

Luna the Plentiful

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Author's Note

As a Victorian scholar who is also interested in contemporary fiction, I have attempted to complicate the conventions of a traditional steampunk story while holding true to certain larger tropes of the genre. Coming from a creative background in self-consciously postmodern 'literary' fiction, I was interested in writing a genre story that was able to emphasise style while also foregrounding what I consider to be the most interesting facets of steampunk for anyone interested in Victorian history and culture: the genre's infatuation with automata and technology, as well as the plight of the Victorian underclass. In the best steampunk stories, contemporary Victorian fears about increasingly mechanised labour processes and the displacement and alienation of individual human labour combine with a humanistic critical interest in Marxism and literary representations of class consciousness. Technological wariness often manifests itself, as it does here, in robots or cyborgs that are humanlike and imposing. The preponderance of automata in steampunk stories offers unique ways of thinking about the posthuman in both Victorian and contemporary culture, exemplifying and exploding academic conceptions of the subject.

The most appealing facets of steampunk for academics and scholarly minded creative writers are its ability to re-imagine a Victorian society in which the lower classes have a central prominent voice and the opportunities it affords for powerful critiques and reflections on the technological absurdities of twenty-first century life. This stronger critical standpoint is best represented, for me, in the proto-examples and the earliest works of the genre, particularly in the novels of Michael Moorcock and Tim Powers; the latter's *The Anubis Gates* (1983) was especially influential for me due to its status as a distinctly literary work of science fiction and for its impressive historical scope and extensive research of nineteenth-century primary sources.

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Steampunk is one of the most visible generic forms in which neo-Victorian literature manifests in the contemporary zeitgeist. The fact that a genre incorporating such a built-in ideological critique, set of values, and historical basis has translated into an increasingly popular subculture should be seen for the exciting opportunity it is by Victorian scholars. Rarely have scholar-authors had such an opportunity to directly influence the shape of a genre by leveraging their historical knowledge and enthusiasm for the subject into narratives that combine historical fact and revisionism, while appealing to such a diverse audience.

“**Y**ou’re sure these will work with the newest models?” he whispered as he placed the wooden box of assorted gunmetal tools on the counter, glancing about the shop to make sure no one was listening.

“Yes, all tools work. Will work perfect. Like new, perfect,” the shop clerk croaked.

Albert Cartwright nodded and pushed a hand through his greasy hair. Having grown up working in his father’s clock and watch repair shop, he was familiar with most of the tools in the kit, though there were a few items expressly for the manipulation of automata whose purpose eluded him. The pale ashen being on the other side of the counter was pensive and looked at the back door of the shop several times. It seemed to be waiting for Albert to leave. At least it had bought the story that he was purchasing the tools for his job as an assembly-man at the factory. It said something soothing in its native tongue to a scaly lunar creature that the shop’s human owner kept on display in a cramped cage on the counter, before turning its black, doleful eyes toward a rocky bluff that stood alone in the distance out the window. Albert handed the coins stamped with the Queen’s image, his very last, across the counter while mentally rehearsing the contents of his wife’s last letter for the tenth time that day.

The shop contained dozens of cramped shelves filled with used spare parts for water filtration systems, cans of oil, sheets of thick glass, the requisite cogs, gears, and spanners. A grime-encrusted Union Jack hung limply from a short pole in one corner. The base was covered in a fine white dust. Next to it sat a nugget of platinum that had been fastened to a boxy

titanium alloy base by the shop's owner. On the sanded-smooth front a brass inscription read, "*Luna the Plentiful*". A portrait of Queen Victoria on the wall stared down approvingly on these treasures taken from the Moon's womb, never utilised once in thousands of years by the native Lunarians who called it home. Albert had tried to strike up a casual conversation with a Lunarian on several occasions but had never been successful. He'd walked past the segregated ghetto where they lived like animals only once, a few days after first arriving in Port Victoria. The squalor had depressed him so much that he'd vowed never to return. They were basically slaves – paid just enough to survive – but weren't allowed real property or permitted to wander outside the town's airlocks, apparently to keep them from organising with the wild Lunarians who still lived in caves and underground dwellings beyond the human outposts. In his first letter back to his family Albert had described their features: a bullfrog voice, a distinct lack of a nose, a smooth face with no discernible ears, sad eyes that never returned your gaze, an extra pair of eyelids to keep out dust. Since sound couldn't travel on Luna's surface, the Lunarians communicated with one another by a form of sign language and facial gestures. They could speak, but the process seemed quite painful to them. They didn't possess lungs, from what he understood. None of the native lunar flora and fauna needed oxygen or hydrogen like humans, but strangely adaptable, they were also able to survive in the artificial atmosphere within the settlements. Albert had heard of Mr. Darwin's death before leaving London and wished now that he had access to his books. He liked to imagine how the great scientist would have accounted for the descent of these morose man-sized creatures that walked upright and survived without air and water.

On his way back to the tenement where he rented a dusty one-room flat, Albert passed Victoria Provincial Bank for the third time that day and tried to avoid eye contact with the slender man-shaped sentry by the door, the very same one he'd earlier subjected to an, as he thought, unobtrusive inspection. Too late. "I trust that you are enjoying a pleasant afternoon, sir, and might I add that your colour has improved since the last time we had the pleasure of meeting," called the polished silver skeleton in the dignified voice of a Shakespearean actor, smooth as silk. *We never met before*, Albert thought. *Bloody eerie with that voice*. The bank sentry was the most sophisticated automaton yet. It was around seven feet tall and thin as rails,

with arms and legs that pumped in and out on pistons, allowing it a high degree of control over its limbs. Its right arm ended in six Gatling gun barrels that fired .45-70 calibre rounds. Several hundred cartridges were wound around its torso in an enormous X. Its titanium alloy body was polished to such a degree that it seemed to shine with an unholy inner light, especially in the dark. Albert was uneasy around automata in general, even the older models that weren't equipped with firearms. This one was particularly terrifying. Its phosphorescent eyes were unnaturally keen and never blinked; they seemed to be full of an otherworldly intelligence and a vaguely evil intent that belied the creature's beautifully modulated speech.

Albert paused at a corner, considering yet again whether he had the skills and fortitude to go through with his hazy plan. It was bad enough that the bank was right in the centre of town. Now he had to contend with a robot that looked ready to kill at a moment's notice. He realised too late that he should have committed the robbery weeks ago, before the sentry was stationed at the bank. But he'd still had a job then. Regardless, it was the only thing left to do, in spite of the increased risks.

Earth beckoned to Albert from the space between two dirty brick facades across the street: two intermingling seas of tufted white and deep blue, like a clouded sapphire, with real air and natural water. "It will be worth it," he whispered to himself. *I'll be back within a couple weeks and we'll have enough to last us until I can find a new job. We'll all be able to put this behind us, to act like it never happened.* The tinted glass of the enormous terrarium, which allowed Port Victoria and other lunar colonial towns to exist, shifted to its evening setting, shadowing the colourful sphere hundreds of thousands of miles away. He sighed and turned down a deserted side street toward his building before the view was completely ruined.

As he walked, Albert fingered a spanner in the box that was carefully crammed into a too small inside pocket of his coat, inadvertently causing it to tip too far forward and open, spilling several tools into the dust. A split-soled boot appeared in front of his face as he bent down to pick them up.

"Let me help ya' there, mate."

"I'm fine, thank you," Albert replied mechanically as he quickly scooped up the tools with one hand, hoping that the man had no idea what they were for. "I must be going."

“Say, I think we’ve met before,” the other man replied.

Albert looked at his face for the first time. It did seem familiar: young and round, with a wispy red moustache and enormous green eyes. Abruptly, the man shot out his hand. “Brandon Carlyle’s the name,” he said, in a breathy and lilting brogue.

Albert cautiously took the proffered hand. The man smiled in expectation as Albert considered possible pseudonyms. *Smiles*, he thought, then, *No, that doesn’t sound real*. Thomas Edison? But everyone would recognise that name.

“Mayhew,” Albert eventually mumbled, trusting that it was an obscure enough moniker among other members of the labouring poor.

“What’s that, mate? Don’t hear so well outta’ this ear on account o’ the factory. Noisy, ya’ know. When the riveters are runnin’ full bore it’s enough to make any man near deaf.”

“Mayhew,” Albert spoke up. “Henry Mayhew. Pleased to meet you.”

The man shook his hand warmly. “Well, Mr. Mayhew, like I was sayin,’ I believe we met before at the pub over on Blackfriars. Don’t you remember? I could have sworn you had a different name that time but I can’t recall what.”

Albert felt panic welling up in his stomach. It wasn’t the time to become involved with old acquaintances.

“Oh. I must’ve been tight that night. I changed my name when I came to the moon. Needed to get away from my past,” he lied. “I might’ve used the old name by mistake.”

“Ah, I’m sure that’s it, then. You’re from London as well I think?”

“Yes. From Whitechapel. Well, it was nice to meet you again Brandon but I must be going.” As he began to walk away the man turned to follow.

“How about I just walk along with ya’ for a moment. Do you remember what we talked about last time? You helped open my eyes that night, Mr. Mayhew. Inspired me. Ain’t you seen the new robot in front of the bank? Bloody frightening how it watches your comin’s and goin’s, ain’t it?”

Albert was becoming profoundly uncomfortable. What did this man know? What was he involved in? He mentally replayed what he could remember from their topics of conversation that night, all of the issues that

were upmost in his own mind: the plight of Luna's poor, the mining and factory layoffs, the refusal of the big companies to pay for return trips to Earth.

"I haven't noticed," said Albert. "Try not to pay too close attention to them." Did this short man have a family too? Was he also desperate to get home?

"Ah, excuse me, Mayhew but you'd have to be blind to not see what's happening around here. The damned things get smarter every week, just like you yourself said last time." The man was incredibly animated. At every pause he exhaled hard as if he were blowing dust off a thick cog.

"I was drunk and not myself. They're robots; they can only do what they're designed to do by the people who make them. Don't you work at the factory? You should know that. Now excuse me."

As Albert began to turn his shoulder, Brandon put out his hand and grabbed a fold in his coat, causing Albert to instinctively grab the other man's wrist and twist hard.

"Damn! Look, mate, Albert. That's your real name, I think? Just listen. They're trying to replace the people around here with 'em! Soon they'll be shipping 'em out all around Luna, even to Earth!"

Albert let go and dropped what he could afford to of his nonchalant pose. He ushered Brandon into an alley before urgently demanding, "What do you mean?"

"You know the new bank one and the old models down at the Moon-people camp? That's just the beginning. There's older models all around town." He counted them out on his hands. "One at the inn over on Carson Street. Two that stand round outside the prison. A couple round the boarding house on Fleet Road, another in the front room of the brothel. Who knows how many's in the rich company-people's homes. There's one outside the factory that keeps watch, and they're talking about puttin' 'em inside too. Goddamned overseers; holdin' clubs, keepin' everyone workin' the line fourteen hours a day. Every man who gets put out is dead or dead drunk in weeks. Wouldn't be surprised if they weren't plannin' on takin' over every job on the moon 'fore long after that. Even me on the line'll be replaced. Robots creating robots forever. What about the men with families? How will they ever support 'em? How will they ever get back to Earth to see 'em again?"

“What did you say about them being shipped to other towns? To Earth?”

“I’ve heard that’s the plan. Talk gets around at the factory. They already sent some out to Camp ‘Lizbeth and St. Bede. Next month they’re sendin’ a whole dozen out to New Canterbury. There should be thirty or forty of ‘em here in town by then. They watch you, ya’ know. They’re gatherin’ information for someone, spyin’ on people, lookin’ into windows at night.” He made a V of his middle and forefinger and drew it in front of his eyes. “I’ve seen ‘em. They’re learning about us, either for their selves or because someone’s makin’ ‘em.”

Albert felt ill. His resolve not to get involved was crumbling before Brandon’s eyes. The short man placed a spectacularly calloused hand on Albert’s shoulder, closed his eyes and let his last few words vibrate out of his narrowed lips like an incantation warding against impending evil – Somethin’ needs to be done. Somethin’ big.”

“I... I’d like to help. But I have a family too. Work hasn’t been good... I’m trying to get back to them and can’t get involved with any of this,” said Albert. They stopped speaking for a moment as a man he recognised as the proprietor of a local pub suddenly walked in front of the alley, his Lunarian servant close on his heels. The man didn’t notice them. The Lunarian stared at the ground and made no sign of acknowledgment.

Brandon spoke once he was sure they were alone. “Creepy buggers, them Moon-people. Look Albert, I ain’t askin’ you to risk anything. Just to help organise. I got a group of fellas from work together. The two of us didn’t meet by accident, I been tryin’ to track you down for a week now and found out where you stay. Was waitin’ for you to come along. I know how good you are with machines, Albert. You can help us. Please, just come to a meetin’ and see what we have to say. You could really help change things for all of us here.” Brandon’s words carried such an instinctive pleading sense of trust and camaraderie that Albert felt almost obligated to help him, for the good of his soul.

“Where and when’s the meeting?” he whispered.

“25 Milton Street tonight at eight. Landlord’s a friend and don’t mind us usin’ a room. He’ll be behind the bar. Tell ‘im you’re lookin’ for the ‘Workin’ Men’s Club’ and he’ll lead ya’ to us.” Brandon pressed Albert’s hand and was off before he could utter another word. The man seemed to count on him showing up.

As he shaved, Albert gazed at the assorted tools he had been gathering for weeks, now augmented by what his new friends had given him. A small, dull silver box with a simple black dial in the centre and a small attached antenna occupied pride of place on the cheap wooden table. It was his masterpiece, a prototype frequency transmitter and manipulator that he had been working on for two weeks, ever since his fateful first meeting with Brandon and his comrades. Every so often he flipped it around in one hand and brought it close to his face, as if he were peering into its secret inner being. He wrapped the tools up with the manipulator and got out the letter that was tucked beneath the mattress, right next to the small bundle of explosives he had created from various chemical compounds. Even though he had experienced a modest upbringing, Albert had always possessed a sharp mind and an eye for detail that had greatly contributed to his mechanical aptitude. He had read voraciously as a child and had excelled in school before leaving to work at his father's shop full-time. His latent sympathies for the destitute and downtrodden were nurtured in his early twenties when he was first introduced to the writings of Henry Mayhew by the radical young man he had met at a lecture at the London Mechanics' Institute. *London Labour and the London Poor* had changed him. Life in the '80s didn't seem all that different from what it had been in the '40s, especially for the lowest classes. Devoting most of his spare time and the little extra money he earned from repairing watches to championing the poor, printing flyers, and contributing to various causes had nearly ruined Albert. When the first announcements advertising the Lunar Ore Rush had gone out, he saw an opportunity to save his wife, Esther, and his two young girls from looming destitution. Even if he wasn't lucky enough to establish a claim, he believed that his mechanically inclined mind would be in demand and allow him to stand out among the largely unskilled lunar workforce. He spent nearly a month arguing with Esther before eventually securing her tearful consent to the plan. When he left, Mayhew's book was the only one he took with him; he hoped it would help him remember his ideals and remind him where he came from.

By the time Albert arrived in Port Victoria, many of the first miners had already quit to work for the booming robotics factories that were springing up around the colonies. The mining companies no longer allowed independent prospectors to stake their own claims, perhaps they never had. He attempted to keep his spirits high by plunging into his work, maintaining

and repairing the various implements utilised in the processes of titanium and platinum extraction and refinement. None of the employees knew, until it was too late, that the companies had intentionally hired more workers than they needed. They drastically decreased their labour force after the initial rush, which allowed them to pay those who remained a much lower wage than they had originally been promised. Those men who remained in work didn't complain about the meagre pittance they received, since they were afraid of being replaced by someone who would do the work for even less. When the first round of mining terminations took place, the only alternative was the factory, which was no longer hiring, not even skilled workmen like Albert. People like Brandon, who had secured factory jobs earlier on, were in constant fear of losing them as the robot fabrication and assembly processes became more streamlined. Albert was nearly broke. Once or twice a week he was able to find day labour at one of the mines, planting explosives and swinging a pick, but it paid barely enough to buy food for a few days. He had sent the entirety of his small store of savings back to Earth; it was never enough. After weeks of failing to find a job, there was nothing else to do. No way to afford a flight home. No work. He rubbed the letter. His wife had written with even worse news this time: the family was in danger of losing their lodging, his father's lungs were getting worse, the man hired to replace Albert had stolen nearly twenty pounds worth of valuable watches and fled the city. Victoria Provincial was the only option; it had to work. He folded up the letter, put it back, and lay down. The morose Lunarian shop clerk's face seemed to materialise before his eyes, haunting him like it had every night recently. He didn't like that the aliens were relegated to the status of the underclass, but he wasn't invested enough to meddle in their plight. He had his own causes to worry about.

Over the last two weeks Albert had met with Brandon's group several times. His initial sympathy for the excitable little man quickly expanded to envelop the other workers that assembled at the public house every few nights. The landlord, Thomas, was a devoted friend of Brandon's, who allowed the men to meet in his apartment above the bar. This arrangement guaranteed the men a private place to meet no matter how busy the establishment was below. Since all of the patrons were equally beleaguered and always drunk, the men didn't worry about their mysterious meetings being reported to the police. Albert heard many similar stories from the men during these meetings. Like him, most of them had come to

Luna full of hope but had been quickly put out by the mining companies. Some had been lucky enough to obtain employment in the factories but had been let go after a few weeks. A few men were still in work but feared termination daily. Some had hungry families back on Earth, sick old mothers and fathers, children in workhouses who were mistreated and half-starved, but most of the men were orphans or bachelors. Many of them initially grumbled about the menial jobs being monopolised by the Lunarians, but when they brought the issue up at the meetings Brandon was quick to remind them that this too was the fault of the capitalists. The factory workers had suffered silently for many weeks before deciding to organise, a decision precipitated by the brutal murder of a colleague. Angus, a middle-aged man with bulldog jowls and a shiny bald head, told the story. "It was at the factory last month. Old George. Different generation, that. Couldn't stand the idea of becoming outdated, having his job go to a damned machine, which is what'll happen when enough get built. Robots building robots, reproducing. So one day he ran at the one who'd just been all wired up the day before, after our shift was over. It's the one in front of the bank now. You've seen it, aye? Watches you, talks to you in that posh voice. Well George just lost it and ran at it with a wrench, maybe thought he was too fast for it or it wouldn't actually fire. The thing started yapping at him before he even got close, and the second George's arm swung, them barrels started spinning. Everyone thought the bullets were India rubber since that's what the foreman said they'd be, just to scare people, hurt 'em without killin' em. But they was real. Shot George six times in the face, once for each barrel. Looked like raw meat. Didn't gasp or make any noise. Fell straight down dead like someone just flipped a switch and turned him off all of a sudden."

"That's why we need it on our side," said Brandon. "It's the only one on the streets with a gun right now, a new model. The others like it are still being put together. These new ones, their brains is more delicate so they take a long time. If we had that one on our side we could march right to the factory and start tearin' things down without havin' to kill anyone, they'd be so scared of it. You're a watchmaker, you work with complicated parts. We just put 'em together, the arms and legs, the basic stuff. We don't do none of the wirin' or tinkerin' inside. Only two fellas at the factory do. They're paid really well and ignore us. They ain't on our side."

Several days after this meeting Brandon gave Albert blueprints for the new model of automaton that he had lifted from one of the two engineers' offices when he was out to lunch. It included a full diagram of the inside of the skull and instructions on the wiring. There was also a diagram for a frequency transmitter and modulator that allowed the robot to switch to different frequencies for various clients and situations, increasing its versatility. From this design Albert had cobbled together a rough prototype. An innocent janitor had been thrown in prison for the offense, where he was tortured for information that he didn't possess. It was unfortunate; Brandon referred to him as a necessary casualty and vowed to break him out during the melee.

The arrangement between Albert and his co-conspirators was mutually beneficial. He now had a perfect distraction for breaking into the bank once the workers started to riot, and he had the automaton to clear a path. They had agreed to split the money, but to leave Albert enough to get back to his family and rebuild his life on Earth. He'd have a lot less to take home to Esther and his daughters, but his plan now had a much greater chance of success. The few men with families wanted to return to Earth with their money and remain incognito for a time. The majority, however, had visions of dismantling the entire lunar capitalist system. As Albert was blowing open the back of the bank and emptying its safe, they would be combatting the police with whatever weapons were at their disposal. Because of the efficiency of the robots, much of Port Victoria's police force didn't carry firearms, and the ones who did would be easily overwhelmed by the men. After they had subdued the police force, they planned on taking over the factory, imprisoning its owners, overseers, and the engineers before destroying the remaining robots. They would then make their way to the mine. Most of the men were well known by the lower class inhabitants throughout Port Victoria. They were confident that the vast majority of the town would join their cause after the capitalists had been subdued. From there, Brandon claimed, the group might even move on to other lunar colonies, eventually gathering a force large enough to make a legitimate claim for independence from the Crown, establishing a new lunar republic founded on the equality of all.

Albert awoke promptly at 12:45 a.m. and slipped softly out of the window of his first-floor room. The town was on the near side of Luna.

Night and day were each around two weeks long, but the moon never really became dark. In addition to an artificial atmosphere regulator, the engineers who designed the great domes, which each town depended on for survival, had equipped the structures with a self-adjusting tinting system that changed intensity at programmed intervals over the course of every twenty-four hour period. During the moon's day cycle, "day" was less harshly bright than usual and "night" was equivalent to dusk back on Earth. During the night cycle, "day" was as bright as an average day on Earth, while night was almost as dark. But day or night, Earth was always there, its brightness diminished, but never its presence.

Because of Port Victoria's strict 12:30 curfew, the street was dead and deserted on the way to the bank, without so much as an insect present. Luna's native wildlife had been eradicated by the first settlers, those hardy men in armour and great bubble-like helmets, who had torn through anything alien that moved with automatic clockwork rifles, cowing the Lunarians into submission. There were no trees, or rivers, or great public works to give life to the austerity. As a result, the rapidly expanding colony of Port Victoria looked more like a ghost town at night, an inverted and abyssal reflection of the City on the Thames.

The lunar colonies were planned on a grid pattern. Albert cut through the back of the bank lot so that he could approach the building from the rear. He'd scouted the last several nights and knew the automaton guard's patrol pattern perfectly. Every hour, on the hour, it stationed itself for five minutes at the front left corner of the building so as to command a wide view of the front of the bank, the intersection, and a hotel farther down on the other side of the street. Albert's soft, slipper-like boots made deep impressions in the moon dust as he stalked toward the mechanical man. He carried a small brush in one of his coat pockets for dispersing his tracks after completing the business.

A police officer appeared from the direction of the hotel when Albert was within fifty feet. *What in hell is he doing out here? Isn't the robot enough?* The constable stopped for a moment and stared at the front of the bank. When the sentry let out a melodious "Pleasant morning, constable!" the officer gave it a weary glance and then shuffled back the way he had come. Brandon had told him at the last meeting that even the police force was worried about their jobs. If an automaton could patrol a building, why

mightn't one also be able to issue citations, arrest drunkards, and kill bank robbers?

After the officer's departure, Albert moved forward in a crouch. *Only thirty seconds left.* Within ten feet of the automaton he pulled a small metal club out of his long trouser pocket. Brandon's words echoed in his mind, "I spied on one o' the engineers and seen him use this when a robot malfunctions when they're doin' the wirin'. It's a failsafe. Hit 'em right in the base of the skull and they'll shut down for a few minutes. The head plate should pop right open when you do it." In one fluid move Albert stood and smacked the back of the robot's lambent skull with all of his might. As it began to crumple he grabbed it around the torso and eased it to the ground. It was remarkably light for its height, no heavier than his wife. He dragged it to the back of the bank and worked quickly in the shadow of its eaves. *It will work, it will work* ran through his mind in a refrain as he made minute adjustments to the mechanical organs before him. A brass box was wedged in at the back of the robot's head among a staggering amount of gears and gossamer threads that ran throughout the creature's inner skeleton. He carefully manoeuvred a fine instrument along one side, popped the box out, and opened it. *This must be the brain.* He held his arm out, letting the moonlight play over the delicate assemblage. It seemed to move in his hand for a moment, but he knew that such a thing couldn't happen. He dismissed the thought as ridiculous and finished his programming so that when he turned the dial, the being would do whatever he commanded.

The outline of Europe slowly swung around the sphere on the horizon. So beautiful and pristine from this distance – tracts of green, ribbons of white, a great wash of blue encircling it all. Two Lunarians passed one another in front of him, pointedly avoiding eye contact while their fingers moved in esoteric gestures. It was ten o'clock the next morning and Albert was sitting at one of the small tables outside the tavern opposite the bank. The sentry seemed to be patrolling and behaving normally. Its eyes sparkled with the usual intensity. He'd rewired the mechanism within its brain and synced its receiver with the small box in his pocket that functioned as frequency transmitter and manipulator. When he turned the dial on the box, the automaton would switch from its default frequency, sent from a radio tower affixed to the top of the factory, to the weak frequency transmitted by the antenna of the manipulator. This would allow him to give

direct commands to the automaton that it would follow unconditionally, until the dial was turned back to its original position.

One of Brandon's men was standing by the post office. The upheaval would begin any minute now. Albert breathed deeply. It was all fine printing anonymous flyers and attending twilight meetings, but real revolution? There wasn't time for second-guessing; he swallowed hard and tried to focus. They were just waiting for his signal, and he in turn was waiting for the sentry to move behind the building. As soon as it did he'd wave his hand. Brandon's man would relay to the large group gathered inside a restaurant down the street, and they'd swarm like an irresistible riptide through the city. Several men would take positions at the corners of the closest buildings with whatever guns and clubs they had; ready to kill, if necessary, any approaching police officer who wouldn't surrender. The automaton was on the right side of the building, seconds away from crossing behind.

Go.

Albert waved and started forward in a brisk walk, carrying the carpetbag stuffed with explosives in his right hand. On the other side of the street, all hell was in the process of breaking loose. The revolutionaries came surging into the street in front of the bank, waving weapons and shouting orders at passersby. Metal cudgels shone in several grimy hands. Albert heard the loud crashing *POW* of a revolver and then the unmistakable noise of breaking glass and a woman's screams. His stomach churned as he dashed around the corner, not daring to look back.

The automaton was coming toward him to investigate, its gun level and ready to fire. The dial seemed to leap from his hand as he fished it out of his pocket, falling into the dust near his foot. "On the ground sir or I will be forced to shoot!" Albert dropped into a roll, picking the dial up with both hands and recovering himself on his knees. It kept coming, the Gatling gun barrels giving off a distinctive whirring noise as they began to spin. Then everything stopped. The robot stood in front of him, motionless and docile. Albert mustered as much command into his voice as he could, "Protect me at all costs. If anyone comes around either corner of this building, make them stop."

"Certainly sir, it would be my humble pleasure." The automaton began twisting its torso a full 360 degrees, scanning for assailants. "Please do inform me of any additional commands."

The fuses crackled as the orange sparks hissed closer toward the tops of the explosive charges. As Albert dove around the corner of the building he remembered that he hadn't told the robot to get down. He covered his ears and watched Brandon talking to a group of working men out front that Albert didn't recognise. Apparently they had decided to join the cause. The bank shook with the force of the explosion. He looked back around the corner, not knowing what to expect, wondering how the plan would be complicated if the automaton had been destroyed. It was waiting for him, perfectly unharmed, in the middle of a cloud of white dust that floated around its head like a halo. "I trust you are well, sir?" it sang out.

"Christ, you weren't blown to smithereens? Follow me, don't let anyone come near me and be ready if I need help."

Most of the wall had been blown off. A haze of stone particles covered the cavernous opening. Albert leapt through, stopping to cough as the robot scanned the area. All of the bank's customers and employees had already evacuated. "For God's sake, why didn't I think about how long the safe would take to open?! Here, open this, *gently*."

They were jogging toward the front of the bank, Albert with his carpetbag in hand, now stuffed with money instead of explosives. The automaton was ahead of him, its torso and head twisting violently left and right. It started chattering back toward him, its voice changing registers randomly. "Please sir, STOP, sir, do let me know if you need anything, ON THE GROUND, from me."

He stopped. *What's wrong with it? Is the dial working? Maybe something's wrong with the antenna and it's shifting between frequencies.* "Go on ahead and help those men in the street, the workers. Stop any police officers or anyone else who tries to interfere with them."

"Of course. NEVER! Yes, sir."

There was no time to open its skull and find out what the problem was, and Albert had no idea what could be wrong. He had been so sure he had gotten the rewiring just right. The transmitter's signal was relatively weak, but he had built it to exact specifications. What could be causing the malfunction? As he rounded the corner, a cacophony of screams punctuated by the sound of machine-gun fire interrupted his musings and brought him violently back to reality.

“Bloody hell! They was surrendered!” Brandon screamed at the robot.

It turned to Albert. “Sir, I have neutralised the threat.”

Brandon was furious and on the verge of tears. “Their guns was already on the ground before you showed up! Why in God’s name would ya’ do that?!”

Albert realised what had happened instantly. The automaton’s gun was still whirring, not yet completely cooled. The corpses of five constables were leaking an obscene amount of blood into the dusty street, which was congealing into a thick scarlet mud.

“Wait there,” Albert ordered the robot.

The group of men were stone-faced, and kept glancing from the robot to the dead men. Albert beckoned to Brandon.

“I think something’s wrong with the robot but I don’t know what. It’s going back and forth, like it’s trying to return to its regular settings. I think we should shut it down. I can open it up and disable it.”

“I’ll knock it out,” offered Brandon, twisting the metal club in his hand. “Jesus, I can’t believe it did that. They had already surrendered, they wouldn’t o’ put up a fight. I’ll do it, you betcha.”

“Stand down and don’t resist,” Albert commanded the automaton.

The robot stared into his eyes but was silent.

“Did you hear me? I said stand down.”

Again it was silent. Albert nodded to Brandon, who was now in position behind it. As Brandon began raising his club the robot pivoted on its torso and grabbed him by the face, picking him up and holding him several feet in the air. The arm extended on its piston so that Brandon couldn’t reach the robot’s body.

“Stop!” screamed Albert. The Gatling arm came up and pumped six perfect rounds into Brandon’s chest as Albert futilely struck at the robot with both hands. It turned toward Albert, dropping the body with a sickening thud.

“Sir, this man was attempting to deactivate me and to sabotage your plans.”

“I told you to stop! He wasn’t trying to sabotage anything.”

The other men were shouting for Albert to do something. None looked ready to make a move on the automaton. He waved them back and removed the dial from his pocket. He thought that flipping it to its original

frequency and then back to his might force the robot to reset. He tried it. The robot's arm immediately began to rise, then went back down just as quickly. It stood still and appeared to be docile.

"Please inform me of any commands that you may have, sir," it sang.

Albert didn't know how to respond. Brandon was dead; he'd never see the republic he'd yearned for or even the factory owners thrown into prison. There was nothing left for Albert to do but to make for the airlock at the edge of town. One of Brandon's men had recruited an operator, who had agreed to let Albert skip the sterilisation process and go right through both gates without trouble. He hadn't been able to arrange for a mechanical carriage, so Albert would have to walk, but it was only a few miles to the spaceport.

"Give us the money and go man, take the bloody robot with ye' 'fore it starts killin' more people," a voice growled at him. A few men flashed glances his way. *They don't trust me. They think it was my fault.*

"Go," said Angus. "We have enough men; the town's as good as ours. Go to your family."

"Scout on ahead," Albert called to the robot. "Make toward the eastern airlock."

Angus pulled Albert aside. "I don't know what you'll do about that robot. It seems to have a mind of its own. If you get a chance use this," he said, placing an iron club in his hand. "Just be careful it knows you're not swingin' it in its general direction, it might decide you're hostile and shoot you." He looked down at Brandon, who looked ludicrously small in death, with no trace of his animated spirit. He was already growing cold, like a machine.

"I'm so sorry. I don't know what could have happened, I did everything by the book. Brandon was my friend, I –."

"I know, lad," said Angus, raising a hand to stop him. "We know it weren't your fault. We'll remember all ya' done for us."

Albert nodded weakly. He took most of the stacks of cash out of the carpetbag and placed them in Angus's hands to distribute to the rest of the men. "Good luck with everything; I... I know you'll give 'em hell."

Angus nodded and turned away to tend to the men, attempting to fill Brandon's late role. Albert ran to catch up to the automaton, who was taking huge strides toward the airlock, methodically scanning back and forth. All

around them the miners and factory workers were marching toward the town square to organise with their comrades outside the bank, carrying clubs, fire pokers, and huge spanners. Several Lunarians passed him from behind, having broken away from their masters. They avoided eye contact. He saw them veer off before coming to the airlock. *What will become of them?* The revolutionaries had planned to eventually allow all of the Lunarians to leave Port Victoria at their convenience, but that was just talk. He hoped that they wouldn't suffer the misplaced wrath of the leaderless men in the ensuing chaos.

"It's me, the one you were told about. Albert."

The airlock operator nodded and stepped down from his stool. He retrieved a lunar surface suit and helmet from a locker by the door, and waited while Albert put them on. The operator turned to a keypad fastened to a small metal privacy curtain near the door and typed in a long code. The two Lunarian workers busy polishing the great titanium edifice stepped back as the lock slowly began to open, the great round gate rolling back to reveal the second gate thirty feet beyond. Albert stepped into the space between locks, the automaton following. One of the Lunarians made so bold as to croak out to him.

"Boss men gone?" he asked, pointing and looking back toward the town, where a line of smoke was rising from the police station.

"Hey, get down and don't talk to the man," yelled the operator, stepping forward.

"It's fine, really," Albert protested. "Yes," he said to the two frightened creatures. "They're gone. No more boss men, no more robots."

The two creatures exchanged glances. Albert realised for the first time that one was shorter, slimmer, and had finer features than the other, that they must be a couple. They looked to be communicating with their eyes and hands. Suddenly – they took off back toward town.

"Hey!" yelled the man. "Get back here you scum!"

"Let them go, they probably just want to make sure they're on the right side."

"I'm here, ain't I? They shoulda' stuck with me."

"They're fine. Help me get through this thing."

The first lock closed. The tunnel between gates was made of a dark, heavy metal that prevented any contaminants from entering or exiting Port

Victoria. It was pitch black inside. Albert was worried about the robot; it hadn't said anything for some time. Maybe it was plotting something? *No, don't be absurd. It was just a malfunction earlier.* As the second lock began to roll back, allowing a slight degree of glaring, untinted sunlight in, it spoke up suddenly. "Sir, I should inform you that I cannot allow myself or anyone in my company to exit the confines of this settlement, for the safety of all concerned. This programming overrides the frequency settings of your manipulator."

"What? Why didn't you tell me? How have I not heard of this?" *Why wasn't it in the blueprints? Is it a failsafe in case anyone ever tried anything like this? Maybe it just needs another reset.*

"Sir, all owners, designers, and operators of the model BoR-1.8 are informed of this aspect of my design."

I'm not any of those. "Maybe I just need to reset you again." It was worth an attempt.

Albert set down the carpetbag and the club. He took the manipulator out of his coat and held it in his left hand, the enormous glove of his suit not allowing him a very tight grip. As he reached his right hand toward the dial the mitt bumped the attached antenna, causing it to slip from his hand. He dropped to his knees but the robot had already extended a leg and brought it to rest about six inches above the small box. At any instant it could fire its foot out on its piston, crushing the manipulator to pieces.

"Don't! Easy now."

"Sir, as I have informed you, I cannot allow you to exit. Do not force me to use whatever means are at my disposal to keep you here." Albert thought that its voice had lost its musical quality, that it sounded harsh and forceful, but unsure, as if it were asserting itself with its own true voice for the first time.

The airlock was fully open now save for a thin piece of glass that would raise once he got close, at which point he would transition to one-sixth the gravity of Earth. Albert knew that he only had a few seconds to step through the lock before it would begin closing again. The robot was still standing on one foot. *It might buy me a few seconds. If I can run out quick, it won't be able to follow me. It said itself that it can't leave the dome.*

"Sir, I will not ask you again –."

Before he could change his mind, Albert struck the dial hard with his hand, sending it flying across the tunnel. As the robot turned to look, he picked up the club and swung hard at its leg, sending it sprawling on its back. The carpetbag was in his hand. He was running. The glass was open. Albert jumped out into the unregulated gravity of the silent lunar surface, landed, and leapt again to the side, attempting to prevent the robot from getting a clear shot. The first round punctured the glass and hit him in the foot, shearing through his boot. The surge of pain from the bullet mingled with that of the sudden shock of freezing air that hit his exposed skin. A second round punctured his calf, a third his thigh. Three more went wide. Then everything was still. The gate had closed.

For several minutes Albert attempted to hop on his one good leg. The air froze the blood from the bullet holes when it reached the surface of his heavily padded trousers, but it wouldn't stop coursing up to the surface; the outermost layer of fabric of his glove ripped off in thin ribbons as he moved his hand from one injury to another. There was nothing else to do. He was making his way toward the spaceport at an angle, thus allowing him an unobstructed view of the dome, now a hundred feet behind his left shoulder. He felt faint. *I just need to rest, just for a moment.* He sat down, wincing through the pain, and looked back at the dome, largely untinted in the morning light. Rapid gunfire shone like angry orange fireflies from somewhere near the gate. *The robot must have crushed the dial.* It seemed to have lost all restraint and to be making up its own commands as it went along. Albert was glad that he couldn't hear the screams through the thick glass.

A large group of Lunarians had apparently escaped the houses and shops of the capitalists in the chaos and had gathered at the base of the dome. They were manipulating something, stacking objects into a very large pile. *Explosives. None of them know the code to the door.* Albert visualised what the group might be like. The shop clerk was handing explosives to its fellows out of a large canvas bag it had brought after the owner left to see what had happened and didn't return. The couple who had been stationed around the airlock must be there too; so close to their home for so long, yet separated by a tinted layer of glass, now just moments away from finally being able to feel the sharp cold air of home on their pale skin. Albert wondered what they would do to him if they found him. He dragged himself

down the deserted road, free of traffic in either direction, for a few more minutes. A meteoric flash of light appeared over his shoulder; gargantuan sheets of glass crashed to the lunar surface and pale grey bodies filtered through the opening. *Every human in Port Victoria will die from lack of oxygen.*

Albert was fighting to remain conscious. Earth flashed into view, unfiltered by the dome. There was the arid yellow of the Middle East. There was a white feathery stripe covering northern Europe. There was England experiencing a rare day of clear skies, shimmering like an emerald beacon. Albert's arm, with which he had been supporting his weight, gave out. As he went down onto his side the sun struck the tiny little island in the sea, setting it ablaze. The first group of Lunarians reached him. The machine shop clerk looked Albert in the face for the first time, meeting his gaze during that last moment. Then the pale creatures walked on around him, toward home.