

Brain Raid

by Alexander Jablovkov

Those of you who know Mr. Jablovkov's fiction already will probably skip right past these notes, but since this story is his first one to appear in our pages, a few words of introduction are in order. Alexander Jablovkov published five novels and about thirty short stories through the 1980s and 1990s, including A Deeper Sea, Nimbus and Carve the Sky. Then he fell quiet for a few years, perhaps because his two young sons took up the bulk of his creative energy, but now he's back at the word processor and we're happy to bring you some of the results. He notes that he's indebted to David Alexander Smith for helping contribute to the story's underpinnings.

* * * *

That morning's job was a straight AI grab 'n go. We'd identified a rogue intelligence in a minimall on Route 222, near Ephrata, PA. A clerk at the Intelligence Regulatory Agency, in the Department of Labor, had assigned it the case name Donald.

Three of us from Gorson's Cognitive Repossession were going into the Limpopo home environment store anchoring the mall's right wing that day: Petra, Max, and me. I'd worked with Max a lot. Petra was new with us. She'd left a C-level outfit over in Philly to "broaden her background," which meant that she had been laid off. That probably accounted for her foul mood, even though she'd snagged a manager title, supervising us. Gorson's was licensed for D-level and below, quite a comedown for her. If you're used to Carries and Chucks, a Donald's barely worth getting up in the morning for.

But there she was, crisp and clean, sliding right for the service desk. My job was securing the staff and customers, then turning them over to the hired hospitality crew. Max's was locking down the loading dock behind the store, where a semi was loading decorative flora and fauna. Petra's was, redundantly, distraction and team management.

"Hot stuff, man." Max was more cheerful than I'd seen him in months. "We're scoring big. I can *feel* it."

"Cool it," I said. "Even at best, this AI's really just consumer-debt-reduction level. Keep that in mind. There's no big money here."

“Hey, not what you said the other night, eh?” He winked at me. “This is just the first step. Things are turning around for us.”

Despite myself, I glanced over at Petra. “Enough tequila, and I’ll say anything.”

“Don’t get all hot, man. I’m just looking to pay off that mortgage.”

Max had a gigantic house, and an adjustable rate, from the days when Gorson really had been making money. That was before I came to work for them, naturally.

Max grinned and sauntered off toward the loading dock. He was fully loaded with a powerpack, focused explosives, circuit suppressers. It was way more gear than I’d ever seen him carry. He and Petra had had a discussion about it: lost and damaged equipment cratered the bottom line. And what had Max said? “You can’t be too careful.” Which didn’t sound like our casual Max at all.

Damn me for shooting my mouth off that night. I’d brought this AI into our target list, but I shouldn’t have told Max how much I had riding on it. There was still a lot that could go wrong.

“But how can these big trees live on my carpet?” Petra’s voice came from somewhere behind glossy monstera leaves. Despite myself, I smiled. In just a few words you could tell she was the inane time-wasting client that was every salesman’s nightmare, the kind you couldn’t ignore, because sometimes they bought huge. “And why don’t they fall through into the basement? I do have a basement. Did I tell you that?”

The clerk was soothing. “All the support gear is self-inserting and self-maintaining. It’s no more than a foot thick, and takes over your subflooring. Structural stiffening is integral. Our installation team will do a full survey for your particular situation.”

I swung through the store. Two middle-aged women stood near a lily pond, one with a frog on her hand, discussing lotus flowers. A gardener half-covered in butterflies stuck a pressure sensor into a thick vine. I had to sweep customers, but the Limpopo staff was my highest priority. The clerk talking to Petra was Sylvia, the gardener was Alphonse. My list had one more employee on duty that day, Maureen, sales and technical support, but there had been no way to predict the number of customers.

Where was I? Streams of hot light broke up the darkness. Steaming, rotting trunks loomed above me and gigantic leaves showered water as I brushed past. Glass walls loomed here and there, but the mulch paths always curved away before I reached one.

No Maureen anywhere. She should have been past those giant pitcher plants, their maws filled with writhing mosquitoes and bluebottles, but there was no sign of her in the mist. Why didn't those bugs die? I got distracted, watching their unending death throes. They must keep the poor damn things alive as a demo, maybe with tiny spiracle-nozzled aqualungs.

"But what about lights?" Petra was plaintive. "I mean, here you've got your growsuns. I'll have sunburn by the time I get back out to my car." Sylvia the clerk made a noise like she would do something about it—a sunsuit behind the desk?—but Petra was not to be pleased. "Oh, it's just sensitive skin. Despite my color. It's my burden, you know. Dermal distress syndrome. But all I have at home is a couple of floor lamps. Nice ones, you know. Ming vase things. At either end of the couch. So these big tree things will die."

"We take the lighting into account, of course. The best solution is for focused microlights to crawl the stems at night, after you're in bed, forcing solar energy directly into the leaf surfaces. By morning, they'll have pulled back into their storage modules. You can't even see them."

"Oh, that sounds dangerous." Petra was good. I had to give that to her. With all the floor clerk's mental energy going to keeping her patience, she wouldn't notice Max and me as we moved into position. "I don't want any fires."

"Not at all. It's a mature technology...."

I had a spider plant once. I guess you're supposed to water them.

Ah, and there was Maureen, my target, with a customer. A businessman in an inappropriate Central Asian duster, goggles dangling around his neck, examined an orchid held out to him by a cute red-haired woman in a coverall marked with green stains. Her big black gum boots emphasized her slender legs. A pair of yellow rubber gloves hung over the edge of a muck-filled bucket. The man reeked of frankincense, a dry scent that stuck out in that jungle, where everything else smelled like you'd squished it out between your toes.

"Hey," I said. "Which way to the club mosses?"

“Recreated genera are over there.” Maureen was cute, but somehow pegged me instantly as an unprofitable customer. I didn’t have Petra’s skill at pretending to be a normal human being.

The church-smell guy had Maureen’s full attention. But she had what looked like sucker marks on her pale skin. The climate had to breed all sorts of blood-sucking arthropods, and I tried to reassure myself that this meant she wasn’t really so attractive after all. That’s easier, when you’re about to take someone into custody.

“Okay,” Max’s voice whispered in my ear. “I got the truck. Gave the driver a gift certificate to pick up some donuts, he’s happy, and the detention mesh is up, so no one else is getting in. They do an incredible business here. This thing is packed with growing shit, man. And did you get a load of these prices? After this is down, I’m getting home to dig up some of those big spiky things I got growing down by the garage.”

“Great,” I said, then switched channels. “Could I have your attention please?” My amplified voice boomed through the jungle. “A cognitive enforcement operation is in progress. We have information about a rogue intelligence in the area. There is no danger. Repeat, you are in no danger. But security concerns require the detention of all citizens in the immediate area. Please relax and remain calm. We will have you on your way as soon as possible.”

No one ever remained calm. The two women by the lily pond tried to scuttle out as if they’d just remembered an important engagement.

I stepped into their path. “Pardon me. Could you come this way, please?”

The shorter of the two, with huge dark sunglasses, barked, “Young man, I run a data-futures agency. An interruption could cost my clients billions. That’s more important than whatever cheap paranoia you’re peddling today.”

“This is for your own protection.” That particular lie must have been invented around the same time as fire.

“Listen—”

“I’m afraid I must insist.”

Her friend, a sweet-faced old woman with hair that glowed a radioactive blue and extremely nice breasts, took her arm. “We’d better do as he says, Maude.”

Maude had to know that violent resistance could get her fined, or worse. We weren’t allowed to manhandle detainees without good reason, but the definition of “good” got looser the more money there was involved. For your average citizen, getting caught in an AI sweep was just bad luck, like getting stuck in a traffic jam. If Maude was smart, she carried detention insurance.

“Can I see some ID?” Maude was stubborn.

I flipped it at her. She rolled her eyes. “Just my luck, caught by the JV squad.”

People can be so cruel sometimes. The real money’s in B- and C-level AIs, but that didn’t mean Ds weren’t as real a threat to the survival of the human race. “Come this way.” I escorted them out and turned them over to the cheerful team we’d hired to manage our hostages.

“It’s a pleasure to have you with us today!” a young woman in a pink smock said. “Would you like some guarana-jalapeo soda?”

“That stuff’s toxic,” Maude muttered as she pushed past her into the hospitality tent. “Get away from me.”

I circled back. The bucket still stood in the clearing, the yellow gloves now floating in the murky water, but both Maureen and the guy in the duster were gone. I scanned for any hint that would make one direction better than another. There was subliminal movement all around me. All the leaves seemed to have tics.

A branch groaned as it rubbed against another. And a shift in the air brought me the scent of frankincense. If his scent generator had been flinging the molecules any harder I’d have heard tiny sonic booms. I moved toward him as quietly as I could.

A floor-length duster is a hell of an outfit for an interior forest. There he was. I could see him through a mesh of aerial roots. I’d thought he was creeping away, but instead he was fiddling with something. I got on my knees in the wet mud, scuttled forward, and grabbed him.

“Hey!” A yank on his coat and he fell face forward into the muck. “I’ve

got an appointment, damn it! My business depends on it.”

No one ever yelled, “I was going to spend the day relaxing!” People just didn’t seem to give that sort of thing enough weight.

He rolled and looked up at me. “She slid off into the trees. Smooth and quiet. She wasn’t running, but it was clear she had an escape hole somewhere.”

“Where did—” He’d given me Maureen’s whereabouts so far ahead of my question about her that I had started to ask it anyway.

“You might have time to get her, if you move fast.”

“Thanks for the advice. What’s that in your pocket?”

“This? It’s, ah, an orchid. For my mom’s birthday. That’s today.” He pulled the purple flower out of his shirt pocket and examined it. “Seems okay. She gave me a whole bunch of instructions on how to set up the pocket ecology for it, let it grow into your clothing....”

“Put it down.”

“What?”

“Put the orchid down and don’t pick anything else up. You haven’t paid for it, so you’ll have to wait.” I stood relaxed, waiting for him. If he tried anything, I was ready.

“Oh, come on.” He seemed near tears. “I was late already. I’m always late. I pick up these things at the last minute.... I’m a bad son.”

“I’m not here to deal with your family issues.”

He sucked air through his nostrils, looked at me, and realized that his mother would have to wait a bit longer for her corsage. He set it gently on some moss.

“Just my luck, grabbed by a bunch of benchwarming D-levels. Have you already checked out every programmable toaster in eastern Pennsylvania?”

I smiled at him. “You can tell us how to serve you better on the appropriate form. Plenty of them available in the lounge.”

The hospitality lady was a shade less cheerful this time. “Would you like some coffee?”

“Eat me.” Duster swept past her. She looked like she was going to cry. I doubted we’d get this team to work with us again, which was fine, because I didn’t think we’d be able to pay them anyway.

Back into the jungle. “Max. Has anyone headed back past you?”

“No, man. All quiet here. You lose someone?”

“I haven’t lost anyone.”

But something about this situation was bugging me. I ran over to the bucket and pulled out the gloves. I turned each one inside out, but they looked like regular rubber fabric. The bucket seemed to contain only muddy water. I dumped it out and poked through it. Nothing in there but a half-rotted leaf she’d probably plucked to keep the plants looking nice. The bucket itself was a single piece of vinyl. I kicked it away.

Seismic analysis had indicated a significant cavern beneath the store’s floor. That was presumably where our target AI, Donald, was hiding out. Was there some kind of secret access to it from the sales floor?

“Taibo,” Petra said in my ear. “Where are you? You should have everyone sequestered by now.”

“One to go,” I said. “Just a second.”

“It was nice work, picking this one up,” she said. “Let’s just wrap it up and go.”

“I’m on it. Really.”

“Hey, man,” Max said. “Don’t get caught up in the details. Be a big picture guy and move on up. Get this right, and everyone will forget all about Bala Cynwyd, you’ll see.”

“Thanks for the career advice.”

“Hey, no problem.”

Max and I had gone out for drinks one night the previous week, not

too long after I'd gotten the lead on the Limpopo AI. I'd been feeling good ... and maybe a bit vulnerable too. I'd gotten the lead from an old bud, Chet. Chet and I worked together, years before, at a beltway bandit tech consulting firm in Falls Church. Since then, I'd knocked around through half a dozen careers, while he'd gotten in on AI hunting early, and now was a partner in a B-level firm, Beagle & Charlevoix, that dominated the mid-Atlantic market. He'd given me a call a few weeks ago, just to catch up on things, and we'd caught dinner at a Cambodian restaurant in Lancaster. Southeast Asian thinkingpins were rumored to be behind a lot of recent AI activity, and the cuisine had become popular among those who hunted AIs. Maybe they thought the spices would give them an insight into their quarry. Chet particularly favored tamarind, pouring it over things that did not require it. And he had given me a lead on the Limpopo AI, as a memory of old times. Maybe he felt sorry for me, I don't know. This particular AI was something his employers regarded as too small-time to mess with.

But to Max I'd made it sound like I made the AI on my own, just from the clues.

Something was going on. I picked up the wet leaf, and an image came to me: sucker marks on Maureen's temples and cheekbones. I looked more closely at the leaf. The veins looked natural, but they were just a surface decoration. Its actual structure was a complex mesh.

Jesus. An aicon.

We were in over our heads. Aicons were datalinks from an AI to people who had decided to associate with it. We tend to call them "acolytes," partially to demean them and make it seem like they are devotees of a carved wooden idol, rather than colleagues of something that disposes of more processing power than the entire world in 2010.

AIs with aicons are not D-level AIs. They are not Donalds or Dorises. They're not even Craigs or Cindys. They are Brittanys and Boones. If that was the case, we were in real trouble. Not only does Gorson's Cog Repo only have a D-level license, it has a D bond that's pushing its face into the floor. Taking on an AI, an intelligent device physically invested in a populated space, is dangerous. Even D-level bonds are millions of dollars. C- and B- level bonds are gigantic funds, with lots of corporate shareholders who hate uncompensated risk and hire expensive lawyers to protect their investments. Taking on a high-level AI with an inadequate bond was like jumping out of an airplane holding a paper umbrella from a Mai Tai. We'd have to cancel the clean, now. Maybe we could grab a finder's fee, which could run five percent or so of eventual recovery.

But why would there be a B-level in a plant store? I was overreacting. The leaf was ... I didn't know what it was.

No way I'd go crying to Petra about it. I'd played clever detective with her too, making like documentary research and pavement pounding had scored this AI. I wasn't ready to drop her respect down to zero again.

So I went off station and ducked into the drier air of the lobby that occupied the central part of the overgrown strip mall.

Down on ground level was a cutesy barewear store with lines of breasts, alternating perky and heavy, hanging in the display window, with a markdown bin of last year's abs outside the door, and in front of that a few pushcarts with fringed canopies selling scented candles, decorative contact lenses ... and cute toys for kids. I'd caught a glimpse of a baby's mobile, schematic faces with big eyes and heavy eyebrows dangling from it. Children react to human faces before anything else, and infants will stare fixedly at one. Someone had clearly interpreted "stare fixedly at" as "enjoy": the beginning of a lifelong misunderstanding.

Competing restaurant logos flickered on the glass balconies above, and dripped down red and green. The scent of galangal and cilantro implied sinister Cambodian thinkingpins plotting the replacement of western civilization by a rack of cognitive servers. The gleaming cylinders of fish tanks penetrated the floor to their support gear somewhere in the cellar. A grainy red dot from a laser spotter marked out a fish a diner had chosen for lunch. A net dropped through the water and scooped it out, flopping.

A waiter in a short jacket pushed a cart stacked with covered dishes.

"Hey!" someone shouted from overhead.

The waiter stopped.

"Extra tamarind!" The staffer overhead tossed down a squeeze bottle, which the waiter caught deftly. "Special order."

I'd been well and truly gamed—I knew it right then. I watched the waiter trot the cart out into the parking lot and disappear, presumably toward an air-conditioned bus with a well-equipped wet bar. Those B-level guys liked to hunt in style.

I didn't see the entire plan, not yet, but I knew there had to be one. It

was looking more and more like there was an unexpected B-level AI somewhere in that jungle, and that was what Chet and his crew were licensed for. Which meant that it wasn't unexpected to Chet. But if he'd known it was a perfect target for his crew, why hadn't he just gone in to get it? Why involve me and my sad sack colleagues from Gorson's Cog Repo? There had to be a reason.

Then I remembered what I had come out here for. I bought a mobile from the pushcart vendor. I grabbed a face with a black pageboy and red lips and held it up to the leaf I suspected of being an aicon. Maybe I had jumped to conclusions a bit too quickly and had imagined the whole thing.... The leaf vibrated. I saw a flicker of lights in what suddenly seemed depths within its folds.

The leaf writhed and tried to grab on to the face. It was so sudden I almost dropped it. Some kind of skin adhesive along the leaf's edge stuck onto my right pinkie. I shook it, disgusted, terrified, but it stuck fast, as if it had become part of my finger. It took an effort of will for me to calm down. It stopped moving after a few seconds, and a few more before it decided autumn had finally come, and dropped off my finger. I shoved the face in my pocket.

* * * *

The Bala Cynwyd AI had really been an Ernie. It had gotten upgraded to Denise after Gorson himself had lobbied the IRA with processing metrics someone in the examiner's office had found persuasive. "Denise" was pretty much an overgrown home media center hacked up by a neglectful but too-smart parent. No one likes these suburban domestic grabs, but they're bread and butter cases.

Maybe we got overconfident. Max and I went in as screen installers and managed to slide a real media center in to replace the AI, so none of the kids in the house even noticed. They often get attached to entertainment devices that were smarter than they were. It made choosing channels so much easier.

But as we were turning out of the cul de sac, a repair van backed out of a driveway and, ignoring our car's frantic envelope-violation signals, smashed right into us. Nothing disabling, but even saving human civilization won't keep you from serious trouble if you leave the scene of an accident. There was a lot of paperwork, and then we found that our fender had been pushed into our front tire, making our minivan undrivable.

As Max and I tried desperately to pull it back out, a couple of cars pulled up and blocked the street. Teenagers spilled out of them. Some quick action with a 3D printer had given them giant styrofoam turbaned heads with the weary and wise face of their iconic image. Seemed like this AI had a thing for early twenty-first-century Islamopop preachers. Not real icons, thank goodness, and they had the merciful side effect of muffling those slogan-chanting voices—but if any of those kids suffocated, it would be our fault. Jesus!

There was Max, wrestling with one of them. What the hell? He was supposed to be in the back of the van, disabling the AI's comm links, not mixing it up. There were half a dozen minicams out already—a lot of people didn't get out of bed without turning on a video recorder. We were popping up as windows on the screens of every easily distracted cognitive activist in the country. Most of them had nothing but time on their hands, and could hop into their augmented walkers and camel-strut on over here, to pile more workstation flab around us.

By this time, small remote-control blimps circled above, denouncing us and our attempts to drive the human race back to a pre-post-industrial economy, disempower ethnic variants, and prohibit refraction-correcting eye surgery.

There was only one thing to do now. I yanked Max off his victim and shook him. "Run!" I said.

"Wha—?" He looked around, as if seeing the yelling mob around us for the first time.

"Come on!"

We sprinted. No one had expected us to abandon our AI so quickly, and it took them a couple of seconds to react. I jumped over a car hood, leaving dents in the soft metal. Two guys managed to grab Max, but he shrugged out of his flight jacket, leaving them with nothing but fleece and leather.

We'd lost the AI. We were alive, we were free, but we were without income for the month. Like any bounty organization, Gorson's worked on a Paleolithic reimbursement schedule: mammoth-stuffed, or starving. Petra, our brand-new boss, wasn't happy to feel her belly rubbing up against her spine quite so soon.

"Oh, man." Max shook his head at his own stupidity. "Don't know what

came over me. Little weasel. Couldn't stand seeing his overprivileged protesting butt out there while I'm working to save him from the futility of his own existence, you know what I'm saying?"

"Yeah, buddy. I do."

"Man, I loved that jacket. This sucks."

"Yeah. It does."

It wasn't too long after that that Chet took me out to Tonle Sap and, while stuffing his face with oversauced pork, had slipped me the location of a so-far unidentified AI that wasn't worth his company's while to go after.

* * * *

Maureen dropped from a tree onto me as I reentered Limpopo. She might have been able to take me out right then and there, but she miscalculated. An angled branch deflected the force of her attack and I was just knocked to the side. I rolled off the soft undergrowth and came to my feet to pursue.

She'd already recovered. I caught a flash of flared nostrils and staring eyes. "You luddite terrorists can try to stop us, but you will fail!" Her kick caught me in the solar plexus and threw me back into the undergrowth. "You're just a taxicab for a DNA helix, you stupid meat processor!"

She had the singularity-sucking rhetoric down so well she could spout it while showing off her aikido moves. That was fine. She was confirming a few things for me. My job now was to stay conscious long enough to do something useful with my conclusions.

No time for pride. She'd be on me in a second.

I tore at the nonlethal restraints on my equipment vest. Stickum, slippem, oopsy, barfem: stuff named by preschoolers, and that did things preschoolers would have found amusing. This gal moved like a martial arts expert, so I figured a vestibular disruptor like oopsy was the best choice. Extremely coordinated people have always pissed me off anyway. I flicked the galvanic grenade at her and ducked.

She took another kick at me, but spun around and fell with a desperate wail as her vestibular system sensed random tilts and accelerations.

Now, where the hell was she?

She was only a few feet away—I could hear her crawling through the underbrush—but no matter which way I turned, huge elephant's-ear leaves were in my way. They pressed in, thick, fleshy, damp.

I felt one unfurl against my cheek. I scrunched my face up like a baby refusing a spoonful of mashed peas. Like that was going to do any good. I unsquinted one eye. The leaf was covered with hairs, each three inches long. No. Not hairs. Needles, incredibly thin needles.

"I have trouble," I said. Petra said something in my ear, but I couldn't understand it.

Then I remembered the face. I reached down along my side, almost dislocating my shoulder. There. I could feel it in my pocket. I got two fingers in, almost dropped it, and managed to pull it out.

Everything had gone silent. The leaves formed a globe around my head, shutting out all sound and light. It should have been dark, but the surface of the leaf flickered. And now I could hear a sound, like the whispering of distant voices. They were saying something immensely important, something I absolutely had to hear ... I jammed my elbow back, and got the face from the child's mobile up.

Human beings sample, and use cheesy makeshift heuristics, because we just don't have any brain capacity. If we tried to deal with the universe full on, our craniums would explode. AIs are different. They dispose of orders of magnitude more processing power, so they can see, hear, and know everything.

That's the theory, but shortcuts appeal, no matter how smart you are. If there's something more valuable to use your processing on, you'll do it. It's comparative advantage. Some thoughts are just more worth having. So, if these icons were something the acolytes put on to communicate with their AIs, the mechanism wouldn't necessarily run a full analysis every time. I'd guessed the leaf responded to simple facial features like eyes, nose, eyebrows, mouth, and, like a child, like anyone, responded more strongly to the high signal-to-noise-ratio fake than the noisy, self-contradictory, and contingent real.

It clamped on the face and, for an instant, the rest of the leaves relaxed. I dropped and twisted, then elbow-crawled through the underbrush,

following the trail of broken stems left by the redhead. Behind me, leaves rustled as they missed further confirming data, and failed to find cranial nerves, or chakras, or acupuncture meridians, or whatever it was they were looking for.

She was on the ground, minimizing the need for balance. And the disruption was temporary. She'd be on her feet in less than a minute. I crawled toward her and got a hand on her foot.

"Please comply," I managed to groan. "This is just a routine security operation. No ideological purification required...."

She twisted away and kicked me in the head. Fortunately her gum boots softened the hit. I sucked muck but didn't lose my grip. I crawled forward onto her.

"You don't understand." Maureen was near tears. "You're going to break the Gardener down into processing units and use her to ... manage an oil refinery, or something."

"Hey, it's relaxing work. I hear it's kind of like being a bartender. Surprisingly high job satisfaction ratings, when you look at the numbers—"

"The Gardener is an artist, not a piece of iron-age industrial control apparatus! You're not getting her. She's staying free."

A few inches farther and I could restrain her—a thick vine slipped off the tree that had been holding it up and fell across my shoulders. The damn thing was heavier than it looked. I tried to shrug it off, but it pushed down harder. By the time I realized what it was up to it had braced itself against some huge roots on one side and an irrigation pipe on the other, and pinned me to the ground. I dug my hips into the dirt and tried to squeeze out under it. Its pressure increased.

I tore holes in the soft soil, but didn't move an inch. I was having trouble breathing. Maureen slipped out of my grasp and disappeared ... back up the tree, it seemed.

I didn't care about that anymore. I was really feeling the lack of oxygen by this point. My vision was contracting, and I could no longer see anything out to the sides.

What had led me to this miserable situation? It might just have been the oxygen deprivation, but as I gasped for breath, I remembered

something.

After our dinner, Chet had slapped me on the shoulder and said. "Hey, Taibo, if you ever run into any trouble, be sure to call me. I value your contribution, you know that. Whatever happens, it will be worth your while."

It hadn't made any sense when I thought about it, but it had been perfectly fine as part of the flow of flattery and moral support that Chet had been offering me. He'd told me that I could still make some money, if less than I had hoped, by calling him and his team in. Great guy, Chet. I hoped I'd live to thank him.

"Hey, man, what you doing on the floor?" Max stood over me, vaguely puzzled.

I tried to talk, but now there really was nothing in my lungs. I tried to point.

"What, this fall on you?" He yanked at it, grunted when it wouldn't move. "You get yourself in another mess, man? Sheesh. Petra's scrubbing the mission. You hear that? Whole thing's a big botch. I can't use any of my gear now. I could lose my license, you know that? Man. I need it. Car needs a new transmission, and there's a frickin' colony of squirrels in my kitchen exhaust fan. I try to chop 'em up with the blades, but they just dance around 'em. Gotta get pest control in there. Those guys cost."

So that was it. The last thing I would ever hear would be Max bitching about his household budget.

"Just a second, man." He stepped away, then reappeared, holding a shovel. He jammed it under the root and levered. The pressure on my chest lessened enough for me to catch a breath, but not enough for me to get out. He grunted and dropped his weight on the handle. I was able to scabble out just before the handle snapped and the vine fell back down.

I rolled onto my back. "What's going on, Max?" I asked, as soon as I got my breath back.

"Ah, a big screwup. Not your fault man, you just got bad information. Happens. Happens to everyone."

"Gee, thanks for being so understanding."

My angry tone startled him. "Hey, man, I just rescued you. What are

you getting so pissy about?”

“You knew this thing was a B-level AI when we came in here.”

“What? No, man, I—”

I grabbed his shirt. “I shot my mouth off about getting a tip from my buddy Chet. And you knew it was a setup. Right away you knew he wasn’t about to be giving me anything valuable without getting something in return.”

“Well, man, you guys do have this dysfunctional relationship. I don’t know why you hang with him.”

I hung with him because he always bought dinner and because he managed to imply that he thought I was too smart to still be stuck with a one-bedroom apartment near an all-night convenience store and grad-school furniture with beer-can rings on top of the bookcases, without actually ever promising to give me any help in moving up. The information about this clean was the first real thing he’d ever given me.

“That’s why you were carrying all that gear,” I said. “You thought you’d take on a B-level AI with a couple of satchel charges and an electromagnetic pulse grenade? Are you crazy?”

He had the grace to look shamefaced. “That damn adjustable-rate mortgage is eating me alive. I bought at the top of the market ... so I’m an idiot. But, yeah, I wasn’t sure what was going on, but I knew there was money in it.”

“But I still don’t get it,” I said. “Why did Chet give me that information in the first place? What does he get out of it?”

“I can tell you that,” Petra said above us.

Both Max and I jerked. I sat up, trying to squeegee some of the mud off my clothes with my hands, and he put what was left of the shovel aside, as if it was a weapon that violated regulations.

She sat down on a fallen mahogany log. She was my boss, and as a result I didn’t particularly like her, but right now she looked young and bony, and as much in the crap as Max and I were.

“Do you think we’re the only ones with money problems?” she said.

“Hell, things are tough all over,” Max said. “We know that. So what’s their game here? Why was Chet setting up poor Taibo?”

Great. That’s the identity I’d been looking for: “Poor Taibo.”

“Because they’re up against it too! They come off smooth, confident, world-beating ... believe me, I know. I smelled it, up there. Beagle & Charlevoix. Great parties, champagne on ice in your hotel room, all that stuff. What was not to like about that? After all, we had a trade secret. Someone in Research had figured out how to turn aicons into one-way trackers. You could detect the AI, while it had no data flow back. Worked great in a couple of major cases. The AIs never knew they were being bugged by their own aicons.

“But now ... there are too many teams—trained teams, full of cog sci Ph.D.s, anthropologists, former Omega Black assault troops—chasing too few AIs and pushing margins down. Beagle & Charlevoix has monstrous overhead. Big capital investments in equipment, lots of salaried staff, nice downtown offices with wood paneling and marble desktops. They’re just as hungry as we are. Hungrier, ‘cause their body is bigger. And they’re not meeting their bonding numbers. No one knows that yet, but they couldn’t credibly bid on a class B assault. They’ve been doing Cs recently. Colleen over in Lehigh, and Cornelius way off in Wheeling. They didn’t publicize it. Full dress operations, using full staff, just to keep everyone busy—I doubt they made much back, if anything.”

Petra had burned out at the company. Personality conflicts, I’d heard. That didn’t surprise me.

“But, like anyone else, if they’re called in on a job that’s going wrong, the bonding requirement is lifted, and the reinsurance is picked up by the Labor Department. So you, my friend, were set up.” She pushed hair off her forehead. “And there’s nothing we can do about it. Chet probably encouraged you to call him—”

“If anything went wrong,” I completed. “Yes. I have his card in my pocket.”

“Very nice of him to offer,” she said. “I think you should punch him up.”

“No way! No way!” Max was furious. “We can take this one, man. We got it on the run already. You’re ready, ain’t you, girl? Ready to blow the floor. I’ve got the gear. It’s hot pursuit. Two can play that ‘got the cognitive

level' game. We got the proper documentation, right? A good-faith Donald. But it's trying to get away. Escape! If we grab it while it's trying to get away, we're totally legit. Oh, maybe a couple of fines here and there, but nothing that will cut too far into our profits. We'll just let our accountants figure out what line of which schedule those expenses go on."

"Max!" Petra was too depressed to even spark up at being called "girl." "This isn't a joke. This thing's too big for us to grab. Even these guys, with a full team, will have trouble."

The thought was bitter. I could just see Chet and his crew rolling out of their wagons and swaggering into the store, the tails of their expensive black coats flapping as they collected the goods....

"Hey," I said. "I don't think I'll have to call Chet at all. They have an agent in here, swept up. He switched out of uniform, but seems to like the feel of the duster around his ankles. I should have guessed it just from that. He's been watching us. He knows the whole story."

Now that I thought about it, it was obvious. When I'd grabbed him, Duster had given me completely false information about where Maureen had headed. That wasn't too suspicious in itself. People sometimes saw Al acolytes as some kind of oppressed ethnic group and tried to protect them. And he'd slid around a little on whether he had to get to work, or get a birthday present to his mother. But the clincher was the way he'd gotten all nasty about our D-level license.

Except I hadn't had a chance to show him my license. He'd known the whole situation without seeing it.

"Who?" Petra demanded. "Who is it?"

I described Duster to her.

Her face flushed. "I can't believe it! I know who that is. We never got along, at B&C. Arrogant little.... Bastards! They had this whole thing set up. How far back? Maybe since I left."

She and Max were both still excited, but I was ready to go home, take a hot shower, and go to bed, despite the fact that it wasn't even noon yet.

"Man, we are screwed." Max shook his head.

I'd switched careers quite a few times in my life. Each time, it put me

at the bottom of the hierarchy, behind people who, dumber or smarter, had had the sense to pick something and work their way up in it. And now I was here, go-to guy in a second-rate AI hunting troupe, tied to a charming hysteric and a depressive control freak. It was the most fun I'd ever had, the first time I'd ever felt that I made a useful contribution.

So, I guessed it was time to make one. A thought had been nibbling at me since I realized who Duster had to be. He had no idea I had figured it out. None of them did. As far as Chet and his gang were concerned, we were all still the patsies he'd set us up to be.

"Petra," I said. "It's my fault. I got that information from—"

"Never mind whose fault it is. Do you have anything to offer but your guilt?"

So she was back to being hard-ass manager. That was fine. I did have something to give her. If it was still there....

I searched down the path toward where I had first encountered Duster. And there, vivid on the emerald of the moss, lay the orchid he had tried so hard to take off with.

"I have an aicon." Sure enough, if you looked carefully, which I hadn't before, you could see the delicate circuitry embedded in the petals. "It's linked into the AI its acolytes call 'The Gardener.' And one of those acolytes, Maureen Nikolaidis, is still on the loose. I think we should leave her that way."

"Okay." Petra crossed her arms. "I like an employee who can turn a performance problem to some advantage. What are we going to do with her?"

"We're going to let her escape. Along with her AI."

* * * *

"Good news, folks!" I'd worked hard on the tone: a chipper front over defeat and failure. "You're free to go. Just a small debrief, and we can have you out of here. Again, I apologize for the inconvenience."

They looked up at me. Most of them had been sitting around a folding table that was littered with half-eaten bagels, orange juice cartons, and mini jelly containers. Phones, screens, and other communication devices had

been inactivated. That usually, after a long pause, resulted in something like a party. People often made friends in those few hours, and Gorson Cog Repo even had two marriages to its credit. None of us had been invited to either wedding.

The data-futures lady, Maude, got up and bustled out past me, followed by her blue-haired friend. She gave a farewell wave to the shirtless plant maintainer, Alphonse, whose thick chest hair was now frosted with powdered sugar. He smiled vaguely, as if he'd already forgotten who she was.

Duster sat by himself, erect in a chair, like a Japanese warlord waiting for a report from a samurai. He raised his eyebrows when he saw me. If I was right about him, he'd need to move now. If we completely disengaged from our pursuit, there would be no legal way for his team to take it over.

"What happened?" he said. "What's going on?"

"I genuinely apologize, sir," I said. "We were in error. There is no AI present here."

"No ... what are you talking about?"

"Oh, that's internal business, I'm afraid. Our information was imperfect. Here's your phone."

He shoved it into a pocket, then remembered his cover story. "My mom ... I'll need to go back and get that orchid. If you've cleared out...."

"Five minutes," I said. "Five minutes, and we will have officially declared this area AI-free—"

That was too much for him. He stood up. "Jesus. You guys can't even handle a simple ... let me out right now. Maybe there's still something to be salvaged from the situation."

Gone was the businessman obsessed with getting his old mom a flower. This was a well-paid, professional, class-B AI hunter. One, I reminded myself, who was just as much at risk of losing his job as I was.

I had to play it carefully. I frowned, trying to look confused but not completely befuddled. "You're a hunter, too? You should have mentioned it. I had a nice cherry Danish I was saving, I could have let you—"

“Let me out of here! There *is* an AI under there. If you pull back, you’ll lose it completely.”

“Thanks for helping out, but there’s nothing under the floor. The cavern’s completely empty. Just a bunch of pots and stuff down there. Fertilizer bags. We thought it was weird, that it was so big, but maybe they’re planning to expand.”

He stared at me, stunned. The subterranean space was clearly where most of the processing power was. A week or so before, Petra had driven a public works truck around the mall, seemingly examining pavement, but really sending seismic mini-shocks through the ground, outlining the nonconducting empty space that hung under the plant store like a giant egg. Our theory was that they had hidden the excavation waste as substrate in their various jobs. The rock and dirt from under the mall now resided in living rooms all over southeastern Pennsylvania.

“You’ve got the perimeter completely tight?” he said.

“We did. Sewer pipes, mall access, everything. Nothing in or out.” I smiled with pride at our thoroughness.

“Ah, you *did*?”

“Well, we can’t very well sequester the whole mall now, can we? Business has to go on. The place has deliveries to make. They lose a shipment, we’ve got penalties to pay. Some of that stuff’s perishable.”

“Shipment?” His rising tone was so outraged that it almost made me break character by laughing. “Where? Show me!”

“I think all those plants are paid for already, but sure. Sure. Come on.”

We ran through the plants. I now knew where the path to the rear led, so I was able to get lost convincingly.

After a bit of confusion, during which I thought he would try to strangle me, we got straightened out and found the loading dock at the rear of the store. The truck full of plants was just pulling out of the alley. Max had had some trouble pulling the driver out of the donut shop where he’d relaxed, but he was now on his way to make his deliveries, just a bit late.

“Damn it!” Duster ran down the access alley, long coat flying, as he yelled into his phone. “Get a team down to the 202 onramp. We’ve got a

good possibility of a live escape! What? Yes, I'm sure! Hurry!"

It wouldn't take them more than a few minutes to discover that the thing was full of nothing but plants. And they were professional enough not to pull everyone off surveillance here at the store. But their surveillance would be light for just a bit. I moved.

I'd thought about how Maureen had arrived and disappeared. There didn't seem to be any access at ground level....

I wasn't as limber as she was, but I was still a primate. I grabbed a branch and clambered up. The trunk seemed solid, at least on this side. I swung around. My feet slipped out from under me, and I ended up dangling, ten feet or so in the air. That would look just perfect, when Chet, Duster, and the rest of the B-squad came sauntering in to take care of things.

I worked up some momentum and managed to get a toehold on the rough bark. That gave me just enough support to walk hand over hand to the next branch, then lift a foot and get, at last, solid support.

And there it was: on this side, the trunk just ended, with a ring of branches around it. A dark hole descended, with a convenient maintenance ladder on one side.

"I'm going down," I said. "Wish me luck."

No one did.

* * * *

Maureen and I spotted each other at the same instant. Instead of running, she charged straight at me. And as she did, I caught a glimpse of what she held in her hand. She was packing ... I guess I wouldn't call it "heat," but close enough: a neuromuscular junction suppressor, sort of a remote-control curare-by-RF. Worked on a human the same way that a HERF gun worked on electronics: Al's Revenge. The thing made no noise at all. I might have stood there with my mouth open, and then collapsed without closing it, if she hadn't, again, acted a bit too soon. The Gardener might be up to B-level, but its staff still required some training. My whole left arm was numb. Jesus! I ran, stumbling and off balance, my arm dangling like a length of Italian sausage.

The Gardener's secret hideout was a vaulted space about twenty feet

high that had been carved out of the earth beneath the minimall. Dirt had been heat sintered into a crude support shell, lumpy and sagging, with concrete squirted in here and there, seemingly at random. Clearly work done without a permit.

A few dim lights showed roots that dangled through the ceiling into masses of perfusion tubes. There, in the center of a tangle of infomycelia, was what had to be what Maureen and her fellow plantsmen called the Gardener: a few complicated shapes that might, at one time, have been irrigation and growth hormone controllers, now grown into a self-aware entity.

I dodged behind it. It was the only possible thing I could do.

It wasn't enough.

"Stop," Maureen said.

A hummingbird that had somehow made it down into the cellar buzzed through the air, zigzagging in its search for a blossom.

"Don't kill the poor bird," I said.

"What?" Her finger was on the trigger, but she didn't pull it yet.

"You may think I'm guilty of something, but that bird hasn't done anything. Let it..." It floated away. "Okay." I scrunched my eyes shut.

"What are you talking about, mister? This thing is nonlethal. Just a little relaxation for you—"

"Sure. If you have a sharp crash cart team ready to intubate and a ventilator warmed up. The diaphragm nerve connections go too, just as with curare. My breathing will stop. I shouldn't tell you, but, lucky for you, an autopsy won't show anything. Unless someone decides to do a neurotransmitter assay and discovers that there's just too little acetylcholine in the postsynaptic receptors. I think you can bluff your way past that one. Not that it will matter much to me, one way or another."

She looked at me. I tried to act as if I were staring death in the face. Where the hell was Petra with Max's explosives?

She shrugged. "I won't tell the Gardener, then. She's kind of sentimental."

She squeezed the trigger just as the ceiling fell in on us.

* * * *

Max's explosives had done a lot of damage. I heard cracking and shifting as the poorly engineered structure started to collapse over our heads. A tree, its roots loose, leaned over with a creak, and toppled. Soil showered after it, then a sizable chunk of concrete, which hit with a hollow thud. Solid columns of light rose around us. Concrete dust clogged my sinuses. I couldn't see where Maureen had gone. I didn't want her hurt. That wasn't the point of this particular exercise.

I crawled through what looked like a combination plant nursery and machine shop, damaged by the cascade of rubble from above. An overturned sprouting tray dripped hydroponic fluid. Grow lights dangled over a project: a veined flower, like a crocus, with its petals floating free, supported by lines of translucent, glowing threads that marked out some complex function, soon to be concealed. A hedge of elaborate manipulator arms labored delicately over it, pulling lines through, connecting others, like a sewing bee. Several aicon leaves floated in sealed plastic bags on an old potting table.

The Gardener's original purpose had been to create biocircuits, hyperflow xylem, physiological sensors that allowed flower scents to reflect or lead the moods of the people in the room with them. So now it created aicons for its dirty-fingernailed followers. I patted the orchid in my pocket. It was still linked in, but the Gardener had no idea that it still existed. As far as it was concerned, Duster's orchid had vanished.

Someone groaned. I dug through the rubble, pulled off several stalks of bamboo, and found Maureen, bruised but still alive.

And conscious. "Get away from me."

"I'd like nothing better. But you're the one who's going to have to get away. With your little gardening gadget, if you please."

"What are you—?"

"Max!" I yelled. "Over here."

Max deftly backed up two trailers with low railings, pushing them with an electric tractor. He'd duct-taped a big yellow flashlight to it as a crude

headlight. It shone forward, away from us, into the darkness of the escape tunnel that the acolytes had dug over long months, between the humming aquarium bases for the fish tanks that stretched up into the restaurants on the top floor. I could see the gleam of fish as they reached the bottom and turned to go back up.

“Don’t run over her!” I waved frantically and he came to a halt a few inches short of Maureen’s outstretched fingers.

Max peered down at her. “She good for this? Or should I grab another of these Druoids?”

“She’s good. Just give her a couple of minutes. The roof just fell in on her.”

“Hmph.” Max was carefully unimpressed. We went to work on the Gardener, in full view of Maureen, who seemed unable, or unwilling, to understand what was going on.

I whacked at power interlocks. They were standard safety-release, but had been wrapped in resistant tape, then encased in resin. I figured that it would definitely be a problem to lobotomize your AI by tripping over a data cord, but this rose to the level of paranoia. Max and I sawed through, released the connections, pulled off the power.

Together, we levered the bulk of the Gardener into the carts, along with a decent selection of interface devices.

“You got that connection gadget?” Max said.

I glanced at Maureen, but she was checking over the Gardener, making sure it was all right. “The aicon? Yes.”

“Give it to me. I’ll take care of it.”

“You’ll—”

“Just give it. You’ll see.”

Sometimes Max knew what he was doing. I handed it to him and he shoved it into a pocket.

“Is it ready to get out of here?” Petra asked from the darkness.

“Just a couple of minutes and she’s ready to roll,” Max said.

Maureen looked up from her AI. “What’s this about?”

“Us helping you to escape, you mean?” I grinned at her. She remained expressionless. “It’s kind of complicated....”

“We want your AI,” Petra said. “We can’t have it. Legal problems. But I’ll be damned if I let those bozos upstairs get it either. If you rip out of here in the next two minutes, sister, you’ll have it free. Otherwise, you’re a bounty for our competition. I really wouldn’t want to see that. Do you?”

The silence stretched. By this point Duster would have realized that the truck was a distraction, and would be back with the rest of his team to cut off all routes of escape. As I thought about that, I found myself irritated with Maureen for not taking this obvious opportunity. In a real sense, it didn’t matter if we were lying or not. If she didn’t do something, her AI was done for.

“Ah, screw it.” Max flipped a switch and the tractor motor hummed back to life. “She’s too dumb. I’m taking this out. Ten percent finder’s fee is better than nothing. Better than sitting around down here trying to slap some sense into an AI-worshipping interior decorator.”

“Wait!” Maureen turned to me. “Is this true? You’re letting me go?”

That was quite unnecessary. What made her trust me all of a sudden? “Yes. But not because we want to.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.” She hopped on the tractor and hummed off into the dark tunnel.

“Okay,” Petra said. “Have we really just let that thing go?”

“Nah,” Max said. “Me and Taibo, we’re all set. Now, let’s see what the smoothies do when they show up.”

* * * *

“I have to say, Taibo, that was a nice try with the truck.” Chet smiled at me. “Anton’s pissed, though. I’d suggest staying out of his way when he finally turns up.”

Chet’s team had arrived. Guys in long coats had spilled out of sedans

with dark-tinted windows and smoothly closed off the mall. There seemed to be dozens of them, each with a stack of gear, a support vehicle, and a separate online channel of coverage. I was no doubt showing up on thirty different feeds right now, edited in different ways, with various explanatory text crawls on my chest. I tried to look iconically like the Losing Team. It was surprisingly easy.

“Anton” had turned out to be Duster’s real name. He had chased that truck for much longer than we’d anticipated. Max’s hopped-up spiel to the driver had persuaded him to expect desperate plant hijackers, and he had led Duster and his team a merry chase along various Amish-cart-blocked roads down toward Lancaster. Duster, I gathered, had gotten a bit out of hand at the seizure, and been arrested by some local cops. The fact that the truck had come up completely clean of any AI activity would not do him any good at any hearing. Chet’s team would have to finish their job here before anyone could try to get him out of the Upper Leacock lockup.

“What are you going to do?” I asked in bewilderment. “Why are you here?”

“We’ve got to take this over, Taibo.” He managed to sound sad and reluctant, as if it had really not been something he wanted to do. “This has gotten completely out of hand. I had hoped you would be able to handle ... well, it’s all water under the bridge now, isn’t it? Some things look really easy when others do them, but then turn out to take a great deal of skill. Just remember that, next time.”

It took every ounce of my willpower to keep from punching him. That was nothing you wanted to do while on two dozen channels of net coverage. People would be critiquing my form—“too much arm, not enough body”—before I was even under arrest.

“So ... I still don’t understand. Are you helping us out?”

“No,” he said. “We’re not helping you out. We’re formally taking over this operation. All of it. It’s the only way, Taibo. I’m sure you understand it.”

There. He’d finally gotten it out formally, though I was sure he’d also filed the necessary permissions. Along with the AI, he’d just taken on all the liabilities associated with the operation. Whatever happened, all the property damage was now entirely Chet’s problem.

“This is a really dangerous AI, Chet.” I got all goggle-eyed and paranoid. “You have no idea—”

He smiled and patted my shoulder. "Come on, Taibo. Let's go in, and you can see how the big boys do it."

* * * *

Petra raised the lid. "Who had the pork and coconut?"

"Me." Max shoveled most of the bowl onto his rice and started eating. Petra looked at me and shrugged. We'd all earned a decent meal.

"Shrimp and baby corn. You on a diet, Taibo?" She knew I usually went for pork.

"It's going to be a long haul, Petra. I don't want to weigh myself down."

She shrugged. "Suit yourself."

The aromas of curry, fish sauce, and galangal mingled in the air.

It had been an uncomfortable scene. Chet's crew had torn the place apart. No Gardener. No aicons. Nothing. Just a huge hole in the floor and some astronomical liability. They'd found Petra in the barewear shop trying on some delts she didn't need, and hauled Max out of his hidey hole behind a fish tank. The exposed orchid aicon had been the biggest risk. Max hadn't yet said anything about what might have happened to it, and Chet had spent a lot of time looking for it, based on the description Duster had phoned in from his holding cell.

Chet had spent some time telling me what an idiot he thought I was, how he had played me the whole way, how I had never had a clue. In the end, he had managed to imply that I'd somehow taken advantage of his generosity to an old and unsuccessful friend in order to betray him. I'd invited him to join us for lunch.

As it happened, he had other plans.

Petra glanced at Max, who still had his face buried in his food. "Okay, Max. Come up for air and tell us where the aicon is."

Max looked up, vaguely irritated, and, instead of answering Petra's question, signaled a waiter. "Hey! Where's the extra?" He then grinned at us. "I ordered another dish for us. From the fish tank. Stuff like that's always

best when it's fresh."

"From the—stop screwing around, Max."

"You gave me the assignment ... ah, here we go."

The waiter pushed up a cart. Max grinned at him and took the covered tray from it.

Petra stared at it. "How—"

"Can't show it yet. Taibo's buds are still staring at us. The orchid's in a doggie bag. We can haul it out with our lefties. I shoved it through the basement maintenance hatch of the fish tank with an almost-neutral floater. It's an old drug smuggling trick. Thing looks just like some bit of kelp or something. Floated right up past these guys while they were charging around."

"Well, Max." Petra sat back. "Very enterprising." She looked at me. "You don't look too happy about it, Taibo."

I had been moving my food around, but not eating it. "I—I don't actually like shrimp that much."

"Hey, man, you scared that Maureen won't like you when you come after her supersmart gardening machine?" Max laughed, spilling rice down his chin. "You got a steady job. She'll forgive you."

I didn't look at him. He was my buddy, but sometimes he really annoyed me.

"That really was good work, Taibo." Petra sat back in her chair. "We have a link back to the AI. Beagle & Charlevoix have been forced to assume all the liability for this job, by formally taking it over. It'll bankrupt them, guaranteed." If I hadn't known her dedication to AI hunting, I would have thought that the most pleasing aspect of the job was the damage it would do to her former employer. "But shorn of aicons, with its processing reduced for transport, this Brenda or whatever it is will still look like the Donald we originally thought it was." She glanced at me, looked away. "Maureen's looking for support from the acolyte underground, but it will be a few days before she manages to find it."

Neither Max nor Petra understood my position. I'd been mediocre in various positions in the past. But now I had a job I was good at. It was in a

declining industry, natch, but you can't have everything. The next step, in addition to being good at it, was to be successful at it.

"Let's grab our leftovers," I said. "Who's driving?"