

The Big Guy

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Everyone called him the Big Guy.

He was seven feet nine inches tall, strong as a bull, and graceful as a gazelle.

I don't think anyone could pronounce his real name, not even the guys who created him. I remember hearing them refer to him as Ralph-43 a couple of times, which kind of makes you wonder what happened to Ralphy 1 through 42.

Still, it was none of my concern. I don't get paid to think. I get paid to rebound and play defense, and once in a while, when our first two or three options are covered, to put the ball in the hoop—or at least to try.

My name's Jacko Melchik. I'm pretty tall, though nothing like the Big Guy. I'm six feet ten and I weigh 257 pounds. (Well, I did after practice this morning. Now that I've had some fluids I'm probably up around 265.) That's what I am. I'll tell you what I'm not: strong as a bull or graceful as a gazelle.

It was only a matter of time before they went out and got a better center than me, but no one ever anticipated what they wound up with: I don't know if he was a robot or an android or some other word, but I know he was the most awesome basketball player I ever saw. I'd seen old holos of Wilt the Stilt, and of Kareem and Shaq and all the others, but they looked like kids next to the Big Guy.

I still remember the day he walked out onto the court during a morning practice. Fishbait McCain—that's our coach; no one's sure how he got the nickname, but they say he once ate a bunch of nightcrawlers when he got drunk on a fishing trip—walked over to me and pulled me aside.

"I want to see what this machine can do," he said. "If he backs into the lane, keep a forearm on him, and when he goes up for a shot, give him a shove. Let's see how he handles it."

"I been reading the newsdisks," I replied. "I know what he cost. I don't want to damage him."

"He's gonna take a lot worse than that if I put him in a game," said Fishbait. "I got to know how he reacts."

"You're the boss," I said with a shrug.

"I'm glad someone around here remembers that," said Fishbait.

He clapped his hands to get the team's attention, then gestured for the Big Guy to step forward. "Men," he said, "this is our newest player. I know you've all read and heard about him. If he's half what they say he is, I think you're gonna be happy Mr. Willoughby outbid all the other owners for him."

"Jesus, he's bigger'n I imagined!" said Scooter Thornley, our point guard.

"He's bigger than anyone imagined!" chimed in Jake Jacobs, our backup power forward. "You got a name, Big Guy?"

"My name is Ralph," he answered in surprisingly human tones.

"I am pleased to meet you all, and to join the Montana Buttes."

"You can feel pleasure?" asked Doc Landrith, our trainer.

"No," said the Big Guy. "But good manners required such an answer."

"Well," said Doc, "if you don't have any emotions, at least Goliath Jepson ain't gonna scare you when you go up against him."

Jepson was leading the league in rebounds and technical fouls. I don't think anyone liked him, even his teammates.

"Okay," said Fishbait. He tossed a ball to the Big Guy.

"Let's try a little one-on-one. Ralph, let's see what you can do against Jacko here."

The Big Guy took a look at me, his face totally expressionless. I moved forward to lean on him a little, just enough to make contact and see which way he was going to move when he began his drive to the basket, but before I got close enough to touch him he'd already raced by me and stuffed the ball through the hoop.

"Again," said Fishbait.

This time I reached up to stick a hand in his face and obscure his vision. He responded with a vertical leap that must have been close to sixty inches, and swished the ball through from the three-point line.

That was the beginning of a ten-minute humiliation in which the Big Guy outquicked me, outstronged me, outjumped me, made every shot he took, and blocked all but two that I took.

We spent the next ten minutes double-teaming him. Got him to double-dribble once, and one other time I saw him move his pivot foot, but Fishbait wouldn't call it, and he beat the pair of us 30 to 0.

"Men," said Fishbait when the second humiliation was over, "I think we got us a center."

It meant that I was out of a job, at least as a starter, but how could I object? We were a pretty good team already; this was just the thing we needed to reach the next level and knock off the Rhode Island Reds for the title.

Each of us in turn walked up to the Big Guy and shook his hand and welcomed him to the team. He couldn't have been more polite, but you got the feeling he was programmed for good manners because his face and attitude were no different than when he was racing downcourt with the ball.

"And you, Jacko," said Fishbait when we were all done, "I want you to room with Ralph, help him along, show him the ropes."

"Room with him?" I repeated. "Don't you just turn him off at night and turn him on again in the morning?"

"He's a member of the team, and he's going to be treated like a member of the team. He'll travel with us, he'll room with us, if he eats, he'll eat with us." He stopped abruptly and turned to the Big Guy. "Do you eat?"

"I can, if we are in public and it is required," answered Ralph. "I will remove what I ingest later, in private, and get rid of it. Or offer it to my roommate."

"No, thanks," I said quickly.

"It will be sterile," he assured me. "I have no digestive acids."

"I'll take a pass on it anyway," I said.

"All right," said Fishbait. "We'll do a twenty-minute drill, shirts and skins. Ralph, you'll play with the shirts. Jacko, you look like you're ready to drop. Go take a shower; we'll have Jake play center for the skins. When we're done we'll bus back to the hotel. The Cheyenne press hasn't caught wind of this yet, so maybe we can get back without running into a couple of hundred reporters. Once we're in the hotel, you're free to do as you want and go where you want, except Ralph. He doesn't set foot outside the place until we catch the bus for tomorrow's game." He paused. "And you'll stay with him, Jacko."

"What for?" I asked.

"School him in our plays, show him how we set our screens, which zones we use against which offenses."

"He doesn't need all that, Fishbait," I said. "Just give him the ball and aim him."

"That just cost you a thousand bucks," said Fishbait. "Now I'm gonna ask you again, and if you give me any more lip, it'll be five thousand this time."

"You wouldn't do this if I was still your starting center," I said bitterly.

"There are a lot of things I wouldn't do if you were still my starting center," he said. "One of them is win the championship. Now go take your shower while you can still afford a towel."

Except for the referees, no one in the history of Man had ever won an argument with Fishbait McCain, so I went and took my shower. When I got back I saw that the shirts were beating the skins 38–7, and the Big Guy had 30 points, 4 assists, 6 blocked shots, and 11 rebounds, which would have been a good week's work for me.

When it was over we went back to the hotel, and I showed Ralph to our room.

"I've never seen anything like you," I said admiringly. "I'm pretty good, but you handled me like a baby. I don't think you're going to have any trouble with Goliath Jepson."

"I will not be playing against Goliath Jepson," he replied.

"Did he blow his knee again?" I said. "If it was on the news I must have missed it."

"No," answered the Big Guy. "But I am not the only prototype. At least three others will be entering the league this year, in time for the playoffs."

"Don't tell me," I said grimly. "One of them's going to play for Rhode Island."

"Yes, Jacko," he said. Then: "Will I be expected to join the team for dinner?"

"No, Fishbait gave everyone their freedom—well, everyone but you and me. I'll either go up to the restaurant on the roof or order from room service."

"And what time do you go to sleep?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe eleven."

"I never sleep," said Ralph. "Will it bother you if I use the room's computer? I will adjust it so that it makes no noise."

"Can you do that?"

"Yes."

"Okay," I said. "But do me a favor and just kind of whisper your commands until I'm asleep."

"I don't have to," he replied. "I, too, am a machine. I will simply connect to the computer, and you will hear nothing."

"Whatever makes you happy," I said. "Do you mind if I ask you a question?"

"We are teammates and roommates," he said. "You can ask me anything you want. I have no secrets from you."

"What the hell do you need to tie into a computer for? I'll diagram all our plays for you before I go to bed."

"I have a compulsion to learn," answered Ralph.

"About basketball plays?" I said, frowning.

"About everything."

"So when you're not playing basketball, you memorize the Library of Congress or something like that?"

"I choose a subject and try to learn everything I can about it, then move on to the next subject. Last night it was Egyptology, with special emphasis on the Twelfth Dynasty."

"What subject will it be tonight?" I asked.

"Your trainer asked me if I can feel emotions. I cannot. So tonight I will try to learn what I can about them. I have seen them referred to in literature, but until this morning I never realized that of all the living things on the Earth only my kind does not possess emotions."

"Are you a living thing?" I asked.

He was absolutely motionless for a full minute.

"I will explore that after I learn about emotions," he replied at last.

"Well, living or not, I'm glad to have you aboard," I said. "But I can't help being puzzled, too."

"What puzzles you?" he asked.

"You're the most remarkable machine I've ever seen, I said.

"Your motions are fluid and graceful, you seem impervious to pain—I gave you a couple of elbows that I guarantee would have decked Goliath Jepson—and you didn't even shrug them off, you just acted like nothing happened. And here you are, tying into a computer whenever you can, learning everything you can." I shook my head. "I can't believe that all they want you to do is play basketball. You should be running Harvard, or the State Department, or something."

"I am merely a prototype," he answered. "Eventually the armed forces will consist of nothing but variations of myself, for humans are too important to waste in such a futile pursuit as war. Once we have proven that we can emulate everything a human can do physically, then, under careful guidance, we will be given the ability to make value judgments, which is, after all, what separates humans from robots."

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