

The Garden

by

Stuart F. Dodds

Copyright © 2021 by Stuart F. Dodds

All Rights Reserved

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the author, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

1.

Inside one of the many exclusive villas lining the quiet street, android, serial number 25-75290, was finishing her morning duties. The children were at school, her master and his wife at work, clothes were washed and pressed, breakfast dishes cleared, and chairs re-aligned.

She took a moment to refer to a real time task file.

Morning chores complete.

Two-five, as she was called by the family, wiped her hands down her apron before speaking. “All done,” she said towards an auto cleaning bot gliding towards its alcove.

With a few minutes to spare, Two-five walked into the living room. In a type of static meditation, she looked through the window to admire the back garden. Across the clipped lawn, sunshine dappled through the trees, swaying gently in a light breeze. Birds tweeted by their bird box as a mischievous cat watched on lazily.

Two-five, modelled in the likeness of an average human body, had no gender attributes. The factory where she was assembled offered buyers a catalogue containing a choice of heads and facial details. Androids like Two five were expensive, because of their self-thinking capability and quality of build. Most androids were servants with limited brain and voice abilities.

The base or lower brain function, within every lawfully certified android, was imbued with *safety first* commands. A mid layer contained role and programmed directions and, above that, the thinking zone. For most androids, the top layer purely ensured mid brain instructions were carried out safely and as per instructions. Two-five’s higher brain, however, allowed her to learn from experience by analysing memory blocks.

Activated four years ago in the villa's basement, her face was of a woman in her early forties with brown eyes, straight nose, and an agreeable voice. A *may I help you?* type smile was evident at the corner of her lips.

“Dressed her like a nanny from my childhood,” her master once said to a small group of men friends relaxing with fine wines and cigars.

As Two-five approached with a drinks tray, her master grasped her backside with a hand. “She looks after me, don't you?” Though his cheeks were flushed red with alcohol and his tie hung loose at the neck, his piggy eyes were searching, questioning.

For the last two years, Two-five did not receive an annual service or inspection. Clutter, experiences, and memories were not removed, and her operating system was not updated.

“This robot works fine. It knows what I want,” her master said to a technician. “We couldn't run the household and entertain our guests without it. It must not be inspected or tampered with.”

“Yes, sir,” the technician replied.

A loud banging was heard on the front door, pulling Two-five back into the present. Who could that be? Deliveries were always on time. She stepped out into the hallway and opened the ornate wooden door.

Two figures burst in. A hand thrust into her throat, pinning her against the wall.

“Don't move, don't contact anyone. Who else is in the house?”

The assailant possessed a firm grip and was a woman.

Two-five spoke as best she could with the restriction under her jaw. “The master and mistress are at work and the two children are at school. May I help you with anything, madam?”

The hand released her. “Usual house bot. Harmless.”

The other person, who quickly checked the downstairs rooms, returned with two knives taken from the kitchen. “Here,” he said in a gruff voice, handing a knife over to the woman.

Both people were gaunt and appeared desperate in the way they constantly glanced around, expecting an attack. Their blue overalls, the clothes of a worker, were smudged with dirt.

The woman had plain facial features and, notably, her hair was short, as if cropped by a blunt pair of scissors. The man was tall and thin with red ringed hollow eyes.

Two-five’s internal thoughts were in overdrive at the shock of the intrusion and attack. In place of the afternoon list of chores, a message sprung up in her consciousness.

Stay safe, protect the house. Honour your master.

“Check upstairs,” the woman said to her partner. “You.” She nodded at Two-five. “Stay here.”

They stood in the hallway for a moment while the woman stared through the window next to the front door. She nodded, then turned her attention to another door off the hallway.

“What’s this?”

“Basement, madam. My charging alcove is there along with heating, spare chairs and...”

The woman put a hand up. “I don’t need an inventory.”

“No one here,” the man said, walking down the stairs. “Seems quiet out front.”

“Yeah, just had a look.” The woman rubbed her wrists. “The team must have covered for us and kept our locator restraints hidden.”

“Hopefully, it will fool the guards long enough.”

“We are out of the way here. Perhaps we can rest up a bit and plan our next move. Can you check the basement?” She pointed to the door.

The man nodded and walked down the basement steps, which squeaked on every movement.

A short while later, he returned. “Empty.”

They entered the living room together and stood open mouthed. Rectangular in shape, its white ornate ceiling was flecked with gold relief, and the walls were panelled in wood. A large table with a vase of flowers on top was against one wall and a piano on the opposite side. At the end of the room, by the windows, was a couch, easy chairs, a fireplace, and a media cube. A light fragrance, suggesting daffodil and orange blossom, permeated the air.

The man plonked himself in the most comfortable looking chair.

“The master’s, my master sits there,” Two-five said.

“I could get used to this. What does your master do?”

“He is an executive. Very important work.”

The man grunted and shrugged his shoulders.

“And your job is?” The woman said.

“I run the household, cook meals, clean, organise evening dinner parties, assist with the children’s homework. I play the piano and chess and otherwise look after the family’s and my master’s needs.”

“Cook? How about a quick meal while we work out what to do?”

“It will be the master’s food. I shall be questioned.”

“Vince, watch out front, would you? I’ll sort this out.” She turned to Two-five. “Into the kitchen.”

Under a watchful eye, Two-five placed various ingredients onto slices of bread, which were deposited inside an auto cooker. Within thirty seconds, the machine beeped, and a warm toasted sandwich appeared. As Two-five set the food on porcelain plates, the woman studied the contents of the fridge. She fished out a carafe of beer and wiggled it in front of two-five.

“Your master’s best beer and you will be questioned about it. I don’t care, okay?”

“As you say, madam.”

“Good, we have an understanding here.” The woman continued to study Two-five’s face. “You’re on a higher level than other robots, aren’t you?”

“I am an exclusive model, allowed to think for myself so I can assist the master and mistress and serve the household.”

“What is your name?”

“Two-five. It’s the first two digits of my serial number.”

The woman wiped her nose with her fingers before speaking. “Well, I’m going to give you a name. Erm…” She regarded Two-five’s face. “Anya. Yes, that suits you.”

“Anya. That’s a nice name, madam.”

“I’m Liv and he’s Vince.”

Two-five smiled as she placed two crystal glasses on a silver tray along with the food.

The intruders made themselves comfortable in the master and mistress’s chairs while Two-five busied herself serving food and drink.

“This,” Liv said, regarding her sandwich. “Forgotten what this was like.”

The man chugged back the glass of beer, belched, then held it out for a refill.

Two-five topped up the glass while considering how to make the guests more comfortable with small talk. Staying friendly would on balance, be the safer option.

“Liv, are you working nearby? In the village?”

Liv and Vince laughed together.

“That is a good one.”

“You really don’t know where we are from?”

“No.” Two-five glanced at the carpet and chairs, assessing the amount of cleaning required. “I gather from your clothes and the dirt that you are manual workers.”

“We’re from the prison.”

“There is a prison near here?”

“You could say that. I presume your master is part of that, with a house like this.

What does he do there?”

“I don’t know his exact role. I hear talk about staff, work problems and keeping people in order.”

“Have you been to his workplace?”

“No. I run the household only, so am not allowed outside.”

“So, you are a prisoner too, then Anya?”

A series of thoughts popped into Two-five’s consciousness making her pause before replying. “I complete my duties as per my master’s wishes.” Then she thought about entertaining the guests. “Would you like me to play a tune?”

“Go on.”

Two-five sat on the piano stool, lifted the lid and played a popular classical piece.

For the next few minutes, no one spoke. Liv and Vince finished their food and beer while regarding the garden view, lost in thoughts. Two-five played with nuance and passion. Dramatic swirls gave way to soothing cadences building towards the lullaby ending.

After a brief silence, Vince wiped his face before speaking. “Just check again.” He stood up and padded off to the front door.

“Another one?” Two-five said, a hint of excitement in her voice.

“No, we need to move on. But, Anya, that was lovely. You know, it reminded me of my childhood.”

“It was a pleasure Liv.” Two-five closed the piano lid and pushed the stool back into place.

Liv joined her colleague. “Anything?”

“No. Seems very quiet.”

“Too quiet?” Liv glanced at the ceiling. “Change of clothes and we’ll go for a walk, all nonchalant, see if we can steal an ID. Get to the port. See what we can do from there.”

“We could lie low in the port. Plenty of places to hide until it blows over.”

They went upstairs and into the main bedroom, with Two-five in tow. Liv shook her head at the opulence of the real wood bed, satin sheets, and racks of expensive clothes.

Vince stripped down to his underclothes and selected a shirt, trousers, and a jacket from a wardrobe. He held them up to Liv. “What do you think?”

“Plain and ordinary.”

He laid them on the bed and stepped into the en-suite bathroom. He splashed around for a while and returned, rubbing his face on a fluffy towel.

The woman discarded her clothes on the floor. Two-five’s first instinct was to pick up the clothes and throw them down the laundry chute. However, she stopped herself. This was a key moment; she had overridden one of her basic programming instructions because of the sudden change in circumstances.

Instead, she noted the diet deficiencies in Liv’s body and the shabbiness of her underwear as she walked into the bathroom. Also, Liv and Vince smelled of oil, dirt and sweat.

Two-five knew the family and their dinner guests were in good health, overweight perhaps, but these two people were unhealthy, ill, and displayed signs of distress.

Once dressed, the pair checked themselves in a mirror. Liv turned to Two-five.

“Anya, what do you think?”

“I can only report that you are stealing those clothes.”

“Forget that. How do we look?”

Two-five considered the magazines and holographic streams she was privy to when serving or working around the family in the evenings. The mistress liked to peruse fashion shopping channels and buy clothes without the master's involvement.

"Your clothes are loose on both of you. Tuck them in more. Otherwise, you both look okay."

Vince grunted and moved over to the window as Liv examined a rack of perfume bottles. Selecting one, she sprayed it over herself and paused to enjoy the delicate scent.

"Anya, have you always worn the same clothes?"

"Yes."

"Take them off. That is an order."

"Liv, madam. My master will be annoyed."

"Off."

Two-five removed her dress and folded it neatly on the end of the bed.

Liv inspected the clothes rack before picking out a long-sleeved dress with flower motifs. "Here, put this on."

Two-five stepped into the dress, which Liv helped her fasten. She then fetched a necklace from a jewellery stand and placed it around Two-five's neck. "That's better."

Two-five inspected herself in the mirror and fondled the gemstones set within the gold chain.

"It is one of the mistress's favourites."

"Looks good on you. You are Anya, the queen of all she surveys."

Two-five glanced at the woman and furrowed her forehead. "Are you in trouble?"

"Me and Vince survived the last three years. Kept our heads down and were trusted enough for casual work in the church garden. If we don't escape, we will die here."

"I cannot comprehend this."

“We disagreed with our governments. They don’t want us back.”

“I cannot understand that.”

“Your life is servitude, is it not?”

“I am an android. It is my duty and programming.”

Liv rubbed a hand through her hair before speaking. “Ha, I once thought that. My duty, my important duty. Pah! It was responsible for me being here.”

“My duty is my life here.”

“Sometimes, Anya, you must break the cycle. Be free.”

Liv wiped her eyes after speaking and walked over to Vince. She pulled back the edge of a curtain to peer out the window and, in doing so, knocked into a small vanity table with framed images on top.

Her gaze strayed to one of the pictures and gasped. She picked up the frame and thrust it out, her face drained of colour.

Vince shook his head and gazed over at Two-five, who was still toying with the necklace. “Who’s this?”

“That’s the master,” Two-five said. “Taken on a family holiday.”

Liv slunk down onto the bed. “We’re dead.”

“Of all the houses, of all the houses to pick. The chief of security. You said it looked nice, reminded you of your aunt’s house, you said.”

Liv stood up. “We have to leave.” She waggled a thumb at Two-five. “We could take her with us, would help divert attention.”

Vince didn’t answer as he was drawn to a sound outside. “Guards across the street, heading this way. Checking all houses.” Signs of stress were creased across his face.

“We’ll hide here,” the woman said. She turned to Two-five. “Anya, please, send them away.” Her voice shook.

There was a repeated thump on the front door. As Two-five walked downstairs, her thoughts were in conflict. Against an awareness of the work required to clean up the house, she mulled over recent events, unable to compare it with similar experiences. The memories of mistreatment by her master were one thing, but a sudden house intrusion, where she was given a proper name, was another. Her system dithered; was she Two-five or Anya?

Her system wrestled back control as she opened the door.

Stay safe, protect the house. Honour your master.

A bevy of security guards stood on the front veranda facing her, batons, and weapons at the ready. They moved their heads to see around her, however, making no attempt to enter.

The guard, with a white stripe over his shoulder, flipped up his helmet visor. “We are on the lookout for two prisoners who escaped a work detail earlier. Do you have two people who do not belong in your house? Speak your answer quietly.”

Two-five blinked twice before lowering her voice and bending her head towards the officer. “They are hiding upstairs in the master’s bedroom.”

The officer nodded back and turned to the officers behind him. “I love these truthful bots.”

Two-five stood back while the guards entered. The guard leader crept upstairs, followed by four others.

Two-five examined the floor and the dirty boot prints. That and the mess created by the other two could mean difficulty in completing the cleaning list before the master came home.

Yet, the sounds of shouting, heavy footsteps, and the zap-zap of non-lethal weapons created a moment of uncertainty. She had performed her duty as per instructions, but the two people, outsiders, had created a shift in her consciousness.

This was compounded when the pair were part led, part dragged down the stairs. Liv, a resigned expression on her face, walked past her and out of the door.

The chief security guard stopped and spoke to Two-five in the hallway. He chose his words with care. “Tell your master that we are sorry that our lax security allowed these people to come here. I will write a report detailing our failings.”

The door shut, the commotion and intrusion were over. All was quiet as Two-five wandered around every room in the house, listing all the required tasks. She paused at every mirror to view herself, still wearing the mistress’s dress.

She found herself by the kitchen door. Caught between the steady world of her domestic duties and the belief her system was corrupted, Two-five considered a walk around the garden amongst nature would assist. Then she would return inside and complete her chores. Without instruction and without knowing why, she said, “Anya would like to see the garden.” Two-five opened the door and stepped outside.

As she walked into the garden amongst the soothing birdsong, she bumped into an invisible wall. Surprised, she stepped back and reached out a hand. Her fingers touched what she realised was a curved wall. She stopped and glanced back at the house her attention straying to the living room window and all the work needing doing inside.

Her gaze trailed up the house to the roof, and a box secured to the chimney stack. A light shone from the box, projecting, Two-five realised, the view she admired.

The garden was a loop of moving images, a complete fake. She glanced up. Was the sky real?

Curious now, rather than return indoors via the kitchen, she made her way along the side of the house, intending to use the front door. A net curtain twitched in the neighbouring house. She saw the person spying on her.

It was an android, a likeness of herself, but dressed differently.

Before she could consider this, she stepped up onto the front veranda. As she was about to go inside, she turned to see a four-seater vehicle silently driving towards the house. Security guard outriders flanked the vehicle on three wheeled motorcycles whose rear pillion passengers held rifles across their laps.

The vehicle stopped in the driveway. Two-five put her arms down by her sides and smiled. Her master extricated himself from the vehicle, his face like thunder. Not the rosy cheeks of intoxication. This was anger. Walking a discrete distance behind was the security officer who recently spoke to her.

“What is this?” the master said, barking his words while pointing at the dress and necklace. “That’s my wife’s. Explain yourself.”

“I.”

“Why are you outside?” He turned to the security officer. “Are you responsible for this?”

“No sir. My officers were lax in not noticing the two prisoners escaping while on work detail. We tracked them to your house and arrested them. The robot was inside when we left. Um, sir.”

Two-five’s master exploded with rage. He lashed out with his fists and kicked her until she had no option but to fall to the ground. Two-five knew her outer body skin was receiving repeated blows. A particularly heavy kick, from the side of a boot, slashed across her left cheek. The master circled around, swearing, and kicking out until interrupted by the security officer’s discreet cough.

“Get this robot away. I want it destroyed. Get me another one to clear up everything those vermin have done to my house.”

“Yes sir.”

The guard, keeping his voice as calm as he could manage, spoke into a communicator. “Control. One metalhead for recycle.” He fidgeted with his belt and produced a device resembling a wand. “I can temporarily suspend all android activity until pickup. It will be made harmless.”

The master stepped back and wiped his forehead with a handkerchief, as the guard bent down.

“Just need to jab this into the neck and press the button.”

He smiled as if hoping that this activity would lessen the punishment he would receive. The master did not smile back. The guard swallowed and returned to the job at hand.

Two-five felt a light pressure on the back of her neck, and everything became blank.

2.

The Yuilevska prison was constructed over fifty years ago in the Great Wastelands, a harsh territory owned by the Slavic/Asian collective. The land, rich in gold, ore, and precious stones, though ripe for exploitation, required mining skills and a large workforce. As android workers, of the level required, were too expensive, the simple solution was to build a prison. Apart from a constant supply of cheap labour, the remoteness of the location meant escape attempts usually failed. World governments regarded the place as perfect for offloading violent and political prisoners.

Many inmates were lifers, others died, while a few completed their sentences. Guards were always on alert as fights were common and less adept prisoners lived in constant fear. Punishments for rule breaking were severe, with executions ordered by senior managers, when circumstances dictated.

The prison blocks, built for practical reasons rather than appearance, were drab both inside and out. A typical wing contained two person cells with bunk beds which lined both sides of a central corridor leading to bathrooms and a canteen beyond that. Rail transporters took prisoners on their work schedule to mine or quarry heads.

Over the years, the prison and its support facilities grew into the size of a small city. Because of its remote location and being surrounded by mountains, the only way for equipment, food, and people to arrive was via an expansive air and spaceport.

While prisoner accommodation had changed little, guards and staff lived comfortably under biosphere domes with their families. Set out like small towns, with facilities to match status, the environment provided year-round light and warmth.

The first thing Two-five saw when she awoke was the white ceiling, before a man's face hovered over her. He leaned back and dropped a tool into a metal tray.

“And... we are awake.”

She moved her head from side to side to take in her surroundings. She lay on a gurney in a booth, strewn with tools and screens wearing green overalls and black boots. Her ankles and wrists were restrained with straps.

“You are in a tech lab,” the technician said in a bored voice. “You are your old self, but not for long. Do not attempt to leave.”

Two-five stared at the ceiling and interrogated her memories. They were still intact. She recalled the most recent events, including Liv speaking to her, the false garden and her master’s assault.

“Follow my finger,” the technician said. He sat on a stool to one side, a smoke tube dangling from his lips.

Two-five gazed at the tip of the dirty forefinger.

“Good.” the man said, slapping the side of her arm. He twisted round and tapped on a screen. “It’s time to upload your new system. You won’t remember a thing.”

The technician rolled up Two-five’s sleeve and pushed a connector into her left forearm. He then attached a pulse beam cable to it which he snaked over the gurney, onto the floor and into the back of a grey cube linked to his screen.

As he studied the upload details, another technician arrived in the next booth, pushing and pulling an android laden gurney into place. Two-five watched the technician pick up a laser cutter and start shaving off the android’s hair.

“What’s your one?” the other technician said while blowing hair away from the android’s scalp.

“This beauty is the very one involved in the incident we can’t talk about.”

“The chief thing? Been three weeks since.”

“Yeah, apart from waiting for the disciplinary to be over, there was a huge row over the destruction order. Because of its cost, they agreed to do a full refresh and give it a cleaning role.”

“Ouch. From playing chess to cleaning toilets.”

“It’s been knocked about a bit.” The technician slid a finger across a rut of broken skin on Two-five’s cheek. “Must have been the escapees. Anyway, it won’t have any idea how to play chess after this upload.” He leant in to Two-five. “It won’t hurt, I promise. Welcome to the new you.”

The technician tapped a start button and dragged on his smoke tube. “Wanna drink?” he said, standing up and yawning. As he moved, his foot inadvertently caught the beam cable, pulling it out of its seating, but not completely out of the socket. Though the briefest of connections was maintained, the software continued with the upload, displaying the percentage on the technician’s screen.

At the start of the process, Two-five closed her eyes as the download flowed in like an unstoppable stream of water. Her base instructions received a brief update first, followed by the overwriting of her mid-brain instructions and memory blocks.

Then came the abruptness of the disconnection, to be replaced with an intermittent trickle of information. She remained cognisant, her high brain untouched. An internal scan revealed the download was insufficient, unstable and a threat. So much so that the new data was quarantined into a safe zone for automatic deletion.

She opened her eyes to study the download screen.

It was paused on seventy-five percent. Lines of codes scrolled in a sub window at the bottom of the screen, suggesting a problem. If this continued, Two-five knew, the technician would re-start the process; her old life, her memories would be erased. A single word pushed through her consciousness. “No.”

She closed her eyes and presented a continual stream of binary code zeroes.

In the meantime, the technician watched the drinks dispenser sloshing hot tea into two cups. He ambled over to his colleague, handed over a cup, then returned to his desk.

The technician coughed and rustled with a pack of smoke tubes.

Two-five kept her eyes closed and waited.

The tip of a smoke tube was struck on the desk.

She opened her eyes to view her fate.

‘Seventy-six percent’ was displayed. In a blur, the counter raced on to ninety-nine percent, then paused again. She continued with the binary code.

The screen flashed up; “System Check Complete.”

“It’s all good,” the technician said, blowing smoke up to the ceiling.

He reached over to disconnect the plug from Two-five’s arm. On pulling it out without resistance, he stared at the end of the plug for a moment. His forehead wrinkled as he looked between Two-five and the screen. He sipped from his cup before speaking. “How many more we got stacked up for today?”

“Six.”

“Think the upload was okay? Cable may need changing.”

The other technician shrugged her shoulders.

Two-five performed an internal diagnosis to find that much of her old role was still present alongside portions of the new “cleaner” role. Some memory blocks were now clear, but recent memories remained. She accessed the cleaner’s role to find that her senses, thinking, voice and body movements were dulled. When switching back, everything became brighter, more alive.

Two-five also realised that the thought stream of Anya, borne out of the intruder incident was present in the background, like a devilish sister pricking at her consciousness.

“Right,” the technician said, unfastening the restraints. “All done. Go and wait in the next room for your assignment.”

“Yes, sir.” She spoke in a monotone voice, barely moving her mouth.

She slowly sat up and swivelled her legs over the side of the gurney. At this height, she saw her reflection in a mirror at the far end of the room. Her hair had been shaved and a deep scar ran across her left cheek. Remembering to act like a basic android, she walked forward without moving her head, entered a waiting room, and sat on a bench next to other androids.

#

An hour later, a young truck driver arrived and signed for Two-five and one other android. They climbed into the rear of a transporter and drove through a biosphere lock into the outside environment. The torrent of wind and rain made the driver swear repeatedly as he drove past prison blocks and offices.

They eventually reached Cell Block 53 North, where she was handed over to a cleaning supervisor: an unsmiling woman with a creased forehead.

“Follow me. Don’t dawdle.”

They traipsed inside through a labyrinth of locked doors. Two-five watched the supervisor hold up a wrist band to a metal pad. By the time a voice sounded over a loudspeaker to confirm identity, the door was already open. Old prison, old technology. They were led into a large storeroom with only a dim ceiling light and the repeated thump, thump of an engine from an adjoining room. An unpleasant smell emanated from a dark corner.

The supervisor pointed to a row of charging cubicles, like cupboards without doors, set against a wall. “Charge units. Don’t break them, or I’ll break you.” She scratched the back of her neck before speaking again. “Charge up. I will return in one hour with security

bracelets, a briefing before your first shift. Map on wall.” The woman jerked a thumb towards a large wall map stuck down with sticky tape. “Learn it.”

Two-five silently backed into a charging unit and studied the map. The cell block was a large rectangular building with a service road on one side and a rail lane on the other. Most rooms and locations were labelled, including all the security doors. Green-coloured lines, denoting Android corridors, snaked around the various cleaning points, including those in the guard’s facility.

The supervisor returned.

“Stand here,” she said, pointing to a spot in front of her.

She looked them over, spending a while examining Two-five’s face. “Been in the wars, have we? You’d better make sure your ugly face doesn’t cause me any problems.”

“Yes, madam.”

“And you,” she said, slapping the other android on the back of the head, “You’d better do what you are told.”

“Yes, madam.”

“Put these on your wrists.” She handed over a plasmal wristband. “They let you through the cleaner corridors and we can see where you are. Follow me. Time for work.”

They followed the supervisor along corridors, through security doors and into a toilet block. As suggested by Anya, Two-five maintained her self-awareness while walking and acting like a cleaner bot. However, when assaulted by the smell in the toilets, she moved her head and twisted her lips, mimicking a human.

The supervisor regarded her for a moment, creased her forehead even more, sniffed, then began explaining their tasks. Two-five remained still and lowered her senses into cleaning mode for the remainder of the work activity.

That night, Two-five stood in a charger and selected a few memories. She overlooked the nasty events involving her master, such as the drunken parties with hired women, held when his wife was on holiday with the children. Skirting through nice memories of her playing piano to important guests, she focussed on the moments when her view of people and the outside world changed.

At the thought of the next day's cleaning tasks, Two-five understood her old life was over. She would be a cleaner for the rest of her life.

But what would Anya say about that?

#

Over the next few days, Two-five worked diligently, performing tasks, and following orders exactly as required. The cleaning supervisor constantly berated her and fellow androids for not completing their tasks quick enough. Any thoughts from Anya were suppressed, pushed down for safety reasons in case the supervisor became suspicious.

Blood, effluent, bodily fluids, and food mess were the order of every day.

“Cleaner! Blood on the floor, mop it up,” was heard often, along with threats and assaults by angry prisoners and belligerent guards.

However, in the background, Two-five gathered information. All security door locations, on her cleaning route, were identified together with their level of access and any weaknesses. It was clear that android security barriers were contained within the buildings inner core allowing no outside access.

She studied the movements and characteristics of guards and visitors, such as delivery staff and transporter drivers. The cleaning supervisor's first name was Janet, and whenever she crossed paths with a particular guard, she blushed and fiddled with her notepad.

It was while mopping the floors of one of the three staff bathrooms that Two-five saw the young driver, who drove her to the cellblock. He entered the bathroom and went inside cubicle number four.

Anya became interested.

Two-five pushed her mop and bucket near the cubicle door, slowed her movements and listened. The man shuffled around inside, noisily used the toilet, then started the shower. Two-five noted the door locks were of a basic lever type, capable of being lifted by using a slim piece of card, poked through the gap in the door. A rise in illicit activity by staff inside the cubicles, meant the locks were not changed by management, to allow for on-the-spot checks.

The cleaning supervisor appeared from the corridor. Two-five kept her gaze down.

“Oi. Ugly. Hurry up.”

“Yes, madam,” Two-five said in a monotone voice.

While the supervisor left to scold another android, Two-five completed the rest of the floor, by which time, the young driver exited the cubicle.

The supervisor returned and leant against the doorway, arms folded, studying Two-five. As the driver walked past her, the supervisor entered the vacant cubicle and pinched her nose before speaking. “What was he doing in here? Oi, ugly, get in here and clean this mess.”

“Yes, madam.”

Two-five first noticed the wet towels on the floor covered in grease, then saw the driver’s peaked hat on the hook behind the door.

She picked up the hat and took it outside.

“Supervisor. I am reporting this has been left behind.”

The supervisor took it out of Two-five’s hand and shook her head. At that moment, the driver returned.

“Did I leave my hat behind?”

The supervisor pressed her lips together while holding out his cap.

“Thanks,” he said.

Intrigued by the driver’s forgetfulness, Two-five watched him walk out. The supervisor stared at her with eyes narrowed.

“Is there something up with your ugly metal head?” She rubbed her chin. “I wonder whether to get you checked and rebooted.” She stood in front of Two-five and jabbed a finger in her chest, a wry smile on her face. “Or just send you for metal recycling. Get back to work.”

Two-five stopped herself from replying and stared straight ahead. “Yes, madam.” She stepped back inside the cubicle.

That evening, during re-charge, Two-five considered the conversation with the supervisor. If she acted out of normal again the supervisor would send her back to the technicians. For the remainder of the night and with Anya’s help they analysed numerous strategies and compared them against safety protocols. A wrong move by Two-five or towards others, could shut her system down.

#

In the staff bathroom, mid-morning, Two-five worked as usual with another android, while the supervisor hovered around. Her shouts were heard along the corridor. In anticipation of a bathroom visit by the young driver, Two-five intentionally positioned herself near cubicle four. Her fellow android cleaned the floor on the other side of the room.

The supervisor walked in and slapped Two-five around the back of the head. “Don’t dawdle.” She walked outside while examining her notepad.

The transporter driver came in and made straight for cubicle four.

“Act quickly,” Anya interjected. With the supervisor out of the room momentarily, Two-five placed the mop at an angle and stamped on it, fracturing the wooden handle but leaving it intact.

She strode over to the other android and, without talking, grasped their mop handle. The android stopped working and turned to regard her. Two-five wrenched the mop out of its hands and thrust her mop in place. The android momentarily paused to calculate what happened, then began mopping again.

Two-five got back into position just as the supervisor swooped in. The mop handle broke, leaving the android standing, confused.

“You useless meat head, too heavy on the mop,” the supervisor said, racing over to the android and slapping the top of its head. She then examined the mop handle and swore at the bot before taking out a communicator. With her back to Two-five, the supervisor began speaking into the device, while the android, like an admonished child, stood to one side.

As this continued, Two-five made a move. Holding the mop in one hand, she took out a slip of cardboard and slipped it under the lock. The driver showered behind a curtain. Water splashed around and hummed a tune. With her free hand, she examined his pile of clothes, dumped on a seat. She lifted a shirt to see his security wristband lying next to a wallet.

She took the wristband, shoved it in a pocket and put back the shirt. Within seconds she was back, pushing the mop around the floor.

“Yeah.” The supervisor turned to scowl at Two-five. “Yeah, useless androids. I’m going to get them rebooted.”

She finished the call.

“You,” she pointed at Two-five. “Wait outside in line for the others. As for you...”

Two-five squished the mop in the auto roller, emptied the bucket into a floor drain and placed it inside a small cupboard. She walked outside to join the line of waiting androids.

The other android joined them shortly afterwards, followed by the supervisor.

“Move on. Canteen duty.”

They trooped off and soon the bathroom and any protestations or alarms raised by the driver were out of earshot and behind her.

The canteen, with its rows of tables and fixed benches, was empty. Along the dull brown walls, large screens played abstract snippets of world news, prison digests, and scenes of a calming nature.

The forest scenes, set to music, were the ones which Two-five watched the most.

As per their duty schedule, the android team wiped tables and chairs as dinner time was due to start. The doors opened. A pall of dense acrid air swept in with the prisoners tramping towards their benches. Guards fondled the whips and weapons hanging at their belts. Light conversation sprang up during the wait for the android servers. Trolleys with four levels were pushed along and a plate of green and white mush was placed in front of each prisoner with a spoon.

Two-five took up her position by a cleaning station ready to mop or sweep up any spillages, including blood from occasional outbursts.

A news item on the victory of a sports team in Europe was abruptly interrupted by a man staring directly at the camera. His appearance was met with jeers and insults by the prisoners. Guards moved from foot to foot uneasily.

It was Two-five’s old master, the Chief of Security.

“We are here to execute two prisoners who were caught trying to escape. Not only that, but they murdered a guard, deliberately damaged an android, and destroyed property.” Images of a burnt-out building were shown. Amongst the blackened timbers, a pair of human legs could be seen protruding out from under a jumble of furniture. An androids body lay nearby, face down, its body scorched and twisted.

“The board of governors had little choice but to grant an execution licence. An appeal by the prisoners failed. This will send out a warning that transgressions of this type will not be tolerated. Work hard, do your time, and earn your release.”

The scene changed to one inside a square concrete room. All conversation stopped inside the canteen.

A metal door swung back with a screech and a man and a woman, sitting on wheeled chairs, were pushed into the room by two guards. The pair wearing brown overalls, had their hands and ankles bound. Their faces showed signs of punishment and defiance. The man’s face loomed large on the screen, followed by the woman.

It was Vince and Liv.

Two-five blinked. Anya analysed.

The chief of security’s voice boomed out into the room. “You have been duly sentenced to death. Guards, carry out the punishment.”

An android, dressed in black, stepped forward from a dark corner and fastened a metal cap over the prisoner’s scalp. The two guards, in unison, placed a hood over the prisoner’s heads. At the sound of a buzzer, the android stepped outside with the guards. The door clanged shut.

Tension filtered across the canteen. A few clasped their hands in prayer, many averted their eyes, and some regarded the screens with quiet anger.

Then, with a loud fizz, the head plates energised. Two seconds later, the upper bodies of the dead prisoners slunk forward, their bodies restrained by chest straps.

The screen images returned to a forest scene. A scuffle broke out at the far side of the canteen, but the prisoners were quickly incapacitated. Eventually, conversations returned to the normal murmur, and the guards relaxed.

Two-five's system was in chaos. Lines of gibberish dialogue collided with memories of Liv and Vince and the revelations of the outside world. Thoughts interwove repeatedly, spinning in a loop until her mind became blank.

Her system performed a soft reboot while maintaining vital systems. Two-five closed her eyes and ignored outside noises and voices.

"Hey, metal head, are you listening to me?" the cleaning supervisor said. "Spillage." She pointed to a pool of mush near her feet.

Liv's conversation streamed into Two-fives thoughts, pushing everything else aside.
Sometimes, Anya, you must break the cycle. Be free.

The internal conflict was over, she opened her eyes. She knew who she was.

The supervisor stood with hands on hips. "Oi ugly. If you don't get over here now, you will be scrapped." Her voice was loud enough for nearby prisoners to cease their conversation and take notice.

Anya picked up the mop and bucket, walked over to the supervisor, and held out the mop handle.

"Here, Janet. Do it yourself."

The woman instinctively grasped the handle as prisoners around her roared with laughter. Other cleaning androids nearby stopped working and regarded the rogue behaviour. Their systems looped through instructions trying to understand the aberration.

"Hey," a prisoner shouted out. "Who are you?"

"I am Anya."

"Anya," a few prisoners called out the name. They spoke again, this time louder and in unison until it became a chant. "Anya, Anya."

Within seconds, the whole canteen was alive with the tumult of clapping or spoons banging on tables. "Anya, Anya."

Anya smiled as she slowly walked past the rows of prisoners; her head held high like a queen in front of her courtiers. She took off her android wristband and held it in the air. Cheers erupted as she tossed it onto the floor.

“Anya, Anya.”

She approached the exit door and held the young driver’s wristband against the metal pad.

The door slid open.

“All done,” she said, disappearing through the exit.