

Like many other servobot models, the DG-series was capable of fully automated maintenance. While incredibly convenient for owners, the Mechanoid and Robot Repair Union lobbied strongly against the capability, claiming manufacturers were descending a 'slippery slope'.

Argyle Electronics' RGN-series of hyper-realistic androids was, infamously, able to fully detach its head unit for cleaning. Given the altogether lifelike appearance of the unit, it was invariably terrifying when performed. This ultimately proved to be a public-relations nightmare, when faulty locking clips led to widespread accidental detachment. But, in a parting stroke of marketing genius, Argyle sold the remainder of their stock to a starship crash-testing firm and promptly disappeared.

'Is that what you do down here?' Felicia said, rifling through an open toolbox. 'Stand around and leak everywhere?'

'I PERFORM A NUMBER OF VITAL TASKS RELATED TO THE MAINTENANCE AND PROPER USE OF OUR DEFENSIVE CAPABILITIES.'

Felicia smiled as she pulled a large thermo-spanner out from amongst the tools. If it was possible for a servobot to bluster, she reckoned Doug was doing a good job of it. Her fingers picked absent-mindedly at a spot of rust on the spanner.

'Don't you ever want to do something else?'

'I DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT.'

He flipped open a narrow compartment just beneath his left arm and retrieved a tool which looked something like a cross between a screwdriver and a parsnip, then tapped it smartly against the bulkhead in several places.

'I mean don't you ever feel like... you were made to do something more?'

Doug's head turned to look at her, his mood bulb blinking incredulously.

'I WAS BUILT TO SERVE THE IMPERIAL STAR CORPS AS A TACTICAL OFFICER. SERVOBOTS ARE NOT ELIGIBLE FOR PROMOTION.'

'Maybe that was the wrong way of putting it.'

Doug swivelled back to face the bulkhead and tapped on it again. After a few seconds, he looked suspiciously at the tool, then tossed it over his shoulder where it clattered to the floor.

'BROKEN,' he said, and pulled a new device from the same compartment as before. This one resembled a ballpoint pen, except it was half a metre long and had a blinking red light on one end. He held it up in the air at a slight angle and stared at the little bulb.

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Without warning, the fish surged forwards into the tank wall. Buck leapt backwards, fell over his mop, and landed sharply on the wet tiles. He let out a cry of pain as the equipment clattered across the floor, coming to a stop several feet away. As he struggled to his feet, the fish stared down at him. There was a smugness in its vacant expression which caused Buck to erupt in rage.

'What?! What do you want?' he bellowed, but it only opened its mouth, then closed it again. Being in something of a bad mood, Buck interpreted this as some kind of threat.

'Look at you!' he shouted, pointing viciously at the fish. 'Who are you to judge me, you water-breathing bastard? I could get out of here any time I want.'

'Give me a week to myself and I could be two, maybe even three floors higher,' he said, gesticulating wildly and clearly unaware of the ridiculous nature of conversing with a fish. 'After that? Who knows! Born to be a penthouser, that's me.'

Gradually, the self-confident smile evaporated.

'But what do you know?' he said, as the fish thudded stupidly against the plastiglass. 'You've

never even seen outside this place.'

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The intra-ship lift doors opened with a satisfying 'swoosh', and Breaker, reclining in the command chair, looked up from his portable game. Drake entered the bridge, his face a picture of determination as he scanned the bridge. Breaker stood up uncomfortably, smoothing out the creases in his uniform, then saluted in Drake's general direction.

'The, um... ah...,' he began, 'Drake is... er...'

Drake frowned slightly, folding his arms as Breaker struggled through his announcement.

'Captain! That's the one. The Captain is here. On the bridge... That is to say, the Captain is on the bridge.'

He looked around, smiling awkwardly. Drake shook his head and moved to the command chair, sitting down in a kind of relaxed-yet-confident manner which he thought made him look quite cool. In reality, it made him look a little distressed, as if he was trying to avoid sitting on a damp spot.

'What's our status?' he said to no-one in particular. The bridge crew shifted uneasily. Drake raised a solitary eyebrow.

'What's the matter? Ulta beast got your tongue?' He paused to allow himself a silent chuckle. Someone coughed from behind a computer screen and Breaker became suddenly fascinated with an imaginary spot on the ceiling.

Finally, one of the younger officers spoke up. 'We're, um, we're on course, Sir,' his voice cracked. A crewman sitting nearby shook his head vigorously towards the man, eyes wide in fear, until he noticed Drake looking at him and very quickly got back to work.

'On course, eh?' Drake raised himself up in his seat. 'On course to where?'

The officer looked around, confused, but everyone suddenly seemed to be very busy. He swallowed hard.

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The two men entered the operations room, where the others sat waiting. The fresh-pine smell of polished furniture was a stark contrast to the stale, sweaty air on the bridge, and the sudden change made Conway sneeze. He wiped his nose awkwardly on his sleeve. Breaker placed his video game back into his pocket, while Felicia sat up and looked quizzically at Conway. Drake hurried him to his place at the table and presented him to the group, clapping his large hands onto the newly-promoted officer's shoulders.

'This is Lieutenant Conway, our new head of Intelligence and Espionage,' he said, thrusting Conway downwards into the seat before marching back to his own.

Breaker regarded the new arrival with a mixture of curiosity and incredulity, and he risked leaning a little closer.

'You're the head of Intelligence and Espionage?' he whispered.

Conway shrugged.

'I don't know... maybe?' he offered.

Breaker raised his eyebrows and turned to Felicia.

'He's good.'

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The surface of Nuthendooine is no stranger to craters. Over the millennia, countless pockmarks and scars have been scattered across the planet and baked under the heat of the three mourning suns. It was with nothing more than an unsurprised sort of shrug, then, that the planet received the latest torrid hole in its landscape.

A column of smoke rose gracefully up above the flat, dusty terrain, a beacon of rising ashes from the point of impact, but there was no sign of life for miles around. Even a flock of famously bold Orvanian warble-fangs had caught a whiff of something peculiar and decided to call it a day. It was a smell like nothing else; an orangey, frustrated sort of smell, but crispy and a little scorched around the edges.

The winds of a distant storm felt their way gently across the ground with barely enough strength to stir the earth around the rim of the crater. In the centre of the hole jutted a buckled cylinder of burnt metal, like a giant tin can had fallen from the great supermarket in the sky.

The escape pod door hissed angrily, releasing a cloud of steam from around its edges as the seals reluctantly loosened their grip. A large, central panel inched forwards slightly, then began to heave itself to one side, revealing the shadowy interior. It might have looked rather dramatic, had the mechanism not managed to get stuck halfway.

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Drake pounded down the corridor with the stern-faced purposefulness that can only be achieved when you've either got a really good idea or desperately need to relieve yourself. In both cases, it pays to keep your wits about you on a battle cruiser. A lower-ranking crew member didn't spot Drake's one-man freight train barrelling down on him until it was too late. While simultaneously trying to salute and leap to safety, he was shoved into a computer relay cabinet, which promptly slammed shut.

'Drake!' shouted Felicia, barely able to walk fast enough.

'Keep up, Lieutenant,' Drake replied without so much as a backwards glance. 'We've got a plan to put into action.'

Felicia quickly stepped around and stopped Drake in his tracks – a dangerous move, by any stretch of the imagination.

'No – you've got a plan,' she said. 'What about my input? What about Breaker?'

She pointed to the puffing, wheezing mess, stumbling along the corridor some way behind them.

'Don't.... don't worry about... me!' Breaker shouted breathlessly. 'I think I might... have a bit of a sit-down, though.'