Franktonland

Frankton Bosley pulled up the document on his wall screen. His doodle dog, Loons, sat beside him and drooled. Frankton talked to his pet like she could understand every word.

"Here's Section 12, subsection C of the 2083 Transportation Infrastructure Act: 'In exchange for railroad company investment and technical support in underground freight tube construction, the Federal Government hereby grants full ownership rights of all railroad easements and associated land rights to participating railroad companies in perpetuity.'"

He stood and tapped the wall with his stylus. "See, Loons? Right there!"
The dog simply shook her head and scattered slobber.

He highlighted the key phrase. "They meant to say 'easement rights' but they wrote 'ownership rights.' One word difference. Loons, that's probably three billion acres."

Frankton had been researching ownership rights for a case his firm recently assigned him—a simple dispute between two siblings over their father's estate. One sister assumed she owned the home because she'd bought it from him before his death. Her brother claimed it was his because their father had left it to him in his will. The question was whether the father still owned the home when he passed.

Frankton was one of the few people who knew how to navigate the Springfield Congressional Library archives. He'd been deep in research about land rights when he stumbled across the railroad document.

His dog barked. "What's wrong, mutt?"

Loons craned her neck toward the door. Break time.

Frankton stepped outside for fresh air. When he returned, the 2083 Transportation document still glowed on the screen. He stared at it, wondering. He searched the national market listings and confirmed his suspicion—railroad companies comprised four of the six largest companies currently for sale.

Walking around his small quarters, he opened his coldbox and grabbed a drink. The beverage could no longer legally be called beer, but that's what it was. He checked his connection to the Earthdata System. His status showed secured and blank, meaning only he could access what he was viewing, and no one would know what he was researching.

The system was still in its early stages. Until last year, any electronic information had to be taken with skepticism—the artificial intelligence age had blended most data into a mixture of errors and fabrications. Only government-verified information could be trusted. Now, all data was routed through multiple verification services before being deemed authentic. Only after three independent reviews would information be stored indefinitely in the Earthdata System, which couldn't be altered or manipulated.

He sat down, Loons beside him. "Can it be?" he mused. "Could those companies really not know?"

His dog groaned.

He grabbed his keyscreen and typed "Transportation Crisis 2080s."

The wall screen displayed a synopsis: Freight transportation had reached a standstill. Crumbling infrastructure had left the country years behind global competitors in shipping efficiency. The European tube system was exceeding all expectations. The US Government had to intervene. The 2083 Transportation Infrastructure Act was enacted to restore America's position in worldwide commerce.

The deal between government and railroads was completed hastily—everyone involved, including the major railroads, wanted the tube system operational quickly. Granting railroads additional rights seemed insignificant to the government.

Financially, the railroads benefited enormously, knowing their traditional market would inevitably collapse. Since they'd become worthless once freight shipments moved underground, they signed the Act without hesitation. Legal scholars warned against rushing legislation, but politicians pushed it through regardless. No one anticipated hidden consequences.

"Holy shit, Loons! Do you understand what this means?"

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Freight rail had moved underground years ago; only a few freight trains still crossed the country. Railroads had returned to worthless passenger service, but their days were numbered as air vehicles dominated transportation.

The vast underground tube network had essentially eliminated long-haul freight from coast to coast. A sixty-foot tube container could now travel from New Angeles to York City in hours. For a while, above-ground tracks were leased for passenger service with promises of high-speed trains, but it failed—too many curves in the old routes.

Nobody realized the railroads still owned the land. They saw them as dying companies. What others dismissed as abandoned industrial waste, Frankton saw as dollar signs.

But his personal account showed three hundred and nineteen in the red. He needed help—and one million dollars.

One million was the asking price for the biggest of the major railroad companies.

Within a week, Frankton leveraged eight hundred thousand dollars, placing liens on everything imaginable. He even put a note on Loons for a hundred bucks, though she wasn't thrilled with that arrangement.

Eight hundred thousand, wasn't quite a million, but it would have to suffice.

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Shipton Incorporated owned America's largest railroad. They still moved some local freight, but most of their expansive track system was deteriorating. Daily above-ground operations hemorrhaged money with no apparent solution.

The company was making billions from underground tubes, so while railroad losses were annoying, they were merely a nuisance. No employees remained in train operations—companies had eliminated most workforce well before 2100. Only a handful of maintenance workers were employed nationwide, with minimal responsibilities but steady paychecks.

Frankton flew his air vehicle to Shipton Headquarters, a two-hour trip he used cramming railroad trivia into his head.

He entered the CEO's office grinning.

"Hi Bob, I'm Frankton Bosley. My great-grandfather was a 'railhead' with this very company many years ago."

Bob George extended his hand. "Pleasure, Mr. Bossley"—Frankton winced at the mispronunciation—"what can Shipton do for you?" Their corny but effective tagline.

Taking a deep breath, Frankton announced, "I understand the Shipton Rail Line Company is for sale."

Adrenaline flooded Bob's system. *Finally, we have a sucker.*

"Please sit, Mr. Frankton. Care for a drink?"

For an hour, they discussed trains and changing times. Bob mentioned that tubes would probably be replaced someday, claiming Shipton was already negotiating with a company called Sky Freight 7. Frankton used his plethora of rail knowledge effectively. It helped that Bob, the CEO, had no railroad experience or knowledge at all.

When finished, Frankton left as sole owner of the Shipton Rail Line Company, ensuring Shipton Inc. and its directors retained no authority over above-ground operations.

They signed away all rights for just under four hundred thousand dollars.

Shipton headquarters celebrated that night—some sucker had taken their bad investment! Maintenance workers received instant severance packages and joined the celebration from many miles away.

The kicker? Bob provided Frankton with the contact information for the four other major railroad CEOs.

By week's end, Frankton had just over two hundred thousand dollars remaining to his name, but owned every above-ground railroad in America.

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The following week, he assembled local legal professionals to address his "problem." Most assumed he had buyer's remorse for purchasing worthless companies.

Four individuals arrived at Frankton's office. He paid each an undisclosed sum, then had them sign non-disclosure agreements before an autonotary. Which was very unusual, since NDAs hadn't been used in years, especially with an autonotary witness.

"What's this about?" asked Bart, a local real estate lawyer.

Straight-faced, Frankton replied, "I want to buy controlling interest in the United States of America."

One lawyer laughed, stood, and left. "I don't have time for this, shit."

Three remained.

"Either that, or I want to declare myself leader of Franktonland and draft articles of incorporation for my new country."

Bart, the local real estate lawyer, chuckled, "Thanks for the stipend, Mr. Frankton. Good luck with your psychiatric bills." As he was leaving, he accidentally kicked over a model train on the floor. "Damn, sorry."

Frankton shrugged and asked, “If someone owns the majority of something, don’t they have rights to the whole according to law?”

“What’s your point?” asked William Shrugg impatiently, adjusting his orange and white checkered tie.

“You can’t buy the United States. Even if you could, nobody has that kind of money.”

The other man at the table was Daniel Brown, another local real estate lawyer enjoying the entertainment. He smiled as William Shrugg, a Washington College law master, stood up. Shrugg straightened his tie again and addressed Frankton directly.

“Sir, before joining my colleagues at the tavern down the street, I have two questions. First, how could you afford controlling interest in the world’s sixth-largest country? You have no collateral. Second, only someone with significant land ownership can incorporate.”

Frankton smiled—this was his moment. He pressed a button, and his wall screen flickered to life. “Gentlemen, here’s a map of the thirty-one Continental United States. Agreed?” Both nodded. The map showed old Florida in grey—nobody understood how Mexico still owned it.

“The United States spans 1.8 billion acres, right?

“Yes, Mr. Bosley, where are you going with this?”

“Bear with me.” Frankton listed various countries’ land ownership: “Mexico, 480 million acres; Brazil, 2 billion; United England, 8 billion.”

“We get it. What’s the point?” Brown asked.

Frankton's voice dropped. "What if an entity owned, say, 2 billion acres? Would they be considered a country?"

"Yes, of course."

Frankton pressed another button. The United States map turned almost entirely purple.

Both men looked perplexed. "What is that?" Shrugg asked.

"That, my friends, is the future country of Franktonland!"

He zoomed in, revealing purple lines zigzagging throughout the country like veins.

"Gentlemen, as of yesterday, I own 2 billion undeveloped acres of the United States. I own more land than the country itself. My problem is: what do I do now?"

The two lawyers stared at the purple map.

William Shrugg's face had gone pale. "Do you understand what you've done?"

"I own a country," Frankton said, grinning.

"No," Daniel Brown said slowly. "You own a nightmare. Every derailment, every accident, every environmental disaster on that land for the past forty years - that's YOUR liability now. Retroactive. The moment you filed that incorporation, you became responsible."

Frankton's grin faded.

“The lawsuits alone…” Shrugg trailed off. “And the tax implications. Jesus. You’d need to pay property taxes on 2 billion acres.”

“But the land is valuable—”

“To WHO?” Brown laughed, but it’s not cruel. “You can’t develop it - it’s crisscrossed with easements, environmental protections, historical designations. You can’t sell it - nobody wants it. That’s WHY the railroads gave it away so easily. They knew.”

Frankton sits down slowly. Loons whines and puts her head on his lap.

“So what do I do?”

The lawyers exchanged a glance.

“You give it back,” Shrugg said gently. “You dissolve Franktonland before anyone notices it existed. You walk away.”

Frankton’s shoulders slumped. Two hundred thousand left. Everything else leveraged. Even Loons had a lien on her.

“Wait.” Daniel Brown stared at the purple map, his eyes narrowed. “Wait, wait, wait.”

“What?” Frankton asked.

“You said it’s undeveloped land, right? Two billion acres of undeveloped land?”

“Mostly. Some old tracks, rotting ties, rusted equipment—”

“But no buildings? No industrial sites? Just… open land?”

"I guess so. Why?"

Brown turned to Shrugg. "The Environmental Restoration Act of 2094. Remember? The carbon sequestration subsidies?"

Shrugg's eyes widen. "Holy shit."

"What?" Frankton demanded. "What act?"

Brown was already typing on his keyscreen. "After the climate crisis of the 2080s, the government created massive incentive programs. If you own undeveloped land—especially land that connects ecosystems—you can register it for carbon credits and biodiversity preservation subsidies."

"How much are we talking?" Frankton asked.

"Depends on the land quality," Shrugg said, leaning forward now, interested. "But for 2 billion acres? Even at the lowest tier..." He paused, calculating. "Could be anywhere from two to twenty billion dollars annually."

The room went quiet.

"Annually?" Frankton whispered.

"You'd need environmental surveys," Brown said quickly. "Certifications. You'd have to prove the land isn't contaminated—well, not too contaminated. And you'd need to commit to not developing it for at least fifty years."

"I have no interest in developing it," Frankton said. "I just want my money back."

“Mr. Bosley,” Shrugg said, straightening his tie again, “I think you’re about to get significantly more than your money back.”

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Six months later, Frankton sat in his new office—still modest, but larger—reviewing the quarterly report. Loons lay beside him, her lien paid off months ago.

The environmental surveys had come back better than expected. Decades of abandonment had allowed native species to reclaim the railroad corridors. His land formed natural wildlife highways across the entire country. The biodiversity scores were exceptional.

The first payment from the Federal Environmental Trust had cleared his debts entirely. The second payment had made him wealthy. The projections for year three were staggering.

He kept the name “Franktonland” for his company—Franktonland Environmental Trust. No sovereignty, no articles of incorporation. Just a private land trust dedicated to conservation.

The railroad companies had been furious when they realized what they’d sold. But the contracts were ironclad. Bob George from Shipton had actually sent a formal complaint, which Frankton had framed on his wall.

“You know what, Loons?” Frankton said, scratching behind her ears. “Turns out owning a country was the wrong dream. But owning a nature preserve that happens to be the size of a country? That works just fine.”

Loons wagged her tail, scattering drool across his new desk.

He didn't mind.

His keyscreen pinged. Another conservation group wanted to lease research rights on a section of his land. He smiled and began typing his response.

Outside his window, an air vehicle passed by, but Frankton barely noticed. He was too busy reading a proposal from the government about expanding the wildlife corridor program.

For one brief, shining moment, he'd almost owned a country.

Now, he owned something better: a future.

-Kiley Georgi

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