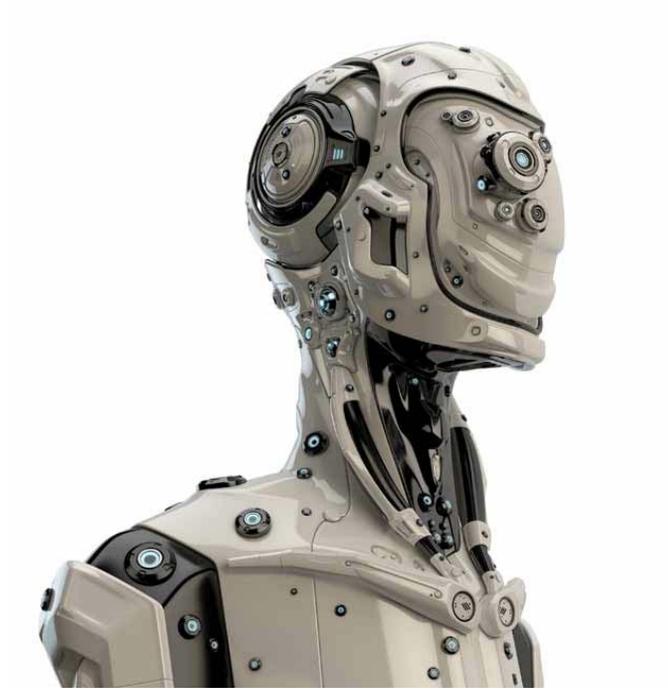


In the Cracks of the Machine
Age of Transcendence Saga: Short Story Four

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*And if you wrong us, do we not revenge?
Shakespeare, The Merchant of Venice, III, i*

Towering Tweed

*2067 Orthodox Calendar
4765 Chinese Calendar
Carbon Alley, New York City, New York*

“Could you come in my office for a second,” said Victor Vundo’s boss, Sayan, a fat, nervous little Indian man who never looked people in the eye and smoked relentlessly. He coughed, a smoker’s hacking cough. With disgust, Victor noted the fat splotches on the man’s tie and his yellowed and chewed up fingernails.

“Sure,” said Victor, wondering, as always, if the district manager could tell he hated him. Sayan Damodara smiled, showing teeth that badly needed a cleaning.

Victor wiped the dirt from his hands. Quickly, he surveyed his work, adjusting a few of his favorite plants so that they sat in precise rows. They were brilliant green, bursting through the soil. He’d nurtured them like babies. He gently dropped his trowel and put up the sign that said: Supermart Garden Department, Be Right Back.

“Great,” said Sayan, as Victor followed him down the back corridors of the store and into a dusty office.

An ugly halogen bulb buzzed overhead, illuminating the disheveled room heaped with electric paper scrawled with moving charts and old mediatronic magazines, the images on their covers dancing. Asami, the latest animatronic doll from Japan, sat on the edge of the desk, looking around and chuckling to itself with anime character glee, its absurdly wide eyes perpetually surprised. A mediatronic photo of Sayan’s two year old daughter sat next to it, her smile disappearing and returning on an endless loop as she swept back and forth on a swing.

Sayan coughed again, not covering his mouth. “Gotta quit that smoking,” he said.

Victor smiled politely, his big hands folded in his lap. A pile of cigarettes were piled in Sayan’s yellowed ashtray. Behind his boss’s head a huge portrait of the Supermart CEO, Wallace Tweed, grinned down on the room. The portraits had started showing up during an ad campaign, but they stuck around long after it was over. Now Tweed’s face was everywhere: in Supermart executive offices, on buildings, on buses and trains, his portraits grand and domineering, like a ruthless dictator’s portrait towering over the country he rules. There were countless variations and poses: Tweed the playboy, in an ascot, toasting with a martini; Tweed in Air Force dress whites, his back to a hovering aircarrier; Tweed puffing a huge cigar; Tweed the man of the people, shaking hands and reaching out.

“Listen,” said Sayan, clearing his throat and running a finger through his hair, “I’m not sure how to say this.” He laughed nervously and fidgeted on his desk, his movements oddly false, like a wind up doll. He couldn’t meet Victor’s eyes.

“We have to let you go. Actually it’s not, ah, just you. It’s a lot of people really. The company’s changing. Management’s got some big new ideas. Really amazing stuff. And anyway most of the staff is out. Not just here. All over. I know you’re not feeling great right now, but just imagine how I feel?” Sayan turned his palms up. “I have to say this to a lot of guys today.”

Right then Victor didn't much care how Sayan felt. He wanted to punch him in the face. Anger seized him. His mind wouldn't focus. It took every ounce of control not to leap across the desk and strangle him until his eyes bled.

A wave of panic bubbled up inside him, squeezing his heart. He thought of his new apartment, the one that was already stretching him. He thought of the stack of bills in his e-box.

The little Asami doll laughed suddenly, making them both jump. Sayan waved it off and its laughter slowly died away.

"Is it something I've done?" said Victor. It felt like someone else was saying it.

Sayan looked up at Victor for a minute and quickly looked away.

"No, no. Nothing you've done. Nothing anyone's done really. It's just that, well, ah, the president feels that it's better to replace most of the workers with drones. Ah, I mean they're hard to resist now. So cheap, you know? Really remarkable things actually when you think about it. They've got all kinds of these machines, floor cleaners, stockers, check-outers, incredible stuff," said Sayan, smiling.

He looked up and saw that Victor wasn't sharing his enthusiasm. His smile died.

"Well, look," said Sayan, scratching his head, "I'm sorry. You've got to understand from management's perspective. These things are too good to pass up. I'm not saying it's right or anything. But you have to see it their way. These things do a perfect job and they only cost a little and then you own the thing. You can work it all night. I mean, instead of paying some guy endlessly, you buy one of these things and it just pays for itself."

"Is there anything I can do?" Victor looked at the floor, his head spinning, everything going wavy. His problems seemed like a tidal wave now. All the things he couldn't pay for came flooding in.

"I'm afraid not, Vic. It's, ah, it's like I said, really it's not your fault. Nobody's fault really. It's just how it is."

Statute 23.56, Code 7869, Sub Code 48920, Sub Sub Code 1098

2067 Orthodox Calendar

4765 Chinese Calendar

Greenwich Village, New York City, New York

For two months Victor frantically looked for a job. Unemployment paid his rent and kept him eating but there just weren't any jobs and unemployment wouldn't last forever; the treasury was virtually bankrupt and a series of laws had scaled unemployment insurance back drastically years before the recession hit. He kept looking and looking, checking the job streams on his glasses' HUD, but no one was hiring.

He sat in a crowded, dingy office with about a hundred other out of work people. The heat of late summer pressed in on the room. The microclimate machine in the building had broken down. It seemed like nobody in the room had bathed in days.

His leg shook impatiently. He checked the time in the corner of his eye again. The clock kept reminding him how fast time was slipping away from him, so he flicked it off. Little balloons overlaid on his vision, showing all the people hiring in a five block radius, but he'd already applied to all of them. Yellow glyphs showed the ones he hadn't heard back from. The red X's showed rejections. He flipped off the depressing virt-vision and sat staring at the peeling, corroded New York State Department of Labor sign that read "labor omnia vincit" and its translation in English,

Arabic, Cantonese and Spanish. “Hard work conquers all.” There was nothing to focus on in the room, so he just kept reading the words over and over.

“What do you do when it doesn’t?” he asked the sign softly.

“Victor Vundo,” flashed the holoscreen, finally. A synthetic voice intoned the name. After all these years they still hadn’t gotten machine speech correct. It sounded mechanical, dry, emotionless.

Victor hustled out of his chair and followed the grungy lights on the floor down a labyrinthine series of tall, narrow hallways and into a small, nearly empty room. A kiosk waited for him there. Its screen was smudged by thousands of greasy fingerprints and its white paint had gone yellow.

“Hello, Mr. Vundo,” said a fake voice from the little box. Victor expected a face to show up on the cracked screen, but the screen stayed blank. Probably broken.

“Mr. Vundo, this is just an informal interview to determine whether you’ve been meeting the requirements dictated by the New York State Department of Labor,” said the box. The voice tried to sound cheerful, but the programmers hadn’t quite nailed the emotion and it sounded off and hollow.

“Do you understand?” said the box.

Victor nodded.

“I did not hear a valid response,” said the machine. “Do you understand?”

“Um, yes,” said Victor. “I think so.”

A pause while the kiosk’s archaic diamond chips processed his answer. “Good. Let’s get started. Have you brought your work search sheet?”

Victor nodded again and then realized his mistake and said “yes.”

“Excellent. According to statute 23.56, code 7869, sub code 48920, sub sub code 1098, you are required to look for work every day and keep a record of those searches.”

“Yes.”

“Okay. Were you were given the special mediatronic paper to record your entries on when you first came in?”

“Yes.”

“Great. Please put that paper on the tray and say: ‘okay’ when you are ready.”

Victor fumbled through his bag for the paper.

“Please put that paper on the tray and say ‘okay’ when you are ready.”

“Yes. I’m looking for it,” said Victor, still pushing aside papers and wrappers in his bag.

“Take you time,” said the machine.

He found it and placed it on the filthy, crusted tray.

“Okay,” he said.

“Okay, you’ve found it?” said the kiosk, “or okay you are ready to read in your entries?”

“I, ah, found it and put it on the tray.”

“Please put a valid worksheet on the tray.”

“Yes.”

“Say, okay when ready.”

“Okay.”

The kiosk lit up and then said, “Please put a valid work search sheet on the tray.”

“It’s on there,” said Victor, frustrated.

“Please say okay when ready.”

“Goddamn it. Okay.”

“Abusive language will not be tolerated.”

“I’m sorry.”

The kiosk lit up again and then said, “Please put a valid work search sheet on the tray.”

“It is on the goddamn tray,” he said smacking the side of the box.

“Further abusive language will force me to terminate this session and withhold unemployment benefits for the next two weeks. Please put a valid work search sheet on the tray.”

“I said it’s on the tray. Come on.” He hammered at it and shook it, his frighteningly powerful fists denting the aluminum and cracking the screen further.

“Not valid,” said the machine. “You have been unable to demonstrate that you have been actively seeking work. Therefore I must recommend that you no longer receive unemployment insurance.”

“Wait a minute. That’s a valid sheet. Please. I’ve been looking for work,” said Victor, trying to keep the panic out of his voice. “Please listen to me.”

The machine went on without acknowledging him; the expert program had triggered a recording and shut off. “It is your obligation to look for work in order to receive your benefits...”

“Wait, please. This is unbelievable. I’ve been looking for work. Who can I talk to about this? There’s obviously been a mistake.” He pounded on the kiosk, like a man pounding a brick wall that had suddenly appeared overnight all around his house.

The machine wasn’t listening.

For an hour he searched the building for someone to complain to, for someone, anyone who could help him, but there was nothing but machines on every floor.

Insomnia

2067 Orthodox Calendar

4765 Chinese Calendar

Carbon Alley, New York City, New York

Across the street a seven story politician shouted slogans, made promises and gestured wildly, promising a landslide Democratic victory. It was election season in New York City and the giant political holograms were out everywhere. Avatars of the candidates, linked to wireless expert systems, answered questions and reiterated their policies endlessly. They smiled at people from buildings or strode freely around the city like ghostly titans, projected from driverless drones. Opposing parties loved to set them up right next to each other so they could argue and refute each other constantly.

Last year they’d finally passed a law that said the ubiquitous and universally hated ads had to be turned down at night, but it didn’t matter. Bitterly, Victor wondered if the ads worked better when turned down. That way they trickled into the subconscious all night, like rain dripping into cracks of an old house. Across the street the ads whispered to him as he struggled to sleep, his muscles stiff and aching, his mind revving endlessly. He changed positions countless times, but he couldn’t get comfortable. His bed felt like a slab of concrete. And even with a pillow over his head, he could still hear the ads talking ceaselessly. He could recite the various talking points as if in a trance.

Through half-lidded eyes Victor angrily watched a fat, jowly Democrat waving his fedora and saying, “We need more jobs, unemployment extensions and limits on robotic labor. We must act now before it’s too late. The Republicans have driven this economy into the ground with their greed and by catering to special interests and big business.” He narrowed his eyes and pointed a long finger at the Republican avatar on the building next to him. “They forget that it’s the people who make the economy go, the little people, the common people.”

The scowling, deeply wrinkled Republican scoffed and said, “It has nothing to do with robots. Robots are an innovation, necessary for our businesses to compete against cheaper overseas labor.

You can't just artificially constrain businesses and tell them they have to hire people. And if the previous administration hadn't rammed through those clean energy bills, we wouldn't be in this economic mess." He turned, glowered at the city and said, "Never forget that Democratic policies caused you to be where you are today by trying to force the change on the power companies, so that they collapsed like dominoes."

"That is a total misrepresentation of the facts..."

It went on like that. In truth, nobody knew why the economy that had boomed along relentlessly had suddenly stalled like an overheated engine. And worse, they had no solutions. They passed meaningless law after meaningless law. Special interests diluted every bill: a million dollars siphoned off for some museum to keep its egg collection; forty million for the preservation of mailboxes in South Dakota. The economy was shedding jobs and not creating more to replace them or replacing them with machines. There was no precedent.

He turned over again, thinking of the skills he didn't have. The pillow felt like cement under his head. He needed new skills. It was so simple, they said. Just learn something new. But how? He needed to have skills yesterday and he needed money to go to school to get them and he needed a job to get money, an endless loop.

He wished he'd finished high school. There'd never been any time. He'd gone to work when his mother died of breast cancer and his father lost his job. He'd worked ever since. There was no net for him.

Panic crept in on him now, slithering up through the drainpipes, crawling in through the bars on the windows. His feet throbbed from walking the city all day, looking for work. He turned over again, and squeezed pillows against his temples to release the pressure of a migraine. They covered his face except for a tiny hole that he'd been staring through, looking at one of his favorite flowers, a Chinese Blackberry Lily, one of the many plants he'd cultivated around the house.

It was four months now looking for a job and he'd found only closed doors. He'd cut back, eaten little, spent even less, but the ghost of hunger waited for him, gibbering, just around the corner. The Republicans had cut off welfare long ago.

He looked past the flower out into the bright city lights. The city felt like a massive machine slowly pressing in on him, a giant, hidden, amorphous monster, its hooks into everything, desperate to crush him and grind his bones to dust. His thoughts thrashed and he felt the bed opening up under him, swallowing him.

And he was alone, so, so alone.

He turned and stared at ceiling, his eyes bleary, his throat tight and wondered if anyone had the answers.

The Big Three

2067 Orthodox Calendar

4765 Chinese Calendar

Carbon Alley, New York City, New York

It started to rain, hammering down on the grimy group of men and women waiting in line for the public food synths. Victor looked around nervously. *Can't believe I'm standing here with these people*, he thought. He scanned the crowd. There was an emaciated woman in a torn housecoat with pink lesions on her face, a tall black man muttering to himself, a filthy old Filipino lady with matted, streaked hair, the features of her face buried beneath heavy wrinkles.

Victor rubbed his eyes. *Gotta get out of here. If I could just get a job.*

Six months had passed, bringing the chill winds of October. He'd run out of money. His landlady had let him stay, because he'd always paid on the first of the month, but that wouldn't last much longer. He hadn't managed to reinstate his unemployment.

He watched a building going up in the distance. Slowly it crawled upwards, under the diligent claws and tool arms of construction drones.

Machines. Always more machines.

Does anyone have a job anymore except the machine makers?

The black man behind him shouted something incomprehensible. Across the street the news played on the side of a building, ads running across the bottom constantly. Victor watched it while the line shuffled forward.

"The Big Three," said the beautifully genesculpted blonde reporter with unmistakable reverence in her voice. A shining image of three fat, gray-suited businessmen appeared with their hands raised together in victory, as the cameras flashed. "Several of the world's most powerful CEOs met for a news conference today and announced what had been rumored for weeks: the joint founding of a new robotics company. Larry Michaelson, president of Coffee King, Peter Tavers the III, chairman of Biomek, the worlds largest biochip company and Wallace Tweed, renowned robotics inventor and Innovense founder, chairman of Supermart, the nation's preeminent department store, announced the creation of General Robotics. Said Michaelson, one of the world's five richest men, 'We created General Robotics to bring the robotic labor revolution to every business in America. We won't stop until every company and every person is reaping the benefits of robotics.'"

The reporter smiled, her lips glittering. "I had a chance to ask The Big Three a few questions."

The footage cut to her asking Tweed for his thoughts.

"Well, I'm just glad to be here with people smarter than me," said Tweed, smiling widely, his flat square teeth perfectly white beneath his thick gray mustache. "I started with industrial robotics. I brought that efficiency to Supermart. Robots give us all more free choice."

"Some people think they kill jobs," said the reporter.

"Some jobs," said Tweed. "Frankly jobs nobody wants to do. Robots free people up to be more creative. People are still the most important thing to me and they shouldn't have to do meaningless nonsense their whole lives."

"Meaningless," whispered Victor, watching him, his eyes narrowing in hate as the cold rain beat down around him.

"Robots make jobs," said Tweed. "They keep jobs here in America where they're supposed to be. We don't need to be looking for the next China for cheap labor. We got it right here. We got 3D printing and now we got robots to clean up after us. Nobody should have to do that. These are job makers, not job killers. Job creators. Robots free people up to do something more interesting with their lives."

"What if they can't do anything else?" whispered Victor.

"Peace be upon you," said a voice in his ear that made him jump. A square faced, Middle Eastern man with a coarse beard and a boxer's nose stood next to him, smiling. He wore a beaten down black suit and white cap.

"Hey," said Victor, edgily.

The man's eyes burned fiercely.

"There's only one way out of this, you know. The devils on that show don't care about you and me. They only care about how much more they can steal. We need a new path. We've only got one choice. We've got to go back to God. Allah is the only way. Peace be upon him. We're paying the price for American sin. Western teachings are sinful. You've got to put your faith in Allah, because the revolution is coming and only the true will be saved.

“Don’t listen to this fucker,” said a stocky, heavily sideburned white man with tiger-bright eyes. He carried a hard metal cane. “Fuckin’ ‘ll have ya bowing to the east fifteen times a day and locking up your women. Get the fuck outta here, Mu’tazz, leave this kid alone.”

The two men squared off against each other.

“Allah’s revolution is coming, praise be to him. He’ll burn you, Keegan, like he’ll burn all the liars.”

“Yeah, yeah. Same old bullshit. If your God’s so fuckin’ great why are your people still living like savages in the stone age and eating rocks, ya fuckin’ sand nigger?” said Keegan, fingering his staff.

Mu’tazz eyed the cane warily, as if he already knew what it could do. He backed away.

“Your day is coming soon,” he said, through gritted teeth, but he turned and walked down the street and around the corner.

Victor felt like he’d taken a wrong turn somewhere and didn’t know how to get back home. This wasn’t supposed to be happening to him. He wasn’t supposed to be here. He’d always worked hard, and now he was reduced to waiting with crazy nuts for lousy synthetic food.

“Name’s Keegan, like the man said.” The short, powerful man grinned, showing chipped front teeth. His hands were tough and leathery like an old baseball. “Stay away from those guys. Fuckin’ Islamic Front. I’m crazy,” he said, and Victor was sure he was, “but those guys are insane. They want to tear down the government and put in a theocracy that’ll close down all the bars and have everyone carrying a prayer mat or else get shot. They want everyone in bondage. Fuckin’ anti-American nuts. I mean we got a lot of shit wrong, but that shit ain’t the way. We got problems: just look at the number of people on this line, and growing every day. But the real problem is those fat cats in the suits, hogging all the money while chumps like you and me wait in line in the rain. And then there’s these fuckin’ robots. Don’t ever forget what put you here. How’d you lose your job? Robot, right?”

Victor nodded, feeling dazed.

“Course. That’s how most of us got here. Maybe it’s our own goddamn fault. We shoulda got better skills, learned a trade, but now it’s too late. You need money to learn a trade. And to get money you need a job. Catch-22, right? No way out. And there’s gonna be blood, believe you me. Somethin’s gotta give. But we can’t let these fuckin’ towel heads take over, and they’re gettin’ stronger every day. We just need jobs is all. Jobs. Give a man a paycheck and he shuts up. But take away a man’s chance to earn a living and you’ve got a revolution. Stick with me kid. You gotta be careful today or you’ll fall in with the wrong people.”

Victor wasn’t entirely sure he hadn’t already fallen in with the wrong people. He finally made it to the end of the line and a slim Catholic nun with kind eyes spooned some slop onto his plate. Keegan wandered off.

Victor sat down away from everyone else.

“Mind if I sit here?” said a soft voice, not long after he started eating.

He looked up and saw the nun who’d served him food.

“Sure.”

She sat down and started eating. She didn’t say much and he was thankful for that. He was tired of people talking all the time. They ate for awhile in silence before she said anything.

“Be careful.”

“Why’s that?” he said.

“When people get hungry, they start to believe all kinds of things. They look for something to blame. And when they find something to blame they do bad things. Things are never what they seem. And remember, no matter what happens you can always change direction. Never be afraid to change course, when you find out you don’t have the whole story.”

“Why tell me?”

“You look like you needed to know.” She stood up and smiled. Her eyes looked golden in the soft light. “Take care of yourself.”

The Sheltering Sky

2067 Orthodox Calendar

4765 Chinese Calendar

Carbon Alley, New York City, New York

Over the next few weeks, Victor lost his apartment, wore out his welcome on people’s couches and found himself sleeping in a shelter on 165th street, with rats boldly striding around the room. The crab-like robotic rat hunters caught lots of them, but there were always more. Everything reeked like rancid garbage. People wandered around the room yelling at nobody or mumbling to themselves. There was nothing green in the room, no plants, no life, except his Chinese Blackberry Lily, its soft orange petals the only true color. He watered it every day and pruned it with great care.

If only he had some family, he could stay with them. He hadn’t talked to his brothers or sisters in ten years. He saw their profiles on the social nets and they were strangers to him.

He’d busted his smart-glasses. It didn’t matter. He didn’t have the money for the nets anyway so they’d gone dark, nothing but dumb glasses now.

At least the shelter had a kiosk for the infostreams. There wasn’t much competition to use it; the people in here were finished. They came here to give up, to live out what life they had left. He still looked for jobs.

Not giving up. No matter what. Keep trying. Keep going.

At night, he took the genetic programming courses that the shelter offered, but it didn’t seem to matter.

Nobody wanted him.

At nights he lay in bed listening to the buzzing crabs hunting the rats and pictured Wallace Tweed in a broad brimmed Panama hat and bright red suspenders over a starched white shirt. When he wasn’t looking for a job, he had the infostream spiders find out as much about the man as they could. In a month, Victor probably knew more about Tweed than any of his former wives.

Tweed loomed in Victor’s mind, larger than the man’s portraits. The thought of him started small and grew like a cancer, until he found himself thinking about him all the time.

About how he could hurt him.

About how he could get even.

All around the city, the people on the food synth lines had polarized, with the Muslims on one side and Socialists on the other. At least once a week huge brawls erupted in the streets between the two groups. People started coming to the lines armed with bats, fission knives, and even illegally 3d printed submachine guns under jackets.

Keegan had emerged as one of the local leaders of the Socialists, and he thought of Victor as one of his closest confidants. Victor wasn’t exactly sure why the little man liked him so much. Maybe because he almost never said anything and Keegan liked to talk.

Mostly, Victor didn't mind Keegan. The man's constant talking made him feel calm, and for a while he didn't have to think. Victor wasn't an out and out racist like Keegan, but he'd never had much use for the Muslims and their strange "God is great" talk. And what Keegan said made more and more sense to him every day. Something had to be done. Something soon. Change was coming.

More time passed. A damp, drizzling November came. Slowly, despite his promises to himself, he was losing hope, feeling more and more boxed in. Panic attacks gripped him and he found himself breaking down whenever the slightest thing went wrong. If only he could work. He just wanted to work. Any job would do.

He got back to the shelter late one night and found his Chinese Lily dead. He'd forgotten to water it. For a long time he just stood staring at it, and then he lay down and couldn't get up again for two days. He stared at the dark rat hunters skittering, their robotic legs scraping the floor.

Welcome to Supermart

2067 Orthodox Calendar

4765 Chinese Calendar

Carbon Alley, New York City, New York

The crowds gathered early, long before the rusted gates of the non-denominational Shining Hope Church opened to the hungry men. They'd come to hear Keegan and Mu'tazz speak, clustering into two groups, snow coming down all around them. No one dared stand in the middle. Around the city, at the same time, other mobs congealed around local Socialist and Muslim leaders.

Keegan and Mu'tazz yelled loudly, trying to drown each other out. Victor stood next to Keegan, his eyes bloodshot, feeling dazed. He didn't really believe in any of this, but he seemed to have lost control of his life, like it was on auto-pilot, things just happening to him, dragging him along. Gravity had taken over. He looked out over the upturned white, Hispanic, Irish and Italian faces.

"They told us these fuckin' robots would be great, that they'd look just like us, that they'd set us free from hard work. But they were wrong. They don't look anything like us and they weren't designed to make us happy. They were built by the rich to replace us, while we all starve," shouted Keegan.

The fevered, swollen crowd shouted back

"Yeah—"

"We hear you—"

"Damn right—"

On the other side, a crowd of dark faces, blacks, Arabs, Indians, stared intently at Mu'tazz as he waved a fist. "It's time to rise up, rise up against a government that hates you. It's a godless government, a government of whites and Zionists and a godless government is a thorn in Allah's eye. A godless government must be ripped up by the roots and replaced with a government of the faithful. These machines are punishment for our sins for our lack of morality. I declare to you again, as I always have, that there is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his Prophet..."

"...something's gotta be done about these robots and these rich fucking bastards," shouted Keegan. "And about these savages right here that want to tear down the government and have us all in chains..."

“...while these Jew controlled enemies of Allah mock us. If anyone be an enemy of God, let the righteous hand grind them to dust...”

The two crowds cheered, pushing and shoving each other, like two mighty rivers barely restrained by a weakening dam. Weapons slithered out.

Victor came alive suddenly. He wanted to hurt someone. He pushed to the front of the crowd, eager for a brawl, ready to strike someone, anyone, ready to finally make someone pay.

Insults flew from both sides. A bottle flew and crashed.

Just then the rusty gates of the church shivered and started to roll open.

Usually the nuns came out to greet the crowds, but today, instead of nuns behind the card tables, three multi-armed, stick thin drones stood ready to dish out meals from the Synthesizers. They moved like insects, their motions precise and perfect. Everyone stood still, frozen for a moment. The shouting died off. No one could believe it. Silence swept them.

The Muslims and the Socialists agreed on nothing. Nothing could unite them.

Except this.

Victor stood wavering for a moment in disbelief.

Not here too. They're everywhere. Can't get away from them. Got to do something. Now.

He launched, roaring, at the machines.

The crowd erupted up around him and stormed the church, hurling aside the tables and seizing the robots, pounding them, ripping them. Bats, sticks and knives came out from under heavy winter coats. They tore the limbs off the machines, like hysterical children ripping off spiders' legs. Kicks and punches rained down on them. People battled viciously to get at the robots, pushing and shoving, biting and punching each other in a frenzy. The nuns came down from upstairs and fell back in fright. Desperate calls to the police went out.

The church couldn't hold the rampaging crowd and they spilled back out into the street, strangely united now, all of the dark and light faces jumbled together, unified and moving like a raging river, Victor still at the head. The wind picked up, whirling the snow, and the crowd tumbled down the streets until they came to a huge, garishly lit Supermart, stocked with row after shining row of junk food, home supplies, toys, plastic furniture, tools and ugly B-line clothes.

“Happy holidays and welcome to Supermart,” said the always cheery holographic greeter at the door.

The mob thundered inside, smashing through the huge front windows and pushing aside the frightened morning shoppers. A stacking drone wobbled forward carrying packages of potato chips and powdered cheese dip on twenty pancake-like plates attached to its thin, spindly body. Two huge men grabbed it, lifted it above them and slammed it against a wall. They tore off some of its carrying plates and battered it until it ruptured, spraying white juice.

An old woman clutched her hoverbasket. A mother in a jogging suit tried to call 911 on her pinkie phone, but a mountainous Socialist knocked her out with a brutal elbow to the jaw. She fell and the crazed group trampled her, heading for the checkout machines with raised bats.

Newsdrones sprayed tiny dragonfly cameras over the scene. The feeds hit the satellite grid and relayed to newsstreams everywhere. All over the city, displays on the sides of buildings showed footage of the men destroying the Supermart.

Men in other food lines saw the images and rioted. They ripped the food synths from the walls and used them to smash through store windows. In minutes at least five Supermarts and two Burger Champs were burning, the black smoke streaming into the Manhattan skyline. Anti-terror systems all over the city recognized the riot and sent out mobilization commands. Police instant messenger chains chimed.

The riot picked up steam. Student activists, opportunists and homeless joined the frenzy, tearing through stores. Glass littered the streets. Looters carried off couches and clothes and food.

Pilotless, bladeless police windcopters erupted from rooftops and spread out over the burning city. People in office buildings barricaded doors according to well fleshed out anti-terror plans that had evolved through the constant barrage of suicide bombings over the past sixty decades. Anti-fire balls lifted off from stations and unleashed powerful blasts of fire suppressant chemicals on the spreading infernos. Others screwed themselves onto hydrants, expanded like huge balloons and sprayed the swirling flames.

Police tumbled from the tortured sky in riot cocoons, the freefall thrashing and splashing them in the impact paste. They hit the streets with a whump and the cocoons burst open, spewing microscopic insect scouts and snake sentries. The snakes skimmed the air, converging on the biggest pockets of violence. They reared up and sprayed sedatives and pepper spray against the crowds.

Police moved in lines, behind electrified shields, their bodies protected in dark blue body armor. They fired shock cannons. Anti-riot balls sprayed rubber bullets and freeze foam, locking unlucky rioters in place. Once stuck it was easy for arrest drones to cuff them and airlift them to waiting porta-prisons.

But even as the police and firefighters made progress in pockets, the riot oozed out in other places and the scattered groups started to come together like smaller fires swelling into one massive blaze. Rioters raided gun shops or printed off guns on hacked synths. Short, bloody laser rifle battles erupted all over the city. In only a few hours at least forty-five Supermarts burned to the ground. Riots broke out in L.A., Chicago, St. Louis, Philadelphia, Atlanta, Washington D.C. and dozens of smaller cities.

The President appeared on holoscreens everywhere, her dark hair crimped into a tight, traditional Republican bun. Subliminal messages of tranquil rivers, flowers and peacefully sleeping people flickered as she talked.

“My fellow Americans,” she said. “This is a time for calm, for peace...”

The Gardener

2071 Orthodox Calendar
4769 Chinese Calendar
Sing Sing, New York

It had taken a year of intensive work, but finally the bright orchids and roses had taken hold in the poor prison soil and exploded in a riot of color. He had time. In fact, Victor didn't have much else.

He'd spent the last three years studying horticulture in the prison workshops. He'd get his certificates soon. The experimental program to teach prisoners trades had gone well and many inmates landed better jobs when they got released. Well known professors from Columbia, Berkeley and Harvard taught many of the classes via satellite. After a two year pilot, funding had continued and the program went full time inside the totally mechanized and rebuilt Sing Sing. Before prison, Victor hadn't even known you could study plants. No one had ever told him.

Gently he tended to the flowers. For months, gnarly hordes of black spiked buffalo treehoppers had besieged the plants, clustering around the branches in dense packs. He had destroyed the tiny monsters with regulated doses of poison and a careful pruning hand, all under the unblinking eyes of the hovering guard drones.

“Excellent work, 118792,” said his professor through the drone's microphone.

Victor smiled. He stood up, wiped his sunburnt forehead and surveyed his garden. He handed the shears back to the buzzing guard drone. It took them and folded them inside itself. Victor checked the time on the drone's screen. Time to go back to his cell.

The wasp like machine led the way through the yard, diving and swooping, avoiding other inmates and their Custodians. Sing Sing was proud that it had introduced the guard machines seven years earlier. The ACLU and other civil rights groups had raised a protest, but the results had silenced the opposition. Murders and other crimes inside the prison walls had dropped to almost zero. Prisoners quickly learned that painful barrages of rubber bullets, electric shocks, temporary paralysis or even deadly force rewarded bad behavior. Other prisons had quickly adopted the expert systems to great effect, particularly in Texas and California.

A year after he got inside, Victor stood watching three newly incarcerated La-Raza Nation gangsters shouting threats at a rival Latin King.

"Hey fuck you, cholo, you ain't heard what I said? I talkin' to you. You hear me talking? Maybe you don't hear so good, no?"

The Latin King just stood, smirking, not saying anything.

Victor shook his head, knowing what was coming. A crowd was gathering to see the entertainment. Everyone who'd been inside for a while knew what was coming. Two guard drones hovered in silence above them.

The smallest La-Raza, with blazing mediatronic tattoos of white skulls all over his chest, piped up.

"I said Latin Kings is fuckin' straight gay as fuck, motherfucker, and you ain't even say nothing?" he said. "Pinche retardado. What kind of basculao puta are you, huh? Got nothing to say, faggot?"

"Yeah, I got something to say," said the Latin King. "You a dumb ass who's about to learn shit the hard way."

That was all the La-Razas were waiting for. The three rushed him.

A blast of air knocked them back before they could land a single punch.

The drones went bright red. "Alert, alert, alert."

The Latin King just laughed at them. "I told you picaflor motherfuckers. You learn real quick how things are up in this bitch, you know?"

The small one got up fast. He got knocked down again, the first guard drone hitting him with a blast of compressed air.

"Stay down, just sit down," said the Latin King. "Do yourself a favor, motherfucker."

He refused to learn. He got up one more time, still trying to attack his rival.

The drone sprayed him with a dark mist. He stood for a second, dazed, and then crumpled to the ground. The other two La-Razas put up their hands. The first drone scooped up the unconscious gangster and carried him off to solitary.

As he watched the streaming mist Victor had an idea that curled his lips. He stood there thinking about it, long after everyone else had drifted away. It wasn't until the alarm to go back to his cell sounded that he came out of his trance.

He arrived at his cell, the door opened and he stepped inside. The Custodian floated in after him, drifted towards the ceiling, hung itself quietly and plugged in.

Victor undressed and climbed into bed. Tomorrow he would get a block of wood and start carving. He could see the final piece in his mind already and it was beautiful and clear. It would make a perfect gift. For a while he lay there, hands behind his head. Soon he started to doze, but before he closed his eyes completely he made sure to look at the small, framed picture of Wallace Tweed. He made sure to look at it every night. Wallace Tweed, king of department stores, king of robotics.

Wallace Tweed, whose favorite flower was the orchid.

The Orchid Block

*2071 Orthodox Calendar
4769 Chinese Calendar
Upstate New York, New York*

“Ah, Victor, right on time. Excellent,” said a prim housekeeper, her hair in a tight bun. “Mr. Tweed received your gift and was very impressed.”

“Yes, ma’am. Thank you,” said Victor.

“Come right in. Quickly now. Mr. Tweed will be with you shortly,” she said.

“Yes, ma’am,” said Victor, nodding to her.

She turned and headed off through the huge mahogany foyer, her steps rigid and precise. Victor shuffled after her, the blood dark carpet spongy under his moccasins. Gaudy paintings covered the walls, framed in heavy gold, buffeted by ornate sconces. Animated sculptures moved under pools of muted light.

The foyer opened into a massive room with a wide, gold banistered staircase that rose majestically to the second floor landings. Lions lounged on the tips of the railings, as if to protect what lay hidden upstairs. Countless doors lined the walls.

Victor followed the housekeeper around the stairs and past multiple doors. She came to a stop and turned sharply in place next to a large black door, gilded with gold designs. She frowned when she saw Victor had fallen behind. He caught up to her.

“Sorry, ma’am.”

“You’ll have to learn to move quicker, Victor. Mr. Tweed despises tardiness,” she said and opened the door.

“No problem,” he said and went into the large office, dominated by a monstrous desk, stacked with statuettes and picture frames and papers. A garish painting of Tweed in kingly purple hung over the high-backed leather chair.

“Have a seat. Expect Mr. Tweed promptly,” she said and closed the door with a leaden thump behind her. He sat down in the guest chair.

And right there on the shelf was his gift to Tweed.

Victor hadn’t expected that he’d keep it so close, but he’d hoped. It was a block of wood he’d carved into a small field of orchids, the detail intricate and flowing. It had taken him years but for years he’d had nothing but time. He wasn’t the best artist but the classes in prison helped. His mother was good once. She used to draw for him when he was a kid, until one day she just said “you’ll have to draw your own pictures now” and stopped. He was never very good at drawing and he gave up not long after, but the carving somehow made sense to him, the three-dimensionality of it. It felt real.

He knew it would make him stand out among all the others who came to beg this rich man for a job. Victor found that the man was involved in a charity, Prison 2 Work, that gave prisoners a second chance.

He looked out the French doors to a magnificent garden hothouse, overflowing with ripples of stunning flowers, much like his sculpture.

He looked to the big bookshelves in the office. They were filled with tiny trinkets: gold coins; sculptures; plaques; trophies; framed letters, all of it inscribed, all of it under glass, lit by tiny firefly

sized glowglobes. What was it with rich people and their piles of trophies and awards and monuments to themselves? Everywhere were monuments to Tweed. Even in the garden, surrounded by vivid orchids, a bust of Tweed, carved in ivory, looked over his kingdom.

Tweed was late.

Victor looked at the big clocks on the wall, all perfectly synchronized. Five minutes passed and then ten, fifteen.

The door opened abruptly and Tweed rushed in. Victor stood and even stooping he was much taller than the little fat man. He'd heard that Tweed didn't like men to be taller than him, so he tried to stoop even lower.

Tweed hurried around his huge desk and dropped into his chair.

"Sit," he said, looking at Victor with an intense and powerful gaze.

Victor smiled, a little nervously, and then sat. Tweed continued to stare at him, unmoved, unblinking, hands on his hips. Victor felt like the man could see right into his thoughts. He wanted to get up and run. Maybe Tweed already knew his plan? His heart hammered in his throat.

Finally, Tweed broke his gaze and smiled.

"Let me get you something," said Tweed. "Sorry I'm late, I'm always late. What, you look surprised? Oh you met Julia. She likes everyone to be on time and I just never am. Tells everyone it's me. I've haven't been on time in the last twenty years."

"It's fine, sir."

"And we don't need any of this 'sir' stuff. Please. Call me Wally."

"Wally?"

"Yeah. Look, what made you send me your gift?"

"Well, I heard you had a program to give people like me a second chance and I wanted to show you that some of us can change, you know? Some of us are worth something. And I heard you liked flowers and so I set about seeing if I could do it after I got the idea. It was hard to learn to sculpt, but I got it figured out."

"You never carved anything before that? Really?"

"No. Lots of them ended up in the trash, but I kept going. Eventually this one turned out all right, I think."

Tweed nodded. "I want to hire you."

"You...you do?"

It's gonna work. After all this time, he finally had some hope. He was almost afraid to think it, lest it slip away. *It's not gonna to work out. You're stupid. Just go. No. It could this time. It really could.*

"Look, Victor, I created the Prison 2 Work program because I knew there were guys like you, guys who just didn't have a chance. And nobody else even came close to your horticulture score on the tests I sent out, so I could use you."

"Um, all right."

Is this really happening? Inside he never really thought it would work. He figured Tweed would hate it. He wasn't very good after all. *I'm not really worth much of anything when it comes down to it.*

"This is great opportunity for you. And the Gardens for Tomorrow program needs you."

"Gardens for Tomorrow? I thought this was a job working in your personal gardens."

"It is, but they're all my personal gardens. It's a great charity. One of my favorite and I've got a lot these days, too many maybe. Making me run down. Do you know about the Give Back plan?"

"No, sir."

"Please, call me Wally or Wall, whatever works. Just not freakin' Mr. Tweed. Hate that."

He turned, as if remembering something, and stared at the giant painting behind him. In a rage, he waved a hand and said, "Julia."

"Yes, Wallace," said a voice from the desk.

“How many times have I told you to take this and every other painting of me looking like a goddamn dictator and burn them?” said Tweed.

“I strongly disagree. They look regal and—”

“For the fifty-fifth millionth time, your strong disagreement is noted. Please get it out of here and turn it into kindling. Thank you.”

“But it’s not proper—”

He waved his hand and cut her off. He turned back to Victor. “Sorry about that. What was I saying? Lot going on.”

“The Gardens of—”

“Right. Excellent. Something that matters, unlike these ridiculous posters that I just cannot get rid of, for God’s sakes. I’m a goddamn prisoner in my own home. You figure I should run the place, but no. Everyone just does what they want. My own fault. I got rid of all the damn robots around here. People don’t always do what you tell them.”

“You...you got rid of the robots?”

“Yeah. Won’t have the damn things in here. Not creative, you know what I mean? Like you, like what you did, that’s creative. Machines can’t do that. And they can’t really make a garden right. It’s too perfect. Got no soul. I need someone who can really see, you know what I mean? An artist. Machines don’t make art. They don’t make what matters. That’s what I wanted. Free people up, do something real. That’s why I got into bots in the first place. Free us all. You know what I mean?”

But you didn’t free us. “I think so.”

Tweed turned and saw the painting again and frowned.

“Stupid paintings. The board loves them. Got to get rid of them if it kills me. Anyway, what was I saying? Gardens of Tomorrow. Right.

“It’s something I started, where I get other wealthy idiots like me and we pledge to give away 90% of it to charity when we die. Not like any of us really deserved it anyway. We all know it. It’s just a bit of luck and timing. Not that hard to make money. You don’t got to be smart, just clever.

“So far I’ve got sixty of us rich bastards signed up. That wasn’t easy. You know how hard it is to separate a man from his money? Anyway, I always thought making it was fun but it just didn’t really fulfill me, you know? A means to an end. Giving away money is hard work, but it’s what I really want to do. It’s like a second life. I just love ideas and I like helping people and I need you to help me.”

Victor didn’t know what to say, so he just said “how?”

“So we do garden therapy with kids with rare diseases. The kids come out and they work with the flowers and the flowers are so alive and you should see the look on their faces. And we don’t just plant gardens to let them die. I need you to tend them all, make sure they’re there, letting people know there’s always hope. There is. I believe that. I made my own way and anyone can. So please take the job. Do you want it?”

“Yes,” said Victor. “Nothing would make me happier.”

“Good, good. Let’s check out the garden.”

Victor followed Tweed outside through the big French doors.

Now he’d have all the time in the world to do what needed to be done. And he wasn’t buying Tweed’s act. He was just giving the money away out of guilt, as a front to make himself even more money. They all did that. *Leeches off the little people. Build their fortune off everyone else’s back and do nothing. A few bucks here and there to some poor kids don’t make you right.*

Trimming and Pruning

2074 Orthodox Calendar
4772 Chinese Calendar
Upstate New York, New York

The garden expanded quickly under Victor's gentle hands. Sometimes Tweed would stand watching him through the French doors, as Victor moved like a reaper through the knee high flowers, trimming and pruning.

After a year, as Tweed's trust grew, he sent Victor on exotic flower gathering trips to Bangkok, Rio, Manila, Singapore and Bangladesh. He'd come back with magnificent, sun-bright flowers that he planted around the bust of Tweed in the center of the garden. He'd often seen Tweed looking at it approvingly, just as Victor had hoped he would. The man was a fraud, Victor knew it, a pompous fucking fraud.

Sometimes Tweed would stride out to the garden at lunchtime while Victor sat sipping a poppy tea he'd learned to make. Tweed would stand in the middle of the luminescent flowers, hands on his hips, surveying. Sometimes, Victor noticed, he would bend down and sniff them. Tweed often liked to come and see Victor work. At first Victor thought he was spying on him, but he was starting to suspect the man just liked flowers.

That was hard to take. *No. After all this he can't be good. He can't. He's nothing but a fraud. He is not fooling me.*

One day, Tweed surprised Victor by asking if he could join him doing the garden work. Victor saw he was dressed in a smart jumpsuit that probably regulated body temperature. A small hoverbag of garden tools floated next to him.

"Of course," said Victor.

"This is where it's really at," said Tweed. He looked excited as he took out his hand rake and shovel. "It took me a long time to figure it out. Spent my whole life running around chasing more stuff. Life is simple. It's right here. It doesn't have a purpose. It just grows. It just is."

That and other moments were making it harder and harder for Victor to believe the man was a fake. He seemed to really enjoy giving away his money. And he didn't just do it from the comfort of his chair, he got out there, met with people, went to work giving out food, or visiting the sick. And he did it a lot. It wasn't just weekend work. It was almost every day.

Often he'd join Victor in the garden and talk.

"Cannot break away from work today," he said one day, pacing while Victor worked. "Killing me. Want to be out there, doing something that matters, not this tedious crap."

A little girl called out, "Grandpa, Grandpa."

The girl came running. Victor saw the scaffolding around her legs, jutting from under her dress.

"Hey, there's my girl," said Tweed, ruffling her hair. "What'd you do today?"

"Grandma took me shopping."

"That's good. Did you get anything?"

"Yeah, I got a new Gem doll."

"Good. This is my friend Victor, he helps make all the pretty gardens."

The little girl looked up at him, a little unsure what to think. She hid behind Tweed's leg.

"It's fine. This is grandpa's friend."

The little girl came out from hiding, smiling big suddenly.

"You see these," he said to Victor, pointing at the girl's legs. "This is why I got into robotics originally. This was my first invention. Attair has a nerve condition that we still don't have a cure

for. Can you believe that? With all the advances we have, we still have stuff that makes doctors say ‘we got no idea.’ I couldn’t accept that. I made this, man, I don’t know thirty-forty years ago. Improved them a lot over the last few years, when Attair got sick, made them lighter. It’s not heavy, right, A?”

“My magic legs,” she said.

“We can make them invisible now, super thin, so you can’t even see them. Without these, missy here couldn’t walk, though she’d still get into a lot of trouble with her mom, wouldn’t she?”

“Yeah,” said the girl.

“I got her the new ones but she wanted to keep these. Said they’re a part of her now. Anyway, I’m rambling. My business partners figured the tech would work better with fast food and service industries so I went to work on that. That worked out pretty goddamn well, I think—”

“Grandma says you ain’t supposed to swear,” said the girl.

“Well just don’t tell her.”

“They didn’t work out well for me. Your machines put me out of work at Supermart,” Victor blurted.

Tweed stared at him. “Did they? I’m sorry.”

Victor wasn’t sure what came over him. *Stay quiet. You’ll blow it all up.* But he couldn’t. Not anymore. *I’ve had enough.*

“They don’t help people at all. You’re wrong. They only help people like you. They put everyone else out of work. The little people. I couldn’t work for years. I hate them. You don’t know anything about real life, about real people.”

“Sweetie, why don’t you go inside,” said Tweed to the girl.

“Um, ok,” she said and ran off quickly.

“I never knew you felt like this,” said Tweed, coolly.

“You never asked. People like you never do.”

Victor threw down his trowel and stormed off.

The Waste of Castor Beans

2074 Orthodox Calendar

4772 Chinese Calendar

Tweed Estate, Upstate New York, New York

Victor soaked the castor beans in water and lye for about an hour and then removed them with special gloves so the lye wouldn’t burn his skin. Very carefully he’d razored the shells off. Then he’d put them into a coffee grinder with some grapeseed oil and churned the mixture until it looked like milk. After that he let the slurry sit for three days in an airtight jar, before draining it through a coffee filter and squeezing out the remaining oil. Then he’d covered the filter with newspaper and let it dry for a day. He filtered and dried it one last time, carefully removed the newspaper and examining the pile of powder. He made sure that he wore his mask and gloves, as even a single sand sized granule could kill him.

He looked up at the small framed picture of Tweed that he’d kept from his prison days. It used to make him smile, thinking about how he’d hurt him. For so long he’d only had one goal. Make Tweed pay. Now he’d met the man and he had no idea what he would do with his poison.

Victor had taken to wearing his mask in the garden for the past several months. “Allergies,” he’d said, and Tweed had thought nothing of it. Why should he really?

In the morning on the weekends Tweed always came to the garden early to sniff the flowers. He loved the orchids best of course. Victor had cultivated them right in the center of it all with an easy walking path that wound their way to them.

Today Victor had dusted the petals with his toxin, and now all he had to do was wait. He’d waited so long for this.

And now he wasn’t sure.

The man is good. He’s no fraud. Victor had to admit that or else he was just lying to himself. That burned him so bad. *After all this, he’s not a fraud. He’s good.*

Victor doubled over suddenly, wrenching, choking back bile. Everything raced and moved too fast. He grasped for the ground and closed his eyes, trying to get control of his breathing.

Let him sniff his favorite flower and shut up. You can change, the nun said. Something like that. If you want to do something different you can. *Just change. Just stop him. You don’t have to do this.*

Tweed was smart and he did something that seemed right to him but it was wrong. It did things he didn’t expect. Little people suffered. What he did only helped the few, no matter what he said. And that wasn’t right.

That’s how it is. It’s always that way. Always has been. Nothing ever changes unless somebody stands up and does something. Unless I stand up and do something.

He steadied himself and took a deep breath. He sat up and opened his eyes and the morning sun peeled back the clouds and its warmth reached out and touched him.

The worst part was the world had cheated him. Again.

He looked at the orchid petals and felt his throat tighten. His whole body knotted up. Everything hurt. Tweed’s bust stared at him. He glared back. He hated that face.

That face took my job. My hope. Took my freedom.

It’s not going to take my revenge.

He had a plan. All the money he’d managed to syphon off during his trips to exotic ports to grab flowers for Tweed was glittering in his bank account. It was enough to get him on a plane and off to Singapore, where his cellmate had told him could sit on a beach, get a professional shave by a beautiful woman, with a cocktail, all for a buck. It was a place where much of the country still didn’t have electricity, much less robots, he’d said. Victor wasn’t sure. Was there really anywhere that wasn’t exactly the same?

Tweed opened the doors of his office and stood drinking in the sun for a moment. Victor knew what was next. He would bend down and breathe in the sweet sense-tickling fragrance in one huge draught, never noticing a difference in smell, because there was none. Ricin was odorless and colorless. Victor would only have to wait for the first cough before leaving. When he heard a second cough, he’d shoulder his satchel and head out the back of the hothouse.

He could still stop this. *There’s still time. Tell him to stay back; you sprayed them with poison this morning to kill some treehoppers.*

The coughs would come on more furiously after that he knew, frightening coughs, deep and bronchial. A few hours after the coughs started the poison would begin to block the protein making ability of Tweed’s cells. Unfortunately, cells need protein to live. Within a few days all of his cells would start to die. His muscles would ache, he’d vomit, huge gushing streams of vomit, and he’d have trouble breathing. At first it might only look like a bad case of the flu, that is until his skin turned blue, but by then it would be too late. Before they could get him to a hospital, the ricin toxin would have collapsed his lungs and he’d stop breathing.

He wouldn't stick around for all that. He would catch a jumper that would take him across the world, where he could live like a king. Singapore gleamed brightly in his mind.

That's when he knew he wasn't going.

Tweed was walking towards the orchids now. He smiled at Victor.

No. Stop. Don't touch those.

Victor stayed quiet.

Tweed put his nose to the bright flowers.

The nun's words flashed back to him. "Never be afraid to change course, when you find out you don't have the whole story."

Victor had the whole story now. Things were exactly as they'd always been. The rich got richer and the poor got nothing. And nothing ever changed. Nobody ever did anything about it.

He put his bag on the table and waited. He wasn't going anywhere. He's stay here and see this thing through.

Tweed coughed.

They'd get him and send him back to the only place that had ever made sense to him: prison. Things had an order there. They followed rules that were clear. The world didn't.

Tweed coughed again.