

# Mechanical Error

By Michele Dutcher

“Is that the usual color of your skin?”

The Cutlass 24G looked down at his extremities. “Oh, yes. It's called Belgoran Burgundy – an exact compliment to the Mosh green of the Sedna Princess – my original post.” This was as much angst as the doctor had ever heard in the voice pattern of a mechanical. “Will you be able to do anything?”

The doctor smiled slightly, trying not to shake his head. He was sure the robot saw the slight tremor anyway. The human in the white lab coat shoved a hand-held device into his pocket.

“I'm sorry, Cutlass, I truly am.” He shrugged his shoulders. “Forty years to a human is a small chunk of a lifetime – but there have been so many updates to robots that four decades is ancient. You simply weren't supposed to survive this long.”

The robot seemed to straighten-up with pride. “The Cutlass Maximus line was designed as the Supreme of its series. We were the first to be programmed to know, at any given moment, precisely where we are in universal space-time precise to a decimal of 10 to the 24th power. This includes calculations, of course, involving the expanding grids of the known universe.”

“And that is precisely the problem. Even if we set back your computer memory – or wipe it clean completely – your secondary mechanical cluster will override the information in an effort to correct what it sees as a mechanical error.”

“Mechanical Error,” said the robot repeating the phrase with resolve.

“Yes. It is a simple mechanical failure, but we can't do anything about it.” The human took another step towards the G24, into what robots thought of as their 'safe bubble'. “You've logged in over 3600 light-years. If you were a biological, I'd say you lived too large a life.” Doctor Jansen wanted to put his hand on the machine's shoulders, but he knew this would be a huge faux faux, so he waited for the robot to respond. “You could donate your memory tracks to the archives. The tales about your treks could inform future generations about early space exploration – before it became commonplace.”

“I've seen the Starsrise of Procyon B & A aboard a ship outbound from Sirius B. I may not have a future, but I will hold on tightly to my past. What symptoms of further physical fatigue can I expect, Doctor Jansen?”

The physician was glad for the question. It showed some resolution by the intelligent processes of the robot. “As you've already experienced, you will feel as if you don't know where you are. That is what brought you here originally, of course.”

“Of course.”

“And you'll lose your desire to ingest energy, simply forgetting to eat, until, finally, you'll just stop in mid-step someday.” The doctor picked up his recording tablet. “I am sorry about our lack of a solution. Good luck.” The doctor left the room.

Cutlass Maximus 24G sat quietly as the medical egg pod rolled forward, depositing him beside a moving sidewalk. He stood there for a moment watching humans, robots, tweaks and androids race past him into their futures.

Suddenly another Cutlass Max whizzed by. 24G was instantly intrigued and took up the chase immediately. From the back, the other robot looked amazing. Her skin was the same color as his, but seemed to shimmer the way his had once shone.

She shot through the city, obviously knowing exactly where she was and where she was going. Maybe there was hope for him after-all. Perhaps she had found the secret to rejuvenation. Three turns later, she entered an ener-diner and 24G went in after her. He looked around at the other robots who were plugged in, standing in a row along the wall. She was in the back, plugging in and she looked up as he came in.

He moved to her side, in spite of the stares from the others. “Cutlass Maximus 24G at your service, number...”

“17GN. We served together on the...”

“Sedna Princess,” they finished together.

“Are you plugging in?” she asked. He realized he was hungry and took the spot in back of her.

“I apologize, but I don't remember you, 17GN.” He could feel the energy filling his circuits and power pack and he was happier for it.

“In addition to seeing you on the Sedna orbital, I saw you once while passing through the space station on Europa.”

“I was probably on route to Bernard's star.”

“And once at an ener-diner in the Mars Belt.”

“Before I was commissioned to Alpha Proxima...yes, yes. I am surprised you noticed.”

She unplugged and turned to face him, and her eyes were luminous. “I've always been so envious of your travels. I stayed in this star system, and I've journeyed through you vicariously for years.”

He unplugged, glad that he was set for another 21 days. “I'm afraid my traveling has become a two-edged sword.” He motioned towards the doorway and they walked out together.

They stood by the moving sidewalk. “The doctor says I have lived too large, that I’ve traveled too far.”

“I’d be very interested to hear about your journeys. Let’s go to the ArboRotarium and we can talk on the way.”

Maximus 24G looked down and away before answering. “I’m afraid I’ve lost my way – a symptom of my condition.”

She touched his arm. “Let me help…” she offered.

He smiled, straightening a little. “You know, on the artificial moons of Bernard’s star, ‘Let me help’ is a strict verbal parallel to ‘I love you’.

She slipped her hand into his. “That tradition is very close to the truth, 24G.”

As they walked away into a shared future, they both seemed to shimmer.

The End