

Testing the Jac Drones

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The soothing sounds of flowing water permeated a spacious room aboard the Hyperion. A tall waterfall flowed down one of the walls, feeding a short river that led into a modest lake. Wide windows provided scenic views of space. Jac took a moment to simply admire it all before getting to work. The pool toy fox held a box with a stylized picture of himself on the side, along with the words “Jac Drone 0802”.

Jac opened the box and pulled out a neatly folded pool toy. He pressed a button—prompting a steady *hisssssssss*—then tossed the vinyl square into the air. Instantly the pool toy started to regain its shape, rapidly filling with air. There was a constant barrage of creaks from the stretching vinyl. The pool toy had inflated just enough to land on its paws when it hit the ground, swaying back and forth as it continued to puff up. After less than a minute the pool toy was fully inflated.

Just as its name implied, the drone resembled Jac to a considerable degree. The unboxed model was a little bit taller and puffier for handling labor-intensive tasks around the ship, with a painted-on grin rather than the actual Jac's expressive face.

“Drone 0802 reporting for duty, sir!” The drone gave its master a sharp salute.

“At ease,” Jac said, poking away at a datapad.

In general the Jac drones met expectations, performing their duties well enough to make Jac's life a bit easier. Still, there was always room for improvement. As of late there'd been one too many accidents that had led to labor drones being turned into flailing blimps, and while some had been unavoidable, most had been the direct result of embarrassing missteps.

Drones knocking over volatile gas canisters and making no effort to seal them, merely waddling along as they inflated until they were unable to move. Artifacts mishandled, the drones carrying them left floating on the ceiling once security countermeasures activated. Jac had even once stumbled across a water-logged drone filling an entire artificial lake, having apparently decided to chug its contents after falling in and getting stranded.

At times the accidents gave Jac a good chuckle, though he couldn't help but be disappointed that the drones made in his image kept ending up in such embarrassing predicaments. Changes would need to be made to their programming, but before that could happen some tests would be run to determine how the drones reacted under certain conditions. That most of the tests would involve Jac blimping up the drones himself was simply a coincidental bonus.

“Alright 0802, I need you to move the gas canister next to the waterfall over to the cart by the lake,” Jac said. “And do make sure to keep it intact.”

“By your command!”

The drone saluted once more before heading in a straight line towards its objective. Jac kept his distance, setting the room's cameras to record the test from multiple angles. As soon as the canister was picked up, Jac poked his datapad.

The canister automatically switched on, hissing as it gradually released its contents. Unlike regular air, the gas would innately attempt to store itself. Pressure prevented it from reentering the canister, leaving the drone as the best next space.

Almost immediately 0802's belly began to balloon outward, the creaks audible even to Jac. Despite the various alerts on the canister, the noises of gas escaping and expanding, and the obvious changes in the drone's body, 0802 showed no sign of concern. From the looks of things the drone hadn't even noticed anything was wrong in the slightest.

Soon 0802 had gone from puffy to bloated. It waddled towards the awaiting cart, growing bigger and squeakier and creakier with every step. Jac shook his head as he started taking notes. In all likelihood the drone would be immobilized by the time it reached the cart. Its task would be completed, technically, but Jac drones certainly weren't the preferred container for storing volatile gasses.

0802 didn't break expectations. The drone's body inevitably became too round, 0802 tripping over its puffy paws and right onto its spherical middle. It managed to avoid losing its grip on the canister somehow, which was impressive. Rounder and rounder the Jac drone grew, limbs swelling to domes. There was a chorus of *creaaaaaaaaaaaaaks* and *squirrrrrrrrks* coming from the pool toy's body, drowning out the hisses of the canister and the splashing of water. The drone was flailing, but in a way that hinted at it attempting to wobble its way to the nearby cart.

As Jac observed, his visor began to give off pressure warnings in regards to the blimping drone. 0802 had reached its limit.

A tear appeared in a seam near the drone's valve, preceding a thunderous boom as 0802 popped. Despite the rupture, 0802 remained mostly intact. A few small scraps of vinyl flew from the whole in its belly, the drone rocketing backwards from the force of the gas escaping it all at once. Without air the drone quickly went into standby mode, a motionless pile of vinyl on the ground.

Jac patiently waited for the inflation gas to return to its original canister after the drone had been burst. He talked to himself as he approached the fallen drone.

"Sample drone currently follows orders too literally. Doesn't adapt to unexpected situations, even when they could jeopardize task in immediate future. Will perform one additional test with existing programming, but I suspect a tweaking of their independence will be necessary." Jac sighed as he looked down upon 0802. "But first I'll need a patch kit."

A few minutes—and one patch application—later, and Jac was ready for renewed testing. He activated the drone, once more treated to a serenade of hissing and creaks as 0802 self-inflated. The pool toy patch was a temporary measure, its solid black color standing out noticeably. Permanent repairs could wait until later.

"Drone 0802 reporting for duty, sir!"

"Yes, yes, I know. 0802, I need you to try transporting the gas canister to the cart again. And this time make sure you remain intact! I'd like to avoid going through a whole pile of patch kits."

0802 saluted. "By your command!"

Jac walked over to the cart, then the second test began just like the first. The gas canister was opened as soon as the drone picked it up, and 0802 paid the issue no heed. It took the exact same route as before, at the exact same pace, with the exact same lack of awareness. It even toppled over at about the same spot as before when it became too round to move.

At least, Jac thought, the darn thing is consistent.

Jac was just about to remotely shut off the gas canister when 0802 surprised him by finally altering its routine. Realizing its vinyl hide was being stretched too thin, the spherical drone tossed the canister away with all its might—right in the direction of Jac and the cart.

Jac's eyes widened as he watched the canister flying towards him, jaw dropping in shock. Everything happened so fast he wasn't able to dodge in time, the canister slamming into Jac's chest and knocking him back a few feet. The pool toy squeaked and grunted as he hit the ground, momentarily dazed.

Meanwhile, the inflation gas was still leaking out, and Jac was the new nearest container. Jac began to swell, his middle growing round like a beach ball. He wobbled as he slowly recovered from the impact. An uncomfortably close *hisssssssss* snapped him back to reality. His eyes darted to the canister balanced on his ballooning belly.

Jac swiftly batted the tank off, but not far enough away to escape its effects. He rocked back-and-forth in an attempt to stand, but he'd inflated *just* too much, leaving him beached. "Meep!"

Hisssssssssssssssssssssss.

Every squirm provoked creaks, his vinyl stretching in all directions. There was the slightest bit of extra pressure as his body grew beyond its standard size, but for the time it was easy to ignore. The datapad that could remotely shut down the canister had been knocked into the lake. Even the canister itself was out of reach now.

Hisssssssssssss—creaaaaaaaaak.

Jac's cheeks and snout started puffing up, along with his limbs. The gas was intent on filling all of him up, not just his now sizable middle. Though the effort was futile, Jac continued to wobble in an attempt to get back up, or at least roll away from the obnoxious canister. He was increasingly thankful that the only witness to the ridiculous accident was the similarly-immobile Drone 0802. Recorded footage would of course be erased as soon as possible.

Hissssssss—creaaak—sqrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrk.

The pressure was intensifying, almost enough to distract Jac from the creaks. He couldn't believe the canister was still hissing away, seemingly bottomless. Perhaps he should've selected something a bit less volatile for testing purposes.

Hiss—creeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeak.

Jac's spherical body rose above him like a mountain, blocking his view. The overinflated pool toy was sporadically drifting into a daze from the pressure, his round cheeks flush red. He avoided wiggling whenever possible in an attempt to reduce the strain on his vinyl. After all, popping would only add to his frustrations.

Creaaaaaaaaak—sqrrrk—creaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaak.

The hissing had been gone for minutes before Jac realized he was no longer inflating. He breathed a careful sigh of relief, letting out a quick *meep* as a particularly long creak echoed out from his body. It seemed that every little movement was going to sound tense until he was deflated.

“Mrrmph, the drone was supposed to be the only one—*creaaak*—inflating today, not me!” Jac complained, before reluctantly switching to comms. “Urgent deflation needed, hone in on my signal.”

Fortunately Jac wouldn't have to remain a blimp for too long. Once he was finally back to his normal, mobile self he'd immediately begin work reprogramming the troublesome Jac Drones...and see if he could resist jettisoning 0802 out the nearest airlock...