

Updated Intelligence

Tehnuka

Constable Lee

Our badgebots finished updating just in time to scan our packed gear. “Confirm arrangements for police detention legal aid.”

“Ah, there aren’t any.” We’d loaded everything else into our vehicle and sat inside, looking over the news on road conditions. “Can you send a message to all badgebots in the station?”

Within minutes, a colleague ran out to shove a dusty box through the window. “It’s an old one, we won’t miss it. Fully charged. Good luck!”

James drove. The roads were so dodgy we couldn’t trust the automated system. Occasionally I flew the drone ahead for a view of the flooding. I was relieved to see it receding, since the chest waders I’d been issued were huge, practically up to my chin.

Our briefing was about welfare checks and supporting Civil Defence. When they mentioned looting, I’d imagined people raiding hardware stores for fuel. We’re out in the wop-wops when my badgebot announces a Mr Neil Archbold reporting a potential burglary in progress. His address appears on the GPS screen, twenty minutes off our route. James stops the car in the middle of the road, as pulling over would tip us into a ditch.

“The homeowner received a supermarket order notification,” reports the auto-dispatcher, via my badgebot. “His fridge should not reorder items until stock is depleted, so this suggests an intruder.”

“Are you kidding?” says James. “His smartfridge malfunctions so he calls the police? More money than sense.”

His badgebot beeps. “Caution, value judgement.”

Weird. We exchange a look, but there’s this fridge-reported burglary to attend to.

“Is the owner on the property?”

“No, at a second residence,” says my badge. “He has the only keys to the property. He suggests the alarm system is storm-damaged or offline. His neighbour across the road stayed behind; he is concerned for her safety. I recommend deploying the drone for a situational overview.”

The drone travels ahead of us, being much faster than James’ pothole navigation. It also has a much smoother trip to the site. I stop paying attention to the nav screen showing its flight while I hang on to the oh-shit handle. When I look again, we’ve lost telemetry.

By then, there’s enough debris across the road that James insists we walk the last kilometre.

“Yeah, a drone would’ve been good at this point,” he says. I try not to be embarrassed. It wouldn’t have changed the fact we’d need to walk on a partly washed-out road and climb over fallen trees.

When we reach the address, the front windows are wide open. Circling the property, I spot the broken drone rotor poking out of the recycling bin, and a glass bottle in the muck of the lawn. The door’s ajar. Those could be footprints in the mud around the door, disappearing into standing water nearby.

There! A movement by the rundown back on the neighbouring section. “Look.”

“Probably a vagrant breaking into all the houses,” says James, after squinting.

His badgebot beeps. “Caution, implicit bias detected.”

“What are you, the thought police? Is this the latest update?” He turns to me. “Did you read the badge updates?”

“When did we have time for that?” No one ever reads the update notes, even when there is time.

Stace

The cops knocked on my door after checking Marni’s. I saw them coming, but there’s nowhere to go and it was raining again.

When I told them everyone else evacuated, they got more suspicious, asking where I’m from. I explained I live here, that it’s just Neil next door on the land my aunt sold off, and Marni trying to turn the old farm across the road into a forest, and the other neighbours were too low-lying to risk staying in their houses. They left last year.

“This is the biggest flood ever, I reckon. I mean, I’ve only been here a few years, but my aunt says her place is the safest in the valley.”

A green light flickered on the first cop’s shoulder. She was dressed in ridiculous waders, way too big. They both wore uniform shirts, and a flat rectangular patch with a green LED on the left shoulder.

They wanted proof I own or rent the cottage, but I don’t do either. I’m trying to show them texts from my aunt on my phone, then her shoulder patch says, “Confirmed legal tenancy,” or something. I hoped that would be it.

A few seconds later, it mentioned prior convictions for underage driving and releasing pest animals.

The driving was true. I was fifteen. The pest animal thing's unfair, it was just a mouse in my kitchen that I let out in a field.

"I don't see how it's legal to force us to kill baby mice," I protested.

Complaining might have been a bad idea. They said I should accompany them on suspicion of damaging police property and burglary, and something about rights and free legal advice. So I said I'd wait for that legal advice.

We had to walk to their car, climbing over logs in the rain. The woman had a little briefcase she said was for the drone. The guy walked behind us talking to his radio, and then to his shoulder patch. I had to empty water from my gumboots before climbing in their 4WD.

At least it was a free lift into town.

We park by a soccer field. It's a terrible place for a marquee—more wet grass to walk through. Turns out my guys weren't even local cops, just backup. This was a temporary post until they sorted out flooding in the station.

The drone-cop brings over a cardboard box and opens it.

When they said 'free and immediate legal advice', I wasn't expecting a roomba.

It plays a turning-on chime when she places it on the trestle table, as if it's channelling a doorbell. "Lorebot has a comprehensive database of legislation and past cases," she says, already backing out of the marquee. "I've sent it a brief with your details. I'll leave you two to it."

Mud splashes up her uniform trousers as she rejoins her cronies.

The roomba sits flashing a tiny blue light at me, faster and faster, illuminating the dust motes drifting off its back.

I fold my arms, pushing my wet clothes against my chest. I unfold them again. “I smashed up one of you already today.”

It answers after the blue light turns steady. “Yes, I understood that from my briefing.”

Lorebot sounds like the voice from every furniture sale ad. I’m not sure it can truly *understand* anything, but it cheerfully tells me it knows why I’m here. “To enable me to assist, could you please begin telling me what happened—including with the drone? I’ll have questions.”

I look around to make sure there isn’t another one buzzing nearby. The police have clustered in the corner of the churned-up field, taking their shoulder robots with them. I want to believe they’ve moved to give me and my ‘free and immediate legal advice’ privacy, but I see some upstanding citizen has actually shown up with a coffee urn and a stack of paper cups. Suck up.

“My scans detect no proximal humans or listening devices. A text interface or headset are available if you’d prefer.”

What I’d prefer is to not to ask the cops for anything. Leaving the marquee to ask for gear would no doubt trigger some sensor, so I choose to trust the lorebot.

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Most houses down the valley became derelict once the council stopped buying out flood-damaged properties. My aunt’s cottage was cut off in previous years—roads wrecked, no fresh supplies, a rough few weeks—so I knew what to expect, but I’d promised to look after the place, and where else could I go?

Neil went down south to one of his other houses. I saw his shiny ute disappear—good riddance, I didn't want to deal with that asshole in a crisis. He's been telling everyone for years this is his off-grid apocalypse hideout, even though he disappears to the city whenever things get sketchy and, as it turns out, only part of the house is off-grid.

Marni decided to evacuate to her girlfriend's after the latest forecast. I helped tetrise the kids' suitcases into her car boot.

"So I know you guys don't talk and his dog's always digging up your kūmara or whatever. As a favour, though, if you could keep an eye on things there too..."

What was I meant to do, sandbag Neil's multitude of double doorways if it looked dodgy? Couldn't his self-driving lawnmower do that for him?

Marni could have offered me a lift. She knew my car's broken down because she's the one who took me grocery shopping the last two weeks. Sure, I didn't have anywhere to go if she'd offered, but she didn't.

Even the fancy new forecasting models never get flooding right. My aunt's cottage stayed safe at the back of the section, but I didn't go out during thirty-eight hours of nonstop rain. Later, I waded across the road to check Marni's place as the sun came up. I would've texted that the bottom of her garden was buried in silt, except there was no phone signal. Cell towers down again. Or a substation flooded again. No way I'd pay for satellite phones ruining the darkness just to text neighbours who buggered off before a storm and left me with the mess.

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I'm careful about which of these details I share with the lorebot, but I do mention that part. "I gather you are not keen on the latest technology," it says. "I can understand that."

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At least it didn't mention me not being keen on the neighbours.

Neil's the opposite with tech. He has the latest gadgets. His monster of a house sits right near the road, roof covered in solar panels.

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"I opened Marni's shed to air out, then walked across to Neil's place and saw he'd left the laundry window open."

Lorebot blinks faster when I hesitate at the break-in. "I am processing your data solely for informed provision of legal advice."

"The key was in the laundry door. When I...pulled the window further, I could unlock it."

"They say you broke the window latch, could that have been an accident?"

A robot lawyer should come with a less cheerful voice. "I might have pulled quite hard."

I'd gone in, opened the windows that didn't need keys. The carpets were saturated. No alarms went off, I don't think he'd set them. It didn't occur to me about alarms until later.

"So you went in to air out the house, which was the neighbourly thing to do after flooding."

That was...a nice way of looking at it.

#

Once I checked the bottom floor I'd gone upstairs, kicking off my boots on the second step where the water hadn't reached. I don't know why. I felt wild, I guess. I did open every window. He had a full-on home theatre in one room. The third floor was a huge den with skylights, and a kitchen. I don't know why one guy needs two kitchens, but it had a big

fridge, still running, and I'd come out without breakfast. I hadn't even lit my camp stove since power went, saving gas in case it took weeks to sort. Neil has solar panels covering his roof. When the rain started again it was more comfortable to stay, with toast and a coffee machine and cold beer, the heated towel rail in every bathroom to dry my pants...

It's a ten-minute walk between our places when his lawn's underwater. I went home for my meds and pajamas but spent the night on his couch. Next morning, I checked Marni's sections again, came out to drop my pajamas at home, and found the drone hovering by the back door.

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I'm honest about the drone. "I thought it would tase me! The recycling bin was right there. I didn't think I'd actually hit it."

"You threw a glass bottle at the drone with no expectation this would help you escape?"

The cops are looking in my direction. I wonder what they're saying about me. "Are you on my side or theirs?"

"I'm programmed to provide legal advice. Given case-specific information, I can tailor my responses."

"Well, I wanted a sec to get away. And I...felt a bit wild." A robot can't understand being abandoned by neighbours. It can't care whether it's out of pity or guilt that Marni helps me.

The lorebot says I could be charged with property damage and burglary. "There may be evidence you'd entered—cameras or the drone may have seen you coming out. We shouldn't assume footage was destroyed in the crash. Admitting you broke the latch trying to get in should work in your favour. After all, you were doing a kind thing for your neighbour.

You can expect property damage charges for the drone, but that wasn't premeditated. We'll explain you're a technophobe who saw a threat."

Technophobe? Still, that's a relief.

Lorebot falls silent as the drone-cop approaches. She waves to get my attention, comes closer to hand me a paper cup of black coffee and backs off again.

"Exploiting a disaster is an aggravating factor in burglary since the 2026 amendment, but there's unlikely to be evidence of looting. You only consumed a little food. They'll be worried about missing high-value items, not fingerprinting the marmite jar. You must have mitigated property damage to a greater value than a window latch and a few beers."

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I could have run when the drone whirred into the wall and thumped onto sodden ground, but, again, nowhere to go except home to the cottage. The cops showed up before I'd decided what to do. I'd left gumboot prints everywhere and there was a broken drone in the recycling bin.

Constable Lee

The lawbot must have told our detainee to confess. Stace refused to talk beforehand, and now it's a blithe, "Yeah, I saw it and panicked."

"Just so you know," James says, "a police drone is essential lifesaving equipment. It's closer to being a dog than a camera. This is a serious charge."

Stace frowns, paper cup crumpling in thin fingers. Lawbot's blue light is blinking again.

“The maximum sentence for wilful damage is seven years. However, my case law database indicates property damage out of self-defence is likely to result in a financial penalty.”

That’s not true. I know this, given the number of people who go after our drones. They changed the laws three years ago to—ah.

“Lawbot, when was your legal database last updated? Do you have the 2048 amendment to the Crimes Act?”

The lawbot blinks faster. “That information is unavailable.”

“You don’t scan lawbots to check their updates, huh?” I tell my badgebot. “James, a word?”

James is already red-faced. We’re meant to be out reassuring the community and we’ve wasted over an hour on this detour. “Bloody useless! That bot, and whoever gave it to you, and didn’t you think to check, either?”

His badge beeps. “Caution—”

“And you’d think someone who’s been convicted twice would know what to do with a lawbot!”

His badge beeps again. “Caution. Implicit bias detected.”

“And this bloody beeping badge update! If I had that glass bottle—”

“Threat to badgebot detected. A meeting with your supervisor has been scheduled.”

I really should read those update notes. But more urgently, “James, between this confession thanks to bad legal advice by an out-of-date lawbot, and being called out for a malfunctioning smartfridge...”

Stace

The cops offer a lift home. I'm hesitating when I learn that the phone signal's back because Neil rings to say he's worried his place is flooded. Marni gave him my number. I say it was just his first floor, and I aired it, but I had to break a window and the police caught me.

"Oh! That's my bad. Something went haywire with my electronics. My alarm and cameras aren't working, so I gave them a call."

When I tell him I'm stranded in town thanks to that, he promises to cover a ride home if I can find one. He's really grateful. He's quite nice when he's grateful. That last kilometer walking back will be tough, but I'll stop by the supermarket first anyway for a six-pack and groceries. If I hide the recycling and restock his fridge, he'll never know I raided his beers.