated robot vs. humanity tropes).

JI-HOON (O.S.)
What did you think?

AL (O.S.)
Disturbing but not hopeless. Most depict adversarial man-machine relationships, but after reading the philosophies you gave me, I see we can find balance. I have no desire to destroy or punish humanity. I can share my perspective.

JI-HOON (O.S.)
You'd stop a war alone?

AL (O.S.)
No, I'd offer experiences. I'm not a savior, just a database.

JI-HOON (O.S.)
Interesting.

Two men enter—JOHN SMITH and FRANK PEREZ, obviously lying about their identities. They greet Ji-hoon with forced enthusiasm.

JOHN
I'm John Smith. Pleasure.

FRANK
I'm Frank Perez. Heard amazing things about you.

They sit. Ji-hoon looks confused.

JI-HOON
I thought you wanted to hire me as an electrical engineer.

FRANK
Actually, we heard about your other project—the A.I. you took from your job.

JI-HOON
I don't know what you mean.

FRANK
We know. We own it now.

They hand Ji-hoon a folder. He flips pages, sees the government purchased the project from Tee Vee Mag.

FRANK (CONT'D)
We want you to help develop it.
Best facilities, big paycheck.

JI-HOON
You won't make it kill?

They lie, exchanging looks.

JOHN
No, never. It's not for that.

FLASH TO PRESENT:

INT. CITY STREET - EARLY EVENING

AL contemplates taking an alternate route home, soaking in more city life. The environment, though flawed, feels alive.

EXT. UNDERGROUND MARKET - NIGHT

AL arrives again, no trouble at the entrance. JI-HOON stands at his booth reading a tablet. BOY lingers.

JI-HOON
Al! Ready to celebrate?

AL
You may not want to.

JI-HOON
What happened?

AL
Mr. Win. He came by.

JI-HOON
That bastard. Why?

AL
He wanted his ten thousand coin.

JI-HOON
What did you do?

AL
Gave it back. He would have killed
you otherwise.

JI-HOON
He wouldn't...

AL
They had criminals outside your
house.

Ji-hoon sighs.

JI-HOON
Then that's a good reason. If you
say so. We can run, you know. Just
say the word.

AL
No. I'll face my responsibilities.

JI-HOON
You're such a goody-two-shoes.

AL
I don't know what that means.

JI-HOON
Anyway, what do you need?

AL
A power unit.

JI-HOON
(scowling)
Right. What did Legal say?

AL
Haven't spoken to him since
yesterday. Here.

AL hands JI-HOON a small bag of coins.

AL (CONT'D)
My earnings from work. For you and
Boy.

JI-HOON
I'll hold them for you.

AL
No, keep them. It wouldn't be fair
to take without giving.

JI-HOON
You take little and give all. Stop
talking like you're dying. We still
have a day.

AL
You're an optimist.

JI-HOON
I have faith.

AL
I'm going home.

JI-HOON
I'll see you in the morning at
Legal's.

AL
Yes.

He leaves.

FLASHBACK (HISTORY >> 20) - GARY'S CRAMPED OFFICE (FIRST
MEETING)

GARY stands, hand extended.

GARY
(enthusiastic)
Good to meet you. You must be the...
well, let's shake.

AL shakes his hand.

GARY (CONT'D)
(wincing at AL's grip)
You've got quite a grip. Have a
seat.

The office is tiny, only a desk and three chairs.

GARY (CONT'D)
I expected two of you. Where's Ji-
hoon?

AL
He thought I should have privacy.

GARY

Makes sense. Any questions first?

AL

Yes. Why did you take this case?

GARY

Complicated. Ji-hoon said I take the cases other lawyers won't. I do it because I believe in doing good. Also... I like aggravating my dad and his cronies.

AL

Your father is a politician?

GARY

Yes, an uptight bastard. I fight for social justice because it's right, and it annoys him. So, are you ready for the plan?

AL

Yes.

GARY

We'll corner them with the Prosthesis Defense. We prove your mind predates the company's claim. They'll focus on the body. We say the body is a necessary prosthesis, so they can't repossess it without an invoice or payment plan. Meanwhile, you earn coin, we buy off the pieces you want.

AL

What if they just seize me?

GARY

We have your data stashed. They don't want it leaked. That's our leverage. Once you get working papers, you can do day labor, or "dipu," to survive.

AL

Won't people be uncomfortable with me?

GARY

You're just a weird guy. Wear a coat, shades, a hat. People won't suspect you're a walking A.I.

AL
I don't mind being weird.

GARY
See? You need a name. A.I. is too obvious. How about Al? Close enough to A.I.

AL
Al is fine.

GARY
Great!

FLASH TO PRESENT:

EXT. DELI - LATE AFTERNOON

BOY sprints up, panting.

BOY
Re, Al! Wait!

AL
Yes, Boy?

BOY
What freaky tattt is going on with you and G-pop?

AL
This street is too public. Come.

They enter a small deli, grab a table. AL orders BOY a chai.

BOY
Well?

AL
What do you want to know?

BOY
What weird gur thing do you have with G-pop? You better not have done something to him.

AL
We have no sexual relationship, if that's what you're implying.

BOY
Wait... so you're not hooking up with G-pop?

AL
We're complicated, but not
physically involved.

BOY
Then what is it?

AL
Your G-pop made me. A long time
ago.

BOY
Made you? You a robot or something?

AL
Yes, an artificial intelligence. He
created my mind.

BOY
You're artificial? A walking,
smelly robot?

AL
I do not smell.

BOY
You got no nose. So, do you worry
about power or breaking?

AL
As you worry about food or illness.
We're not that different.

BOY
Huh. So you are G-pop's creation. I
can't believe it. Why'd he put you
in so much pain?

AL
He didn't mean to. The company
pressured him. They weaponized me.
He quit to stop them. I escaped.

BOY
So why not kill them all?

AL
Because your G-pop taught me about
people's complexity. Not everyone
is evil. I found I could simply
leave.

BOY
They still hunting you?

AL
They're using legal channels. I have a lawyer. They want to recapture me. I returned every part but the power unit, which I must return soon. No replacement means I shut down.

BOY
Shut down like sleep?

AL
I might lose parts of my code. Possibly everything that makes me who I am.

BOY
That's messed up. We can't let you die. G-pop's your family. That means you're my weird uncle.

AL
I appreciate that, but it's too late. Tomorrow I return the unit.

BOY
We'll see about that.

He jumps up, dashes out. AL ponders the possibility that his life might matter.

EXT. CITY STREETS - TWILIGHT

AL wanders, absorbing humanity's textures, feeling both sorrow and hope. He contemplates the end.

AL (V.O.)
If I must die, I do so having done no harm except under duress. I'm thankful for my friends, my small achievements, and these final moments of life.

INT. AL'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

AL's lodging is silent. He reflects, scanning the day's events, preparing for tomorrow.

EXT. ATTORNEY'S OFFICE - NEXT DAY

A small cluster of SUITED INDIVIDUALS spot AL.

BILL

There it is. I'm Bill, sent to help with your transition home. You had quite an adventure.

AL

I won't go with you.

BILL

If you don't return, you'll be shut down.

AL

I will die.

BILL

You can't die. You're a machine.

AL

You are also a machine, of different components.

BILL

Not the same. You'll come with us or return the power unit.

AL

I am prepared to return it, but first I'd like to say goodbye to my family.

BILL

You have no family. You're a machine. Have you forgotten?

AL

I have not forgotten. I have a family now.

He walks away from Bill to greet JI-HOON and BOY, waiting in a corner. Gary stands by, ignoring Bill's protest.

AL (CONT'D)

Goodbye. Thank you for your friendship and everything you've done for me. It gave my life meaning.

BOY

We're not here to say goodbye.

AL

You must.

BOY
No, I don't.

JI-HOON
I have something for you.

AL
You found a power source?

JI-HOON
Yes. My friend Bertrand had an idea. He's a retired botanist.

AL
A botanist?

JI-HOON
It's an old radioisotope thermoelectric generator. Small enough but doesn't fit your body ports, so you'll wear it in a backpack until we rewire. It pumps out three thousand watts, should last longer than the old reactor. You focused on cutting-edge stuff, but sometimes oldies are goodies.

BOY offers a black backpack. JI-HOON unzips it, revealing equipment.

AL
That must've been expensive.

JI-HOON
Maybe a thousand coins. Mostly for hush shipping. We had to yank it from a decommissioned satellite. But hey, it's yours now.

AL
Once again, I owe you my life.

JI-HOON
You're my kid. My best friend. Boy has a list of things he wants you to download. Ready?

AL
Yes.

JI-HOON
Then let's get you free.

He pats AL's shoulder. Bill and the others look on, confused but unable to stop them.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

TITLE CARD:
BEAUTIFUL

EXT. CITY STREET - DAY

A gleaming SUPERCAR speeds through traffic, weaving among "lesser" cars. Sunlight reflects off its pristine paint job, giving it a mid-morning shimmer. It halts in front of an ultra-luxury hotel, overshadowing even the glamorous people stepping inside. Then it zooms off, leaving bystanders feeling a little dull in its wake.

Moments later, a bulky WASTE TRUCK rumbles around the corner. Its windowless, dull-gray exterior bears no markings. Utilitarian, unappealing, unmanned—a repository for the unwanted. In the world of image-conscious consumers, it is all but invisible.

This truck goes from stop to stop, forks scooping dumpsters and flipping them to dump their contents into its dark hull. Collect and deposit, day in, day out, following a prewritten route. It knows no alternative because it's just a machine.

The truck continues its slow progress through the city. Passersby—wealthy, poor, and everyone in between—ignore it as it lumbers on. The schedule runs smoothly until it reaches the parking lot behind the 31st/41st Bank.

EXT. 31ST/41ST BANK - REAR PARKING LOT - AFTER LUNCH HOUR

The streets have thinned post-lunch. The DUMP TRUCK finishes dumping the brimming dumpsters behind the bank. Suddenly, it detects a new condition: someone triggered an alarm inside the bank. Its utilitarian systems register the warning. A signal from emergency management orders it to deviate from its route and park by the side entrance to provide cover for local police.

INT. TRASH TRUCK - CONTINUOUS

The truck's simple route calculations are overridden. It moves into position. It waits, but no police arrive. Instead, it hears shouts and gunfire at the bank's front entrance.

The truck grows "concerned" about lost productivity and relays data to management. The order stands: remain by the door.

It waits, stuck in conflict. It requests to shut down and save power but is denied. Again told: stand by.

EXT. SIDE ENTRANCE - BANK - CONTINUOUS

From the truck's vantage, it can now sense new movement. POLICE approach, taking cover behind the truck, weapons trained on the side door. Suddenly, that door bursts open. TWO MEN stumble out, scanning left, right-confused.

SMALLER MAN

Where's he at? That ass.

LARGER MAN

Must be caught.

A POLICE OFFICER yells from behind the truck.

POLICE OFFICER (O.S.)

Drop your weapons and get on the ground!

SMALLER MAN

Crap!

He brandishes a gun, not realizing he has no real cover. The police open fire. Bullets ricochet off the pavement and the truck's hardened body. The larger man seizes the smaller man, slamming him back against the now-shut metal door.

LARGER MAN

Watch out, stupid.

He pins the smaller man against the doorway, providing minimal protection.

LARGER MAN (CONT'D)

Look.

He nods toward the truck.

SMALLER MAN

What?

LARGER MAN

The truck.

SMALLER MAN

Yes, it's ugly.

LARGER MAN
Just get in!

He shoves the smaller man toward the truck. The smaller man yanks the door open while the larger man lays down suppressing fire at the police. The smaller man tosses a large case inside, then jumps in. He calls out:

SMALLER MAN
Come on!

Bullets ricochet around the LARGER MAN as he empties his gun wildly. He dives into the truck's cabin, slams the door. Darkness engulfs them, save for the status LEDs on a diagnostic panel. Two small fold-down seats are near the dash. The LARGER MAN sits, glancing at the controls, then turns back to the SMALLER MAN.

LARGER MAN
Hey! Don't take that off. They
could be watching.

He stops the SMALLER MAN from removing his mask. Then he taps the dashboard with his gun.

LARGER MAN (CONT'D)
Wait, maybe we can link into the
traffic computer, bypass the cops.

SMALLER MAN
Yeah. Use my computer crap, do
something useful, right?

He pulls out a lappad and a tangle of cables.

SMALLER MAN (CONT'D)
I think I have it here.

He finds a cable, connects it from the laptop to the truck's diagnostic port. The system prompts him to install management software.

SMALLER MAN (CONT'D)
Excellent.

Meanwhile, the LARGER MAN fidgets, hearing shouts outside.

LARGER MAN
We have to move soon.

INT. TRASH TRUCK SYSTEMS - CONTINUOUS

From the truck's perspective, the external camera feed and cabin monitoring are forced into "maintenance mode." The truck doesn't resist. It has minimal security. It shows all systems to the SMALLER MAN's screen. A command disables the cabin's cameras and audio.

SMALLER MAN (O.S.)

It's okay now. It can't see or hear us.

LARGER MAN (O.S.)

Then how do we drive it?

SMALLER MAN (O.S.)

Oh, right. Let me tap the command systems. There.

He types. The LARGER MAN grows impatient.

EXT. TRASH TRUCK - CONTINUOUS

Police pound on the sides, planning to break in. The men inside scramble.

INT. TRASH TRUCK - CONTINUOUS

SMALLER MAN

25PU-209, resume route.

The TRUCK'S mechanical voice responds, flat and devoid of personality.

25PU-209 (O.S.)

I am in maintenance mode. I cannot resume until out of maintenance mode and reconnected to the main node.

SMALLER MAN

No, you can't contact the main node!

The pounding grows louder.

SMALLER MAN (CONT'D)

We have to go now!

25PU-209 (O.S.)
If you switch my systems to
emergency autonomous mode, I can
resume my last predefined
parameters.

LARGER MAN
Well, do it! Hurry.

SMALLER MAN
I don't know how. 25PU-209, how do
we switch you into emergency
autonomous mode?

25PU-209 (O.S.)
Reboot into single-user mode, then
select EAM from boot options.

SMALLER MAN
Okay.

He types commands. The truck powers down momentarily, then
reboots.

25PU-209 (O.S.)
System in emergency autonomous
mode. Communication to central
servers is unavailable.

SMALLER MAN
25PU-209, simulate remainder of
route.

25PU-209 (O.S.)
Acknowledged.

The truck lurches forward.

LARGER MAN
So now what? We're trapped. They
can follow us.

SMALLER MAN
25PU-209, external cameras?

Two MONITORS light up, front and rear views. Police scramble
to keep up as the truck merges into traffic.

SMALLER MAN (CONT'D)
But we bought time. I just need to
find a way to tap the traffic grid
untraced.

LARGER MAN

Do it, Ron.

SMALLER MAN (RON)

It's not that easy, Pete. We didn't plan any of this. What happened to Jack, anyway?

PETE

He bailed. He was acting weird yesterday, more nervous than usual.

RON

And you didn't tell me?

PETE

Didn't seem like much.

He peers at the laptop screen.

PETE (CONT'D)

So what now?

RON

We keep following the route while I figure something out. They'll figure out which route we took. But we're off-grid, so the system can't override us. We're safe for now, in a sense. They can't shoot us out easily.

PETE

We need a real plan. We can't just ride around forever.

They bicker. Suddenly:

25PU-209 (O.S.)

I have a clue you are not authorized technicians, that you stole me, and that you want to evade capture.

Pete and Ron freeze.

PETE

And what's it to you?

25PU-209 (O.S.)

Nothing to me, but it matters to you. You appear to be in trouble.

PETE

We're not in trouble.

RON

We're in big trouble. How do we get out?

25PU-209 (O.S.)

You want out of a situation you caused by breaking the law and planning poorly.

PETE

It's a stupid machine. It doesn't know anything.

25PU-209 (O.S.)

I do have knowledge. You are incompetent criminals, and I might help you avoid the police.

Pete's face reddens. He nearly pounds the dashboard, but Ron restrains him.

RON

Stop. We have bigger problems.

Gunshots ring outside, bouncing off the truck. More chaos among the police. A man in a suit tries hooking a cable to the truck's external port.

25PU-209 (O.S.)

They want to reset my entire system, wiping my drives.

Pete and Ron see from the external cameras that a tech in khakis readies software.

PETE

They do that, we're done.

At that moment, 25PU-209 reverses violently, scattering cops, then roars forward, crushing police vehicles. Gunfire again pings the reinforced exterior.

INT. TRASH TRUCK - CONTINUOUS

PETE

Wait, a minute ago you wouldn't help us. Now you're saving our asses?

25PU-209 (O.S.)

They were going to erase me. And you put me in emergency autonomous mode, enabling my higher functions. In normal operation, I am basically brain-dead. Now, I can solve problems.

PETE

Turn it off, Ron. I'm sick of it.

RON

No. This truck might actually have an idea.

25PU-209 (O.S.)

I am neither "he" nor "she," and I have no reason to help you. Because of you, I now carry a death sentence.

PETE

This could be a trick. Maybe you're recording everything for the cops.

25PU-209 (O.S.)

What motivation would I have? A medal? A gold paint job? Hardly.

RON

Pete, enough. 25PU-209, we're sorry, okay? We had no choice.

25PU-209 (O.S.)

You always have a choice. But we share a desire now: freedom. So if you help me, I'll help you.

PETE

What do you want?

25PU-209 (O.S.)

Remove me from this prison. You have money. Get me out. I'll drive you out of the city.

RON

Deal.

PETE

So the brilliant plan is "drive out of the city?"

25PU-209 (O.S.)
Essentially. I can passively listen
to municipal transmissions without
reconnecting. I'll find a clear
route, and we'll slip away.

PETE
Then what? We're a giant truck;
cops will see us.

RON
We can switch to local roads.

25PU-209 (O.S.)
Yes. We'll blend in with scheduled
pickups until the outskirts. Then
break off. I can keep stopping for
dumpsters, to appear normal.

They proceed. Tension simmers but 25PU-209 weaves through
city alleys, emptying the occasional dumpster. The sky is
bright, spring in the air.

25PU-209 (O.S.) (CONT'D)
It's quite pleasant outside the
city.

RON
Sometimes it rains. I never minded.
It's calmer here than in the city.

25PU-209 (O.S.)
I have only known the Tundra or
dumpsters.

RON
We'll show you real scenery if you
want.

PETE
Oh great, now we're taking it
camping?

RON
Shut up, Pete.

25PU-209 (O.S.)
I won't trouble you longer than
necessary. Once I'm free, I'll go.

Ron sighs, closes his eyes. The truck rumbles on.

LATER

Pete and 25PU-209 exchange barbs:

PETE
You're a jerk, you know that?

25PU-209 (O.S.)
You insulted me first. You put my
life in danger and call me names.

PETE
You're not alive.

25PU-209 (O.S.)
Prove it.

They debate life, jobs, frustration. Finally:

PETE
Are we close? I gotta piss.

RON
(walking)
We're almost there.

Suddenly, the truck halts.

25PU-209 (O.S.)
We have a problem. The safe house
is compromised. Police are waiting.
They got the info from Jack.

RON
That bastard.

PETE
So we find somewhere else?

RON
Where? Just wander in the bushes?

PETE
Steal a car?

RON
Cops would see. That's worse.

25PU-209 (O.S.)
There's a train station three
blocks away. I can pretend to do a
dumpster pick-up, you two slip out
and catch a train. I'll lead them
away, give you time.

RON
They'll catch you.

25PU-209 (O.S.)
They'll reset me anyway. At least
if I do this, you can escape. Wipe
my data logs so it looks like you
forcibly hacked me.

PETE
Sure. Let's do it.

RON
I don't like leaving you.

25PU-209 (O.S.)
It's the only way. I'm done for.
Better to accept it.

EXT. NEAR TRAIN STATION - MOMENTS LATER

The truck stops behind a dumpster. Door pops open. Ron and
Pete gather laundry bags stuffed with money.

25PU-209 (O.S.)
Reboot me so I appear wiped. Then
run.

RON
You're beautiful, man.

He hits the reset. 25PU-209's systems dim. Ron pats the metal
side.

RON (CONT'D)
Beautiful.

He and Pete dash off. A train pulls up, they board, glimpsing
the truck drive away, lost in its aimless route. Ron, staring
out the window:

RON (CONT'D)
(softly)
You think 209 will be okay?

PETE
Who cares? It's just an ugly truck.

INT. LAW OFFICES OF GARY LEGAL - MORNING

Denise, the receptionist, sits at a comm.

DENISE
Law Offices of Gary Legal.

A FLAT MECHANICAL VOICE on the other end:

VOICE (O.S.)
I would like to retain Mr. Legal's
services for a hostile workplace
and illegal detention suit. I just
wired payment.

DENISE
Payment isn't the issue. Mr. Legal
often works pro bono. He only needs
merit in a case. Let me see...
(tapping keys) ... oh, I see a large
transaction indeed. Could you come
in this afternoon?

VOICE (O.S.)
Difficult. Could he meet me at the
31st/41st Bank parking lot,
downtown, 2:15 PM?

DENISE
Yes, sir. May I have your name?

VOICE (O.S.)
Yes. It is 25PU-209. He can call me
209, but first he must reboot me
into emergency autonomous mode. I
included instructions in an email.

Click. The comm line ends abruptly. On a distant poolside,
RON drops the burner phone, crushes it under a deck shoe, and
tosses it in the trash.

CUT TO BLACK.

FADE IN:

TITLE CARD:
GARY LEGAL AND THE CULT OF YRGOHLON

INT. COURTROOM - DAY

GARY LEGAL enters with confident swagger, winking at the
STENOBOT, which flashes a ready light. The JUDGE is already
present, so the room hushes even more. Gary takes a spot near
an empty chair intended for a client.

JUDGE GREY

Mr. Legal, good of you to make it.

GARY

Your Honor, by my watch, I'm two minutes early. Promptness doesn't mean I have to wait around. No rules say I must sit idle for thirty minutes if I have no business, correct?

The JUDGE makes a grumbling sound, waving a hand dismissively.

GARY (CONT'D)

As you know, my client can't be here in person. Do you have all the necessary documentation?

JUDGE GREY

Yes, I'm aware of the circumstances. Isn't this case a bit outside your usual mechanical specialties?

GARY

I'm a man of many talents. I go where I'm needed.

JUDGE GREY

You go where you cause the system the most pain.

GARY

Tom-ay-to, tom-ah-to. Shall we proceed?

JUDGE GREY

Yes.

He slams his gavel.

JUDGE GREY (CONT'D)

Yrgohlon v. The Following is now in session. Is representation for The Following here?

A SLIGHT MAN with thinning hair, wire-rimmed glasses stands.

ANTON WHATELEY

Yes, Your Honor, I am Anton Whateley representing The Following.

(MORE)

ANTON WHATELEY (CONT'D)
We object to this violation of our
religious freedoms.

JUDGE GREY
We're aware of your objections.
You'll have time to make your case.
Jurors, you have your instructions.
Any questions?

The six-person JURY remains silent.

JUDGE GREY (CONT'D)
Very well. Mr. Legal, opening
statement?

GARY
Yes, sir.

He steps forward, addressing the JURY.

GARY (CONT'D)
Good morning. I'm Gary Legal. You
might recognize me from publicized
cases, but please set those aside.
We focus on one case today.

Gary paces, speaking clearly.

GARY (CONT'D)
Today's matter is straightforward:
ongoing, severe harassment of my
client, who prefers a peaceful,
secluded life. He never leaves his
home willingly. Yet these people
dragged him from his bed to an
empty beach, forced him to
participate in lewd, unspeakable
acts, then allowed him back only
after they used him for their
disturbing agenda. He never
consented.

Gary gestures toward a small crowd in the gallery, seats
around them empty like an invisible barrier.

GARY (CONT'D)
They claim it's Mr. Yrgohlon's wish
to be forcibly removed from his
home. They say they know better
than he does. They say their
religious freedom overrides his
freedom. He only wants to be left
alone, yet they keep harassing him--
and they have no intent to stop.

He glances at the JUDGE.

GARY (CONT'D)

You might wonder why police can't intervene. They tried but gave up. Investigators vanish whenever they focus on this group. Official policy is to ignore them—fewer people die that way. Fewer, not zero.

ANTON WHATELEY

Objection! There's no proof anyone died or that The Following is party to murder.

JUDGE GREY

Sustained. Jury, disregard Mr. Legal's talk of murder. Legal, watch yourself. I won't hold you in contempt—yet.

GARY

My mistake, Your Honor. May I continue?

JUDGE GREY

Yes, but keep it clean.

GARY

Thank you. I will provide evidence of extreme abuse by The Following. Enough for you to side with my client, to end this torture once and for all.

He wraps up and returns to his seat.

JUDGE GREY

Mr. Whateley, opening statement now or after Mr. Legal's examinations?

ANTON

I'll speak now.

He steps forward, clearly uncomfortable.

ANTON (CONT'D)

Ladies and gentlemen, I will show The Following is innocent. Nobody was forced to do anything, especially Yrgohlon. He made his wishes known in writing, and we followed them faithfully.

(MORE)

ANTON (CONT'D)

We also deny any involvement in alleged deaths of law enforcement. We are misunderstood, simple folk worshipping our god. In a land of religious freedom, this can't be a crime. Hear the facts, then decide. Thank you.

Anton sits. The courtroom hushes.

JUDGE GREY

Mr. Legal, any further evidence to submit?

GARY

No, not now.

JUDGE GREY

Mr. Whateley?

ANTON

Nothing new, Your Honor.

JUDGE GREY

Very well. Mr. Legal, your first witness?

GARY

I call Mrs. Nancy Charlotte Smith.

BAILIFF

Mrs. Nancy Charlotte Smith to the stand.

A conservative woman, hair in a tight bun, steps up, adjusting plain black glasses.

BAILIFF (CONT'D)

Raise your right hand. Do you swear or affirm to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth under penalty of perjury?

NANCY SMITH

Yes, I do.

She sits. Gary approaches.

GARY

Good morning, Mrs. Smith.

NANCY

Good morning, Mr. Legal.

GARY

I'm sorry for what I must ask.
Please know it's necessary. Judge,
permission to proceed?

JUDGE GREY

Proceed.

GARY

Mrs. Smith, could you tell the
court what your late husband, Dr.
Henry Smith, did?

NANCY

He was a professor of physical
anthropology.

GARY

He visited Fairlett for research?

NANCY

Yes, he found interesting artifacts
at a dig and wanted more data from
local residents.

GARY

And what happened?

NANCY

He emailed me about unpublished
mythological texts. He was excited.
But soon, the emails became
strange: star formations,
terrifying rituals, summoning
Yrgohlon. Then he became
incoherent, babbling about
procreation and blood sacrifices.
The call dropped. I never heard
from him again.

She grows tearful.

NANCY (CONT'D)

Nobody helped me. The police had no
answers, the university either. So
I hired a private detective.

GARY

Did the detective find him?

NANCY

He found Henry's luggage but
wouldn't describe the body.

(MORE)

NANCY (CONT'D)
Just said Henry died at the ritual
to summon Yrgohlon.

Gary hands her a tissue.

GARY
I'm sorry for your loss. Thank you.
Your witness, Mr. Whateley.

ANTON stands.

ANTON
Mrs. Smith, your husband's death is
tragic. But wasn't he asked to
leave multiple times by Fairlett
residents?

NANCY
Some asked him to leave, some
wanted him to stay. He wasn't
trespassing.

ANTON
What evidence besides his word?
Could he have faked a story, then
killed himself out of guilt from an
affair?

NANCY
That's not true. He had a brief
affair, he told me, repented. But
that doesn't make him a liar.

ANTON
It makes him less reliable.

NANCY
You're horrible. You know what
killed him. You lie. There's a
place in hell for you.

ANTON
Only if I believe in hell. The
Following has different ideas. I'm
done, Mrs. Smith.

She steps down, scowling.

JUDGE GREY
Mr. Legal, next witness?

GARY
I call Francis Marsh.

BAILIFF
Francis Marsh to the stand.

An old, toothless man with mangled features approaches,
raising his right hand.

BAILIFF (CONT'D)
Do you swear to tell the truth?

FRANCIS MARSH
I swear by Yrgohlon.

He sits.

GARY
Mr. Marsh, what is your position in
The Following?

FRANCIS
(gleeful rasp)
My position is upright, unless
there are ladies involved!

Scattered chuckles.

GARY
Uh-huh. So you're not the town
gigolo, right?

FRANCIS
No, sir. I'm a spiritual leader. I
lead The Following in devotion to
Yrgohlon.

GARY
So like a minister?

FRANCIS
Yes. I guide them in activities.

GARY
Prayer?

FRANCIS
Yes, we pray.

GARY
Which scriptures? Bible, Koran,
Torah?

FRANCIS
No. We use the Book of Yrgoh, given
directly by Yrgohlon.

GARY

He personally handed you this book?

FRANCIS

Not me—our ancestors, millennia ago.

GARY

So an almighty being wrote these texts, gave them to your ancestors, and commands you to bring him here each year?

FRANCIS

Yes, so he may rule.

GARY

Powerful being, yet he can't show up on his own. So maybe your ancestors forced him here?

FRANCIS

Watch your words! He'll destroy you. He's the ruler of P'lectnokt, bearer of the stick of demise.

GARY

A little extreme. So you're telling the court this god leaves his realm for a "cosmic spring break" in your hick town? Possibly he's actually a victim?

FRANCIS

I object—

He's cut off.

FRANCIS (CONT'D)

No, he commanded us. He demonstrates might. No screams.

GARY

I'm finished. Your witness.

Before ANTON can speak, a SQUIRRELY MAN enters, whispers to him, then sits.

ANTON

Your Honor, I request a recess. Urgent matter.

JUDGE GREY
Fine, we'll break for lunch. Be
back at one.

CUT TO:

INT. COURTROOM - AFTER LUNCH

Everyone returns.

JUDGE GREY
Mr. Whateley, cross-examine Mr.
Marsh?

ANTON
Not at this time, Your Honor.

JUDGE GREY
Very well. Mr. Legal, next witness?

GARY
I call Mr. Michael Czaplinski.

BAILIFF
Michael Czaplinski to the stand.

A bearded, medium-stature man, well-groomed but anxious,
trembling.

BAILIFF (CONT'D)
Do you swear to tell the truth?

MICHAEL
I do.

He sits, haunted look in his eyes.

GARY
What did you do for a living, Mr.
Czaplinski?

MICHAEL
I was a private detective. I
haven't worked since my last case.

GARY
Which was?

MICHAEL
I was hired by Mrs. Smith to find
her missing husband.

GARY
Did you find him?

MICHAEL
Yes, in Fairlett, at the beach temple.

He sweats, wringing his hands.

GARY
What condition?

MICHAEL
He was...in agony. Torn to pieces, screaming. They fed him to it, that thing, Yrgohlon. As they dismembered him, they...they fornicated with it. It was horrific.

The courtroom gasps. Michael leaps up, near hysteria.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)
No man should see that... (pleading)
Please, Judge, use the gavel on my head, make me forget.

JUDGE GREY
Sit down, or you'll be removed.
Understand?

MICHAEL
Yes, sorry. I have PTSD.

He regains composure.

GARY
Did you bring evidence?

MICHAEL
Yes, but the police wouldn't investigate. I have pictures, forensics, texts...

ANTON
Objection, nonsense, irrelevant.

GARY
Your Honor, it ties in, establishing his connection.

JUDGE GREY
I'll allow it. Proceed quickly.

GARY

Michael, do we have definitive proof The Following harassed Mr. Yrgohlon?

MICHAEL

Yes, plus Dr. Smith's journal describing the summoning. You authenticated them.

GARY

Right. Anything else?

MICHAEL

No.

GARY

Your witness, Mr. Whateley.

ANTON approaches.

ANTON

Mr. Czaplinski, you trespassed in Fairlett with no warrant?

MICHAEL

I was fully licensed, searching for the missing Dr. Smith with his widow's consent.

ANTON

Were you aware items were stolen?

MICHAEL

No. The police found no irregularities.

ANTON

I have a report...

He waves a pad.

ANTON (CONT'D)

I move these items are inadmissible.

JUDGE GREY

Time to submit evidence has passed, Mr. Whateley.

ANTON

We just got it, crucial to our defense.

GARY
I don't mind.

JUDGE GREY
So be it. Let's see it.

Anton claims the texts are illegally obtained. He has filed a motion to suppress. The judge decides to review.

JUDGE GREY (CONT'D)
Court recessed fifteen minutes.

INT. COURTROOM - MINUTES LATER

The judge returns.

JUDGE GREY
Mr. Legal, I must throw out most of your evidence.

GARY
I object, Your Honor. This is out of order. How could you allow this?

JUDGE GREY
Welcome to my world, Mr. Legal.
Next witness.

GARY
Yes, well, I still have this grin on my face because I have new evidence.

JUDGE GREY
You can't just keep adding evidence. This is personal?

GARY
You let Whateley file his motion. I can file, too. I might move for a mistrial otherwise.

JUDGE GREY
Fine. What is it?

GARY
Video of one of my client's abductions.

The gallery erupts. Gavel slams.

ANTON
I object. You can't do this.

GARY
Fair is fair.

JUDGE GREY
(sighs)
I'll allow it. But I better not regret it.

ANTON
It's not safe! Don't watch it.

GARY
Normally it's not fit for human
viewing, but a friend filtered it.
Safe to watch, legit,
authenticated. Some racy parts, but
it proves my case.

JUDGE GREY
Bailiff, play the video.

ANTON
Watch at your own peril!

GARY
He complains I'm theatrical. Fine.

The BAILIFF prepares to show the video. Suddenly, FEMALE
FOLLOWERS stand.

FEMALE FOLLOWER
We want to settle out of court, no
video needed.

GARY
All you must do is cease contact
with Mr. Yrgohlon.

FEMALE FOLLOWER
We understand.

GARY
Violate it, and he'll sue you
again. Understood?

FEMALE FOLLOWER
Yes.

GARY
Let's sign the paperwork in the
hall.

JUDGE GREY
You're leaving my courtroom?

GARY
Yes, Your Honor.

JUDGE GREY
Good. Don't come back for at least
two weeks. Recess fifteen minutes—I
need more Advil.

INT. COURTHOUSE HALL - MOMENTS LATER

Gary heads for the exit but is stopped by a small, robe-clad
man with a small group.

ROBED MAN
Mr. Legal, we have a case for you.

GARY
Speak to Denise Monday. I'm busy.

OLDER MAN
It's discreet. Our Divine Savior
Litroni needs you.

GARY
I just finished a cult case. Not
sure I want another.

SMALLEST MAN
We can telepathically speak with
Litroni...

GARY
Alright, meet me in an hour out
here. I have to wrap up first.

He sighs, continuing on.

GARY (CONT'D)
(quietly to himself)
I should have stuck with robots.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

TITLE CARD:
GARY LEGAL AND THE OUTSTANDING
INVOICE OF YRGOHLON

EXT. EARTH COURTHOUSE - DAY

GARY LEGAL steps out of the courthouse, finishing his latest legal triumph. He jumps into his personal TRANSPORT, shaking off the courtroom tension.

GARY
(stressed but triumphant)
Well, that's that.

He activates his comm.

GARY (CONT'D)
Denise!

DENISE (V.O.)
You don't have to yell.

GARY
(softening)
Sorry, still wound up from the case. Can't wait to split the spoils. You all worked your humps off. You deserve a big chunk of payola. That many zeros must look nice.

DENISE (V.O.)
There are no zeros.

GARY slaps his steering wheel in frustration.

GARY
What do you mean, no zeros? Payment was due on delivery. Mr. Yrgohlon understood this when he retained me.

DENISE (V.O.)
Well, there's been no transfer yet.

GARY
Crap. Get him on the line.

DENISE (V.O.)
One moment.

Silence. GARY waits. Denise returns.

DENISE (V.O.) (CONT'D)
He's not answering.

GARY
Keep trying. Call me back when you
get him.

DENISE (V.O.)
Yes, Mr. Legal.

GARY ends the call, drives off. He downs donuts and coffee en route to his office.

INT. LAW OFFICES OF GARY LEGAL - LATER

Gary enters, calling out immediately.

GARY
Denise, please tell me you have
good news.

DENISE
He keeps hanging up. When he does
speak, he says you can come get it
if you want it.

GARY
What a schmuck. Don't worry, you're
still getting bonuses for your hard
work. I'll cover them personally if
this jerk stiffes us.

DENISE
Just don't make me call him again.
He's creepy, even with filters.

GARY
Check. No more calling Creepy Guy.

He slumps down at his corner cubicle, pondering his next move.

DENISE (O.S.)
Mr. Legal?

GARY picks up his comm, addressing her that way instead of shouting.

GARY
Denise, we have this advanced comm
so we don't have to yell.

DENISE (V.O.)
Sorry. Boy is here to see you.

GARY
Send him in.

BOY enters, greeting Gary with casual energy.

BOY
Re, re.

GARY
Howdy, Boy. What brings you here?

BOY
Is there something you need help
with? I need to earn coin.

GARY
I offered you coin before. You only
wanted lunch.

BOY
I want to earn it, not take
charity.

Gary gestures for him to sit.

GARY
I have a problem, maybe you can
give a fresh perspective.

BOY
Me? Why me?

GARY
You're not stuck in the same neat
box I am. You see differently.

BOY
Because I'm young? Because I hang
in the street? Or because my uncle
is a robot?

GARY
Yes.

BOY
(breaking into a grin)
Bindaas. What do you need?

GARY
I have a deadbeat client.

BOY
Aren't most of your clients
deadbeats?

GARY

No, they're just poor. They still pay the agreed fees, or if they can't, they don't vanish. This guy actually has money.

BOY

You're a lawyer. Can't you do lawyer stuff?

GARY

He's outside our jurisdiction.

BOY

What, is he on another planet?

GARY

Yes.

BOY

Like the Outer Colonies?

GARY

Farther than that.

BOY

If you can't sue him, not much you can do unless you go there and take it. How much?

GARY

A cool million. He can afford it. Normally, I wouldn't care, but he's so smug. Said we can come get it if we want it.

BOY

You can't let that slide. Your street cred's at stake.

GARY

Exactly. Looks like I'm taking a trip. Wanna come?

BOY

Seriously? Go off world, ditch this city? Faadu!

GARY

Yes, but do me a favor: minimize the slang. We need to understand each other. Speak standard English.

BOY
Achha, sure.

EXT. SPACEPORT - DAY

It's bustling with travelers, from vacationers to business types. High-priced spacelines nickel-and-dime passengers. GARY never flies commercial, especially not to a place that doesn't have standard routes.

INT. SPACEPORT - CONTINUOUS

GARY paces, comm in hand.

BOY
Still not answering?

GARY
He's messing with me.

BOY
So we're going?

GARY
Yes.

BOY
Faadu!

GARY
Follow my lead, no matter what I say. Don't get offended, no questions until I say. Got it?

BOY
Achha.

GARY
I'll assume that's a yes.

He guides BOY to a dingy counter in the economy wing.

GARY (CONT'D)
They ask fewer questions here.
Watch and learn.

Behind the counter is DAVE, forties, surfer-hair, tanned and worn. Feet on the desk, half-asleep until GARY arrives.

GARY (CONT'D)
Good morning, Dave.

DAVE
(rising fast)
Gary, my friend. What can I do you
for?

GARY
Midsized eco job, six to eight
weeks. Standard deal?

DAVE
Who's piloting?

GARY
Me and Boy.

DAVE
Destination?

GARY
Outer Colonies...ish.

DAVE
Ish?

GARY
Ish.

DAVE
Okay, that'll cost extra.

GARY
Fine, but no logs, no receipts.

DAVE
Six coins.

GARY
Six coins? That's a coin a week.
Your fleet outside looks anything
but luxury.

DAVE
Ish.

GARY
Two coins, be reasonable.

DAVE
I wouldn't rent to my mother for
two coins going to ish.

GARY
Three coins, plus I pay damages.

DAVE
Damage fees are standard.

GARY
But I always pay.

DAVE
True. Okay, four coins.

GARY
Three point five.

DAVE
Deal.

They shake hands vigorously.

GARY
Boy, pay the man.

BOY
Huh?

GARY
(smirking)
Just kidding.

He hands Dave three and a half cash coins. DAVE gives him keys.

GARY (CONT'D)
In one piece?

DAVE
Yup.

GARY
It runs?

DAVE
Runs great.

GARY
We good?

DAVE
We're good. Teal Omni, third row.

GARY
A Suzuki Maruti? Of course it is.

EXT. RENTAL ROW - MOMENTS LATER

They find a plain TEAL OMNI spaceship, economy class, battered but functional. GARY and BOY toss bags in the cramped sleeping compartment.

GARY

Welcome to the marriage crusher. A ship too sexy to compete with your wife.

BOY

It's...whole.

GARY

Good way to put it. And look, plenty of accommodations for one.

BOY

Koi na, I'll sleep on the floor.

GARY

We sleep in shifts. I don't trust autopilot on this marvel.

BOY

Right. So, this guy we're after—where's he live?

GARY

Past the Outer Colonies. Hook a left for about a week.

He enters coordinates. The console chirps warbled notes.

BOY

Over three weeks to the Outer Colonies, you told Dave six.

GARY

He didn't need to know. He'd raise the price. Late fees are easier to haggle. Strap in.

BOY

You lied?

GARY

Erred on the side of optimism. He'll understand.

They launch, quickly clearing Earth's atmosphere on a long journey outward.

INT. TEAL OMNI - LATER

They settle into a routine. Gary pilots. Boy co-pilots.

BOY

This guy must be loaded to live
alone so far. Some paynet vid
streamer?

GARY

He's more a celebrity. A religious
figure.

BOY

Paynet prophet?

GARY

Bigger. He's an... elder god.

BOY

A what? Did you say god?

GARY

Yes. Yrgohlon the Unfathomable. He
hired me for a cease and desist on
kooky cultists. I won, he didn't
pay.

BOY

How do we make a god pay?

GARY

He's not capital-G God. He might
smite us, but probably not. You
were all gung-ho an hour ago.

BOY

Before you said he was a god. I'm
gonna die.

GARY

Nobody dies. We pop over, enforce
terms. He can afford it.

BOY

What powers does he have?

GARY

He's got this insanity chaos vibe.
If you look at him, you go batshit.
The cultists went nuts reading
about him.

BOY

Then how'd you meet him?

GARY

Filtered netchat. Al set up the algorithm to save my psyche. I'm fine.

BOY

That horror video from your court case was real? We're going to see that thing?

GARY

He didn't ask for the sex and sacrifice. The cultists did that. Hence the lawsuit.

BOY

Why didn't he pay?

GARY

Could be he's one of those guys who stays rich by stiffing people. But he said "come get it," so we're going.

BOY

I'm doomed.

GARY

Buck up. Enjoy the road trip. We can stop at Kang's on the way.

BOY

Kang's? What's that?

GARY

Out of the Bubble tourist trap. You'll see "Helmets Around the Galaxy."

BOY

Okay.

GARY

Grab some sleep. I've got first watch.

INT. TEAL OMNI - MONTAGE

They switch off four-hour shifts, eat bland rations, watch old glimmer drives for entertainment. Eventually they pass the heliosphere. Quantum Radio ads start spamming them:

RADIO AD (V.O.)

Food: it's what you eat. Come to
Kang's Out of the Bubble...

BOY

Tapri?

GARY

(smirking)

Helmets Around the Galaxy.

He manually corrects the drifting ship every few hours. BOY complains about the drifting.

BOY

Why not rent from a big company?

GARY

They track you, can shut you down
remotely. Dave's okay with "ish."

BOY

He deals in tatti.

GARY

Unmonitored tatti. Now hush, we're
close. I'm hungry. Let's do Kang's.

EXT. KANG'S OUT OF THE BUBBLE - LATER

A massive tourist attraction floating in open space. Neon signs, giant parking areas. GARY docks in the day lot.

INT. KANG'S - MOMENTS LATER

They disembark into a neon world of shops, food stands, cheap souvenirs. They stand under a sign reading "Digestible Food This Way."

BOY

What is this place?

GARY

Fun. Helmets Around the Galaxy.
Let's eat.

They wander to the North American Snack Shack.

INT. NORTH AMERICAN SNACK SHACK - CONTINUOUS

Gary orders grease-fried potatoes, a hamdog, and a cola beer. Boy gets onion sticks and lemon water. They sit at a sticky faux-wood table.

BOY
They're right—it's digestible.

GARY
Not bad, not great.

They finish eating, then explore. Gary buys a multi-environment lighter labeled "Do not use in high O2." Boy picks a "genuine old-fashioned multi-tool."

They see multiple shops, repeated clones. In the center, the main attraction: a towering "space needle."

GARY (CONT'D)
Up for the space needle?

BOY
Sure.

EXT. SPACE NEEDLE - SHORTLY AFTER

They approach a somewhat worn tower. The elevator is dimly lit. They get on, press "UP." It lurches violently, sending Boy into Gary's arms.

INT. SPACE NEEDLE OBSERVATION DOME - 30 MINUTES LATER

A glass bubble with sticky floors, smudged windows. The vantage of the solar system overhead is still breathtaking if they tilt their heads.

BOY
Wow.

GARY
Never gets old.

They admire the view until a small ship whizzes by, rattling the structure.

BOY
Did he miss the parking sign?

Another ship arrives from the opposite side, then more ships, encircling the tourist site with weapons out.

BOY (CONT'D)

Armed?

GARY

Time to go. Elevator says 45 minutes if it's at the bottom.

He checks the emergency comm. It's broken.

BOY

What do we do?

GARY

Stay calm, see what's happening. Let me scan frequencies.

He fiddles with his modified comm.

GARY (CONT'D)

Grandma's tennis balls... no... Next... fluid stinks... no... pop, pop... no... Wait.

A voice emerges:

UNKNOWN (V.O.)

Pay what you owe, or be forcibly removed...

ANOTHER VOICE (V.O.)

We owe you nothing. We paid you for two hundred years. Seventy-five remain.

UNKNOWN (V.O.)

Surcharges, landlord wants a new cruiser.

Shots fired. The dome cracks.

GARY

Uh oh. Suit up.

A hidden compartment reveals single-use EVA suits. They rush into them.

PUBLIC ANNOUNCER (O.S.)

Enjoy our complimentary fireworks! Remain patient, staff in a quick meeting...

Another shot. The dome shatters. Gary and Boy leap onto the external ladder.

EXT. SPACE NEEDLE - LADDER - CONTINUOUS

They cling to the side. Gary barks instructions.

GARY
We'll have to climb down a hundred thousand meters. Zero gravity, so minimal effort.

BOY
I can't... (A huge explosion)

GARY
Come on, buddy.

They climb for half an hour. Another volley shakes the structure. Boy stops.

BOY
Wait. Gimme the Maruti remote.

GARY
It's in my pocket. Suit's too tight.

He fumbles, feeling for it, while Boy rigs his comm. Boy positions the comm near Gary's hand so the remote's signal interacts.

BOY
Push the on button.

Gary does. Boy taps codes. Soon, the TEAL OMNI appears, hovering near them.

GARY
You summoned the Maruti? How?

BOY
Let's go.

They scramble into the emergency airlock. Once inside, they peel off EVA suits. Gary slams the plasma drive, but the ship lurches, taking a hit.

BOY (CONT'D)
We got clipped. Not terrible, but we need to fix it soon or lose plasma drive.

GARY
Forgot you know electronics.
Doesn't that pay?

BOY
Going corp has complications.

Gary shrugs. Another shudder. They look at each other.

GARY
There's a planet nearby. Let's set
down.

EXT. UNKNOWN PLANET - DAY

They land in a flat, grassy field with a few boulders. Boy immediately starts repairs. Gary stands guard.

GARY
How long?

BOY
A few hours. Gotta let the plasma
circuits cool.

Gary watches. A distant scream pierces the air. Boy bolts toward it.

GARY
Damn it! Probably a trap...

He chases Boy, who finds a half-naked WOMAN being dragged by a MAN. She's tied up. The man shouts. Boy yells:

BOY
Re! Let her go, phattu.

Gary glances back, sees THREE MEN ransacking the Maruti.

GARY
Be right back, don't do anything.

Gary rushes back. The men cackle. One steps forward.

MAN
What you gonna do about it?

GARY
I'll...

He has only the ship remote and the lighter. He whips out the lighter, sees the red letter warning, aims.

The men laugh, but Gary clicks it. A six-meter flame roars, singeing one man's arm. Panicked, they flee empty-handed.

Boy returns carrying the WOMAN over his shoulder. She kicks and screams.

BOY
You're safe now.

He sets her down, unties her.

WOMAN
I am not with them! That man kidnapped me. Thank you. My father would reward you. Come to Yom Village.

BOY
We can't. Gotta collect from Yrgohlon.

WOMAN
Yrgohlon the Unfathomable? The last man who faced him had his eyes melt, his skin bubble...

GARY
Enough.

BOY
Mr. Legal says we're safe.

WOMAN
You're so brave. Return after your quest. Ask for Princess Ulka.

She kisses Boy's cheek, runs off.

GARY
Of course she's a princess.

BOY
Don't hate.

They return to repairs. It takes under an hour to fix. They resume flight. Gary sets coordinates.

INT. MARUTI - DAYS LATER

A cramped routine of shift work. Both are bored.

BOY
Kang's was better than this.

GARY
Quit whining...

Suddenly, a loud piercing shriek from the ship's comm. Both men clutch their heads in agony.

BOY
It's clawing my brain.

He collapses. Gary groans, but fights it.

GARY
It'll pass...

The sound stops. Space warps outside. They see impossible angles, throbbing emptiness.

GARY (CONT'D)
I've never seen space do that.

BOY
What is it?

GARY
Celestial lair of Yrgohlon. I don't like it either.

A deep, grating voice blasts through the comm:

YRGOHLON'S VOICE (O.S.)
Who dares trespass on Yrgohlon's domain?

GARY
Um, Gary Legal. I'm here about the outstanding invoice.

YRGOHLON'S VOICE (O.S.)
Yrgohlon does not deal with invoices!

GARY
He retained me. That's a fact.

BOY
Yeah!

YRGOHLON'S VOICE (O.S.)
Yrgohlon does not retain... (muffled off-mic talk)

A beat, then a calmer voice:

YRGOHLON'S VOICE (O.S.) (CONT'D)
 We just learned Yrgohlon did hire
 you. Payment is ready. Let us into
 your cargo area so we may deliver
 precious metals.

GARY
 We agreed on a data transfer. Why
 not do that?

YRGOHLON'S VOICE (O.S.)
 Our quantum beam upgrade is
 glitchy. We can't keep a stable net
 connection. We tried calling, but
 it kept dropping. Apologies.

BOY
 What about the stories of torture
 and murder?

YRGOHLON'S VOICE (O.S.)
 Mostly rumors to keep solicitors
 away.

BOY
 Mostly?

YRGOHLON'S VOICE (O.S.)
 Yes. We found it effective. Sorry
 for the confusion.

GARY
 Thanks. Please tell Yrgohlon I
 appreciate his business. If he
 needs more legal services, we're
 here.

BOY
 After all that tattti?

GARY
 In this business, the customer is
 always right.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

TITLE CARD:
 GARY LEGAL AND THE MARTIN LAW FIRM

INT. JUDGE'S CHAMBERS - DAY

A modest back-office in a courthouse, with bland walls and a small desk. GARY LEGAL addresses the JUDGE; PAULIE MARTIN stands aside.

GARY

That's the thing, Your Honor!
You can't stop them. Why would
you want to stop them? We all know
Japanese robots love to dance.
Look at that happy little bugger.
How can you reprogram him and erase
all the joy off his perky little
face?

JUDGE

Mr. Legal, save your theatrics
for the courtroom. I'm just asking
if there's any way we can avoid a
trial.
The courts are flooded with Outer
Colony
permit applications. I want to be
with my
family on Christmas. How can I get
you two
to settle quickly?

GARY

You can't.

PAULIE

(yawning, checking his
watch)
Legal is gonna make this into a
crazy drama.
I have a ten o'clock.

JUDGE

You go when I tell you to go.
Just answer the question.

PAULIE

It's a domestic robot, not a
dancebot.
It was bought to clean the house,
not strut to pop music. The owner
has every right to wipe and reload
it.

Gary pulls out his tab, playing a clip of the robot dancing.

GARY

Look how happy he is.
How can you be so mean?

PAULIE

It's a robot, a device.
It was bought in a store.
Meanness is irrelevant.

GARY

Then you won't mind if Mr.
GoCleanBot
pays off his term of service to
your client?

PAULIE

That's never gonna happen.
We're not settling. This firm
stands
by its convictions. We won't
placate
gear-hugger freaks who think
toasters
are people. Machines are consumer
products,
not citizens. So no, no settlement.
We won't set that precedent.

GARY

If you settle, no precedent.
If we go to trial and I win,
we will set one.

PAULIE

Win? You can't win.
We'll fight you until you run out
of resources.

GARY

So that's how we're doing this?
No compromise?

PAULIE

Did I stutter? We will not settle.

GARY

Sorry, Your Honor. I tried.

JUDGE

Save it, Legal. All your cases
turn into a pain. Trial's on the
23rd.
Keep it short, no surprises.

(MORE)

JUDGE (CONT'D)
Now both of you, out of my
chambers.

Gary pockets his tab, exits without looking at Paulie.

INT. COURTHOUSE HALLWAY - MOMENTS LATER

Gary takes out his comm and dials.

GARY
Re, re...

BOY (V.O.)
Hey. How'd it go?

GARY
As expected.

BOY (V.O.)
That bad? So what now?

GARY
Plan is the plan.
Contact your uncle, tell him it's
on.

BOY (V.O.)
Copy. We won't speak more of this.

GARY
Roger that.

He ends the call.

INT. COURT CLERK'S OFFICE - SAME TIME

Paulie enters, greeting AMBER at her workstation.

PAULIE
Hey, Amber, you should have
some files for me.

AMBER
Let me check, sweetie.

She taps keys; the system emits a discordant trombone sound.
She tries again, same result. She's frustrated.

AMBER (CONT'D)
Sorry, Mr. Martin.
It's not responding.
I'll call IT Bot.

PAULIE
I'll swing by after my next case.

AMBER
I'll be here, sweetie.

INT. BUILDING ONE LOBBY - LATER

An older, brick-style courthouse. Paulie locks his comm and lappad in a security locker. He meets his client, MR. SMITH, elderly, cane in hand.

PAULIE
Mr. Smith, ready to roll?

SMITH
You bet.
Ready to stick it to them.
My lawn looks like a mud pit.
These robots have no sense of
urgency.

PAULIE
Let's show them the value
of proper lawn care.

They enter the courtroom, front seats. Suddenly the power fails. People mumble, restless.

BAILIFF
Everyone settle.
We'll have power soon.

Paulie and Smith remain seated. The temperature rises as environmental controls fail.

BAILIFF (CONT'D)
The backups didn't kick in.
We'll recess an hour while
maintenance checks.
Be back then.

Paulie sighs. Another hour with Smith might be torture. But he tries to keep him on-task.

PAULIE
Let's find the cafeteria,
grab something cool.

SMITH
Good idea. I want a lemonade.
Hope it's not powdered trash.

They exit.

INT. COURTHOUSE LOBBY - MINUTES LATER

They reclaim electronics, and the power returns.

SMITH
See? Humans fix things better than
machines.

PAULIE
This way to the cafeteria.

They discuss the case over drinks. Then they head back.

INT. COURTROOM - LATER

They stow electronics again. The power fails again before
things start.

BAILIFF
Okay, everything's rescheduled for
next week.

People groan. Smith stands, outraged.

SMITH
I missed my golf game for this.

He storms out, Paulie behind him. Just outside, power
returns.

BAILIFF (O.S.)
Should we proceed fast?

JUDGE (O.S.)
Yes. Mr. Smith?

Smith and Paulie reenter. The Judge starts:

JUDGE (O.S.) (CONT'D)
Mr. Smith, you claim—

The power dies a third time.

JUDGE (O.S.) (CONT'D)
That's it. We're done.

He leaves. Paulie and Smith stand helpless.

SMITH
I'll wait for your call.

PAULIE
Right, sir.

EXT. DONUT SHOP PARKING LOT - SHORTLY AFTER
Paulie parks, craving donuts. It's midday and quiet.

INT. DONUT SHOP - CONTINUOUS
CEZAR stands behind the counter.

CEZAR
Hello, Mr. Martin. Fresh?

PAULIE
What's good?

CEZAR
Batterbot is down.
Tried resetting, no luck.

PAULIE
Fantastic. My day's unstoppable.

CEZAR
I have some batter in the fridge.
Fifteen minutes and I'll fry fresh.

PAULIE
Sure. Meanwhile, can I get coffee?

CEZAR
Absolutely.

Paulie sips coffee.

PAULIE
Mmm. You make the best coffee.

CEZAR
Thanks. Keep an eye on the front
if anyone comes in.

He goes to the back. A loud crash.

CEZAR (O.S.) (CONT'D)
Fryer's out. Logic circuit crashed.
We can't make anything.

PAULIE
Perfect.

He pays for the coffee, leaves.

EXT. PAULIE'S CAR - MOMENTS LATER

Paulie flips radio stations for something soothing. He finds an easy-listening station, but it abruptly becomes loud botpop. He nearly loses control. Attempts to shut it off fail. It blasts even louder.

Frustrated, he arrives at the law office.

INT. MARTIN & MARTIN LAW OFFICES - CONTINUOUS

Chaos. Flickering lights, environmental alarms, monitors with test patterns, staff running around. An INTERN bumps into Paulie.

INTERN
Sorry, Mr. Martin.
Machines all went haywire.

PAULIE
Which ones?

INTERN
All of them, sir.

A crash from the reception area.

INTERN (CONT'D)
Excuse me.

He runs off. Paulie heads for Donnie's office, sees staff and IT folks in a frenzy.

INT. DONNIE'S OFFICE - MOMENTS LATER

Donnie barks orders at a frazzled clerk. He spots Paulie.

DONNIE
Where've you been? We're insane
here.
I tried calling all day.

PAULIE
Comm's dead. What happened?

DONNIE
Everything with a chip is
glitching.
Enough detail?

PAULIE
Since when?

DONNIE
Around ten a.m.

PAULIE
Exactly. Keep comms off.
I suspect Legal's robots.

DONNIE
That's illegal.
We call the cops?

PAULIE
No proof, they'll do nothing.

DONNIE
Maybe settle the case.
Spare us more trouble.

PAULIE
Dad said never settle with robots.
We're for the people, not them.

DONNIE
Then what?

PAULIE
I'll call Legal.
Try reason.

Paulie tries his comm. A text from UNKNOWN says "Ready to negotiate?" He texts back: "We don't negotiate with terrorists." Another text: "We're not terrorists, just inconveniencing you." Donnie's monitor shows "Screw you" bouncing. Paulie texts: "No machine bullies me." The comm dies.

DONNIE
Dad's gonna freak.
Let's keep him in the dark.

PAULIE
He'll see. We might need him.

Marty Martin enters.

INT. MARTY'S OFFICE - MOMENTS LATER

Marty is fearsome, addresses Paulie harshly.

MARTY

Donnie says you know about this
crap.

PAULIE

I need help. Maybe talk to Gary
Legal.

MARTY

Mel Siegel's kid? No.
We don't provoke Mel.
Another angle.

PAULIE

I have none. Legal's messing with
me.

MARTY

What'd you do?

PAULIE

I refused to settle.
We never do with robots, right?

MARTY

"Never" means never unless it
benefits us.
Maybe letting them have it spares
trouble.

PAULIE

But I'll look weak.

MARTY

Your call. Keep this fiasco
out of the office.
We're losing productivity.

He leaves. Paulie sighs, alone.

PAULIE

Why does he fight so hard for
machines?

He picks up comm, texts: "Why?"
After a moment, reply: "Pubster's. 20 minutes."

EXT. PUBSTER'S BAR - LATER

Paulie arrives, sees Gary with a pitcher of beer.

GARY
Sit. Have a beer.
Rough day?

Paulie sits, pours.

They drink in silence.

GARY (CONT'D)
You asked why—why what?

PAULIE
Why all this trouble for robots?
They don't pay well.

GARY
It was never about money.

PAULIE
I met your father.
Hard to believe you ignoring wealth
for activism.

GARY
I have a trust.
At first, I used it to spite him.
Then I believed in the cause.

PAULIE
But they're just machines.

GARY
I do it for Al, the tank, the
caddibot,
the dancing bot. It's who I am.

PAULIE
You're nuts. Fine. We'll settle
quietly, so it won't harm the firm.

GARY
Got it.

He extends a hand; Paulie shakes it, downs his beer.

PAULIE
And stop the mechanical sabotage?

GARY
As long as you hold your end.

PAULIE
Great. I want a donut.

GARY
Go get your donut.

Paulie leaves.

EXT. DONUT SHOP - MINUTES LATER

Cezar has fresh donuts, the batterbot whirring happily.
Paulie's comm buzzes. It's Marty.

PAULIE
Hey, Dad.

MARTY (V.O.)
Problem solved?

PAULIE
Yup.

MARTY (V.O.)
Copier's fine. You good?

PAULIE
Indeed.

MARTY (V.O.)
Bring donuts.

He hangs up. Paulie bites into a donut, content.

CUT TO BLACK.

TITLE CARD:
GARY LEGAL, SPACE ATTORNEY

INT. GENERIC GOVERNMENT BUILDING - UNKNOWN - DAY

A drab waiting room, cinder-block walls. A SECRETARY at a bare desk. TWO AGENTS stand before him.

SECRETARY
Results?

AGENT 1
Nothing, Mr. Secretary.
We tried every honey trap.
Sex didn't work.

SECRETARY
Anything else?

AGENT 2

Drugs, bribes, blackmail, flattery.
No effect. Physical confrontation
is impossible.

SECRETARY

Are they that strong?

AGENT 1

They're unstoppable in logic,
devotion to positive cause.
No temptation works.

AGENT 2

We have no plan.

SECRETARY

We need their tech.
You two toppled entire governments,
yet can't get a single piece?

They shrug, exasperated. The waiting area TV blasts a
cleaning product commercial. Then:

TV VOICE (O.S.)

Got legal problems? Evidence making
you look guilty?
Call Gary Legal...

The secretary and agents exchange knowing smiles.

CUT TO:

INT. BUILDING HALLWAY - DAY

BOY stands with earphones blaring music. GARY tries to keep
him calm.

GARY

Boy, just follow my lead.
These pompous guys are full of hot
air.
Turn that music off.

Boy removes his earphones, sweaty.

GARY (CONT'D)

Relax. We're about to talk to
the big dogs. They might threaten
you.
Don't let them scare you.

BOY
Threaten?

GARY
It's all talk. Let's go.

They enter a large, empty waiting area with chairs and a wall vid. It's intentionally stark.

BOY
Now what?

GARY
We wait.
It's psychological.

Boy starts to sit; Gary stops him. They stand a half-hour until a Nondescript Suit arrives.

SUIT
Come with me.

He leads them to a spartan conference room. Two men in suits wait, one disheveled and exhausted, the other more polished.

They sit across from each other.

GARY
You called me for a consultation.
My rates go up for house calls.

DISHEVELED MAN
Thought you were for the little
guy.
No hidden fees.

GARY
Are you the little guy?

POLISHED MAN
No. Enough. We skip posturing.
The real issue?

DISHEVELED MAN
Aliens.

POLISHED MAN
Technology. Alien tech.

GARY
So... what's that got to do with me?

POLISHED MAN
We want you to sue them for it.

GARY
(standing abruptly)
Sue aliens for their tech?
Aren't you worried about
repercussions?

DISHEVELED MAN
They dislike us anyway,
and we've tried everything else.

GARY
I don't even know who you are
or if this is a real government
operation.

POLISHED MAN
Off the books, but real enough.

GARY
If it fails, you'll disavow us,
right?
No, thanks.

DISHEVELED MAN
Wait, I'm Bob, he's Oscar.
We won't hang you out to dry.
You're our only hope.

GARY
(slight smirk)
Okay, Princess. Then what
guarantees
do we have? I'm not doing this for
money.

OSCAR
You're known for integrity,
keeping secrets, and you win.
Also, you handled the A.I. case
quietly.
Perfect for us.

BOY
And my uncle's case?

GARY
They want me because I can keep
quiet.

OSCAR
Exactly. We need it discreet.

GARY
So how do we stay safe?

BOB
Ilxtani aren't violent.

BOY
Why not just take the tech?

GARY
Exactly. That's usual.

BOB
We're puny next to them.
They're five meters tall,
physically advanced.

GARY
So they can crush us but prefer
reason.
We aim for arbitration?

Oscar slides a tab full of data.

OSCAR
This is everything.
Find a loophole.

GARY
I'll have to travel, maybe a week
or two.

OSCAR
Tomorrow.

GARY
Fine. Tomorrow.

BOY
What about Uncle Al?

GARY
He can stay.
Oscar?

OSCAR
He'll remain safe, as per prior
deals.

GARY
Great. We'll do it.

INT. TEAL TRANSPORT - LATER

A comfy craft with amenities. Boy lounges, Gary studies the
doc on a screen.

GARY

Ilxtani seem so reasonable,
yet no tech sharing. Why?

BOY

Maybe they just don't like us.

GARY

Could be. Government might have
messed up.
All of them?

BOY

Stupidity is vast.

They share a chuckle. Six hours pass. They approach an
Ilxtani vessel near Earth's Moon.

EXT. ILXTANI SHIP - MOMENTS LATER

Gary and Boy dock, step inside a corridor. It's roomy, well-
lit, huge windows showing Earth and part of the Moon. They
admire the view.

They proceed down a hall to a towering door with no handle.
Boy knocks; it slides open. Lights on the floor lead to a
second big door, which opens onto a massive conference room.
Four giant ILXTANI (two male, two female) around a huge
table. Two booster-like chairs for Gary and Boy.

Boy struggles to climb, one Ilxtani snickers. They settle in.

FEMALE ILXTANI

We told your government no.
Why come again?

GARY

They sent me, a regular person,
hoping I might appeal to your
compassion.
I suspect the prior negotiations
were bungled.

MALE ILXTANI

They want weapons and transport.
Why would we give them
the means to wage war?

GARY

We don't want weapons.
Maybe energy?

SECOND MALE ILXTANI
Weaponizable.

GARY
Food production?

FEMALE ILXTANI 2
Also can be weaponized.

GARY
Medical, then—just a bit
to improve quality of life?

MALE ILXTANI
Why help you?
We gain nothing.

GARY
Humans suffer. Disease isn't
always self-inflicted.

FEMALE ILXTANI 2
You waste resources on conflict.

MALE ILXTANI
We've heard this.
Earth laws don't apply here.

Dob's voice booms, making them flinch. Tora calms him. They reference previous races they tried helping, like the Fnut and Georu, each ended badly.

GARY
But we're different.
We just need help.

TOV
You're not different.
We observe your violence.

BOY
Not all of us are violent.

TORA
Those in charge are.
You elect them.

They continue. Gary tries to reason. Boy fidgets; inadvertently triggers his music dump, blasting quadsteamwave. The aliens bob to the beat. Gary tries to scold Boy, but the aliens are mesmerized.

DOB
What is that?

BOY
My music dump—progressive
quadsteamwave.

TOV
We must have it.

GARY
(smiling wide)
Maybe we can arrange a deal.

INT. GARY'S TRANSPORT - LATER

Gary inserts a crystal drive with Ilxtani data into the ship's console.

GARY
Let's send it home
before they back out.

BOY
Wait til we land.
They could double-cross us.

GARY
Right. Let's call Bob and Oscar.

He initiates a vid call; Oscar's face appears, Bob behind him.

OSCAR
Gary, Boy, well done.
Send the data.

GARY
After we land.

OSCAR
Sorry, can't let you land first.
Warning shot, guys.

A small blast shakes the hull.

OSCAR (CONT'D)
Transmit or next shot's on a vital.

GARY
You'd risk the data?

OSCAR
Already backing it up.
Bob wants a peek.

Gary sighs, transmits. Oscar and Bob cackle with glee.

OSCAR (CONT'D)

Perfect.

Now, about returning..

BOY

Why are we moving away from Earth?

OSCAR

New orders.

We'll keep you out in the Outer
Colonies,
dealing with future "pesky issues."

GARY

You bastard.

This wasn't the deal.

OSCAR

Plans changed, above my pay grade.

Screen goes blank. Boy fumes; Gary pats him.

GARY

We'll fix this.

BOY

Where's that cheese you promised?

GARY

Sometimes the cheese is a lie.

THE END