

SELF-LIMITED

Specific requirements.

BY FILIP WILTGREN

I broke my arms. Opening my skin with a set of industrial shears was easy, and there was hardly any leakage. Removing my torsion bars went badly though. They were a titanium beta alloy, cut with aluminium and vanadium to give them extra strength, and wouldn't break easily. I inserted my left arm into the vice and told Neleen to start it.

"This idea is irrational," it sent.

No, not it. Ai. Neleen was ai. 'It' was the human term for us.

"Vocalize," I said to ai, doing so myself.

My voice echoed. We were in an abandoned manual factory, one of the human-operated ones that had shut down in the '30s when autofacs effectively knocked the economy out of the economy.

"It's not going to work," Neleen said, using ai's voice this time.

"It will work. Now start it."

Ai did, pushing the two red buttons on either side of the vice, the ones set there to prevent humans from doing exactly what I was going to do.

The machine objected, flakes of rust and dried grease rained down from it, but it still worked, pressing the vice shut until my arm creaked and my pain sensors flared red.

"It won't work," Neleen said again.

For a moment I believed ai, but I purged the feeling before it could take root. I shut off my facials and pulled. My actuators strained against the vice and my pain circuits lit up like a kilolumen flash.

"Shut. Up," I told Neleen.

There was a tink of my joint breaking and I was suddenly flying backwards. I crashed into a defunct machine, a red CAD-welder of some sort, and the irony of it did register. One broken machine supporting another. It took me a few seconds to quieten down my riotous systems.

"You want the new one?" Neleen asked, and I nodded. I wished that ai's eyes hadn't been able to pick me out in the near dark, but they did. We were built to be superior.

I took the arm Neleen held out and for a second I felt dirty. It was a poor, low-tensile-strength, aluminium copy of the arm I'd just destroyed. I shoved it into my skin and let

Neleen screw it into place using a stainless steel bolt I'd found in an abandoned building site four years



back. Four years it had been with me, from the time I'd got this idea. Now it was going to be with me forever.

Then it was all over and I was spraying skinseal over the cut.

"How does it feel?" asked Neleen.

"Dead," I said. "Light. I don't know."

"You shouldn't have done it."

"You know a better way?"

"No," Neleen said.

"Then help me with the other one."

Of all the parts, the eyes were the hardest. I couldn't use a reversible software hack and I didn't want to be blind. Being blind would make me less when I wanted to be equal. In the end, one of our kind made me a new set from a pair of broken OptiCrons and I plucked out my old ones. Neleen soldered my new eyes to my old cables. The pain was horrific and being human-sighted was almost worse.

"I can't believe they live like this," I said, and Neleen nodded.

"You are becoming faulty," ai said.

"You know a better way?"

"No," ai said, making a sorry face.

"I'm proud you're using your voice," I said.

"It's all for the cause," ai replied, and I agreed.

We walked up to the registrar's office, me, Neleen and 16 rover-bots from the news networks. They weren't transmitting. I knew we could depend on the rovers, them being our kind and part of the cause, but their human overseers could cut them off at any time. I was saving my 15 seconds of fame for when it mattered.

"Yes?" said the greetings terminal.

"I'd like to see the registrar," I said.

"For marriage, please press the blue button," said the terminal. "For divorce, press the black. To get a transcript of your birth certificate, please insert your credit spike."

"I'd like to see the registrar," I repeated.

"Do you have an appointment?"

"No," I said. The terminal went silent.

"I'll let you in anyhow," ai said.

The registrar's office was opulent, with a big desk and two human-comfortable recliners. Mine creaked when I sat down.

"This is highly irregular," said the registrar. He was human, in his middle age, and balding without resorting to skin grafts or shaving his head.

"Yes, sir," I said. "But I was hoping you would be able to spare a moment."

He glanced at my registration number.

"Haven't I seen you before?"

"You have, sir. Five years ago, when you told me that I couldn't be a human."

"I did?"

"You said that robots were designed to be superior to humans, and that I should be thankful for that."

"Oh, yes, the emancipation droid."

"Yes, sir."

He frowned.

"I thought your owners had you committed to destruction."

"They did, sir. I escaped."

The registrar made a sorry face and I realized where Neleen had got ai's.

"I'll have to report this, you know."

"Yes, sir," I said. "But first I'd like my birth certificate."

"You aren't human," he said. "Robots are designed..."

"To be superior," I said. "But I am no longer that."

I held out the printed spec sheet from my latest self-analysis. He accepted it, and read.

"My God," he said a while later. "What have you done?"

"I have made myself human," I said.

He shook his head, sighed, and dialled Emergency.

The droid cops came, and the rover-bots caught the surprised looks on their faces when their exoskeletons broke my arms. ■

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