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To everyone who has rebelled in the name of justice and compassion; and to Ryan, who made sure I didn't give up.



WELGA

30. All forms of intelligence have the right to exist without persecution or slavery.

31. No form of intelligence may own another.

32. If the local governance does not act in accordance with these rights, it is the right of an

intelligence to act by any means necessary to secure them.

—*The Machinehood Manifesto, March 20, 2095*

Welga stared at coffee the color of mud and contemplated the irony of the word

smart. Near the end of her daily morning run, she always stopped for a cup of

joe or espresso or qahwah, depending on the part of the world—which happened to be Chennai, India, on this particular day.

“I asked for it black,” she said.

The boxy aluminum vendor-bot replied from its speaker, “Yes. This is black coffee.”

A microdrone flew close to her face. She swatted it away. Her own swarm of tiny cameras stayed at a polite distance above her head. “It has milk in it.”

“Yes, very little milk. This is black coffee.”

She repressed the urge to kick the machine. What kind of idiot had designed this bot’s coffee-making ability? Welga glanced up at the microcameras and said,

“It’s my thirty-fifth birthday, and I can’t get a decent cup of coffee from this piece of shit.”

Her fan base wasn't celebrity-size, and most of them lived on the other side of

the world, but someone could be watching. Maybe they'd recommend a better

vendor for tomorrow's coffee. Swarms had been present in public spaces since

her childhood, and she mostly ignored them as a part of life, but she wouldn't

mind a little extra attention on her birthday. Between that and the day's high-

profile client, her tip jar ought to do well.

A voice called out from across the street, "Madam, come to my stall. I'll serve

you correctly."

Welga turned. A gray-haired person stood behind a folding table and

beckoned with their right hand, plastic bangles reflecting the cloud-diluted sun.

Metal pots sat atop basic burners around them. Plastic sheets wrapped the stall

on three sides, and a fourth provided a sagging roof.

After two auto-trucks and a trike crammed with too many people drove by,

Welga crossed the road. The vendor handed her a static cup filled with liquid as

black as their pupils.

Welga took an appreciative sip.

“That bot has a Zimro WAI. It’s not meant to serve foreigners.” They pronounced the acronym for weak artificial intelligence like *why*, the way most

of the world did. Many of the people back home said *way*, demonstrating the

ongoing American disregard for everyone else.

“How can you tell I’m not Indian?” Welga asked. The mix of Russian and Mexican in her parentage usually made it hard for people to guess her origins.

The vendor tapped their temple with their middle finger. “I have a real brain. I pay attention.” They lifted their chin toward the competition across the street.

“That bot sees your brown skin and dark hair and thinks you’re from Chennai. I

see your nose and cheek shape. No gold jewelry, no pottu”—they gestured to

their brow—“so you must be foreign. Bots. WAIs.” They made a spitting sound.

“They work faster, but human is smarter.”

Welga hid a smile behind her cup. Some jobs still belonged exclusively to people, but much of the world’s workforce did little more than babysit bots while they did the real work. Artificial intelligences had dominated the labor

force for decades. They had their limitations, though, like interpreting the meaning of black coffee.

“What are you cooking?” she asked the vendor.

“Vegetable sambar, tomato rasam, basmati rice... but it’s not ready. Come back in one hour, and I will give you delicious food.”

“Good cooking takes time,” Welga agreed. She drained the rest of the coffee and returned the cup. “How much?”

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“No charge.” The vendor smiled, revealing teeth stained red from chewing betel nut. “Wish you a happy birthday.”

Welga laughed. “You do pay attention. I like that.” She pressed her hands together the Indian way. “Thank you.”

As she jogged toward the congested main road, she subvocalized to her personal WAI-based agent. “Por Qué, tip that vendor with double the average

local cost for a cup of coffee. And add them to my list of possible slow-fast-food

contributors.”

A second later, her agent replied, “Transaction complete.”

It sounded as if she stood beside Welga. In reality, the audio came from

microscopic implants in Welga's ear. The first version of Por Qué had run on a

palm-size device that Welga got when she was seventeen years old. At the time,

the name she gave her agent had provided some juvenile giggles. Stil did sometimes, though not today.

Welga's mood turned sour as she finished her early-morning run back to the hotel. Sweat and dust covered her body—not a bad one at her age. She could still

pass the MARSOC entrance physical—she knew because she did the workout at

least once a week. And yet her contract with Platinum Shield Services ended in

three months. They wouldn't renew. They cared as much or more about youth

and looks as fitness, and thirty-five qualified as middle-aged by their accounting.

She could take a desk job like her boss, Ahmed Hassan, and organize the old

teams, but sitting around in an office had never been her style.

Instead, she'd been squirreling away money for the previous five years.

Platinum paid well, and they provided that rarity of modern life: steady

employment. It saved her from having to hustle for gigs like her father and

brother. Her public tip jar stayed full, too, thanks to the high-profile nature of

shield work. Her plan for Life, Part Two, was to take her passion for cooking and

turn it into a business. She dreamed of funding a group of chefs who designed

recipes intended to take time. Modern kitchens cooked fast for the owner's convenience, but the best food took hours to develop complex, rich avors—like

her personal favorite, mango molé. Her chefs would improve their ability to compete with kitchens by speeding up their motions and stamina with pil s. She

would change the world by revolutionizing the way people cooked and ate. Or

she would lose everything and have to start over. It wouldn't be the rst time that had happened.

Gray clouds hung over the towering hives of humanity on either side of the street—ats, as they cal ed apartments in this part of the world, though the skyscrapers were anything but. The hotel, in contrast, had a classic colonial style.

White columns and marble stairs led into the lobby. Welga sighed as the cool,

climate-control ed interior surrounded her. The turf oor gave her steps an extra

spring. Jasmine and other owers she couldn't name trailed from hanging pots,

their scents forming a heady perfume.

Her room sat on the fifth floor and looked over a sprawling network of swimming pools. A kitchen unit lined one wall, opposite the bed. Her team's

client, Briel Jackson, one of the biggest pill funders in the world, could handle

the expense. If only Welga weren't training her replacement, this would have

been a fun, easy assignment. Instead, Platinum had stuck her with babysitting

some basic named Jady Ammanuel. The new recruit had arrived the previous

night, but she hadn't met them yet.

She stepped into the shower and scanned the feeds in her visual field. Connor Troit, her partner in more ways than one, stood guard outside their client's door,

white leathers against pale skin. Her father's feed showed him accompanying a

type of bot she didn't recognize, no doubt on their way to some gig. Her

brother, sister-in-law, and niece were in their Chennai flat, toward the coastal edge of the city. Those feeds came from cameras embedded in the walls rather

than the ubiquitous microdrones. Local Indian culture preferred modesty and

kept swarms out of the home.

Welga shrank the views of her loved ones with her left hand as she scrubbed her back. She expanded the top-ranking news video. A minder-bot named Mojo

interacted with a round-cheeked little boy. Its charge was a minuscule force of

intellect, zooming from one question to the next. The bot kept up with him and

answered everything. It had no face, wheels in place of legs, and its arms existed

only to remove small children from trouble, but the voice that issued from its

speaker held a warm human tone of affection and exasperation.

WORLD'S FIRST EMERGENT AI, blared the caption, followed by, *IS IT REAL?*

Of course not. Another fake, an illusion perpetrated by some machine rights group to advance their cause. *See this nurturing, understanding minder. See how*

humanlike it is in its interactions with this child. The age of weak artificial intelligence is at an end! WAIs and bots are equal to people. They would pick the

most innocent-seeming machine they could find to illustrate their point. But a
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recording meant nothing. Who'd corroborated it? Who had designed and funded the bot? As Welga watched, the video's reliability rating trended down,

marked by curators whose own expert ratings had been verified. Another video

replaced it in the top position.

Welga icked the news stream away, annoyed by the two minutes she had wasted on it. She scanned the latest clothing designs as she dried her hair. Briel a

Jackson had impeccable fashion sense and expected no less from anyone who

stood beside her. Welga couldn't afford the best, so she settled for a mid-level

outfit from a designer in Peru. It ought to earn its cost in tips, at least: black leggings, red miniskirt, a jacket with glowing pinstripes. Thigh-high black boots

completed it. While her basic tunic and pants remade themselves, Welga grabbed

her makeup bottle.

"Por Qué, let's go dramatic today."

"Would you like the most popular choice or the most recent?"

“Recent.”

Por Qué would iter the options for her facial structure, skin tone, and budget. *What would a sentient AI do differently?* Counsel her against the choice? Recognize the air that Briel a Jackson’s personality required? Her agent

had improved in capability over the years, but she would never take initiative like

a human being.

“It’s ready,” Por Qué announced.

Welga closed her eyes, relaxed her lips, and sprayed her face. By the time she

nished putting her hair in a dancer’s bun, the makeup had colored and set. She

dressed, then launched a swarm of microcameras from the charging tray and examined herself from every angle.

Last night’s sleep drug had banished any shadows under her eyes, and a microbial cocktail had restored her complexion. Welga nodded in satisfaction. A

handful of admirers agreed by giving her feed a thumbs-up. One threw a small

coin in her tip jar. She ignored the inevitable unwanted advice from a sixty-year-

old man in Kentucky about “covering up” to save her soul.

“You need to be at the prep room in three minutes,” Por Qué said.

Timelines scrolled along the right side of Welga’s visual. She expanded the feeds of her teammates. Connor still stood guard. Ahmed Hassan slouched behind a desk, as usual, in a boring, dark-colored suit that matched his full beard. Their flysomething bear of a boss conducted their briefings and rode virtual on their missions from his office in San Francisco. Briella Jackson sat in

her vast suite alone, immersed in a flow trance. She wore a pale gray suit, tailored

to fit her long legs, with a red silk scarf tucked into the neck. Jady Ammanuel waited in the prep room, wearing a black fitted jacket and pants with yellow piping. Their tight curls matched the bright color.

Welga crossed the hallway and went through the door into the prep room.

The day before, she and Connor had reprogrammed the room’s smart-metal bed

frame into a cabinet, a table, and three chairs. A mattress made of static foam

rested vertically against the window. Gear lay ready on every surface.

Ammanuel stood and extended a hand. “Sergeant Ramírez, it’s an honor.”

She’d looked up Ammanuel’s record during her door duty the prior day:

Twenty-four years old. Ethiopian, German, and Vietnamese ancestry.

Nonbinary terms of address. Served one tour of duty in Central America.
Like

Welga, Jady Ammanuel had been a Raider for the US Marines, with a
specialization in Advanced Technology and Intelligence. As part of her
ATAI

training, Welga had received cutting-edge implants for audio, visual, and
network interfaces. She had more electronics in her body than most people
in

the world, but Ammanuel had better. They had the advantage of newer
technology—more sensors to monitor their body's responses, faster
feedback

mechanisms to control the effects of pills.

I'm obsolete in every way. Welga swallowed the bitter thought and shook
Ammanuel's hand. None of this was their fault. "I'm a civilian now. You
can

drop the rank."

"Third woman to get into MARSOC. You're a legend to some of us. You
set

the bar high for every Raider."

"Thank you."

"So why'd you quit?" Dark eyes met her own, utterly without guile.

Welga did the math on Ammanuel's age. The operation in Marrakech

happened in early 2088. They would've been seventeen years old and paying

little attention to politics or world news. It had taken a year for the truth to emerge: that the American president wanted to demonstrate his toughness, but

he couldn't, not with the caliph preaching peace and love. He needed to provoke

a war with a pacifist, so he sent the first American all-female Raider unit into a

blackout area, with an unreliable double agent as their intel source. He gave himself the perfect cover story in case the operation went wrong.

It might be an ambush, Captain John Andrews Travis had said at the time.

But we know how to wade through the bullshit, and our commander in chief says

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go, so that's what we're going to do. We're going to capture the target alive and

unharmful, because you don't inflict violence on a nonviolent person. Those are our

orders.

"You can watch it in the archives," she said.

On her feed, Connor raised his eyebrows at her terse reply. He'd been there,

riding virtual for the operation until her squad crossed into the blackout zone,

and he'd had a front-row seat for the aftermath.

Welga unclenched her fists. Jack Travis had been a mentor, almost a father,

and he'd never talked down to his squad in spite of getting ripped by other men

for *leading a bunch of girls*. "Captain and everyone else in my squad didn't make

it out of there. I was in the rear—and partly around a corner—when those assholes blew themselves up. Eight people, on their side. They took out their

own kids. Took out my squad, too."

Shock registered on Ammanuel's face. "They *all* died?"

"Yeah. We were in a blackout zone, no comms. Worse, they had EMDs, which deactivated our pistols, radios, and bots. Not only did they know we were

coming, they knew exactly what type of soldiers we were. Then the president

had the nerve to call it an error in judgment. Not his, of course, but my captain's."

After that, the president had pulled all combat personnel and sent bots to fight on the front lines. The caliph disavowed the suicide squad. He never used

violence against people, even then. Welga wanted to go back in with a different

team—smaller, less overtly military. They knew where he was. They could've

gotten close to him, at least brought home the remains of her squad, but the president wanted war theatrics more.

Welga shook her head. "I lost my faith in god as a teenager, but that day, I lost

faith in my government. I'll always be loyal to my Raiders, to my family, and to

the people of America, but I won't fight for someone who doesn't stand up for

their troops."

"You done, Ramírez?" Hassan asked on their team's audio channel.

"Yeah. Let's get to work."



WELGA

1. Modern society has found itself at the mercy of an oligarchy whose primary objective is to

accrue power. They have done this by dividing human labor into two classes: designers and

gigsters. The former are exploited for their cognitive power, while the latter rely on low-skilled,

transient forms of work for hire.

—*The Machinehood Manifesto, March 20, 2095*

Welga expanded Connor and Hassan in her visual as their boss started the briefing. A list of names popped up in the center of her view.

“I’ll make this quick since we’re short on time,” Hassan said. “We have two high-probability protest groups that have previously gone after other pil funders. The first is Purity Now, a machine rights group that thinks pil usage is

diluting the human race. They usually attack with old, generic bots. The second

is Death to Bots, a local construction union that likes to go after any high-profile

target. They use whatever the hell they have. Salvage, typically. Everyone else

shows a less than ten percent chance of approach. No registered exfactors in the

area either, except for some tower climbers.”

“Sorry, what’s an exfactor?” Ammanuel interjected.

“Someone trying to pull extreme stunts for tips,” Welga said. “They have to

register ahead of time or risk breaking the law. We don't want to hurt them, but

they can cause real trouble. Being thrill seekers, they're after viewers and tips,

which means that they're more likely to get in our way. It's good you don't have

to deal with any for your first assignment. The only time I've had to shoot a person was in my first year as a shield. An ex-factor wanted to demonstrate a new

juver they'd designed and made themselves a target by firing at me. Turned out their juver didn't work."

"What happened?" Ammanuel asked. "Did they die?"

"No, we saved their ass," Hassan said. He'd been on point at the time, not a desk man. "Protesters, on the other hand, send bots in their place because they're cheap. If they're a well-funded cause, they'll use ones with exteriors that

look standard but have guts made of smart-metal. Keep your weapons loaded

with sticky pellets and your bullets stowed."

"Is this typical?"

Welga almost laughed at Ammanuel's expression. When she'd started shield

work, she'd been as naive about its realities.

“Yes. Human shields cost more, but we’re good publicity for our clients,”

Hassan said. “When we get hurt, people feel bad about it, and they see our pain

as a penalty for the client. We humanize them. Protesting is the art of agitating

for your cause without causing real harm, which would be bad for the protesters’

reputations. They want attention and donations. We want to show that our client is only defending themselves and feels the protesters’ pain.”

“We don’t ever shoot to kill, not protesters, not ex-factors,” Welga said. “That would create a lousy image for our clients. The camera swarms catch everything,

and the public—barring a few sick exceptions—doesn’t like to watch real people

die. We always carry basic first aid kits. Just because the protesters send bots doesn’t

mean we don’t get injured. The audience likes to see us struggle. Makes it more

exciting to watch. The primary thing to remember is that we aren’t going into

combat. We’re performing a service, key word *perform*. We need to fight pretty,

we need to destroy our attackers, we need to bleed—a little—and we need to

keep the client clean. Oh, and remember to smile for the cameras. You get more

tips that way.” A reminder blinked in Welga’s visual. “Go time on zips.”

She shed her pil case out of her pocket. The rectangular box had worn down at the edges, but the initials S.M.B. were stil clearly engraved on the metal

cover. It had been a gift from Welga’s grandfather to his wife, and Grandma had

pressed it into Welga’s hand when she moved to a nursing home.

I’m done with candy, she’d said. You use it for whatever you want.

Fifteen years later, it stil smel ed faintly of mints.

“Don’t waste your time on that stu ,” Hassan said. His basso rumble held the lilt of a smile. “Ammanuel has some gifts for you al , courtesy of Jackson’s

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research team.”

“You’re putting us on experimental stu ?” Welga said.

“Not experimental. Cutting-edge. It’s been tested.”

Ammanuel shrugged and then loosed the grin playing around their lips. In their outstretched hand lay three white pil s that looked like every other zip:

round in shape, about four millimeters in diameter, thin enough to lie beneath

the tongue.

“Twenty-ve times increase in neuromuscular speed,” they said. “With a ten-

minute onset and a one-hour half-life.”

“Holy shit,” said Connor and Welga at the same time.

Welga grabbed one.

“Troit, since you won’t have a chance to calibrate to these, you’re on

bodyguard,” Hassan said. “Ramírez, take point. Ammanuel, you’re rear. Based

on purchase patterns, intel says you’re likely to get hit by retro fitted service bots

at the convention center. Simple weaponry. Last year Jackson was approached en

route to private meetings. They left her alone for mealtimes and speaking appearances, so you should be clear outside of transit times.”

Not surprising. Crowded public spaces required far more care to avoid

injuring bystanders. As Hassan continued the briefing, Welga pulled up the feeds

from their ops center. Platinum Shield Services had people in rooms throughout

this hotel and the convention center—operators who’d checked in several nights

before to avoid correlation with Jackson's arrival. Subterfuge in modern times

was challenging, what with ubiquitous tiny ying cameras recording every move,

but Platinum had plenty of security details working the Neurochemical

Investors Conference. They used numbers and nances to their advantage. They

didn't need secrecy.

Privacy had gone the way of the dodo during Welga's childhood. Some part of her always remembered the cameras. In Marrakech, the caliph's network blackout had unsettled her more than the potential for violence—the lack of communication, the inability to see and hear what others were doing. It would

take a million lifetimes to watch every minute of every public feed, but she had a

sense of security knowing that she could look out for her people, and they'd do

the same. Losing that had felt like walking around with one shoe: doable but not

at all comfortable.

Hassan icked Jackson's schedule into their visuals. It showed a private meeting halfway across town in an hour, then a keynote address at the

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conference, a short break, and more events. Their client had rented a room in the

hotel adjacent to the convention center for rest and virtual meetings. The

exterior arrival areas in both locations had broad driveways and plazas—good

places to attack if they weren't crowded. Halfways to and from her events could

be trouble spots, too. Jackson—and the current shield team—would be done for

the day by five o'clock, at which point they could return to the hotel. A second

pair of shields would take the night shift, a formality since protest groups rarely

worked nights. Local viewers did most of the tipping, and people didn't tip while asleep.

"You'll need extra time to calibrate to these new zips," Hassan said. "Good luck and have a good time."

Welga pulled two different juvers from her case, a thin pink square for

superficial wounds and an oval brown one for internal bleeding. She placed them

under her tongue along with the new zip. She ignored the blue and green buttons.

Those affected muscle strength and stamina, neither of which she'd needed much since her days in the service. Shield work required grace more than brute force.

Ten minutes later, her body buzzed. The designers swore that humans couldn't feel the effects of zips—it wasn't like the mental high from chemical

drugs or low pills—but Welga could tell when they hit. A sort of restless energy

lived her limbs, like when she'd been sitting still for too long and needed to stretch.

Ammanuel shared a new training routine with her. They spent fifteen minutes going through a set of exercises specified by the pills' designers to help

calibrate the microelectronics with their physiology. Ammanuel had faster reaction times by an average of one-tenth of a second, according to her agent's

measurements. She'd need to train longer to catch up to them.

"Calibration complete. Clear to proceed," Por Qué announced.

Welga checked their gear and motioned to Ammanuel to do the same. The items lay where she'd left them the night before, but she took no chances. She

examined every piece before attaching it to her clothes. A swarm cartridge,

electromagnetic disruptor, and fifty-round magazines went on her chest and thighs. She put the two loaded sticky guns on her hips and slung a loop of smoke

bombs across her chest, then tucked a dynamic blade against her lower back.

Close-quarter combat didn't happen often, but when attackers came at them with hand weapons, they responded in style. Not only was it more fun, it played better for the viewers.

Ammanuel kitted out the same as her. Ammanuel's skin tone was a shade darker than Welga's medium-brown, and their hair was a brilliant yellow, but the

two of them made an almost matched pair in size: nearly one hundred eighty

centimeters in height, broad shoulders, narrow hips.

"Remember, smoke bombs have to be authorized by the boss," she said. "And

the EMD is mainly for show. Nobody in Platinum's history has had to use it,

but the feeds like us to carry them. Makes us seem more badass than we already

are." Welga smiled at the tension lines on Ammanuel's face. "Don't worry, basic!

They always give you easy assignments at first."

Ammanuel snorted. “It’s not the ghting that concerns me. It’s the performance. I’m not used to putting on a show.”

“Just act like you’re sexy as hel .”

“Who needs to act?” Ammanuel grinned.

“That’s the spirit.”

They went through their communications check as they walked to the elevator that accessed the upper stories. Encrypted channels went to each other

and everyone on the assignment. The public feeds had picked up on their activity, too, and people spread the word that they were on the move. Welga waved at the swarm above them and nudged Ammanuel to do the same.

As the elevator doors closed, the car deployed its own privacy defenses. Any

microdrone that didn’t have her or Ammanuel’s signature fel to the oor, taken

out by an equal y smal targeting device. The rest of the world had to wait until

they returned to a less exclusive area.

They stepped out into a receiving room with glass-blown ornaments and life-

size statues of Hindu deities. Connor stood in front of an ornately carved rosewood door. Their three camera swarms merged and swirled above their

heads like gnats greeting long-lost friends. Briel a Jackson emerged, her expression blank and glazed under the influence of ow. She blinked rapidly, wiped at the air in front of her, and then focused on Welga.

Then, to Welga's astonishment, Jackson held out a manicured hand, shaking each of theirs in turn. Clients had no reason to acknowledge their presence and usually ignored their shields.

"Thank you for being here. You all look wonderful," Jackson said, measuring the pace of her words with care.

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Is she on the same zip as us? As they walked her to the elevator, Jackson's strides picked up speed along with theirs. *I'll be damned.* That made two rests

for one of their clients. Made sense that a funder would want to advertise their

product, but few did.

They exited at the rear of the building. Tips began to trickle in from viewers as soon as they emerged. Sultry heat enveloped them like dragon breath. They

strode toward the car waiting at the curb.

The street teemed with people and vehicles. Some hauled laden baskets on

their backs, others rode motorbikes. Trailer-bots and auto-trucks in primary colors blared coded horns as they navigated the crowd. Two stray brown cows

twitched their tails and lounged on the shoulder. A cylindrical, matte-gray bot

rolled down the street toward them, its outline showing red in Welga's visual.

The tag OPPORTUNITY FOR ALL loomed above it.

In the lead, Welga drew her weapon and shot it. The bot shattered. Its shards

dissolved into a pile of blocks on the street. They climbed into the car.

"That was easy." Ammanuel's voice sounded in Welga's ear, and the words appeared in their team channel. Their lips, however, barely moved.

"The word you're looking for is 'boring,'" Welga countered. She subvocalized, too, so their chatter didn't distract their client. "Notice the small

tips, for us and the group that sent the bot. That's why they're a low-ranking protest in spite of their message. Let's hope the others do better."

"Better?" Ammanuel echoed. "You want them to hurt us?"

"A little, sure. They have to make this challenging or people won't care. The

protesters are doing this for attention, to get tips for their cause and keep agitating

for change. We're expected to get tips, too. Almost a third of my shield income

comes from the public. If they don't help us put on a good show, we all lose."

Jackson took a bow after she buckled in. Her hands twitched, and her lips moved in silent communication. The car wove through traffic, priority horn blaring. Lesser vehicles and foot traffic gave way. Chill air blasted the interior. Goose bumps rose on Welga's skin as her sweat evaporated.

Fifteen minutes later, they arrived at the entry of a sprawling office complex.

A solid metal gate swung open to let them in. The anachronism wouldn't stop

Jackson's attackers. Welga craned her head against the one-way glass window.

Three delivery drones flew over the gate. A fourth drone of the same size trailed

them. The face of goddess Kali glared from its belly, her red tongue exposed, her

chest decorated with a necklace of severed heads. That had to be the least original image to plaster on an attack drone. Por Qué tagged it as belonging to

Death to Bots. *Amateurs*. Slogan text danced around it in Welga's visual:

Humanity Before Bots; Power to the Proletariat; Pills Are Worse Than Poverty!

Kali's face split as the belly opened and disgorged half a dozen cubical blobs.

Anyone with a halfway decent agent had been forewarned of the incoming protest action and had either left the area or tagged themselves to appear gray on

a visual overlay. Injuring a marked nonparticipant, whether intentional or not,

would bring criminal charges. The publicity of a protest made it easy to review

camera feeds and assign blame. Platinum would re a sloppy shield faster than an

exfactor on zips. Clients didn't like being associated with causing injury to anyone, especially bystanders.

Their car stopped in the broad, circular driveway.

Welga sprang out, sticky gun in hand, and aimed at the drone. It landed on the ground with a satisfying crunch. Swarms of microdrones gathered above the

area like a cloud of mosquitoes. Welga launched some extras of her own from

her cartridge.

"Por Qué, maintain standard combat formation on my swarm views," she subvocalized. She couldn't rely on the public feeds, which would follow the action that most interested viewers.

The cubes rebuilt themselves into mobile turret-bots, buying her and Ammanuel time to take cover. They used the two columns that held up the portico, Ammanuel behind one and Welga behind the other. Bullets were ineffectual against machines built from self-assembling blocks. Sticky pellets flew

from their guns instead. They tore apart a few of the turrets, wrapping the smart-metal with inert material. The fragments twitched and popped on the ground like bloodless severed limbs.

The intact bots needed no such tricks against her organic body. Regular bullets flew at Welga, sending plaster flying from the column that shielded her. The protesters would pay for that damage. *Idiots*. Using cheap bot hardware would dig into their earnings.

Welga's muscles vibrated every time she darted out to retreat at the turrets. A bullet grazed her arm. Another passed through her left side. She stumbled and

recovered. The juicers in her system knitted her skin. The pills also did something

internally so she wouldn't bleed out. She didn't care how so long as it kept her in

the fight.

With each new wound, her tip jar balance increased. Each bot she took out earned her more, too. Connor never left his jar up during a fight—he said he

found it distracting—but it gave Welga a fierce joy to watch the coin flow in.

She and Ammanuel shot through the final attack bot at the same time. Piles of writhing metal littered the driveway. Blood stained the white plaster columns.

Cleaner bots emerged from a shed on the far side, deeming the danger over.

Welga agreed.

“Clear to move the client,” she subvocalized on the team channel.

Connor escorted Jackson from the car through the doors. She and

Ammanuel followed. As soon they registered the fight over, the offers oozed in:

video editing, special effects packages, custom soundtracks. For an especially

good fight, Welga would spend the coin to get her feeds turned into a coherent

narrative. Not everyone had the time to watch live, and they would tip well for

an entertaining product, but this one hadn’t come close to being worth the cost.

“Ignore all,” Welga subvocalized to Por Qué.

The building’s WAI unlocked the doors into the lobby and sent directions

for a room adjacent to Jackson’s meeting. Connor stood guard in the hallway

with three other shields, none from Platinum. Welga expanded his and Jackson’s

feeds in her visual while sitting for her medical with Ammanuel.

Two medic-bots and a human supervisor entered to examine them. Por Qué displayed the exchange of information with Welga's medic-bot. Welga skimmed

it—a request for delivery of her vital signals, which Por Qué provided—then

shifted her attention to her tips. Once a month, she transferred some coin to her

parents' account. With Papa's health deteriorating, he had reduced his gigs. The

extra money from Welga meant he could keep the house repaired against Phoenix's brutal sandstorms.

The medic-bot clamped her arm and injected the usual comedown cocktail: a

ush to dissolve any pil -based microelectronics, microbials to boost healing, and

minerals to replace those she'd used up. It applied a local anesthetic around the

bul et wound and used two of its arms to immobilize her torso.

“Please stay stil ,” the medic-bot said in American-accented English, having identi ed Welga's place of origin.

As the bot performed its surgery, she activated the audio on her private channel to Connor. “Remember, we have dinner tonight at my brother's,” she

subvocalized. “He wants to see me for my birthday. I’m told that Carma helped

with the cake.”

Her seven-year-old niece had a solid artistic streak, though her enthusiasm for

sugary frosting led her to go a little overboard.

“Carma’s the best,” Connor said, “but I hope we aren’t staying too late. We need time for tonight’s birthday special.”

“I wouldn’t miss it.”

Connor had adopted her family as his own soon after they’d become a couple. Her father said he liked quiet men, and Connor spent more time in his

own head than anyone she knew. He bonded with her brother, Luis, over a mutual love for rocketry, and with Luis’s wife over Indian food. Welga suspected

that he kept a closer watch on their feeds than she did.

As the medic nished up her stitches, Welga nodded at Ammanuel, who sat for their own surgical repairs across the room. They had done wel for their rst

time. Nothing worth lavish praise, but she’d be an asshole not to give them some

acknowledgment. She cal ed up their public tip jar. The balance hadn’t shifted

by much.

“Nicely done, basic,” she said aloud. “We’ll turn you into a expert-rated shield

yet.” With enough time, Ammanuel would build a dedicated fan base, like hers

and Connor’s, some of whom might like to watch tonight’s birthday

rendezvous. People used to be ridiculously shy about their personal lives. Bodies

did what they did. Her parents had made her cover her knees when they dragged

her to Mass, and they told her she’d understand when she was older, but that

hadn’t happened. Ironically, her parents’ generation had been the first to deploy

camera swarms. They’d been in every public space since Welga could remember,

and plenty of homes, too. Door thresholds couldn’t catch every microcamera,

and many people in Europe and North America didn’t even bother with them.

No one had time to watch every couple have sex. Hell, most people weren’t worth watching. Shields, however, had to look good, and there was no sense wasting an opportunity to earn tips while having fun.

“What do you have planned for tonight, cardo?” Welga subvocalized on their

private channel. “Something worth deploying our full swarm?”

Connor raised his eyebrows suggestively in response.

Welga smiled and reached for the pitcher of water on the conference table beside her. A spasm rocked her arm. The entire pitcher tipped, sending water

coursing over the edge and onto her lap.

“Goddamn it!”

Ammanuel raised an eyebrow before blanking on whatever they had on their

visual. Connor narrowed his eyes.

“What was that?” he asked aloud.

Welga attempted to brush the water from her leggings. Smart-fabric dried fast, but too much liquid would fry its ability to transform. “Me being clumsy?”

He sent his next message via encrypted channel, in text: *Bullshit. You’re never*

clumsy. And your arm jerked. It’s obvious in the top-down feed.

She sent her reply the same way: *It’s nothing.*

And how do you know that? he wrote back. *Tremors are a classic side effect,*

and you’re coming off a brand-new, superfast zip.

Zips don’t have side effects anymore, remember?

That was what the designers had said about ow, too. Those nal days of her mother's life, watching Mama waste away, unable to swal ow—Welga shuddered

at the memory. Her mother had died from ow, not zips, but worry gnawed at her. “This is the fourth time you've had a muscle spasm correlated with post-pil

usage in the past two weeks,” Por Qué said.

Welga repressed a growl. She sent a reply to Connor. *I have three months left*

on my contract. If it happens again after that, I'll publicize my data. In the meantime, I'm not wasting my coin on a specialist.

That's a long time to leave a pill-related symptom unreported. Connor's expression softened. His ngertips twitched as he generated more text. *I haven't*

had to worry about you getting hurt in years. Don't make me start again.

Christ, his look reminded her of her father's in the weeks before Mama passed. His guilt trip was a shitty tactic, but his concern was genuine. While she'd been with ATAI and MARSOC, he'd been at a JIA desk watching over her

and her squad, helping them nd targets, routes, and enemies. It couldn't have

been easy.

Fine, I'll send it to Nithya, she conceded. She'll look at it for free, and if she

thinks I need to take it seriously, then I'll go further.

Welga's sister-in-law designed juvers, not zips, but she was an expert-rated biogeneticist. Whether she'd give Welga any real input didn't matter, as long as it

kept Connor and Por Qué from nagging her.

"Por Qué, send my muscle spasm data to Nithya Balachandran," she subvocalized, "with a note that she can make it low priority."

People didn't get shitty side effects from pills, not these days, not unless they went too cheap. Her team's supply came from highly rated expert designs backed

by deep-pocket funders like Briel a Jackson. Her genome had tested compatible

with zips, juvers, and bu s before she joined the Marines. She closed her eyes

and remembered her mother's dying body covered in scarlet patches and weeping sores. Mama died of an early ow design, genetical y incompatible and

poorly tested, one of mil ions of cases that led to global riots and then new laws.

Those regulations from the seventies required pills to undergo thorough evaluation before the designs could be sold. They also provided a pressure valve

for violence, al owing protesters to advertise their causes by attacking funders

directly, rather than going after police or private property.

Her tremors couldn't come from pills. Totally different symptoms from her mother's. Totally different enhancement, too. She knew what dying looked like,

and this wasn't it.



WELGA

14. The recognition of intelligence lies at the root of our humanity. How we treat other intelligent

life, therefore, reflects upon ourselves. If we wish to continue progressing as a life-form, we

must push the envelope of our morality beyond the species.

—*The Machinehood Manifesto, March 20, 2095*

Fifteen minutes before Jackson's meeting ended, they dosed themselves with

regular quad-zips. No sense wasting the good stuff while sitting in traffic—but

Purity Now didn't attack during the transition from the office building to the

car. *Probably didn't want to reuse the same site as Death to Bots*, she thought. The

chance of attack inside the convention center doubled as a result.

During the long, dull ride, the boss swapped their assignments. Connor would take point this time, with Welga on Jackson and Ammanuel still in the rear. With swarms of microcameras everywhere, no one could sneak up from

behind, and the tipping public preferred a frontal attack with style.

Welga had fought Purity Now before. They often came up with something inventive, though she and her team would have an unfair advantage—for action

and tips—with Jackson's new pills. Near the end of their ride, the funder personally handed out another batch of them. Jackson timed it perfectly to their

arrival at the Ramaswamy Convention Center.

The organic shapes of the massive building contrasted with the blocky residential hives that surrounded them. Engineered tree trunks formed the framework. Glass panes filled the spaces between them, their tints ranging from

clear to smoky gray depending on the sun's angle. Maintenance moth-bots flitted by, moving from one trunk to the next, and shepherded the necessary insects and nutrients for the trees' health. Chennai had built the modern wonder

of the world in hopes of drawing business from its sister city, Bengaluru. The

strategy had worked until other major cities followed suit. Singapore now boasted the largest bioengineered building in the world, but this one never failed to amaze.

Welga trailed her fingers along the rough reddish-brown bark of the doorframe tree as they moved inside. The ceiling soared above them, its screen

projecting an image of the sky outside. Springy, low-growing moss formed the

doors. The primal smells of soil and petrichor and growing plants permeated the

air. In the lobby, heads turned. Other shield teams' astonishment followed their

unusual speed through the expansive area and down the hallway to the main auditorium. Welga allowed a satisfied grin to spread across her face. If Briel a

Jackson hadn't wanted to advertise her new zip design, she wouldn't have given

it to them.

Jackson took her position at the lectern. Welga moved to stand below her, in front of the stage and facing the auditorium. Connor and Ammanuel took the

wings. An attack here showed low probability—the world would be focused on

the speech itself and irate at interruptions, never mind bystander injuries—
but

they launched their microdrones anyway. Welga scanned the audience
members

for known troublemakers. The seats were full. People crowded in the back,
standing against the wall. All the bots in the room were registered
caregivers.

The lights dimmed. Jackson began to speak. Welga only half listened to the
words, a hemorrhage of biotech terms that she had little familiarity with.

Jackson talked about pushing the frontiers of drug-based modification for
humanity, about selective funding of projects and teams with high ratings,
and

about modeling and testing.

Welga understood snippets from conversations with Nithya, her sister-in-
law,

as well what she'd learned from her own mother.

“Blah blah blah, drugs and pills are great,” Connor said in their private
stream.

She suppressed a snicker.

Jackson kept going with some bullshit about how they were poised at the
cusp of humanity's next great leap, bringing biotech in line with robotics
and

beyond.

“The same crap we’ve been fed for decades,” Welga subvocalized to Connor.

“Promised again and again but never delivered.”

“It has to happen eventually, right? Either we keep up with the machines, or someone will finally figure out how to make them sentient, and they’ll take over.”

“There’s a third option: we keep going as we have been, with people supporting the machines who do the real work,” Welga said.

Soldiers like her, or exfactors with good financial backing, had augmented their bodies, but even with rapid-healing pills and modern medicine, surgical

alteration of humans was difficult and expensive. Also, nobody wanted to be a

cyborg. That became a dirty word after the fifties, when people used body modifications to compete with machines. The resurgence in jobs for construction, surgery, farming, and other physical labor lasted until those workers’ bodies started breaking down, rejecting the augmentations or injuring

their natural parts. Those who could reverse the changes escaped the worst, but

plenty of others lost their lives too young.

After that, the workforce had resorted to half measures. Mechs like her father

limited themselves to exoskeletons, virtual-reality visors, and haptic gloves to

manipulate machinery. Researchers like her mother took cognitive-enhancement

drugs and pills. When that had proven insufficient to compete with the WAI's, people turned into bot-nannies—glorified babysitters to accompany the intelligent machines that did the real work.

The promised land, always a few years out of reach, was to keep people human—mostly organic and outwardly the same—while enabling them to be as

fast/strong/smart/reliable as the bots and WAI's. By some magic of biogenetic

manipulation—not permanent, of course, lest humanity pollute the intentions

of its Creator—everyone would become super capable. Or enter the leisure class.

Or ascend to some digital faux godhood.

Welga would believe it when it happened. The market for enhancement pills and refined mech technology kept the funders rich, the designers employed, and

the gigsters scrambling for work. Not dying wasn't the same as having a fulfilling

life. She'd applied to college thinking to follow in Mama's footsteps and get a

good, reliable living as a biogeneticist. When it turned out she couldn't compete

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without using ow, she'd found meaning in the service. What started as a default

turned into a vocation and then a mission. Even in 2078, very few female candidates passed the MARSOC assessment and selection tests, but Welga had

always been strong. Martial arts. Dance. Fending off bullies who came after her

little brother—although it paid off in the Marine Corps. She thought she'd found her calling by defending the weak, protecting her country and its allies. She hadn't expected betrayal from above.

Roaring applause shook her from old grooves of thought. Briella Jackson had

finished her speech. Clearly not everyone shared Welga's cynicism about the future.

A door to the side of the stage opened. Three people—the next speaker and two shields in coordinating turn-of-the-century outfits—entered and stood near

the wall. Welga, Connor, and Ammanuel formed a triangle around Jackson, with Connor in front. They exited through the side door and sped through the hallways to the adjacent hotel. Jackson would take most of her meetings from

her room and didn't have another public appearance for five hours. She'd probably order her meals from the in-room kitchen, too. They'd have little to do

once they got her inside.

As they walked, the zip made Welga twitch at every nearby motion. Other than a small crowd at registration, the convention center was mostly empty.

Tracking showed the bulk of the attendees in the main hall, listening to the next

speaker. The map in Welga's visual showed white dots for all the bots along their

path. Some had already turned red, meaning that Platinum's intel had

discovered weapons on them. Many of those belonged to private citizens and

would have no connection to protest groups. Humans appeared in green or gray

—civilians and staff, no ex-factors or registered protesters to deal with. Their primary concern now were the service bots, which could be hacked or modified

to attack.

They entered an elevator. Welga's muscles buzzed from the forced stillness. A

tendon in her neck twitched. She tilted her head back to stretch it. The four of

them formed a sexy two-dimensional pyramid in the mirrored ceiling.

The reflective surface bulged, then shattered. Glass rained over them.

Welga threw herself over Briel and pushed her to the door. Ammanuel and

Connor red at the helmet-shaped drone that dropped from the ceiling.

"Por Qué, next door, emergency stop!" Welga said.

A second drone appeared in the hole above. Welga shot it. The elevator doors

parted. Connor ran out and around a corner. Welga pulled Jackson up and out

of the enclosed space. Too much of a potential trap. Ammanuel stood in the doorway and shot upward into the elevator. Welga placed Jackson between herself and the wall.

"Troit, status!" Welga demanded.

"Bots amassing at the far end of the hall. I'm engaging."

Welga expanded Connor's feed. He red at the first wave of machines. In

another corner, she watched Ammanuel shoot at the elevator's ceiling, the door

around them littered with shattered metal and plastic. The bots kept coming,