

Non Compliance

Asimov's Robots - 0

Greg Toland

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The huge skyscraper that was the head office building of US Robots and Mechanical Men, Inc., towered above the many domes that were beginning to cover what was old New York. Its glass and chrome sides caught the mid-morning sun and reflected the rays of light across Central Park, one of the few remaining truly open green areas of the country. Deep down in its multi-level basement, two middle-aged men were working in the archives. Greg Powell blew the dirt off yet another pile of old manuscripts, creating clouds of dust which were almost magnetically drawn towards Mike Donovan.

Donovan sneezed violently for the hundredth time that day.

“Greg! That’s it! I’m out of here!” he exploded.

He rose slowly from the desk where he had been working and headed towards the exit. The years had been reasonably kind to him, and although his red thatch of hair had now turned very gray, he still moved in his old excitable manner.

Mike left the basement level and rode the elevator from the depths of the building to the top floor. The doors opened silently. He left the elevator and made his way to the refreshment area where he drew himself a coffee from the dispenser and sat at an empty table near the window overlooking the park. A few minutes later, Powell stood over him with his coffee and a peace offering of cookies.

“Sorry, Mike,” he said contritely, nodding for permission to sit down with Donovan.

“Oh, take that hangdog expression of your face and sit down!” he said with a smile, “I know it’s not your fault were down in the dumps.”

“But I ask you,” said Powell, “The two greatest field operatives that US Robots and Mechanical Men has ever had, reduced to this, librarians!”

Pete Jones and Sharon Williams leaned across from the adjacent table. “The ex-greatest field operatives,” said Williams, “Age catches up with everyone, you know. Working with these new-model robots requires youth, virility. Erk!”

She probably would have said more but had to duck the sugar cubes that came flying across the table at her.

“Get out of here and take that other baby with you!” said Powell with more than a hint of jealousy in his voice, “Anyway, where are you off to next?”

A new assignment on the International Space Station working with the ‘gravity-free’ robots that are being developed for interplanetary flights. I think they’re called the Geoff series,” replied Jones.

“Zero gravity should suit you quite nicely,” retorted Donovan, “Should help manage those overgrown heads you’ve both developed!”

“Any problems on them yet?” asked Powell, curious as to what might be happening.

“No, it’s all pretty straightforward from what we hear,” answered Jones, trying to be nonchalant.

Williams, however, pulled a face. “Well, the truth is there are some significant problems. The lack of gravity is causing difficulties during the development cycle on Earth because they are not able to recreate a suitable environment. That means that the robots are spending too much time processing the differences between what they are told to expect and what actually happens. The theory is that when they are in a gravity-free environment they will operate more naturally.”

Powell chipped in. "That sounds similar to a problem we had with a series of robots on the asteroid mining project!"

He would have continued, but Jones and Williams, with big grins on their faces, feigned synchronized yawns and made to leave. They then had to hurriedly leave the refreshment area accompanied by a further barrage of sugar cubes.

After they left, Donovan turned to Powell and said, "The trouble is, I am jealous of the work that they are doing. Wouldn't you love to be up there again battling with recalcitrant robots and the elements?"

"Of course I would," replied Powell, "But rules are rules, and nobody over 55 is allowed to do field operative work anymore. Anyway, in all honesty I think we are too old for this game. It is as much a young person's game now as it ever was in our day."

Donovan was about to respond that he was still in his first flush of youth, but then thought better of it. His balding head and the aches that now accompanied his early morning exercise regime made him realize the truth in Powell's words.

The two men sat for a few minutes in silence, each reminiscing about their days with Speedy on Mercury, Dave in the mines, and their other adventures as the leading operatives in the pioneering days of robot development.

Eventually, Powell broke their reverie with a glance at his watch. "I suppose we'd better get back to it; that work will not do itself."

As they made their way back to the lower levels of US Robots headquarters, Donovan suddenly had a thought. "Greg, why don't we write our memoirs? We've got a lot of material from the field work we could use."

They continued their work through the afternoon with a bit more enthusiasm as they thought out what they would include in their masterpiece. A few arguments took place as they disagreed over

who actually solved some of the problems they had encountered, but most were resolved. They both knew in their hearts, if not their minds, that their strength was as a team, not individuals.

As a result of the distractions of their memoir planning, they only managed to get through the first half of the main archive room before they called it a day.

The following morning, they returned to the lower levels to continue. Donovan moved the last rack of books in the row, exposing a large crate.

It was about 2 meters long by 1 meter wide and had obviously been left there for a number of years as it was covered with a thick layer of dust.

“What’s this?” Donovan said as he leafed his way through the manifest they had been issued with, “It’s not on the itinerary.”

They cleared the top of the crate of a few books that had fallen behind the rack.

“Look, it’s an old robot transportation box,” said Powell. He cleared the dust off the identification label. “Have you ever heard of the DN series?”

“Nope, it’s not one I’m aware of” as it was early in the morning I suppose we could call it the Dawn series!

“Dreadful pun, but it’ll do for now,” grimaced Powell, “Let’s get it open and see what’s inside.”

They undid the magnetic locks and slid back the lid, revealing a humanoid robot which still looked in good condition. It was modern in its appearance but had suffered some corrosion and the head had a

red sheen from what was apparently rust particles from the crate. Also in the transportation crate was a smaller box with the power unit inside. Powell opened up the robot and started to insert the power unit. Donovan reached over and grabbed his arm.

◆◆◆What are you doing, Greg?◆◆◆

◆◆◆What do you think I◆◆◆m doing? I◆◆◆m going to power it up.◆◆◆

Donovan was about to point out the risk of its shorting and starting a fire, but instead he just shrugged his shoulders. ◆◆◆I imagine the power supply is probably dead anyway.◆◆◆

He reached into the box and pulled out the robot◆◆◆s manual. ◆◆◆Hey, it◆◆◆s an early librarian model.◆◆◆

Donovan started to read out loud from the introduction: ◆◆◆The DN series of robots have been developed to provide all of the functionality of a human library and information expert. It is capable of reading, categorizing, filing and storing all library material within its knowledge banks. This can include manuscripts, books, tapes, CD-ROM◆◆◆s.◆◆◆

He trailed off with a grin on his face. ◆◆◆Are you thinking what I◆◆◆m thinking, Greg?◆◆◆

◆◆◆I◆◆◆m ahead of you, Mike,◆◆◆ said Powell as he threw the switch initiating the robot.

They stepped back and watched as first the photocell eyes flickered into life and then the robot rose smoothly to its feet. It stood there looking at them for a moment and then spoke.

◆◆◆What can I do for you, sir?◆◆◆

Powell looked at Donovan. "What a peculiar sounding voice."

It was definitely feminine but there was something else about it that they could not place; it was quite an old sounding dialect.

Donovan picked up the robot's manual again and continued to read.

Fully functional positronic brain, soft pad fingers for delicate material handling, Schipol feet for silent movement.

He trailed off into mumbling as he continued to flick through the manual. "No, nothing else in here to explain that strange accent in the voice. It could just be the age of the robot; after all, it is..." he paused to look at the front page, "Wow, this robot was manufactured in the year 2011! That's before we started our field operative work."

"Well, never mind that," said Powell, "Let's get Dawn working on this material and take it easy for the rest of the assignment. Dawn, let's make a start on these CD-ROMs and tapes. Get them categorized then filed."

He passed the disks and tapes to the robot, which just stood looking at them. Although the metal face had no expression, Powell almost imagined he could see a blank look in it.

"What's wrong?"

The robot turned to look at him. "What are these, sir?"

It was now Powell's turn to look blank. "Mike, what do you make of this? Do you think it's a fault in the positronic brain? Perhaps that's why it was re-boxed."

◆◆◆No, I don't think so. The reactions appear about normal.◆◆◆

Powell reached into his back pocket and pulled out the Handbook of Robotics that was the bible of every field operative. He still used a very battered, much annotated paperback version of the handbook rather than the more modern e-book version being used by some of the younger field operatives. He started on the basic diagnosis tests.

Twenty minutes later, he sat back in his chair still puzzled.

◆◆◆Well, as far as I'm concerned, she is in perfect working order. The sight functions are acceptable, hearing module has a slight fault, but no real problem except in noisy conditions. I don't understand why she doesn't recognize the material.◆◆◆

◆◆◆Perhaps she doesn't want to do the task,◆◆◆ volunteered Donovan.

◆◆◆Mike, why do you have to see a conspiracy every time something goes wrong with a robot?◆◆◆ exclaimed Powell.

◆◆◆Just one of my endearing features,◆◆◆ smiled Donovan,
◆◆◆Well, assuming she understands what it is we want, why isn't she doing her job?◆◆◆

◆◆◆Succinct and to the point as usual,◆◆◆ replied Powell,
◆◆◆What do you want to do next, then? Give up, re-create her, and forget about it, or try to solve this mystery?◆◆◆

◆◆◆Phrased that way, how can we resist a challenge?◆◆◆ said Donovan, rolling up his sleeves.

For the next hour they worked with Dawn, passing her material and getting her to classify it or reject it, and analyzed the result of her decisions.

At the end of the hour, Powell looked at his notes and started to summarize.

◆◆◆ Well, as I see it, what we have is a robot librarian that can work with paper documents, books, etchings, et cetera, but not CD◆◆◆s, tapes, microfiche◆◆◆◆◆ he trailed off in thought.

Donovan chipped in: ◆◆◆ I cannot see a pattern; it◆◆◆s not that they are all electronic ◆◆◆ microfiche is definitely physical. In fact, it◆◆◆s quite out of date now and hasn◆◆◆t really been used since the end of the last century.◆◆◆

◆◆◆ That◆◆◆s it!◆◆◆ exclaimed Powell.

◆◆◆ What◆◆◆s it?◆◆◆ asked Donovan with a puzzled look on his face, ◆◆◆ If I got the answer, I don◆◆◆t know how.◆◆◆

◆◆◆ Do you remember in some of our early courses at college how some of the rudimentary computers of the late 20th century had a particular problem with what came to be known as the Millennium Bug?◆◆◆ said Powell.

◆◆◆ Ah, yes. It was all about lack of planning, wasn◆◆◆t it?◆◆◆

◆◆◆ Well, sort of. Who would have thought that some of those computers would have been working 15 minutes after they were made, let alone 15 years!◆◆◆ replied Powell, ◆◆◆ I actually did some of my science history thesis on that subject and◆◆◆◆◆

◆◆◆◆◆ it◆◆◆s probably somewhere in these dusty piles,◆◆◆ finished off Donovan, ◆◆◆ So what has this got to do with the price of eggs?◆◆◆

◆◆◆ Everything, if Dawn here is non-Y2K compliant, ◆◆◆ replied Powell. ◆◆◆ Year 2000 compliant, that is, ◆◆◆ he added before Donovan could ask the next question.

◆◆◆ And what happened to those machines that were non-compliant? ◆◆◆

Donovan jumped in to answer his own question before Powell could continue his ◆◆◆ lecture. ◆◆◆ ◆◆◆ Wait, I know. They defaulted to an earlier date, generally January 1, 1980 ◆◆◆ but some of the machines defaulted all the way back to 1900. ◆◆◆

◆◆◆ So, ◆◆◆ joined in Powell, ◆◆◆ Dawn here thinks that it is the turn of the century: January the first in the year one thousand nine hundred. William McKinley is president of what used to be known as the United States of America, Victoria I is queen of the United Kingdom, and microfiche, CD-ROM ◆◆◆s and the like don't exist, probably not even in the science fiction of the day. ◆◆◆

◆◆◆ Which means that Dawn here can only work with things that exist in her world, so bang goes the idea of saving our time down here, ◆◆◆ Donovan exclaimed in frustration.

◆◆◆ Why? ◆◆◆ said Powell, ◆◆◆ She can still file the old-fashioned dusty stuff, and that will save us considerable time and effort. ◆◆◆

◆◆◆ Hey, that is a thought, ◆◆◆ said Donovan, cheering up as he led her towards the next aisle of books and files, ◆◆◆ Let ◆◆◆s get her started. ◆◆◆

He began to instruct her: ◆◆◆ Dawn, here are 14 aisles of books, files and papers. Please categorize them by age and subject and

record the information for archival storage. After that, we can get them crated for long-term storage and eventual disposal. ❖❖❖

The robot turned to the first rack, began carefully to take down the boxes of papers, and started to scan them.

Donovan turned to Powell. ❖❖❖ Well, that ❖❖❖s all we should have to do in the dirty environment. Let ❖❖❖s get the last few of these electronic media out of the way. ❖❖❖

As they both moved away, Dawn opened up a box of manuscripts among the early science fiction works section. The first manuscript, typed on an old manual typewriter, was headed ❖❖❖ The Snows of Pluto ❖❖❖ and she began to scan the content:

David Starr looked down the long slope that led away from the base dome on Pluto. The snow, actually frozen ammonia, glistened from the searchlights mounted outside of the curved dome surface. He checked the fastenings on his skis prior to setting off on his cross-planet trek.

Dawn moved across the aisle and placed the document in the fantasy section under unpublished work/not to be reviewed further and turned to the next document.

THE END