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The Human Factor

by D.B. Toth

Deck was a five-year man and among detectives that put him in a precarious position. No longer a rookie, but no seasoned veteran, his esteem depended on who stood next to him at the crime scene. Fresh-faced rookie detectives looked up to him, because he was cool under pressure and because he shot a cop killer from a tricky distance the year before. The old-timers treated him with undisguised scorn, because he had not yet cracked a major case.

He was at a stage in his career where he could coast for another five years and unless he screwed up, or was killed, he would be promoted to lead detective. His life was as predictable as a cop's can be.

Which is why he was surprised when they assigned him a robot partner.

January was a month of long, slow patrols, because most of the cases could be solved without the help of the Detective Squad. When Deck got off his shift on another dreary morning, he was looking forward to dinner followed by an uninterrupted eight hours of sleep. The message on his phone stopped him halfway to his car. He saw the readout, but in case he missed it, the voice in his ear repeated it in a slow, feminine drawl.

Five minutes later, the Captain slid a document across his desk. A paper printout. Synthetic paper, what with the new law to use trees for one purpose only; to produce oxygen. His fondness for paper was one of the Captain's idiosyncrasies, which nailed him as a child of the quickly passing 21st century.

Deck read the single page. It was a simple two-paragraph memo, typical of the corporate bureaucratese of upper management.

Under Amendment 5 to Directive 21, a fleet of brand-new Artificial Police Units (APUs) are to be paired with human police officers. The purpose of Amendment 5 is two-fold:

- 1. Reduce human casualties, as APUs are designed to place the lives of their human partners, (and the lives of law-abiding civilians) above their own.*
- 2. Afford APUs an opportunity to fine-tune their software through exposure to human behavior and thought pattern under real-life conditions.*

Deck pushed the paper back to the captain. He had a photographic memory and had the corporate gibberish memorized.

“What’s so special about this batch of APUs?”

“The police shrink explained it to me, but you know how he is. Basically, it’s the same old crap about programming vs. the environment. Like, can these tin cans evolve beyond their original software? These academic types never get tired of it. ”

Deck laughed.

“Evolve? That’s the biggest word I’ve heard you use, Captain.”

“Watch it,” said the Captain, but laughed along.

“Why me?”

The Captain hesitated, the telltale moment when a superior decides whether his next words will be on a professional, or a personal level.

“Probably because you’re not built for company. The brass knows you won’t try to get friendly with your partner and it’s just as well. He could be taken off the line any time the Robonerds deem necessary.”

Though the Captain spoke on a personal level, he tried to hide his rancor at the last bit. According to law, APUs fell under the direct command of the Robotics Unit of the company, which made sense because Robotics built and programmed them. It also meant that the Captain had no direct authority over the APUs in his precinct, which he felt undermined his authority. So far, no APU has ever disobeyed his orders, but that did not put his old-fashioned cop mind at ease.

Deck’s gaze wandered past the grimy window. The Captain’s office was on the 25th floor, which was just below the ceiling for civilian vehicle flight. Deck watched cars zoom by, too fast for him to make out any faces. Traffic was pretty light for rush hour.

The Captain mistook his silence for an objection.

“Look, I don’t expect you to like this. But look at the bright side. It’s trained to take a bullet for you.”

“You mean programmed to take a bullet for me. Is there anything else, Cap?”

“Yes. You’ll debrief twice a week with Dr. Selig. Mostly questionnaires about Nichols’s performance.”

“Nichols? I never met an Irish robot before.”

“Close the door on your way out, wiseass.”

The next morning, Nichols was waiting for him by the patrol car. He was a trim black man in his early 30s and looked human through and through. He even acted nervous, which Deck found endearing.

“Interesting, the way they paired us up,” Deck said as Nichols eased out of their parking slot. Deck wanted to see his reflexes and asked him to drive.

“What do you mean?”

“A black and a white cop together, like in the last century. Before the neighborhoods were integrated. They thought it would cut down on racial strife in the black neighborhoods.”

Nichols laughed.

“I don’t remember learning about that in school.”

I bet you don’t, Deck thought. He watched as Nichols piloted the car up the ramp and waited for a clear signal. He lifted the car with one smooth tap on the wheel and accelerated, banking left to join the traffic streaming out over the city. Smooth as a cloud.

The first shift went off without a hitch. Deck watched Nichols get in his private vehicle and zoom off the parking lot. Deck flew to the Psych Unit for his first appointment with Dr. Selig.

He didn't like the shrink, but liked the idea of getting paid overtime. The Psych Unit also employed the prettiest women and Deck liked talking to them, because it made him feel less guilty about never asking one of them out on a date.

"So, how was the first day?" Dr. Selig asked, leaning back in his armchair.

"Fine. He's polite, I give him that. Good reflexes, too."

"Glad to hear it."

"What's so special about him? This is a pilot study of some kind, right?"

"Yes. I tried to explain it to your boss, but I don't think he was listening. Nichols is part of a cohort who believes he is human."

"How is that possible?"

"Easy. He's programmed that way."

"He doesn't know he's a robot?"

"No. He comes fully equipped with memories, fears, even sexual desire. I'm proud to say that at my recommendation, the programmers have added a touch of *Weltschmerz*.

Periodically, he feels a sadness at the mystery of it all."

Dr. Selig made a gesture that indicated the universe beyond his windows. "Just like real people."

Speak for yourself, Deck thought.

"What's the point?"

But he could already guess. As long as a cop knew he was a robot, he would always act according to his programming. There was no data to contradict what it was wired to do. But what if he thought himself to be human?

Dr. Selig watched Deck, his eyes sharp behind his glasses.

“Your file says your Inference Skills are way above average.”

“You want to see if it will act more human with prolonged contact.”

“Precisely. You see, robotics is not a perfect science, though no engineer would ever admit that. We don’t know how they integrate new experiences, or to what extent their belief influences their actions. For example, APUs are programmed to value human life over their own. But what if they believed they were human?”

“Would they turn into cowards?”

“Something like that. The only way to know for sure is to observe them in the field.”

Deck thought about this for a while. Had the shrink ever fired a gun? Did he know what it was like to shoot at a criminal and wonder what would happen if the bullet missed its mark?

“What if someone tells him?”

“He’s programmed not to believe it. Still, don’t try it. Don’t forget you signed a confidentiality agreement when you became a cop.”

The shrink’s eyes defocused and he leaned back in his armchair.

“I envy them on some level, you know. They know neither guilt, nor doubt. Absolute faith in themselves. They live like children. Or psychopaths.

The mention of social deviants always made Deck uncomfortable and he was glad when Dr. Selig wrapped up the meeting.

The first few weeks were uneventful. The only excitement came from a homicide call. When they got to a high-end residential section of District 12, it turned out to be a bum who had fallen asleep on private property. The owner of the house had not bothered to check if he was alive before he called the cops. Deck called the corporation responsible for R&R (Relocation & Rehabilitation) and a van arrived within the mandated ten minutes.

The call made Deck uneasy, but he didn't want to tell Nichols, because every conversation in the squad car was recorded. He told himself that R&R was the only way to deal with social deviants. The old man would be fed and housed on the corporation's dime and treated for substance abuse if necessary. Then he would be matched with a job fitting his aptitude and pay off his debt to the corporation.

It made perfect sense. Deck wasn't old enough to remember when the government had a Department of Social Services. It was difficult to imagine a time when people relied on the government to deal with problems that required efficiency and logic. What was even harder to imagine was a government-run police force. His mother had told him that a hundred years ago even the City's subways were owned and run by inefficient government agencies. Run into the ground is how she had phrased it. All public transportation was privatized in the mid 21st century and the country was better for it.

Deck couldn't remember the last time he had this feeling of cold ambivalence that had to do with the world and his place in it. He kept stealing glances at Nichols, but Nichols was impassive as ever and Deck felt a tinge of envy, because Nichols didn't know how good he had it.

"Why did you become a cop?" he asked Nichols once he got the car up to cruising altitude. Flying always made him feel better, even when traffic was heavy.

“My old man was a cop. I can’t picture him without his sidearm. I’ve never wanted to be anything else.”

What a surprise, Deck thought.

“I was fascinated by that gun. It was an old model, a .45 made to look like the antiques that used to fire bullets instead of laser. One day he forgot to lock it. I was surprised at how heavy it was. Do you think they added weight to it to make it consistent with the analog models?”

Deck was starting to feel better. Talking about guns usually did that.

“It’s possible. Some people’s drug of choice is nostalgia.” Deck was surprised at his own statement. Where has he read it?

“That’s very poetic, Deck. Maybe you’re in the wrong line of business.”

They both laughed. The first light moment of the day.

“Why all the personal questions, Deck? It’s not like I know anything about you.”

“Not much to know. I became a cop because I like helping people, but not enough to be a teacher.”

“I hear you. Where are you from?”

“District 14. I lived there all the way through the academy. I moved to 21 right after my divorce.”

“Sorry to hear it.”

“21, or the wife?”

“Both,” Nichols said, smiling.

Check the box on “sense of humor,” Deck thought, thinking of the long-winded questionnaires Dr. Selig had him fill out every week.

Deck cruised the outer rim of District 16, scanning the ground for any unauthorized activity. He remembered seeing an old map of New York City that showed the original names. Instead of districts, the city was divided into five boroughs. District 16 used to be called “The Bronx”, a name that meant nothing to Deck. What was hard to believe was that all the way up to the middle of the 21st century, people in New York City lived segregated by race. It was not a forced segregation, but it may as well have been, being caused by economic factors. The area Deck was currently flying over used to house mostly people of African descent, the type Nichols was modeled after. Deck knew there was also a group called “Hispanics”, before they became mixed with whites to the point that the label became meaningless.

Life was now fair. Races were distributed evenly, according to a mathematical algorithm that ran the numbers and spread different races as evenly as possible along geographic areas that were still habitable. District 16 was no exception. It was a sleepy neighborhood of neat single-family homes that were laid down along a perfectly symmetrical grid.

“Ever have the urge to live down there, and not the Police Zone?” Deck asked.

“Only families are allowed to live in District 16”.

“I know.”

“Never.”

Deck thought he heard a moment of hesitation.

Every Tuesday and Friday, Deck stopped by Dr. Selig’s office. The shrink knew no mercy when it came to giving Deck one questionnaire after another. Most of them were multiple-choice questions about Nichol’s mental state, whether he said, or anything out of the ordinary. There were also endless questions about how Deck felt about Nichols as a partner.

What annoyed Deck most were the last few open-ended questions, which prompted him to write about anything that wasn't covered by previous probing. "Reliable partner" is what he put down on the second week, embarrassed that he could not think of anything more to say.

Two months passed this way and Deck was beginning to think that Nichols would be rotated away from him before anything hairy happened. In retrospect it seemed just a matter of time before their lull ended. Most cops never thought about it and pretended that every day would be routine.

They were patrolling District 29, where the only thing to do was to keep the windows rolled up and the pollution meter on. The call lit up the dashboard, because Deck had forgotten to turn off the silence mode, which turned audio into readouts.

5 Social Deviants in an abandoned warehouse on 163rd and M. Armed and dangerous. Three hostages. Respond immediately.

It was the "hostage" part that sealed their fate. Armed and dangerous meant securing the location and waiting for the SWAT team to storm it. Hostages meant that the closest available unit would have to engage, because every passing minute increased the likelihood of hostages being killed. "Hostage Negotiation" was not in the company's mission statement.

Looking at Nichols's face, Deck could tell the robot understood what the call meant. He had the appropriate fear response and if Deck wasn't so scared himself, he would have made a mental note to tell Dr. Selig.

Nichols banked sharply to the right, bringing Deck back to the present.

"Two minutes to location," Nichols said, glancing at the readout. His voice was steady.

Deck recited the little information Central Command had beamed out after the original transmission.

“Weapons, military grade. Five automatics. Motive unknown.”

The last part was the trickiest. A drone could tell you all the facts it gleaned from infrared searches, but no technological tool could tell you why five people holed themselves up with three hostages. They could be crankheads, hoping to exchange the hostages for drugs, or revolutionaries protesting one, or all five factions of the coalition government.

Nichols lowered the car the ground level and, as per protocol, set it to hover at a few inches above the ground. The warehouse was a an ugly squat building with no distinguishing features except for a wide, dented door that was painted an optimistic blue. There was another entrance on the other side, but the heat sensor pinpointed the deviants closer to this one.

They jumped out of the car together, but Nichols reached the trunk first. He threw Deck his Deflection Vest. Deck put his head through the sleeve and felt the straps and harnesses snaking over his shoulder blades and torso and heard the overloud click of the buckle. Normally, putting on the vest made him feel safe. Today he felt that the contraption was trying to suffocate him.

Nichols was eyeing the door, holding a flashbang. Deck flipped the on switch of his assault rifle and Nichols followed suit. In a hostage situation, the rules of the game went out of the window. No entry through the back door, no sneak-and-peak around the corner and scanning the area with night vision. No time. They knew the location of the deviants and that will have to do. The rest was up to the element of surprise, a tactic which never became outdated, no matter what the advances in weaponry.

“I’ll go first,” Nichols said. “I’ll go right, you take left. With any luck, they’ll fire at the door.”

Deck looked at Nichols. Programmed as he was to take a bullet for a human, Nichols did not look ready.

Which should not have been any of Deck's concern.

"Nichols, I have three years on you. Usually that means jack, but right now, it could mean everything."

Nichols hesitated, undoubtedly confused at the contradictory orders running through his circuit. On the one hand, he was programmed to obey a human police officer; on the other he was wired to put the life of any law-abiding human above his own.

Before Nichols could make up his mind, Deck pried the flashbang from his partner's fingers and pitched it against the door. It tore the door off its hinges and blew it inward in a gorgeous melding of sight and sound that drew Deck's admiration.

Deck charged after it. He rolled left and came up to a shooting position. He scanned the warehouse through the heavy smoke and though he could hear nothing, he could feel the shooters on the other side. He got to his feet and keeping low to the ground, pushed forward. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Nichols coming up on his right flank.

The first shooter came firing through the smoke. He fired at the door, noticed Deck and swung his rifle. Deck took him out with a textbook headshot. The second shooter came right behind the first and fired wild. Deck felt a cold pain in his left leg that drove him to his knee. His rifle fell from his hands.

They should have had him then, they would have had him if they were professionals and not confused by the smoke and the echo that made it sound like every bullet flew in a thousand directions at once. Deck heard the hollow thunk of Nichols's rifle and the second shooter went

down. A third emerged from the deep shadows to Nichols's right and Nichols shot him before he had a chance to fire.

That left two shooters. They had evened the odds in less than thirty seconds. Deck reached for his gun, ignoring the pain and rolled to his left, just as the fourth shooter fired at him. And missed. He heard Nichols cry out in pain and hit the deck and for a split-second, it did not seem possible they could recover. Not with both of them down and two shooters still standing. In the end, what saved them was practice; he and Nichols had it, the shooters did not. Any fool could fire a rifle, but accuracy only came after firing thousands of rounds.

Nichols fired from a lying position, catching the fourth man in his leg. The man dropped his weapon and curled up into a ball of wretched pain. Deck grabbed his rifle and lay on his stomach, scanning the warehouse. He was hoping that the fifth man would lose his head and charge instead of pulling back to the hostages.

There was momentary silence, weighed down by the smell of blood and smoke, a combination that made most men sick to their stomachs. To Deck, it was beautiful in its primitive madness.

The fifth shooter charged through the smoke in a way that reminded Deck of the World War III movies he saw as a kid. He didn't see Deck and fired at Nichols, who did not cry out, which hopefully meant that the shooter had missed his mark.

Deck didn't. He hit the shooter in the chest with a shot that pushed him back a few inches. He crashed to the ground and was still. Deck tried to get to his feet. He had to make sure that whoever was down stayed down and that meant a bullet to the head. But he could hardly move. The leg must be worse than he thought, but this was not the time to examine it.

"You all right?" Nichols cried out.

“Yeah. You?”

“Nearly blew my arm off, but I’m okay.”

“One of them got me in the leg. I can’t see how bad it is.”

“Don’t look at it,” Nichols said. “I’m coming to you.”

“No. Check on the hostages first.”

Tell me all this wasn’t in vain, Deck added in thought. He could hear Nichols getting to his feet and running off. His steps echoed in the cavernous warehouse.

Deck rolled over on his back and closed his eyes. The crazy shrink was right. Nichols let him go first. Let a human go first and take all the risk. Self-preservation above all else. They *are* becoming more like us.

He heard footsteps again and opened his eyes to see Nichols staring down at him. Behind him stood a middle-aged man wearing the robe of a civil servant and next to him, a woman with wild eyes. His wife?

“All three civilians okay,” Nichols said and smiled that perfect smile of his. His right arm was wrapped in a primitive tourniquet. Before Deck could ask who the third person was, a child peeked this head from behind his mother’s legs.

“Thanks mister,” the boy said and when he saw Deck’s leg, his expression became troubled. Must be much worse than it feels, Deck thought. There was no more pain, just a numbness that was not all unpleasant.

He reached out to Nichols, who grabbed his arm with his free hand and pulled him up to a kneeling position. Though Nichols did his best to hide his injured arm, Deck saw a dark stain spreading through his tourniquet. A faint suspicion ran through Deck. He held Nichol’s gaze and his partner’s eyes, somewhere between sad and concerned, told him the truth.

A robot is always ready to sacrifice its life for a human.

Even if the robot believes he is human.

When Deck looked down at his injured leg, he was not surprised to see the dangle of wires protruding from his lifeless stump.