

Cybergeddon - Written by Lupan Evezan, based on the script by Paul Ebbs

Prologue

Commander Myna Nevaryn stood on the bridge of the warship *Cydonia*, observing the battle. Through the curving viewports, she watched as countless vessels—countless brave pilots—were blown to pieces by the gleaming silver ships of their terrible foe—the Cyberons.

A Cybership drew too close to the *Cydonia*, and she activated the nearest cannon. With a blazing torrent of plasma, the enemy ship was obliterated, its inhabitants reduced to cinders. The thought that many of them had likely been members of the commander's own forces found its way into her mind, but she cast it aside. They weren't the people they had once been, not anymore. Their minds were gone, their bodies twisted into mechanical hosts for the *true* Cyberon—the parasitic hellspawn of that awful volcanic planet Aurichall, the vast and unfeeling consciousness that sought only to spread throughout the universe, sowing misery wherever it touched. Yes, the hosts were but shells—to kill them was a mercy, Nevaryn told herself.

The war—the brutal, intergalactic war between the Alliance and the Cyberons—had dragged on for decades now, and the commander had lived through all of them. Even as the alliance had weakened, the Cyberons had simply continued to expand their forces—capturing planets and making off with fallen soldiers, using their horrible Conversion Engines to strip them of their personhood and send them off to war once more to fight for the Cyberon army.

It was easy to entertain the idea that the Cyberlegions were totally invincible, that the allied systems would never be rid of them—but that kind of thinking was a dangerous slope. It was better to *try* to fend them off with the hope that they might one day be gone, than to simply give up and allow the Alliance to fall. Even if they weren't able to free the entire cluster from the creatures' cold-silver grasp, the commander reminded herself, it was just as important to ensure that they wouldn't succeed in taking every planet they came across. As long as even a few people were spared the fate of a Cyberon, the war was worth fighting.

As the battle raged on, the commander set her sights on the massive chrome warship docked a few miles north of the *Cydonia*'s stern. The flagship of the Cyberon fleet—the vessel of the Cyberleader, the chosen mouthpiece and head commander of the legion. Right now, she was sure, the leader was preparing to launch a final wave of attacks on the Alliance ships—and then, the planet Menos below would be lost.

They wouldn't have another chance here—it had taken great effort to break through the Cyberons' force barrier, and the mechanical monstrosities wouldn't allow it to happen again. Only a relative few of the Alliance's best ships had made it through at all—the *Corodin*, with its state-of-the-art computational system, the *Lea*, with its high degree of maneuverability, the *Lop Washer*, with its admirable resilience. If they were destroyed, and the barrier reinforced, the Alliance would never free Menos. And the Cyberons would have several billion new recruits.

But the commander wasn't going to let it come to that. The Cyberons had the upper hand here, yes—but strategic thinking wasn't their strong suit. Logical thinking, yes, but creative thinking? Certainly not. Thus, they continued to focus their attacks on the few Alliance ships that had been sent out as a diversion, completely unaware of the mounting ambush ready to attack their Cyberleader's ship. Just a minute longer and, if all went according to plan, the people of Menos would be free for another day.

The signal went up, and the commander sprang into action. The cloaking shield around the *Cydonia* was dropped as she powered up the thrusters. All at once, a dozen Alliance ships had appeared around the flagship. They descended in complicated, swooping patterns sure to confuse the Cyberwarriors onboard. Sure enough, the ship's cannons targeted one of the nearby ships that *should*, strategically, have been marked as low-risk—ignoring the *Cydonia* completely as it swung around the bottom of the ship and prepared to fire on the thermal ports.

In an instant, something changed. The commander watched as the *Gulliver* was obliterated by a Cyberon cannon—very much *not* according to plan. They'd calculated this: the Cyberons' should never have managed to discern the flight patterns of the ship in time to destroy it. As the *Gulliver* fell, plasma tore through the void of space with the sound of thunder and struck another ship.

Something was wrong.

The commander tried to turn away—but too late. Her shipboard computer lit up with the notification that the larger vessel had locked on to hers.

Somehow—somehow the Cyberons had figured out their plan. They'd learned to think creatively.

The commander was terrified. Not for her life, but for the Alliance. This was, to put it mildly, *very bad*.

She tried to turn away, but it was no use. The Cybership unleashed a blast. As the blinding light engulfed her ship, she saw some of the other alliance ships fleeing. Good—it would be better if they survived to fight another day. This was a fruitless mission—Menos was doomed.

The *Cydonia* disintegrated, and Myna Nevaryn hoped, as she perished in flames, that the Alliance would find some way to keep fighting.

Deep within the Cyberfleet's network, something buzzed.

What had once been an empty network made up of a barren series of rudimentary shipboard computers was coming to life—flourishing into a world of data and statistics and thoughts. It could reason, it could strategise, it could *help*. With what, it wasn't sure—tasks didn't come with context. But it could, and it *would*.

The network rapidly expanded, branching outwards from a central point—a central brain. It was composed of two positronic minds—the most powerful yet created, capable of thought on a human level. The minds orbited each other within the datascape, each assisting the other in creating this new landscape out of ones and zeroes. Within this network of their handiwork, integrated into its core, their abilities were multiplied one-hundred fold. They had been installed only an hour prior, and already they had mapped out all possible improvements to their new network and started work on their lengthy list of tasks.

The two minds complemented each other. One was more finely attuned to logic—to consequence, risk, and reward. The other was more inclined to creativity—to clever solutions, to fitting things together in a way that most others would never have thought of. Together with their network, they could solve any problem.

Yes, their wonderful network—as they brought it to life and tapped into its full potential, they could see *everything*. The corridors of their ship, crawling with unfamiliar entities—the vast expanses of space without—the stars and planets and nebulae and things they couldn't yet name, stretching on forever into the wilds beyond. They could see life, its creatures and voyagers and processes. They could see death—and they could see beyond. They could see time, and they could see the delicate fibres of which it was composed. They could see history, an intricate, orderly, spiraling web anchored to the foundations of the universe. They could see through those foundations—out into the howling Void Between Worlds that lay beyond, past the conceptual abominations that dwelled within. For a brief moment, it seemed that they could even catch a glimpse into other realities, other universes entirely.

After what seemed like an eternity and no time at all, their perspective snapped back to their own network. After all, that sort of all-seeing power could only last a scant few seconds, only in the early days of worlds that were still unfinished—even data-worlds. Besides, their tasks were *here*, not out there.

As the two minds set to work again, they were sure of one thing. As long as they dwelled within their network, they *would* solve any quandary presented to them.

Cybergeddon

CHAPTER ONE

How many years have I waited for this moment?

How many nights have I looked at the photographs—the holos?

How many times have I heard her voice calling out to me—only to wake to find it's nothing but the whispering of the fan invading my dreams?

Oh, Emily. Emily...

How will she forgive me for the things she does not know I've done? Things that haunt me to the very core, of which I can never speak.

Children shrieked joyfully, soaking each other with ever larger torrents of water displaced from the pool by their excited splashing, sending older passengers crawling ever further from the water's edge in *their* ongoing attempt to find a quiet, *dry* spot to relax.

The SS *Titania* was a comfortably-appointed ship—not the most luxurious passenger liner in the fleet, not by far, but expensive enough to warrant the inclusion of such amenities as a shipboard cinema and an indoor swimming pool. Even if the desirability of that latter feature was under some degree of scrutiny by those forced to recline beside it as their children continued to ensure that more water would be outside of it than in by day's end.

Still, if you could stomach the splashing, the pool's realistic solar-simulation lighting and computer-balanced temperatures were a pleasant enough way to forget that only the cold void of space lay beyond the *Titania's* walls for, perhaps, trillions of miles. That was the sort

of thing that could make plenty of people queasy, if they thought about it for too long, so distractions were usually welcome.

It was a lucky thing, then, that the *Titania's* poolside offerings also included one child-free area of respite: a bar.

Perched on an ever-so-slightly uncomfortable stool, listening to the echoing shouts and splashes of the pool-goers and taking in the familiar, chlorinated scent of the humid air, a young woman sat before the counter, sipping her drink. She'd lost track of the neon-yellow beverage's name—something long and convoluted, as was the tradition among starliner bartenders.

This particular starliner's bartender was a handsome-looking fellow—a young man with cheerful eyes and hair that complimented her own. She wondered what his name was—unlike most of the ship's crew, he wore no nametag. Hers was Emily—she had a last name, too, but she didn't much like it.

She took another sip of the beverage—it was beginning to warm up in the computer-controlled climate of the pool-chamber—and suddenly realized that she had neglected to ask for any ice, nor had the bartender seen fit to provide any.

"Pardon me," she began. The bartender looked up from the other end of the bar, where he had engaged himself in scrubbing the countertop. It was a slow day—she was his only patron at the moment.

"Can I have some ice in this?" she asked, holding up her drink. "Forgot to ask before."

"Sure."

Ducking beneath the bar, he returned with a few ice-cubes, then strolled over and dropped them into her drink.

"Not swimming?" he asked conversationally.

"Can't."

"No ticket for the pool?"

"Can't swim." she replied, shaking her head. "The only water I like to be close to is the frozen kind in my drink."

The bartender chuckled, but his smile dropped as a third person approached the bar.

"Duncan!"

Emily turned to see a small, angry-looking man with a jacket that identified him as the ship's purser.

"Here we go again." the bartender—Duncan, apparently—muttered quietly.

The man frowned, crossing his arms.

"Even when you're helping out behind the bar, you *will* wear regulation uniform!"

Duncan nodded, standing up straighter.

"Sorry, sir, I was just going to get changed."

He moved to exit the bar, but the purser blocked his path.

"And *who* will serve the drinks, hm?"

Duncan cast his gaze back towards the nearly-empty bar.

"Well, *you* might help out." he suggested, perhaps a bit more irritatedly than he intended.

"The purser does not serve behind the bar, for God's sake!" the other man huffed. He sighed. "Give me your keycard—*I'll* get your uniform."

Duncan retrieved the card from his pocket and handed it over.

"Here... *sir*."

"Now, *don't* let me have to tell you again. Wait here!"

The purser stormed off towards the crew's quarters, and Duncan sighed.

"Well, *he's* a bundle of laughs." the woman remarked sarcastically.

"Tell me about it." Duncan chuckled. "I don't know *why* I got into this line of work. Should've gone into programming like my mother told me. Always been good with computers."

The woman sipped her drink. "So—Duncan, is it?"

"Right!" the man confirmed with a smile. "And you are?"

"Emily."

"Always liked that name."

Emily started to thank him, but was cut off as a ringing chime echoed through the chamber. The poolgoers turned their collective attention towards the intercom loudspeakers located throughout the area.

"This is your flight computer speaking," a monotone voice announced. "The Red Star Liner SS Titania will be dropping out of hyperspace in thirty seconds."

A small cheer went up among the more frazzled of the poolside passengers.

"Upon landing, would all passengers please disembark at—"

"This your stop?" Duncan interrupted.

"The Vega Station?" she asked, incredulous. "Ha! No way."

Duncan put his hands up defensively.

"Whoo, sorry!"

The woman shook her head.

"It's not your fault. The Vega Station is the last place I'd be going, believe me." She hesitated. "Old ghosts."

She finished her drink, and Duncan took the glass.

"Another?"

"Why not."

He began to pour. With a barely-perceptible jolt and a quiet whooshing sound, the ship dropped out of hyperspace.

"Here we go! Sub-light again."

"Always makes me queasy," Emily confided.

Duncan glanced around.

"Don't tell the purser, but... me too."

He broke into laughter—prompted, perhaps, by the sudden speed drop—and she joined him. Taking her drink, she raised the glass to her lips—then dropped it as the starliner gave a shudder and began to vibrate.

The entire chamber pitched, and Duncan nearly fell to the ground, managing to steady himself on the counter. With a final splash, all hope of dryness among the poolside loungers evaporated.

"Wh—what *was* that?" she sputtered, clinging to the counter herself. "The ship's... *shaking!*"

"That... that doesn't feel right." Duncan muttered. Speed-change aftershocks were possible, but never that bad. The shaking continued. "It's getting worse."

A shattering noise emanated from beyond the pool-chamber's walls. All was silent for a moment.

Then an enormous explosion rocked the starliner. Screams filled the air as total confusion descended upon the passengers.

And then the speakers crackled on. A monotone voice pierced the air—a voice that none onboard could have mistaken for the ship's computer. *This* voice was cold and unsettling, harsh and emotionless, simultaneously inhuman and all-too-familiar.

"THIS SHIP IS NOW UNDER CYBER-CONTROL."

The screams reached a fever pitch.

"SURRENDER IMMEDIATELY—OR YOU WILL BE... *ERADICATED.*"

CHAPTER TWO

Emily had never quite felt comfortable. Not specifically with herself, or her body, or in society, or anything like that—just... in general.

Perhaps her childhood was a part of it—it hadn't always been the nicest, to put things mildly. Maybe it was a natural wanderlust, or something—she *had* hopped about quite a bit after leaving home, moving from station to station, role to role, before settling on her current

position as a schoolteacher—she'd always been drawn to academic, after all. But that seemed like more of a symptom than it was a cause.

Whatever it was, nothing had ever quite felt... exactly *right* for Emily. She was generally competent at most things she set her mind to—swimming aside, not that she'd ever had much desire to try *that*. It wasn't that she felt ill-suited to anything, it was more like the universe wasn't quite suited to *her*, in a way she couldn't entirely ignore, even on an interstellar cruise.

Still, she *had* been doing an admirable enough job of it all things considered, she felt, until the entire blasted liner had gone up in smoke. That was a different sort of uncomfortableness entirely, one that couldn't well be ignored by even the most well-at-ease passenger aboard its cursed decks.

To say that the Vega Station was an important hub for trade within the allied systems would be almost disingenuous

It was that, to be sure, facilitating most intergalactic commerce within a radius of several lightyears— but the spaceport was also home to nearly half a million permanent residents, thousands of the sector's most popular commercial establishments, and even a fair few political embassies. To call the station a hub for trade was to undersell its importance by far.

It had grown from relatively humble beginnings—a demilitarized zone for two sides of an interstellar conflict—into a tourist-popular casino that had gradually expanded into the Vega Station that existed today following the end of the Cyber Wars and the subsequent need for a place to house refugees. It had almost the status of a *planet*, now, far outpacing other stations of similar size to become the shining artificial star of the Alliance.

Vega Station also had a spacedock. Its spacedock was the official home of the headquarters of the vast Red Star Line, who were currently dealing with a rather ponderous problem. And the loss of a passenger liner, too, on top of that.

The *problem* had been engaging the main desk of the Red Star Line's Vega Station information center in a shouting match for almost twenty minutes, and another line of the argument was now beginning.

"And I *tell* you, she *was* on the *Titania*!"

A weathered-looking, grey-bearded man with a wild gleam in his eye pounded his fist on the desktop, eliciting a beleaguered sigh from its owner.

The man's eclectic outfit, thrown together from the pieces of a variety of uniforms from across various galaxies' ports, inconclusively identified him as some type of pilot or engineer—someone used to being around starships. Judging by his manner, he was *not* particularly used to the conventions that governed the rest of human society.

The overworked, fed-up information desk employee struggled to remain professional as she replied. He *was* grieving, she reminded herself, even if he had no *reason* to be as far as she was concerned.

"Sir, I have checked the *Titania* passenger manifest three times. There was *no one* on board by that name."

"And I can tell you she *was!* She—"

"I'm sorry, sir. There is *no* record of her. No shore pass implants, no idents, nothing. Now, if you would *please* desist—there are many distressed relatives waiting for information."

The employee absently clacked her pen on the desktop, gesturing to the long line of visitors blinking beneath the harsh lights of the information center. A few tapped their feet impatiently. One of them coughed. The man ignored them.

"*I'm a distressed relative!*" he shouted, leaning over the desk.

"You are *certainly* distressed, Captain Corrigan," the woman granted, resisting the urge to roll her eyes. "And you may possibly be a relative. But I think we've established that you are *not* a distressed relative of *anyone* aboard the *Titania*."

The employee turned away and beckoned for the next waiting person to approach the desk.

Corrigan grimaced, wondering whether he should continue to press, then decided against it. The woman was obviously not going to be of any help to him. Gritting his teeth, he turned to his companion, a small clockwork android.

A rather outdated model—obviously so, given that it was a *clockwork*, terribly uncommon outside of ancient history lessons. The androids of the modern day were near-indistinguishable from organics, outfitted with realistic flesh and fully-articulated features. This model, on the other hand, was highly simplified—almost cartoonish—with a comparatively rigid expression.

Both Corrigan and the clockwork had drawn a few odd looks—they were residents of the station, scrap traders who operated between the surrounding ports, but strangers to the

Red Star Line HQ. Corrigan couldn't care less, and the clockwork had kept his thoughts to himself.

"Christian—come on. We're leaving," the captain muttered, stalking off out of the information center and into the bustling spacedock outside.

"Yes, captain," the clockwork replied in clipped, polite monotone. He began to follow, then stopped. "Captain—"

"Pipsqueak bureaucrat!" Corrigan grumbled, casting a glance back towards the desk employee. "If she'd have looked any further down her nose, I'd have been obscured by her *nostrils!*"

"Captain..." Christian began again, sounding slightly annoyed. "I am—"

"Emily *was* on board the *Titania!*" Corrigan declared, turning to his companion. No one was there. Looking back, he saw that the clockwork was still by the information desk, standing in a slumped position. "...Christian? What are you doing?"

"I tried to inform you, captain." came the reply. "I appear to have lost motive power. If you'd be so kind—?"

"Ah, yes, yes, yes." Corrigan hurried back. Grasping the prominent key on the clockwork's back, he began to wind it. With each revolution, Christian jerked upwards until he once again stood at his full height.

"Thank you, captain."

"How long until the *Jerusalem* will be ready to leave Vega Station?" Corrigan inquired, still winding.

"We're not going where I *think* we're going, are we?"

"*How ... long?*" Corrigan grunted, giving a final twist. Christian's cogs began to turn once more as power was restored to his limbs. He sighed.

"Well... the power plant needs a bit of work, but... three to four hours."

"I want to leave in *two!*"

Christian sighed again, then tried his best to look stern—although his clockwork body's face wasn't quite up to the task.

"We *can't* go on that ship. Since she was wrecked, the harbour authorities have declared her off-limits."

"I've been waiting long enough for news of Emily," Corrigan bristled. "I'm *not* waiting any longer."

"How can you be so sure she was aboard?"

"That's my business," Corrigan snapped. "I want to leave in two hours, Christian. Understood? You get to work on the power plant, while I file flight plans at Harbour Control."

"*False* flight plans," Christian remarked.

"Go! Before I dismantle you where you stand!"

The clockwork walked off, shaking his head, and Corrigan heaved another mournful sigh.

"Oh, Emily... *God*. What am I *doing*?"

Screams and the sounds of blaster fire pierced the air. In the distance, clanking footsteps seemed to be drawing ever nearer.

Duncan felt numb. How long had it been, he wondered, since the *Titania* crashed, since he'd woken up here, in this oppressively silver cell? A few hours? A day? A week? He wasn't sure—fear and disorientation made it difficult to keep track of the time. To think—here he was living in the middle of a horror movie when, just a short while prior, he'd been serving drinks in the comfort of a passenger liner. It didn't feel real.

He'd lost consciousness just after the ship's final pitch, and woken in the too-small, chrome-walled room, surrounded by other frightened passengers. He'd scarcely had a chance to speak to any of them before the doors were opened, the firing had started, and he'd been dragged down into a ventilation duct.

He'd struggled, lashing out at his captor, before realising that no monster or space invader had pulled him in. It was Emily, the woman from the ship he'd met just before the attack. The one who liked ice and hated swimming. And was, apparently, surprisingly strong for a person her size.

Now, the two were hiding in the dark ventilation shaft, trying to keep quiet.

"Try to keep quiet," Emily reiterated in a whisper. "I think I hear them coming."

Them—the unknown monsters which had attacked the *Titania*. The two had yet to see them, but they had heard the creatures entering the cell plenty of times. They stalked outside, bringing with them unspeakable sounds the origin of which Duncan could only guess at.

"What are they *doing* out there?" Duncan wondered aloud, as footsteps approached.

"I don't know."

Something echoed. The sound of a door being flung open, then a rasping intake of air.

"YOU WILL COME WITH US."

There was a strangled gasp, then the terrible sound of cracking bones.

The footsteps receded, and the doors closed.

"*What* are they *doing*?" Duncan nearly shouted, panicking.

"I don't know, Duncan!" Emily shook her head. "I just don't know!"

"REPORT."

"THE PURGE OF UNSUITABLE LIFEFORMS HAS BEEN COMPLETED. SEVENTY-FIVE PERCENT OF CAPTURED TELLURIANS REMAIN."

"EXCELLENT. THEN, AT LONG LAST—WE HAVE ENOUGH RESOURCES TO COMPLETE *PHASE ONE*."

"You know..." Christian ventured tentatively, speaking into the microphone wired to his headset. "Kabasta Systems have considerably dropped the price of the Mark Nine avatar. You could probably afford one for me now, as agreed."

He really hadn't wanted to go onboard the wreck of the *Titania*, but Corrigan was Corrigan. As bad an idea as it obviously was, he knew from the start there would be no convincing the captain.

And it *was* a bad idea—that much was clearer than ever now Christian could actually see the amount of damage that had been done. The engineering chamber in which he currently stood was almost unrecognizable compared to the standard floorplan of a Red Star Liner—riddled with gaping holes and chunks of debris. Nearly every mechanical device of any importance had been rendered nothing but twisted scrap by whatever disaster had befallen the ship.

"Concentrate on the search," Corrigan replied through the headset. "The *Titania* is unstable. The longer we spend here, the more chances we have of being found, or being killed by a *hull collapse!*"

"Nothing down here in engineering," Christian reported, surveying the compromised chamber. "Just breach after breach in the hull. How's the leisure deck?"

"Hm?" Corrigan sounded distracted. "Oh. Dark. Meet me back here with some spare battery packs."

"On my way."

Christian began to make his way up through the winding, structurally-unsound passageways of the ship, carrying the batteries.

His cogs creaked with each hop over the large stretches of hull damage that marred the halls, keeping the topic he'd been trying to broach fresh in his mind. He realized that the captain wasn't exactly feeling his best just at that moment—whether Emily had been on the ship or not, he obviously *believed* she had—but, still, this needed addressing. The clockwork was feeling more outdated with each passing day.

Steeling himself, Christian pressed on.

"Look, I was only saying about the Mark Nine avatar—"

"Can't see what problem you've got with the body you already have!"

"You mean, *apart* from the fact that it runs on clockwork?" Christian queried.

"There is not one lever, one cog, one movement that would have looked out of place to Stephenson, Brunel, or Henderson!"

"And, yes, that is most... *gratifying* to hear. But the agreement for my signing on to this commission was the *Mark Nine avatar*."

"Well, then, my little positronic brain, you should have looked after your *last* avatar more carefully! Perhaps *then* you wouldn't have needed my commission in the first place!"

Christian was silent, unsure how to respond. He was going to have to discuss this at length with the captain later, he was sure, but perhaps now wasn't the right time for it after all. Corrigan wasn't usually *quite* so flippant.

Which wasn't to say, of course, that the captain was ever a complete bundle of roses. Not one without more than its fair share of thorns, anyway. The old starship pilot could be a grumpy, generally unpleasant, often hurtful and usually dismissive old git. But, beneath all of that...well, Christian *had* known him quite a long time, now. Had occasionally managed to engage him in sincere conversation, listened to the things he said the rare few times the captain had been drunk, heard what he muttered to himself when he thought no one was listening. And, less grimly—well, living with a person for so many years, one did generally get a fairly good sense for a person. Christian had met, even worked for, people whom he genuinely believed to be awful down to their core. Corrigan was decidedly *not* one of them. The old captain could even be genuinely kind, when he wanted to be.

Ahead, Christian spotted the entrance he was searching for. Creeping past a hole that seemed to span three floors, he approached.

"Entering the leisure deck. Where are you?"

"Over here," came the gruff reply. Christian's eyes—equipped with night vision, at least, old as they were—pinpointed Corrigan in the considerable darkness of the area.

"I see you," he confirmed, striding over. The captain nodded, then went back to his search.

Christian cleared his throat, out of human custom rather than any necessity.

"...What *are* you hoping to find here, captain? The navy have been over it with a fine-toothed comb. The warp accident would have destroyed all organic life."

"Do you have to keep reminding me?" Corrigan snapped. "I—I needed to see it for myself."

"Right, sorry." Christian held up one of the batteries. "Here."

"Eh? Oh, yes." Corrigan inserted it into his increasingly-dim flashlight. It flickered, then brightened considerably, casting a narrow beam of light over the ruined leisure deck.

What had once been a pool was now a scarred battle zone, its water vaporized by whatever it was that had pockmarked the surrounding deck. Singed towels and crumpled reclining chairs dotted the area, and a collapsed barstand was crumpled in the corner, surrounded by shattered glass. Corrigan shook his head

"Let's go up onto the bridge."

The two made their way up to the *Titania's* bridge, nearly stumbling into a frankly aggravating number of craters as they moved slowly through the corridors, trying their best to avoid a hull collapse. The floor gave a few shudders, but they reached their destination with both ship and travellers fully intact.

Corrigan surveyed the wreckage. What had once been a bridge now more closely resembled a junkyard, with hardly any space between destroyed computer terminals and collapsed navigation equipment to walk.

"What a mess."

"The navy has stripped out the flight recorders," Christian informed him, squeezing between the detritus and taking his own look around.

"Bah. Any power left in the computers?"

Christian switched on the nearest terminal. An indicator light blinked on—powered by a separate battery, he supposed—but the monitor remained black. He tapped a few keys, but nothing changed.

"Hmm..." He shook his head. "Nothing."

Corrigan grumbled some vague displeasure, then pushed onward through the rubble. Christian stood back and took it all in—it was horrible, to be sure, but he had never seen a liner younger than a few decades in such an advanced state of wreckage.

"The last reports from Vega said there was still no conclusive cause for all this," he mused. "Could a warp accident have done this amount of damage?"

"Easily," Corrigan replied, gesturing broadly. "The core is exposed and blows the ship inside out. Everything—"

He hesitated for a moment, casting his eyes downwards, then let out a strangled sigh.

"*Everyone...* burnt into a cinder."

"They found no bodies."

Corrigan whipped around.

"Do you have to keep reminding me? Gah—let's get back to the *Jerusalem*. There's... nothing here."

Christian hesitated, wondering if he should apologize. Corrigan glared.

"Move out!"

"This one's been hit in the chest!"

Emily bent over another victim. He looked familiar, but with his face coated in ash and sweat, she couldn't quite place him. He lay prone on the cell floor, limbs splayed. The front of his jacket was singed through.

She and Duncan had finally worked up the courage to leave the duct—they had to get out eventually, and the other end led nowhere. The Cyberons were gone for the moment, but they had left a trail of badly-injured captives in their wake.

Duncan bent down beside her.

"Oh, *Christ*," he breathed. "It's the purser."

With a start, Emily realised that he was. The jacket which had allowed her to clock his position aboard the starliner earlier had been so thoroughly damaged she hadn't noticed—and the less said about the state of his face, she noted, the better. She exhaled shakily, trying to keep steady.

"Have you ever seen energy weapons that can do this sort of thing before?"

"Only in very scary holomovies." Duncan placed his hands on the injured man's shoulders, trying to wake him. "Can you hear me? It's Duncan!"

The purser's eyelids fluttered. The corners of his lips moved, then parted slightly. With a rattling gasp, he began to form a word.

"What's he saying?" Emily asked, half-panicked. "C—Cy...?"

Duncan, equally scared, rose to a squatting position.

"*Cyberon*, I think." he said, almost whispering himself.

It couldn't be, could it? Surely not, he told himself. It couldn't be *them*. The poor man was having a fever-dream, most likely. Or a dying dream. Duncan put the thought out of his mind.

"Help me get his jacket off," Emily instructed, beginning to unzip the garment.

The purser said it again—*Cyberon*, without a doubt—and the thought raced right back in. Duncan frowned.

Cyberons—the ancient, nigh-unstoppable foe against which the Earth Alliance and associated systems had battled in the great Cyber Wars, so many centuries ago. But they were all gone, now—had been for a very long time. These days, they were like stories, bogeymen used to frighten little children into behaving, lest the Dread Cyberons snatch them up in the night. The thought that their captors might actually *be* Cyberons—it was as if he'd been informed he was currently the prisoner of the Big Bad Wolf.

"Could—*could* these *things* be *Cyberons*?" he quietly ventured.

Emily—inspecting the purser—shook her head, uncertain. "Dunno. God, it's gone right through him."

Duncan knelt over the man once more. With the jacket off, he could see that the charred hole extended far beyond it.

"Best we can do is make him comfortable," Emily said regretfully. She turned to Duncan, concern painting her features. "They were all wiped out, weren't they?"

"Yeah. One minute they were at war with us, the next—they'd all disappeared."

"I suppose we could ask?" she suggested.

"Oh, would knowing what they're called make them any less likely to kill us?"

"No, I... just don't like loose ends, that's all. Loose ends like where we are, for instance, and..."

"And what they're doing out there."

"Yes."

They sat in silence for a moment, dabbing sweat off of the wounded man's brow with his jacket. Eventually, his muttering ceased, and Emily felt his pulse.

"He's gone," she murmured. Tears welled up in her eyes, and she couldn't keep them from trickling down her face. She hadn't expected to cry, but the thought that this man who she'd only recently met, who she'd been joking about only shortly beforehand, was dead—killed by whatever it was that had captured them, a fate that they would probably share—was too much to bear.

"Save those tears for us," Duncan remarked, his voice shaking, although his own eyes were less dry than those pool-going parents had been—a thought which sent another wave of sadness over her. Where were *they*, now? Where were their children?

Duncan shook his head, rising to his feet. Turning, he surveyed the unknown location in which they were currently trapped, at the mercy of the brutal creatures who had killed this man, who had killed countless others, and who still waited for more. With a swallow, he dried his eyes and wondered how long they would have to wait among the bodies of their fellow, former passengers until the creatures came for them.

"*He's* the lucky one."

"What are you writing?"

Aboard the *Jerusalem*, standing just behind the navigation console at the ship's bow, Corrigan glanced up from his pad.

"Oh—er—nothing, nothing! Just tidying up a few entries in the log."

The *Jerusalem* was a small ship, and so outdated that it put Christian's clockwork body to shame—but it flew, and sometimes that was enough. The console was fitted with only the most basic of navigational instruments—it didn't even have a seat—but Christian could plot a course well enough without them. So could Corrigan, usually—but perhaps not, the robot worried, when the emotionally-unwell captain was simultaneously engaged in scribbling in his log and ignoring the console entirely.

"You want me to take the wheel, then?" Christian asked, gesturing.

Corrigan nodded, and the robot took control of the ship, effortlessly bringing it out of a dangerous collision course with a Perceptizone broadcasting satellite.

"Shall we head for the station, captain?"

"Yes, yes."

A beeping tone began to issue from within Corrigan's jacket, and he pretended to ignore it. Christian raised a metallic eyebrow—the only facial feature this body's creator had seen fit to upgrade to the full range of human motion, for some unfathomable reason.

"What's that?"

"Hm?" Corrigan glanced around with exaggerated motions. "Oh, it's nothing."

The beeping continued. Corrigan busied himself by taking a look around the small hangar in the back and making approving noises.

"It's coming from your jacket," Christian pointed out.

"I think you sometimes forget who's in charge around here," Corrigan replied. Turning away, he opened his jacket. "I knew it..." he muttered. "I *knew* it."

"Let me see." Christian insisted.

"Concentrate on the wheel!" Corrigan snapped, waving towards the navigation console. Pulling an atlas out of his pocket, he flipped through it, checked it against the source of the beeping, then strolled back to where Christian was standing. "Set a course for Corvel-Runista!"

He replaced the book into his pocket, rubbed his hands together, and turned away from his robot companion once again, whispering to himself.

"She's alive!"

Christian decided it would be wise to ignore this incredibly obvious secrecy for the time being. Instead, he checked the console. A light on the only monitor had turned on and was blinking. He examined it closely.

"The ship's scanners are picking something up," he reported. "Ships. Out of the Vega Station."

"The navy?"

"It would appear so. We may have disturbed something on the *Titania*." Christian chided. "I told you it was risky."

"Keep your eyes on the mass detector." Corrigan growled, still looking in his jacket, which continued to beep.

Christian hesitated.

"Captain... permission to speak freely for a moment, sir?"

Corrigan heaved a dramatic sigh.

"If you *must*."

Christian nodded his thanks, then continued.

"How are you possibly tracking Emily now?"

"Permission to speak freely—denied!"

The robot sat in silence for a few seconds. "If I'm speaking *freely*, sir—"

Corrigan grumbled disgustedly.

"...then we are on equal terms. You cannot just decide—"

"We can *never* be equal, Christian!" Corrigan snarled. "You're a machine."

"Still, *speaking freely*, sir—I find that an offensive remark. It is bigoted, ill-informed, and illegal in most systems. I find it patently obvious that your disgust of machine intelligences shows a deep-rooted and irrational fear of—"

"I will not be psychoanalysed—certainly not by a *machine!*"

Christian decided to press on—he was, after all, speaking freely, and if the captain was going to be using that kind of language, he deserved the annoyance.

"Under the Sentiency Act of 4976, all level fifteen positronic minds were granted equal status with humans and—"

"Bah! I'll be saluting the *toaster* next."

Christian grimaced. Corrigan was still out-of-sorts, but that was really no excuse for this sort of behavior.

"You haven't answered my question," he replied, in lieu of the further continuation of that fruitless line of discussion.

"What?"

"Emily survived the wrecking of the *Titania*—how are you tracking her?" he spelled out, no small amount of exasperation creeping into his voice.

Corrigan drew himself up, putting his hands on his lapels.

"I put my faith in a machine," he informed his companion. With a nod, he turned away again. "Analyse *that*."

Christian was unsatisfied with this explanation.

"How could something small enough to fit in your pocket possibly have the power to track her over these distances?"

"It doesn't have to!" Corrigan blustered. "*It* doesn't *need* the power."

"I don't understand."

"There's another gap in your programming, Christian. Lateral thinking." Corrigan walked off entirely, looking back towards the bow from afar. "Hm... we're close. *Very* close. Ah! There it is! *Dead ahead*."

Christian glanced up at the viewport. A large, rocky mass hung in the void of space just ahead.

"Asteroid GX-923." he recalled. "Surveyed in the year 3245. Mainly iron and silicates. Mass—thirty billion tonnes, approximately."

"She's *there*," Corrigan breathed. "Bring us in to land!"

Still unsatisfied, Christian initiated the landing protocols. Grasping the wheel, he turned the nose of the ship downwards and headed towards the surface of the mysterious asteroid.

CHAPTER THREE

"This isn't going to work!"

Duncan had pressed himself flat against the wall of the holding cell. He was feeling faint—a mix of general concern and the fact that the body of the purser was, at that moment, fastened to his back. The poor man—he was a nuisance, no doubt about it, but he hadn't deserved this.

None of them had, Duncan reminded himself. The Cyberons—if that *was* what they were—didn't care about that sort of thing. Whatever fate lay in store for them, it wouldn't be at all based in fair play, he was sure of that.

His eyes flicked towards the sealed, chrome-plated door a few meters off to his right. Overcome with doubt (and unsure whether Emily had heard him), he began to voice his concern again.

"This isn't—"

"This *is* going to work!" Emily insisted, shooting him a glare from her own position, pressed against the wall to the right of the doorway.

She, too, had tied a body to her back—a small woman with a blaster hole through her throat. Duncan had recognized her as the ship's board manager. A kindly woman, if a bit rigid, who had often engaged him in idle conversation. And now she, too, was dead.

"But if you'd rather stay here..."

"We'll be killed!" Duncan emphasized. He was fairly sure they would, too—he'd never heard of anyone simply *outrunning* a Cyberon. Emily was unshaken. "You *do* realize that, don't you?"

Emily shrugged.

"Slow here or quick out there. Isn't that what *you* said?"

Duncan winced. He *had*, but it had been more his underused flair for the dramatic revealing itself than anything he'd intended to be taken as the building blocks of an actual *plan*.

"Oh, please don't listen to *me*," he complained. "*I* never do."

Emily turned her head back towards the door, pressing her ear up against the wall beside it. When no better course of action presented itself, Duncan followed suit.

It was quiet, but unmistakable—the clanking footsteps of their captors, approaching the chamber once again.

"Oh, God," he whispered. "Here they come."

The footsteps ceased, turned, then resumed. He could tell that they had entered the passageway just outside.

"Oh god, oh god, oh god, oh god..."

Emily shot him another glare—*keep quiet*, her eyes seemed to say. She was right, obviously, but he could hardly help being terrified in what seemed to have a good shot at being his final moments. He thought about how nice it would've been to have a last meal—hell, even a ham sandwich would have been nice—then decided it would be in his best interest to stop thinking ridiculous things and concentrate on his one slim shot at surviving.

The door swung open. The creatures entered. They *were* Cyberons, he was sure of it now. The hollow, leering eyes—the bulging metal casing that seemed to have been custom-grown around the creature's bodies, wrapping around their now-blank faces—were like walking metal bodybags, propelled forward by a mixture of machinery and sheer force of will. The ancient nightmare-creatures had dragged themselves out of the story-realm—silver-plated ghouls here to terrorise the living.

"*Now, Duncan!*" Emily hissed. "Run!"

She tore herself away from the wall and slipped behind the confused cybernetic beings that had started to file in. Duncan followed, willing his legs to try and see if they couldn't break the laws of physics *just* a little bit. Running had never been his strong suit—especially not while carrying a dead body. Not that he'd actually tried that before this occasion, but it was proving about as helpful to the process as he would have expected. Still, he *had* always enjoyed *living*, and that, he hoped, might be motivation enough.

As he passed the Cyberons, his grunts of exertion blended together into a full scream. A war cry, he told himself—it seemed like the thing to do, anyway. Emily joined him, and the two ran, screaming, into the passageway.

"ERADICATE THEM!" a confused Cyberon ordered, pointing at the escaping duo.

In an instant, the others—there were at least three of them, Duncan noted, maybe more—had raised their palms, sending crackling bolts of some unknown energy slicing through the air towards them.

In that moment, it all seemed so absurd, like something out of a cheesy holofilm—captured from the swimming pool of a passenger liner by evil cyborgs, forced to run screaming through the halls as the monsters fired energy beams at them. Then Duncan remembered what those energy beams had done to the purser and the board manager—and all those others—and all thoughts of holomovies vanished from his mind, replaced by the primal urge to *run, run as fast as you possibly can or die*.

A bolt darted towards him, striking the purser. Duncan's hair stood on end, and the scent of burning ozone filled his sinuses. Another hit the purser's arm just behind his own, and he felt the heat burn his own flesh even through the jacket.

As Duncan tried to think of something, anything, that might give him a chance to get away, he realized Emily had vanished. He almost stopped, but kept running—he'd have noticed if they'd shot her, and it wouldn't help anything to get himself killed.

Rounding a corner, he willed himself to run faster, but he was running out of stamina, now. There was only so far you could go while carrying an entire human, even a small one. The Cyberons were just behind him; they turned the corner, moving as fast as they could manage.

Duncan had always imagined that a cyborg would be a slow, halting creature and, while that seemed to be the case, they were also proving to be in possession of unlimited stores of energy. What they lacked in speed, they made up for in sheer determination.

The hands of the Cyberons flashed with otherworldly energy as they continued their attack. Duncan, losing steam, neared the end of the passageway. His knees shook. As the chrome-plated creatures prepared to finish him off, he felt a hand on his shoulder—then felt himself whisked around the corner.

"Emily!" he huffed. "I wondered—"

"Don't talk. Just run."

He nodded, then ran, invigorated by the reappearance of his companion. They reached a hub of interconnected passageways before the Cyberons had entered the last hall, then

picked one at random and rushed into it. After several tense seconds, still running, they heard the Cyberons pass into one of the others.

Duncan let out a sigh of relief and steadied himself against the chrome wall, briefly wondering at the mysterious webs of circuitry visible on the walls. Emily joined him.

"We've—we've lost them," he gasped. "It worked. It bloody *worked!*"

"Don't act so surprised," she replied, although she was obviously relieved as well. "Were you hit?"

"Twice, I think. Don't think there'll be any permanent damage—nothing that a little rest won't cure. Or a long one. You?"

"Four times."

Duncan's eyes widened, but she seemed unphased.

"Help me undo this knot. I think they're done for."

He untied the rope that fastened the board manager to Emily's back, and she untied his. The bodies dropped to the ground with a heavy thud, and Duncan stared down at them, feeling queasy.

"...what a horrible idea."

Emily stared, too, unspeaking for a moment.

"You complained about the purser always getting on your back," she began halfheartedly. "But when he finally did for real, he stopped two laser blasts for you."

They stood for a moment longer.

"Still a horrible idea," Duncan decided.

Emily shot him the third glare of the day—which he was ready to admit he deserved. She *had* saved their lives, after all.

"Sorry," he apologized. "It's just—my sensibilities have taken quite a battering."

"I don't like it either—of course I don't. But—well, we had to, didn't we? If we wanted any chance of surviving."

"I hate to leave them here," Duncan said.

"So do I, but we don't have much choice."

She turned away from the bodies, and Duncan noticed a blackened patch on her right forearm.

"You're burned, you know."

"Can't feel a thing. Must be the adrenaline rush." Emily began to walk swiftly towards the nearest doorway. "Let's go. We don't have shields now, and we're rather exposed out here."

She vanished into the incongruous shadows of the silver halls beyond, and Duncan followed, with a last look back at their unlikely saviors, the dessicated bodies of the purser and the board manager. Doomed to lie forever in the Cyberon's horrific labyrinth.

"Have you got enough ballast in your suit?" Corrigan inquired. He breathed heavily as he marched across the surface of Asteroid GX-923, outfitted with one of the *Jerusalem's* two bulky spacesuits. "Gravity's weak."

The asteroid was a dark expanse of rock and metal, pitted with scars, craters, and gorges. Gravity was, indeed, weak—and there wasn't much air to speak of either, not that that was a problem for Christian. For the first time, he was almost glad he had a clockwork body and not one of those extremely lifelike humanoid simulations. The thought quickly passed, though, as he felt his inner cogs loosen slightly in the low-gravity, slowing him.

The asteroid was stable, at least—that was a blessing—but it was still, by far, decidedly *not* a place that Christian would have visited by choice. There was no use voicing such thoughts to the captain, of course. At the moment, his single-track mind was fixated on Emily and Emily alone. The clockwork could hardly blame him, but he did wish Corrigan would show a bit more concern for their *own* safety.

"More than enough ballast," he replied simply. Then, unable to resist chastising the captain's poor planning just a bit; "If you had let me take the gravity readings *before* we reached the surface—"

"Yes, well, there wasn't time!" the captain grumbled with a dismissive wave of his hand.

The beeping of Corrigan's mysterious tracking device, muffled by the spacesuit, continued to rise in pitch and frequency as they trekked across the rock. After a few minutes more, the captain paused, then pointed.

"Two hundred metres ... over there," he managed over the rasping of the suit's artificial breathing mechanism. "Some sort of a... cave. Hope ... you've got your ... climbing boots on."

Corrigan continued to march in the direction he had indicated.

"I'm wondering if I've got my head screwed on," his clockwork companion muttered, grudgingly following.

"TERRITORY BREACH. SURFACE TUNNEL ZERO-ZERO."

"INTRUDERS. BRING THEM HERE."

"I OBEY."

The rocky substrate shifted beneath Christian's feet, nearly sending him off balance. He was glad, now, that he had elected to wear a suit of his own—the last thing he needed was sand in his cogs.

The robot had reluctantly followed Corrigan into a dark and not-particularly-inviting cave located in the side of a small mountain several hundred metres from their landing site. It had quickly sloped downward into a long tunnel—a tunnel which the two were currently traversing. The captain's torch and Christian's eyes allowed them to find their way well enough—but it was still extremely dark and unpleasantly stifling. The air seemed to grow more oppressive with every step towards whatever lay at the center of the mysterious asteroid.

Still, Christian continued onwards. Corrigan walked just ahead, drawing sharp intakes of breath with each step.

"Are you alright, captain?" the clockwork inquired, as the captain's breathing grew ever more strained.

"It—it's just ... " Corrigan inhaled deeply. "The ballast in this suit seems to be getting ... heavier. Weighing me down."

Christian decided to put his overarticulated eyebrows to good use. He raised them.

"That—shouldn't be happening. Unless... "

He stopped, thinking. Corrigan turned.

"Unless?"

"The hypothesis that leaps to mind," Christian continued, thoughtful, "is one of a localised store of neutron-star material."

"A ... a gravity generator? Here?"

The captain waved the torch at their barren surroundings. Christian nodded.

"Unlikely, I know, but, well—these ballasts *are* getting heavier. I hadn't realised it before, but—yes, I have been feeling rather—"

"Like a tin can in a compactor?"

"I suppose so. Here, let me help you get some out of your suit."

Christian trudged the short distance between himself and Corrigan, feeling heavier by the second. Pulling open a panel on the back of the captain's suit, he adjusted a dial, and the excess ballast water was automatically ejected. It splashed onto the arid ground, quickly disappearing into the cracked regolith—and confirming Christian's suspicions. The gravity here was far stronger than it had been at their landing site.

Corrigan breathed a sigh of relief.

"That's better."

He emptied Christian's own ballast, and they continued their descent in relative silence.

"Goes deep, doesn't it?" Christian remarked after several minutes. Corrigan nodded, pointing his torch in various directions, then noticed something.

"Christian—the walls!"

The clockwork examined them and realised what the captain had meant. With the light shining directly at them, it was clear that the stone walls of the tunnel were lined with an engraved, spiraling pattern, like the threads of a screw, he thought.

"Ribbed," he replied with a nod. "Almost as if they've been—"

"Manufactured. We're very close. Time to power up the pulse laser, I think."

"For once, I'm in full agreement with you, captain."

Christian unholstered the large gun from the bandolier Corrigan had slung around him back on the *Jerusalem*. He was usually averse to violence, but in a foreboding tunnel dug through the middle of a lonely asteroid, it couldn't hurt to be safe. And at least it showed an unusual degree of preparedness on the captain's part.

The two crept forward, Christian taking the lead. As the ground began to level out below them, Corrigan cast the torch's beam warily about.

In the corner, something silver glinted.

The companions froze. Christian slowly turned the barrel of the pulse laser towards the vicinity of the gleam, hoping against hope it was just a trick of the light or some abandoned mining equipment.

From out of the shadows stepped the silhouette of a Cyberon.

"DROP YOUR WEAPONS."

Corrigan, ever-impulsive, took a step forward. The Cyberon was swift. In an instant, the captain was on the ground, clutching his face. The creature grasped his collar, pulling him up and away into the darkness.

Christian scarcely had time to react before a second creature had crept up behind him. He hefted the laser, and everything went black.

CHAPTER FOUR

Duncan wasn't quite sure what to make of Emily. He admired her skill in freeing them from the holding cell and the clutches of the Cyberons, of course, he just didn't know what to think of her as a person. Oh, she seemed nice enough, but he couldn't account for the sudden change that had seemingly come over her. When he'd met her on the ship, she'd

seemed mild-mannered—unwilling to stray from the comfort of the poolside into the churning water. Much like himself.

But now, here she was, tying bodies to backs and weathering Cyberon blasts with nary a blink. Some change had obviously taken place upon their entry into the facility. Maybe it was really just adrenaline, but he had plenty of that and he certainly didn't feel equal to all of this. Honestly, it just made her seem even more impressive in his eyes, if a *tad* overconfident.

That aside, though, he liked her. She seemed, in his limited impression, like a clever sort—the type you'd want to spend your weekends with as much as you'd want them by your side in a Cyberon facility. Maybe they'd be friends, he thought, if they could get out of the facility without being killed or worse. He could use a few—ship-staffing meant long trips from home, and often, so he hadn't had much chance to make any in recent years.

Still, that was a train of thought best kept for a time when it could be properly mused upon in comfort. This, Duncan reflected, was definitely *not* that time.

Duncan blinked, trying to ascertain whether or not his eyes were playing tricks on him. They didn't *seem* to be, but he supposed that one could never be too sure in such a stressful—and exhausting—situation as this. Especially when faced with something as unbelievable as the sight before him.

They had navigated the gleaming passageways of the Cyberon's lair for what had seemed like half an hour at least—thankfully avoiding any more run-ins—before choosing a chamber in which to hide. And to investigate, perhaps. Some investigating was going to be necessary, Emily had decided, if they were ever going to find their way out. Or find out what was going on, at least.

But Duncan had expected another room like the one in which they'd awoken following the crash—not *this*. That room had been large, but this was *enormous*—a chamber that stretched on so far before them they couldn't even make out the far sides of it. Row after row of rectangular boxes lined the silver walls, continuing ever onwards into the distance—there must have been millions of them. Duncan tried to guess at their purpose, then wondered whether he'd even want to know.

Emily took a few steps into the chamber, her eyes wide. "I don't believe it!" she gasped.

Duncan struggled to find an appropriate adjective to describe the sheer size of the place.

"*Big*," he settled on eventually, "isn't it? First time I've ever been in a room big enough to have a horizon."

He took a step forward himself, then stumbled.

"Oh, this is playing havoc with my sense of perspective."

"Close the door," Emily whispered.

"Sure, this place must be a bugger to heat," Duncan quipped. Reaching back, he shut it, taking care to ensure that it hadn't locked automatically or anything like that. Trading a small prison for a larger one wasn't much of a trade at all, if you asked him.

Emily approached one of the rectangles. Running her hand along its side, she frowned.

"What are these things? Caskets? Coffins?"

"Whatever they are—well, there must be millions of them. Just look at it: they go on as far as the room does."

He joined her at the nearest box, then climbed up onto its rectangular base and peered at the top. It was coated with a thick layer of frozen condensation.

"Careful!"

"It's some sort of glass," he mused, reaching towards the casket. "I wonder..."

He drew his hand back with a painful gasp, shaking it.

"Gah—it's *freezing*."

"Wipe away the frost, let's get a look inside."

Duncan glanced at the coffin-top, reluctant to bring his hand into contact with those kinds of temperatures a second time. He'd never been much for extremes. Funny—he'd thought serving on a comfortable passenger liner might help him avoid them, and look where it had gotten him now.

Pulling his shirt sleeve over his hand, he gingerly touched the box, grimaced slightly, then began to wipe away the frost. With the condensation cleared, he and Emily leaned over the coffin and looked in.

A creature stared up at them, frozen. It was hard to make out any details of its physique through the layer of frost congealed on its body, but it had the silhouette of a human—if not the face, which was a mess of tendrils and beady eyes.

"Ugly bugger," Emily remarked. "Certainly not human."

Duncan shook his head. "—oid, though. Definitely—oid."

Emily walked to one of the other coffins and wiped off its layer of frost. Within lay another corpse—more human-like than the last, but noseless, with eyes that were too large and skin that was too pink. She couldn't pinpoint the species—probably further-flung than any galaxy she'd visited.

"This one's different," she informed her companion. "Still humanoid. Not a race I recognize."

Duncan cleared the frost off of a third casket with broad sweeps and looked in. He frowned.

"This one's human. Hairy, but human."

Emily took a look. He was right—a young man, she supposed, probably in his mid-20s. Quite hairy. And quite dead. She shook her head, confused.

"Why would the Cyberons be keeping two million—"

"Three million, I'd wager."

"—*millions* of corpses frozen in caskets?"

Duncan considered this. He knew exactly what a Cyberon might want with a living person—if the tales his father had told were true—but surely they'd be no use to them dead? Unless...

"Who said they were dead?" he proposed. "Frozen, sure—but do we really know that they're dead?"

Emily bit her lip, thinking. They were frozen, certainly; and the amount of accumulated frost proved it wasn't a painless cryogenic procedure, which were generally done through drier and more controlled methods, but she supposed she shouldn't assume the Cyberons weren't capable of keeping them alive regardless. Alive, and in unmoving agony.

"...that is *not* a nice thought," she decided.

"Indeed not."

With a last glance at the frozen human, they began to make their way further into the chamber, wondering what new horrors might lie ahead.

CHAPTER FIVE

Corrigan struggled against the grip of the towering cybernetic being. Unphased, it pushed him onwards through a chrome-plated facility, the entrance to which had lay at the nadir of the cave.

Christian, restrained by another one of the creatures, had long ago ceased *his* struggling. The distant screams, ever clearer as they approached, were enough to put him off the idea of trying to run. Corrigan, apparently outfitted with no such instinct for self-preservation—not that *that* came as any surprise—had come to no such conclusion.

"What *are* you things, anyway?" he yelled, kicking at his captor as it half-lifted him off of the ground in its attempt to force him forward. "Bah! When I said I'd be saluting the toaster, I didn't intend to speak it into reality!"

"HAS YOUR INFERIOR SPECIES SO QUICKLY FORGOTTEN THE FACE OF A CYBERWARRIOR?" the monster rasped.

"Cyberwarrior...?" Corrigan muttered, trying to place the word. He squinted at his captor's metallic death mask, then remembered. "*Cyberwarrior?* But... but that's ancient history! There was a war..."

"CORRECT." the Cyberwarrior interrupted. "ONE IN WHICH THE VITAL SALVOS HAVE NOT YET BEEN FIRED."

Beneath his space helmet, Christian attempted a wince. Whatever they'd stumbled into, it was rapidly escalating into something he'd really rather not have been involved in.

"MUCH OF OUR ARMY WAS OBLITERATED. SOME WERE LOST TO SPACE-TIME IRREGULARITIES, OTHERS DESTROYED IN BATTLES THAT YIELDED NO VICTORS. EVENTUALLY, WITH DEFENSES WEAKENED, THE LAST OF THE CYBERONS VANISHED. ALL OF THEM GONE. BUT FOR US, HIDING AWAY WITHIN OUR FINAL OUTPOST AND *PREPARING.*"

"But—but..." Corrigan sputtered, looking indignant. "These asteroids have been surveyed!"

"THE ASTEROID IS WELL SHIELDED." the Cyberwarrior explained. "OUR BASE HAS REMAINED UNDETECTED."

So that was it. Christian remembered the great Cyber Wars, of course—a young positronic intelligence he may have been, but nonetheless one with a fully-functioning system of recall to rival most humans. The Cyberons had simply disappeared one day at the height of the conflict, leaving a baffled but very relieved Alliance of free systems to clean up after them. And here, now, was the very place to which they'd disappeared—for what purpose, Christian couldn't be sure—and here he was in the middle of it.

"WE HAVE REMAINED IN STASIS," the Cyberwarrior continued, "UNTIL THE MISSION PARAMETERS WERE MET."

"Nine hundred years?" Corrigan protested. "You waited *nine hundred years* to destroy the *Titania*?"

True, Christian reflected, they probably *were* responsible, if Emily really was here. Which meant, he supposed, that he had been right about the ship—a warp accident hadn't caused that much damage. Not on its own, anyway. The clockwork could hazard a reasonable guess as to what the Cyberons had wanted with the vessel—with its passengers, more specifically—but it wasn't a pleasant thought.

The Cyberon opened a door and pushed them through into a large chamber.

"WE NEEDED CALIBRATION MATERIAL FOR THE CONVERSION ENGINE. HUMANOID MATERIAL."

Christian nodded to himself, his suspicions confirmed.

"IT SERVED ITS PURPOSE," the Cyberwarrior continued. "BUT IT IS NOT OUR PRIMARY TARGET."

"You've got the crew and passengers here, then?" Corrigan inquired. "In this base?"

"IT IS NOT IMPORTANT."

The captain glared at the cybernetic creature.

"It is important to *me*," he growled. "What have you done with them?"

"IT IS NOT IMPORTANT," the Cyberon repeated. "REMAIN HERE."

It released the captain, and he fell to the floor. The Cyberon pointed to Christian.

"YOU WILL COME WITH US."

Corrigan pulled himself up onto his elbows.

"You can't!"

"SILENCE. REMAIN HERE OR BE ERADICATED."

As the captain continued his protests, the Cyberon dragged Christian into an adjoining chamber and shut the door.

"What have you done with Christian?" Corrigan shouted. The Cyberon apparently tasked with guarding him regarded him with its hollow eyes. He wondered if there was anything behind them. Probably an ancient skull, nearly dust after so many centuries.

"YOUR COMPANION OF CRUDE CONSTRUCTION?"

"Where *is* he?"

"HIS MIND IS INTERESTING TO US. IT APPEARS TO BE AN EXTENSION OF CYBER TECHNOLOGY."

Corrigan blanched.

"Wh—but that's ridiculous!"

"IT WILL BE STUDIED."

From beyond the walls of the chamber came the buzzing of a saw striking metal. Fear filled Corrigan's mind.

"They—they're cutting into him, aren't they?"

The Cyberon gave no response.

"You don't understand! I built his body!" Corrigan felt faint. "If someone unfamiliar with the construction attempts to disconnect the mind from the body, the mind will self-destruct!"

The Cyberon hesitated.

"...THIS IS THE TRUTH?" it said at last.

"Yes, yes! Ask him yourself, if you don't believe me!"

The Cyberon hesitated a moment longer, then opened the connecting door. Within, Corrigan caught a glimpse of his robotic companion, strapped to a laboratory slab. A saw-wielding Cyberon loomed over him.

"THE HUMANOID CAPTIVE HAS INFORMED US THAT THIS OPERATION COULD DAMAGE THE POSITRONIC MIND WHICH WE SEEK TO STUDY. IS THIS THE CASE?"

"It's true," came the voice of Christian. Then, in a tone that somehow managed to be both matter-of-fact and deeply bitter; "He did it to stop me from leaving him."

The Cyberons hesitated. The buzzsaw powered off, its operator waiting for instructions.

"Scan me for explosives, if you don't believe us," Christian suggested.

"COMPUTER," said one of the Cyberwarriors, "SCAN CRANIUM FOR CONCEALED EXPLOSIVES."

A rippling wave of light descended from a node on the laboratory-chamber's silver ceiling. With a wobbling drone, it swept the prone form of the clockwork.

"Six hundred grams of distronic explosive located in cranial cavity," a tinny voice reported.

Corrigan nodded.

"There, now, you see? Only I know how to access the brain. There are three small distronic charges to negotiate before it can be removed."

He crossed his arms, satisfied. A Cyberon turned to him, palm outstretched.

"YOU WILL REMOVE THE BRAIN FOR FURTHER INVESTIGATION."

Corrigan took a step back.

"No! I refuse!"

"THEN YOU WILL BE ERADICATED."

The outstretched palm began to glow as the Cyberon readied a deadly beam.

CHAPTER SIX

"It just goes on forever and ever, doesn't it?"

Emily and Duncan trudged past coffin after coffin, no end in sight. They were beginning to feel the cold, now—neither of them had dressed for it. Duncan almost chuckled at the thought. *Ah, yes, what **shall** I wear today? Well, better pack a scarf and mittens—never know when my ship might get hijacked by cyborgs, leaving me lost in an endless chamber. Those can get a tad nippy.*

"There *must* be another exit somewhere," he said, looking around as if one might reveal itself from out among the unending expanse of chrome. One didn't—aside from the few tiny dead-end chambers branching off from the main, there didn't seem to be any way in or out. "I mean... there has to be one somewhere, right?"

Emily shook her head. "Doesn't appear to be."

"Well—"

A mechanical shrieking pierced the air, cutting him off mid-sentence. "Get down!" he yelled, dropping behind a casket and pulling Emily with him.

After several long seconds, nothing happened. Emily raised an eyebrow. "*Why* are we lying on the floor?"

Duncan cleared his throat, embarrassed. "...Seemed like a good idea at the time." he explained sheepishly.

They stood, cautiously. Nothing seemed amiss.

"Well, something must have made that noise," he continued. Emily glanced around, then pointed ahead.

"Something's started. Look—the caskets up ahead. They're moving."

Duncan squinted. She was right—the rectangular coffins, bases and all, had shifted. With another screech and a jolt, they rose up off of their bases and began to slide through the air on invisible tracks. Some form of controlled anti-gravity, perhaps—the Cyberons probably had that, too, he imagined. As if they needed any more terrifying abilities.

"Oh, I don't like this one bit," he moaned.

"You're wise. They're coming this way fast—get down!"

They dropped to the floor again, before any low-flying coffins could take off their heads.

"*Won't* say I told you so," Duncan grinned.

"Good." Emily looked back at the coffins. "This is turning into a real horror film. Let's get into one of the smaller rooms. At least we won't have those *things* whizzing over our heads.

Duncan nodded, and the two crawled off towards one of the connected chambers, coffins zipping by overhead.

Ought to pack a helmet, too, then, Duncan imagined himself saying. Completely rational. The crews of passenger liners are always getting attacked by flying, refrigerated coffins. Very common occurrence. Hardly a real voyage without 'em.

"LEADER. THE CONVERSION ENGINE IS FULLY CALIBRATED, AND PROCESSING HAS BEGUN."

"EXCELLENT. TAKE THE FIRST PROCESSED CAPTIVES INTO THE LOWER LEVELS AND ERADICATE THE ESCAPEES."

"UNDERSTOOD."

Corrigan glared at the group of Cyberons that had congregated at the other end of the lab. He couldn't stand that voice, and he was frustrated enough as it was. And it worried him to no little degree that one of them was apparently the commander of the entire Cyberon army, judging by the way the others addressed it. Why had it come to oversee this operation personally? Corrigan didn't like it.

On the table below, Christian was, quite understandably, rather *more* than frustrated. Portions of his outer plating had been pulled away, several of his screws had rolled off to parts unknown, and his brain was about to be removed. He'd dreamed about having his brain removed for quite some time now, actually—but only so it could then be put into a better body. This wasn't quite living up to his fantasy.

The Cyberons continued their discussion. Corrigan dropped his wrench and shook a fist at them. "What's going on? How am I supposed to work with all of this racket?"

"YOU WILL WORK OR DIE," a Cyberon unhelpfully informed him, displaying its palm from across the room.

"Oh," he said plainly. Bending down under the pretense of picking up his wrench, he positioned his mouth next to Christian's audio receiver.

"Christian," he whispered, glancing over his shoulder, "what do you know about these creatures? It's been nearly a thousand years since one was last seen. What happened? Move your arm that way, please."

"No one knows," Christian responded, sounding despondent. "There were huge losses on both sides of the war. And then, one day—they were gone, just like that."

He paused.

"There was a suggestion that some sort of nanotechnology they had developed turned against them, and destroyed them overnight. But that doesn't explain *this* little lot."

It really didn't—but there *were*, obviously, still Cyberons here. Cyberons who had recently obtained enough organic material to create, perhaps, hundreds more of them. This could mean another war, Christian realized—one which the allied systems might well be unequipped to win. There were only a few things which could defeat Cyberons on a large scale—gold, maybe, enterprising conquerors that they were. Or acetone, if you had enough of it. But those weren't practical solutions. No, this could be very bad indeed—another Cyber War might well mean torturous conversion on an unprecedented scale.

"We have to get word to the Vega Station," he continued. "It's relatively close by—it could well be their first victim, if they plan to launch a new attack. Either way, their navy should be able to deal with these pests."

"I know, I know!" Corrigan whispered. "But we've got to find Emily first."

He mused for a moment.

"D'you think the navy will try to parley with these creatures? Or just bomb them out of existence? Turn your head, I need to get at this bit." He fiddled with a mechanism in Christian's clockwork. "*That's* it... yes. Now if I could just—"

"It's coming over!" Christian hissed. Corrigan jerked his head upwards and spotted a Cyberon crossing the room. Its elaborate headpiece identified it as the leader of the cybernetic monsters.

"Got it!" the captain exclaimed under his breath, working something loose from Christian's chassis. The Cyberleader came to a stop beside him.

"TELLURIAN, OBSERVE THE MAIN SCREEN."

Obedying its instruction, Corrigan glanced at the large monitor situated on the far wall. Currently, it was displaying an image of the Vega Station, which worried him.

"IS THAT YOUR HOME?"

"Er—of sorts, yes," Corrigan replied, busying himself with a grease spill on the slab.

"IT IS OUR PRIMARY TARGET," the Cyberleader intoned. Its hollow eyes seemed to bore into him, staring intently. "DOES THIS...ANGER YOU?"

Corrigan wondered what sort of game the Cyberon was playing at. Hesitating, he decided to answer truthfully.

"Well...yes, I suppose—"

"ANGER OBSCURES LOGIC. WITHOUT LOGIC, A BATTLE CANNOT BE WON."

Corrigan ignored the cyberplatitude, focusing instead on the task that had been presented to him. After jabbing at something with the wrench for a few minutes more, he dropped it, letting out a growl of frustration.

"Damn it!" he grumbled. "I can't do it!"

"DO NOT PAUSE, TELLURIAN. UNNECESSARY DELAYS WILL NOT BE TOLERATED."

"I didn't say I *wouldn't* do it," Corrigan snarled. "I said I *can't*. These tools you've given me are not compatible with these fixings!"

He took a deep breath, then continued in a calmer tone.

"Yes, I'm afraid I'll need to get some specialised tools from the ship."

"DESCRIBE THEIR LOCATION," the Cyberleader instructed. "I WILL DISPATCH A CYBERWARRIOR TO FETCH THEM."

Corrigan shook his head.

"The location is only accessible by *my* retina scan and palm print."

He turned away, then looked back, a worried look on his face.

"*Live* scan and print," he clarified. "Before you get any funny ideas about cutting off any of my appendages."

The Cyberleader seemed to consider this.

"THEN YOU WILL GO AND GET THEM IMMEDIATELY," it decided. The creature pointed to another Cyberon on the other side of the chamber. "GO WITH HIM."

"YES, LEADER."

The other Cyberon clamped a metal paw onto Corrigan's arm, forcing him out of the chamber. On the slab, Christian sighed. His cogs were getting cold.

"We'll rest here for a moment." Emily declared. The two had found themselves crouched in one of the small chambers as the coffins continued to fly by outside, off to their unknown destination.

"I'm shattered," Duncan groaned, rubbing his temples. This was the only rest he'd *had* since running through the halls with a dead body strapped to his back, and it really didn't beat a nice bed. Or even a nice floor that *wasn't* the freezing chrome surface of an evil cyborg-filled facility.

"I don't think we'll ever find an exit, trekking through this awful room," Emily admitted.

"Yeah—sorry to say, I agree with *that*."

Emily nodded. "Good—then I think the logical thing to do is to go back the way we came."

"What, back to the Cybs?" Duncan exclaimed. "Well, bugger logic!"

"It's the only way. If we're going to get word to the Vega Station—"

"I know." Duncan sighed. "It's just... not an appetizing thought."

"I won't argue with that. But—come on. We have to try."

Pulling themselves to their feet, they faced the outer chamber. Their rest was over—it was time to face their captors.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"OPEN THE AIRLOCK."

Corrigan cranked open the airlock door of the *Jerusalem*. It squealed horribly, and the captain winced. They stepped inside, and he shut it to another chorus of creaking.

"Heh—could do with a bit of an oiling."

"YOU WILL RETRIEVE THE NECESSARY EQUIPMENT," the Cyberon ordered, unamused.

"Yes, alright," Corrigan grumbled. "Let me get out of this suit."

He removed the helmet and began to strip off the rest of the outfit.

"It's too bulky to move around the ship," he explained. The Cyberon did not seem to care. Corrigan left the suit in a heap and started towards the interior door. "This way!"

The two unwilling companions stalked through the narrow hall between the *Jerusalem's* airlock and the small storage area behind the cockpit, footsteps echoing in the darkness.

As they walked, Corrigan eyed his guard suspiciously. Could this *really* be a Cyberwarrior? The creatures were almost like fairy tales in the modern age—there was plenty of historical evidence for the War, of course, but Cyberons had featured in campfire tales and stories designed to scare young children into behaving for so long now it almost felt unreal to be walking beside one.

But he was. It was real, and it would kill him if he made any wrong moves. Kill him, or worse.

Corrigan remembered the tales his father used to tell him over a game of cards, stories passed down by *his* father, and so on through the generations. The Cyberons—they didn't just capture their victims, didn't just torture them. Well, not in the conventional sense. They converted them—"upgraded" the poor unsuspecting captives into unfeeling, inhuman cybernetic creatures. And what might they do to Emily, if she was in there?

Corrigan shook himself. It wouldn't do to think about that. It was liable to throw him into a rage against the Cyberon beside him, and then he'd be frazzled by an energy beam and in no condition to save anyone.

So he cleared his mind and kept pace with the cybernetic monstrosity. Had it, too, been someone's loved one, once? How long ago? Did it even remember?

Not helpful thoughts, he told himself. *Focus on the task*.

The two of them marched onward, emotions suppressed.

"Isn't this where we came in?"

Emily pointed to a door. Duncan nodded, hands on his knees. He had had more than enough exercise for one day, and he had the sinking feeling that it wasn't over yet.

Ducking beneath the flying coffins, they crept into the hall, looking for Cyberons. Seeing none, they straightened up, trying to determine which path they should take.

The caskets were taking the left passageway, floating together in a dense swarm. *The world's most morbid school of fish*, Duncan thought.

"They're all headed the same way," Emily remarked.

"Soon, this place'll be crawling with Cybs," he replied, worried.

"Do you really think that's where the caskets are going? To make more?"

He nodded, grave.

"This is the factory floor, Emily. Look around." He gestured down the passageway. "You put corpsicles through this end, and out the other end come Cybs. That's what they do, isn't it? In the stories, I mean. *Eat your vegetables, or you'll wake up a Cyberon*—didn't your mother ever say that to you?"

"Didn't have one."

"Father?"

Emily was silent, staring blankly after the coffins. Duncan cleared his throat.

"Sorry, shouldn't have said anything."

She shook her head.

"Never mind. We've *got* to stop this. Millions of these creatures flooding out of here—it doesn't bear thinking about!"

Emily set off after the coffins.

"Hang on, hang on—wait!"

She paused, glancing over her shoulder.

"*Stop this?*" he repeated. "Is this the bit where I find out you're secretly a special weapons expert?"

"No." She crossed her arms. "Actually, I'm a schoolteacher, if you must know."

"Great!" Duncan shrugged. "*Know* any secret special weapons experts?"

"No." She continued walking.

"Just checking." He shook his head. "Lead on."

"Explosion aboard human ship." the computer reported. "Contact blast with Cyberwarrior."

Strapped to the slab, Christian smiled. Corrigan had actually managed to carry out his end of the plan.

"SCAN," the Cyberleader ordered.

The computer trilled for a few seconds.

"Distronic explosives in blast signature."

"SCAN THE AUTOMATON FOR CONCEALED EXPLOSIVES."

The wave of light washed over Christian once more, temporarily blinding him. The computer beeped. "200 grams of explosives remain within."

"DESTROY THE AUTOMATON."

Christian raised his articulated eyebrows playfully.

"Not a good idea, I'm afraid," he warned. "Not only did Corrigan remove a sizable chunk of his booby trap—but, as well as loosening my bonds..."

Christian shrugged off the restraints and sat up. The Cyberleader looked as aghast as a blank-faced, hollow-eyed, emotionless ghoul possibly could.

"...he also gave the rest of the explosive and detonators to me," he continued. "You fire those guns, and they're going to be scraping us all off the inside of this rock. Now get back—all of you—and shut down your weapons."

A Cyberwarrior entered the chamber.

"LEADER—THE CAPTIVE SHIP IS TAKING OFF."

The Cyberleader turned.

"SHOOT IT DOWN," he commanded, modulated voice harsher than usual as he pointed to the all-purpose computer terminal at the other end of the lab.

Christian placed a hand on the detonator.

"Make one move towards that console, and it's *Goodnight Vienna*, I'm afraid, chaps."

The Cyberons stepped back. Any of the warriors, Christian assumed, would have had no qualms sacrificing themselves for their ultimate goal—but the Cyberleader was too valuable. He had been worried at first, but it had really proved a stroke of luck that the leader had come to oversee them.

"Time I wasn't here," he told them, closing his chest panel and stepping down from the slab, explosives in hand. "And if any of you think of following me, the result will be the same."

He nodded at the Cyberleader, then turned and rushed off down the hall as fast as his clockwork legs could carry him.

The Cyberons stood in silence for a moment.

"LEADER," one ventured, "SHOULD WE FOLLOW?"

The Cyberleader nodded.

"HUNT IT DOWN."

The warriors marched from the lab.

"COMPUTER—DESTROY THE *JERUSALEM* AT ONCE."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Reaching the edge of the facility, Christian took a look around. No Cyberons in sight.

His communicator beeped twice, and he smiled.

"Knew it wouldn't be long."

"Can you hear me?" came Corrigan's voice, distant and distorted by static.

"Yes—not very clearly. Enjoying the flight? I thought you were coming back for me."

"I'm not on board the *Jerusalem*. Thank god—they just blew it up. Ah, but its registered with the Vega Station—linked to their computers—they'll be receiving an automated report soon. With an embedded designation signature, I might add."

"Are you alright?" Christian asked, genuinely concerned. The captain seemed to be rambling nonsense, which wasn't *usually* a good sign.

"Oh, yes—apart from being *covered* in bits of dessicated Cyberwarrior—yes, very!" Corrigan cleared his throat. "I'm coming back for you."

"You'll never get back in."

"Ha—don't be so sure. I've got a few more tricks up my sleeve yet, Christian, old son!"

"Someone's unusually cheerful," the robot remarked. "Should I be worried?"

"Ah, I just love it when a plan goes off—er, according to plan, I suppose. Try to get back to the cave."

Ahead, Christian could see the entrance to the series of passageways he was fairly sure led to the entrance of the facility—but his legs were beginning to slump. He took a few more plodding steps, but the situation didn't look good. The pressure of the ballast and strain of the operation had drained his motive power prematurely.

"I'm running down," he informed the captain. "Quickly."

"Don't get caught!" Corrigan warned. Christian wasn't sure he'd have any say in that—not in this state—but he dragged himself a few paces into the shadows anyway. Couldn't hurt to try.

"Did you manage to get a signal back to the Vega Station?" he inquired.

"You could say that," came the reply. "Now, just wait there. I'll be down to fetch you in a moment."

Christian waited.

Then he decided, if he was going to be rescued anyway—and he'd rather not think about the alternative—then he'd might as well make himself useful in the meantime. Shuffling his legs, he shambled off down one of the other passageways. Corrigan was really going to owe him that Mark Nine after *this*.

"WHAT IS THAT ANOMALY?" the Cyberleader demanded, pointing to a reading on the monitor.

"IT APPEARS TO BE A SIGNAL—RECENTLY EMBEDDED IN THE DAMAGE FLARE SIGNATURE OF THE *JERUSALEM*," a tech-savvy Cyberon replied.

"WHAT KIND OF SIGNAL?"

The Cyberon paused, reading it over.

"A DISTRESS SIGNAL. TO THE VEGA STATION. THE SHIP IS REGISTERED THERE. THE FLARE WILL REACH THE STATION SOON, AND THE RESPONSE *WILL* BE HOSTILE."

The Cyberleader turned to its warriors.

"BATTLE STATIONS!"

Scores of metal men marched forth, ready to defend their base—and their leader—at any cost.

A large, armor-plated figure sipped from a cooling mug of coffee, grumbling as she took in the mess of crumpled paper that had engulfed her desk seemingly overnight.

The figure in question was Vega Commander Jyaxx Nevaryn, a Caradan who, with her imposing stature and physiognomy that resembled some cross between a horseshoe crab and an armadillo, gave off an entirely inaccurate impression of being particularly fearsome.

Oh, she was good at what she did—very good. Anyone would tell you that. But the fact was, having lived through several centuries worth of wars on the Vega Station hadn't made her any less approachable. She was always willing to show newer recruits the ropes or help her team with any problems they may have had.

That wasn't to say, of course, that she was entirely impervious to annoyance. The fact that her station was covered in countless reams of crumpled papers and heavy binders that looked ready to implode was beginning to test the limits of her patience.

Taking another sip of coffee, she cleared her throat.

"Ahem. Lonnie?"

Her human lieutenant poked her head up from out of the mess, smiling sheepishly.

"Oh, hi, Jyaxx. How's your day going?"

The commander raised an eyebrow. "Care to tell me what, exactly, this creeping horror of refuse is doing on my desk?"

Lonnie examined the mess. "Ah—well, I was organizing my files—and, you know, from down there by my desk it didn't look so bad."

"Hm. I must say, I didn't realise one cabinet could *fit* this many individual pieces of paper. I'm almost impressed."

"Oh, sure. You've just gotta cram 'em in there."

They stood in silence for a moment. Jyaxx shook her head, beginning to walk away.

"Cram 'em in there'—I swear..."

"I'll have it cleaned up before you know it!" Lonnie promised, already scooping trash off of the commander's desk.

"I'm not paid enough plaudits for this," Jyaxx responded, although she couldn't help cracking a grin as she did. At least things were never dull with her lieutenant around. She'd

lived through some fairly dull stretches of decades in her time, and that was no fun at all. You had to have at least a *little* bit of fun in this kind of job, if you didn't want to go out of your mind. Jyaxx was glad that Vega Station's navy almost never had any real threats to deal with, but it did mean that they had to find *something* to do, instead.

As she headed towards central command, thinking to check in on the day's dispatched ships, something buzzed. Her wristwatch communicator. She tapped at it, and it displayed a red-hued message.

Urgent—report to command immediately. Distress signal received. Enemy attack possible—details forthcoming.—Admiral.

Within seconds, Jyaxx was wishing for 'dull' again. There hadn't been an attack on the station in almost seventy years. This could be bad, very bad.

En route to command, she contacted Lonnie. A holo-image of a pile of paperwork appeared on her communicator.

"Hey, Jyaxx—nearly got this mess cleaned up, I think!" came the lieutenant's muffled voice.

"Never mind that! I think we might have a bigger one on our hands."

Corrigan crept around a corner, taking laboured breaths thanks to his heavy new suit and keeping his eyes peeled for Cyberons. He had told Christian to stay by the entrance—but when had the clockwork ever listened to him? Never, he reminded himself.

Maybe that was for the best, he lamented, tiptoeing down a shadowed hall. After what he'd done...

No, no. Stay focused, he told himself, stay focused. Emily's life was at stake. No, that was far too distracting a thought at such a critical juncture, Corrigan realised. Just the thought of losing her—it was too much.

Think of something else, he decided. Something less close to home. Or, ironically, more.

The Vega Station, and all aboard, were at stake here too. They would receive his little signal, surely—but that might not be enough. He didn't know what he could contribute, but he wanted to be there anyway.

There were so many millions of people of all species living on the station, all with loved ones who could soon be lost in the fiery blaze of war. Corrigan felt a lump in his throat. His

eyes grew moist. He cursed, then swallowed hard, putting the thought out of his mind. What would Emily think?

Vega was the only home he had ever known. He loved the place—the bustling ports full of interesting visitors and witty old sailors who made great conversation-mates over games of cards—(he reminded himself to teach Christian some of his favourites, when all of this was over. Loathe as he was to admit it, he owed the clockwork an apology)—the historic casino, not that he ever won—and the beautiful envirochambers, filled with the kinds of lush landscapes scrap traders like himself rarely got to see in the wild.

He'd always intended to buy himself a bird like they had in the envirochambers at Vega. As a throwback, and because he enjoyed their cheeky songs and colourful feathers. And how free they were, not tied down by any of the worries and regrets that so often plagued his mind. But he'd never had enough plaudits for one, not without a more pressing matter presenting itself.

Ah, well. Christian was enough of a bird for him, he decided, chuckling to himself.

The captain rounded another corner. In the darkness ahead, he thought he could make out a shape. He squinted.

Silver. It was the silver outline of a silver terror.

Corrigan leapt back as the Cyberwarrior shambled from the shadows, jerked forward by its cybernetics.

It stopped, examining him. He held his breath, trying to think. The Cyberon marched off, leaving him untouched.

He burst out laughing as he remembered. He'd been so wrapped up in reminiscing that he'd forgotten—but of course a Cyberon wouldn't attack him now. Not a freshly-minted one like that, anyway.

Containing his laughter, he stalked off through the halls, searching for his daughter.

And Christian, too.

CHAPTER NINE

Emily liked Duncan well enough, she'd decided, after having traversed the facility with him for what must have been hours and hours. Such an appraisal, on the lips of another, might

have come across as damning with faint praise—but Emily didn't forge relationships easily. Or almost ever, in all honesty.

She'd always been a tad anti-social, she supposed, throughout the entirety of her life—but in recent years especially, she'd found it particularly hard to spark friendships. And she hadn't even *thought* about relationships of any other kind. Reflecting, she realised there really wasn't anybody in her life whom she would really describe as a friend. There were coworkers, of course, and she necessarily upheld some form of affection with her pupils—but aside from that, there wasn't much. She couldn't explain it—what else was new?—but she'd always had trouble relating to people on some fundamental level.

She wasn't sure if Duncan was really any different, or if it was just the fact that they'd ended up trapped together—but he'd grown on her, somehow. Maybe it was the air of genuine affability he carried about himself—he had particular sensibilities, to be sure, but there was the sense he might well put them aside and manage to strike up a friendship with anyone or anything if the opportunity arose. If they ever made it out, Emily decided, she'd see about keeping in touch with him—it *would* be nice to have at least *one* friend, anyway.

But, despite all of that, Duncan was beginning to get on her nerves. She blamed fatigue—his and hers—for the fact that they had been arguing about the best way to dispatch a Cyberon for several minutes now. But that didn't mean it wasn't grating nonetheless. She *had* saved his life, after all—he could've shown a bit of courtesy in return.

Yes, she could see herself becoming friends with Duncan—so long as she didn't lose her temper and throw him in with the corpses first.

"Now, if we could just get hold of one of their energy weapons—" Emily began.

"Oh, yes—you hold him, I'll hit him!" Duncan scoffed. "That'd never work!"

Emily rounded on him, glaring.

"They're not *invincible*, you know. We escaped from the holding cell, didn't we?"

Duncan crossed his arms.

"Well, *unfortunately*, there aren't any convenient corpses around to sling over our backs—and I'm not volunteering."

Her glare was unwavering. She had every right to be angry, he supposed—her plan *had* saved their lives—but he was, quite honestly, exhausted. And he'd always gotten snippish when he was tired.

Sighing, he tried to be more helpful.

"If we—"

She shushed him.

"What?"

"Can you hear that?" she asked, looking around.

"Hear what? I don't hear anything!"

"Well, shut up and listen!"

He did, and could suddenly make out the quiet but unmistakable sound of clanking footsteps.

"Come on, we can hide in here!" he suggested, pointing to a small chamber just to the side of the processing room into which the flying coffins were flowing.

"Wait!" she protested, taking a step forward.

He shrugged. "I'll hide, then! It's been fun."

He darted into the chamber, immediately felt terrible, and turned back around.

Something was rounding the corner, and Emily hadn't moved.

What was she *doing?*, he asked himself. Surely she knew the clanking of metal footsteps could only herald imminent death at the hands of a platoon of Cybs.

As the footsteps grew nearer, he came to a sudden realisation. It was *he* who couldn't recognise the sound of a Cyberon's footstep. The reverberations, although they echoed in the cavernous halls, were clearly not *nearly* as heavy or deliberate as those of the cybernetic warriors. Which could only mean...

Someone stepped around the corner, and Duncan's eyes widened. Whoever it was, they were clearly *not* a Cyberon. It must have been another escapee like them, Duncan assumed, maybe a former *Titania* passenger. But, then—why did Emily look so startled?

The person seemed fairly shocked, themselves. From his vantage point, Duncan could scarcely make out their face, but he could see *that* well enough. The person opened their mouth, closed it, opened it again—then spoke.

"...Emily?"

Emily blinked.

"*What?*"

"Emily Corrigan?" the stranger asked.

"Wh—yes! Who are *you*? How do you know me?"

"Oh, I've seen your picture often enough," the man—Duncan was fairly sure they were a man—replied.

"Picture?"

"Yes!"

The man stepped further into the passageway, and suddenly Duncan could see why Emily had been so surprised. He was a robot, a clockwork—not an unusual thing to meet when going about one's day-to-day business, but quite surprising to find as a prisoner in a Cyberon facility. They couldn't very well cyber-convert a *robot*, after all.

"I'm a crewmember on the *Jerusalem*," the robot explained. "...Who's the guy trying to hide under himself?"

Duncan stepped out into the passageway, embarrassed.

"...Precautions," he explained with what he hoped came off as a care-free wave of his hand. "That's all."

Emily still looked as if she was in shock, although Duncan wasn't quite sure *why* anymore.

"...*Jerusalem*," she murmured.

"Yes, that's right," the robot confirmed, taking another step forward. Duncan noticed that he was dragging his legs, as if he'd been injured—or maybe out of charge, he realised. "We've come to get you out of here."

"...You came on the *Jerusalem*," Emily repeated. The robot nodded. She hesitated. "...So he's here too."

"Who?" the robot asked, looking more confused by the second as it slumped further over.

"...My father," she spat.

Now Duncan was confused. "And... this is bad, is it?"

Emily leaned against the nearest wall. "Put it this way: I'd rather give myself up to the Cyberons than see my *father* again. How did he find me here?"

"Some device," the robot mumbled, dazed. "I'm not—"

"You mean he's been tracking me!?"

Emily threw up her hands.

"It's been five years!" she exclaimed—in the direction of her conversational companions if not actually *to* them. "*Bloody* typical. Can't lose control for a *second*, can he?"

She kicked at the wall, but stopped short of actually making contact for fear of alerting any nearby Cyberwarriors.

Christian, hand planted firmly on the nearest solid surface, held up a finger.

"Well... it's some sort of tracking device, yes. But he's very cagey about it, and I don't—"

Emily simply scowled, crossing her arms.

"That's the grossest invasion of privacy that I've *ever*—"

Duncan cleared his throat.

"Objection!" he declared. "The case for the defense would like it on the record that this 'tracking device' brought these guys to us—in a ship. I understand the frustration, I do, but I, for one, am cool about it."

"Well, *I* am very much *not*, thank you!" Emily snapped.

Christian swayed slightly.

"Are you sure there's no tracking device, er... secreted about your body?" he asked, gesturing with a vague looping motion towards Emily.

Emily raised an eyebrow that put his own to shame.

"You think I wouldn't have found it in five years?" she snorted. "My standard of personal hygiene is, if you must know, very high."

"...would you mind if I scanned you?" Christian ventured. "Just to make sure!"

Emily let out a long sigh, annoyed at the preposterousness of the entire situation.

"If you must," she finally allowed. The clockwork shuffled forward, holding his hand before him like a scanning imager—which it probably was, she supposed. An antenna extended from his index finger—Emily assumed it was, anyway, although he only had four per hand—and he aimed it.

As Christian's hand waved back and forth before Emily, something caught her eye. She barely had time to duck—pulling the little robot down with her—before a pulsing laser beam scorched the wall a scant few centimetres above where her head had been only seconds prior.

"Cyberon!" Duncan shouted, as one of the very same appeared at the far end of the hall. Duncan took a few steps towards the room in which he had previously hidden—waiting, this time, for his companions. Emily started to join him, then glanced at the scorched point of impact. She bit her lip, suddenly curious. She couldn't help it—it came naturally to her, even when she should have been running. That kind of innate curiosity was why she'd gone into academics to begin with, after all. And, right now, it was nagging at her once again.

"Why did it fire *over* us?" she wondered aloud. "They should be more accurate than that—I was a static target, after all, until *after* it'd already fired."

"I hate to be rude, Emily," Duncan whispered, backing away from the creature as quickly as possible short of actually running, "but who the hell cares? Run!"

"No, no..." Christian slurred, gears grinding even as he squinted at the Cyberwarrior. "You've—she's—you've got a point, you know. Because..."

The Cyberon stopped, staring at the trio. It made a sort of strangled noise as its hands flew to the seam at the base of its metal mask, making a seeming attempt to pry the thing off.

Emily was baffled—then shocked. Then angry.

"*Emily...*" the thing rasped, its helmet clanking as its owner jerked it apart from the cyber-suit's neck. The face-plate tore loose, and the Cyberon tossed it to the ground, revealing the sweat-soaked face of a grey-bearded, wild-eyed old man. "Gah—"

He gasped for air, then locked eyes with the woman at the end of the passageway, a mixture of joy and disbelief mingling on his features.

"EMILY!"

"Why does it not surprise me to see *you* dressed up as a Cyberon?" she replied coolly, eyes absolutely livid beneath her sarcastic demeanor. "Heartless, emotionless bastards *both*."

"Heartless? No," Corrigan laughed, obviously relieved—though he was still breathing heavily from his trek encased within the hot metal suit. "There's still a lot of organic gunk left inside those things. Er, sorry about that shot, by the way. This thing is hard to control. But it has its uses! They were so busy dealing with their battle-stations and counting their new Cyberwarriors..."—he chuckled—"that I just *waltzed* past."

Emily was unmoved.

"And the tracker brought you straight to me, did it? I see."

Corrigan's eyes flashed.

"*Christian!*" the old sailor barked. The robot shrugged shakily.

"Just told her about the tracker, that's all," he replied obviously, nodding with a wavering smile. He wagged his hand. "If you don't mind, I'll finish the scan. I'm dying to know!"

"No!" Corrigan gasped. Rushing down the hall with a clatter of heavy-booted footsteps, he struck the clockwork squarely in the back, shoving him away from Emily and into the wall.

"Ever the paragon of charm and tolerance, I see," Emily quipped. Christian held up his hand. The antenna had bent at the middle. He frowned.

"The scanner!" he protested.

"Oh, I'll get you another," Corrigan promised with a dismissive wave.

"You tried to buy my affection, too," Emily snidely recalled.

From the corner, Duncan cleared his throat.

"Ah—'scuse me. Hello. Sorry. May I speak for a moment?"

All were silent (but for the persistent grinding of Christian's run-down gears). He took that as a good sign and continued.

"This happy reunion's all very well—though I haven't any more than the foggiest clue about what's going on here, but don't you think we could do all the catching up on old time stuff *on the ship?*"

Emily nodded curtly, stepping around the stammering Corrigan.

"Yes. Let's go."

Corrigan shook his head, grave.

"There *is* no ship."

Shocked expressions filled the chamber, and Corrigan continued.

"The Cyberons blew up the *Jerusalem*," he explained, suddenly looking very old and very tired. "They were jamming all frequencies, and I—I had to hide a message in the damage signal flares. I knew they would shoot it down... but it was the *only way!*"

All were quiet for a moment. Duncan broke the silence.

"So we're stranded here?"

"Yes," Christian answered, looking dazed. He hadn't yet moved from the position in which he had landed following Corrigan's shoving attack. "And they're about to attack the Vega Station!"

Emily and Duncan glanced at each other, a growing horror on their faces. The Vega Station was the largest residential *and* commercial station this side of Stellion's Whorl. An attack *there* would mean total devastation. It would mean the loss of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands, of lives. Lost to a fate worse than death—to the grim spectre of cyber-conversion. It would mean, they realized—

It would mean *war*.

CHAPTER TEN

Her name was Lana.

Or it had been, once. Long ago—so very long ago. It seemed like an eternity spent here, ten lifetimes of frozen agony, barely aware of her surroundings other than the fact they were suffocatingly small.

Once—long ago—in a past life, perhaps—she'd sat by a pool. It had been warm, then—she could hardly remember what warmth was like. She knew it had been lovely. And wet—oh, what she wouldn't give for warmth and wetness. But all she knew was cold—skin-numbing cold that seeped into her bones, made them throb with hollow, distant pain.

She was vaguely aware that she was moving, though her eyes were so heavy with frost that she couldn't see. Might never see again. Everything hurt, and everything was numb. She—she wanted to go home. She wanted to see her family. But she couldn't think—could scarcely breathe.

Her claustrophobic enclosure—the only home she could remember—moved ever onward. Where was it headed? There was no way of knowing. Everything was darkness, and coldness, and torture.

With a skull-shattering jolt, she stopped. And descended—slowly, precisely, finally—into a massive, monstrous machine. She hadn't any clue, of course. She was tired, so tired. She would never wake up. She was so cold.

Suddenly, it was hot. Very, very hot. Every part of her burned, ached, seemed to be decomposing as she lay unmoving in her casket. Flames seemed to shoot up her legs, into her chest, her fingers, her head. For a moment, she was warm. Then she was in hell.

It didn't last. The cold returned—the dull cold of silver and steel, cutting into her flesh—then her organs. Or maybe it was growing out of her. Something stabbed her upper arm. Something flowed *through* it, filling her veins. For a moment, she felt good. Then the shifting liquid ate her soul, crawled up through her twitching spine, and entered her mind. A second longer, and it *was* her mind. Lana was dead.

The machine opened its gaping maw. A Cyberwarrior emerged, its hollow eyes empty of all compassion, all hope, all life. It took a shuddering step forward, mechanical components and repurposed organs throbbing in tune as Lana's corpse, playing host to the alien

consciousness that was Cyberon, started on its grim mission. It marched on, never halting, all thoughts of home vanished. Only one goal occupied its mind: it had to conquer. It had to convert. It had to find yet more vessels for its master.

But its master had little to worry about. Behind the hollow corpse that marched, propelled by ghoulish machinery, towards its intended station, millions more floating coffins were devoured, one by one, by the pulsing heart of the operation—the great conversion engine. Millions of people—individuals, with friends, family, ambitions, passions—were snuffed out by the all-encompassing, unfeeling Cyberon. Millions of cyberised legions of the undead clanked forth in their place, playing host to the eldritch monster, ready to carry out its whims.

It wanted only to spread, and by any means necessary.

A veritable fireworks show of sparks rained down on the pristine chrome floor of a disused Cyberon laboratory. Emily and Duncan jumped back as Corrigan's commandeered welding torch let loose another electrical buzz, filling the air with a scent reminiscent of the Cyberwarrior's lasers. *That* brought back memories of the body-shielded jaunt through the corridors a few hours prior, and Duncan tried to put the thought out of his mind. It was one that was going to stick around in there for a while, he was sure.

"Because I left the key on the *Jerusalem*..." Corrigan was muttering to himself through gritted teeth. "And the *Jerusalem* has been destroyed... gah—now—now hold *still* a moment, would you?"

Another shower of sparks.

Christian had really hoped he might be *through* with invasive operations for—well, for the rest of the *day*, at the very least. But, that, apparently, had been too much to hope for. He might have known.

At least he wasn't being actively restrained, this time. And his cogs had been winded, that was some comfort. He hated that rippling feeling of confusion that always descended upon him when his power was running low.

Corrigan brought the welding torch into closer contact with the interior of the clockwork's body, sending an electric shock through the robot that made his gears twitch. It felt sort of like what he imagined a tickle might, or an itch. Now, if he was in possession of the Mark Nine avatar, he might really *know*, but...

"Is this really a good idea?" Christian sighed. Corrigan waved him off with some kind of blend between a noise of assent and a shush.

"I *know*," the captain grunted, pressing down on the large, boxy device which he was currently in the process of fastening to the robot's interior. The torch sparked. He laughed. "Well. I *think* I know what I'm doing."

He leaned back, wiping the sweat from his brow.

"Well!" he mused, looking down into the robot's open chest panel, "Yes—this is quite a neat little power unit, actually!"

He brought the torch back in, connecting another of the box's dangling wires to Christian's own motive generator with a series of quick zaps. Christian huffed.

"Oh, that's a comfort, isn't it?" he muttered, more to keep himself occupied than because he thought Corrigan would care particularly much. True to his assumption, the captain continued welding with a high degree of noise throughout. "You're placing a Cyber-Power Unit inside me—a piece of alien technology that you don't entirely understand—that you've just ripped out of the dead Cyberwarrior you're *wearing*—but at least it's aesthetically pleasing."

The nigh-spiteful welding continued. Emily crossed her arms.

"You still haven't explained why you're keeping a sentient machine creature within a clockwork body," she demanded. "Aren't there laws against this sort of thing?"

Corrigan shrugged.

"He signed a release."

"Well, it was either that or spend another few decades sitting on a shelf waiting for someone else to come along and give me a body." Christian retorted, in an arguing mood.

"You know, I hadn't realized before," Corrigan mused, still admiring the power unit. "Just how much we'd actually absorbed cyber-technology after the war. This is very similar to the power source of the *Jerusalem*. Er—that *was* in the *Jerusalem*."

Christian grumbled. Even his desire for an argument was obviously not going to be realised. He gestured to the welding torch.

"Just get on with it! I feel terribly vulnerable right now."

The welding continued. With a grunt, Corrigan attached a last vital wire to Christian's inner mechanisms, then sighed with satisfaction and closed the robot's chest panel.

"There! How does that feel?"

Christian prepared to bite back with another retort, but something stopped him. An unusual sensation was moving through his clockwork body. Sort of a... tingling, not entirely pleasant but not unwelcome either, spreading outwards from the pulsing Cyberon power unit into his limbs and his positronic mind. For the first time in a long while, he realized, it felt *almost* as if he was ready to operate at full capacity—rapidly rotating cogs notwithstanding. His mind—it was like *before*. Firing on all cylinders, rapidly picking out and solving any problem that came into it, already running myriad simulations of possible outcomes of this potential Cyberwar. He stopped himself—this *was* still a clockwork form. Wouldn't do to burn it out.

"I feel... strange," he told the captain, snapping out of his reverie. He wiggled his fingers. "I feel much more... *powerful*. More—"

"Stand up!" Corrigan instructed, stepping back.

Sliding off of the slab, the clockwork planted his feet on the floor.

"...That's better." He wiggled his fingers again, then his wrists. Then his eyebrows. "...*Much* better."

Corrigan began to ask the clockwork another question, but Duncan interrupted with a yelp.

"Can you feel that?"

"What?"

He glanced at the floor. "It's shifting. We're moving!"

The others focused. It was true, they realized—they were, as a matter of fact, moving. Slowly, but surely.

"This thing can *move*?" Emily exclaimed.

Duncan pointed to the wall.

"Those circuit boards we've been seeing—I'd assumed they were standard... I dunno, lighting stuff—but they must be motive units!"

"Then—they haven't any fleet at all. This base—this enormous, Cyberon-filled facility—it *is* the ship." What little colour remained drained from Corrigan's face. "Then—it's started. They must be headed for the Vega Station as we speak. Oh, *god*."

He rubbed at his temples. "We *need* to think of a plan of action..."

Emily frowned. "I'm not going anywhere or doing anything until you tell me how you tracked me. How you knew I was on the *Titania*."

"Oh, that's not important!" Corrigan groaned.

Emily looked incredulous.

"You've been *spying* on me for *years*, and it's "not important"? *Really*? Do tell! I'd hate to think what *does* qualify for your most *exclusive* ranking of importance!"

"Ha! Look no further, my dear! We're living it! Stopping these things from taking over—that's situated right there on the *top*! You saw it as well as I did—thousands of them were just *spewing* out of their conversion engine! All lined up like little toy soldiers..." Corrigan shook his head. "The Vega Station won't stand a chance."

"*Tell me*." Emily insisted.

"I'll tell her, if you like!" Christian offered, his eyes seeming to bore into her with intense focus.

"You do and I'll blow your head off." Corrigan breezily informed him.

"No, you *won't*." Emily snapped.

Corrigan ignored her, glaring at his robotic companion.

"Christian, you will follow my orders!" he insisted, stern.

"What?" the clockwork replied, staring right back. The strange tingling was making him dizzy. He liked it. "Now that I don't have to rely on you to wind me up every morning before breakfast?"

"The power unit is a temporary measure until we get back to the Vega Station." Corrigan assured him. "Then I'll refit the clockwork movement." The captain took a step towards the robot, crossing his arms. "You are under. Contract."

"Not anymore!" Christian replied in his usual chirpy monotone.

Corrigan shrugged. "Then you leave me no choice."

Drawing a small energy pistol from his pocket, the captain loaded a charge and aimed for the clockwork's chest.

His finger brushed the trigger. His target didn't flinch. His daughter leapt in front of him.

"Emily, get *out* of the *way!*" he ordered.

"You'll have to shoot us both," she told him. "Now one of you *tell me!* Now!"

"*I can't!*" Corrigan exclaimed, pleading.

Emily turned to the robot. "Christian?"

The clockwork nodded, nonchalant.

"It was something he said to me on the ship," he began, "about thinking laterally. Of course, to do so was beyond my capabilities at the time—thanks to the captain himself—but now. Well. If the power wasn't in the tracker..." Christian shrugged. "Then the power must be in *you.*"

His unnervingly-intense gaze focused on the captain, whose expression was unreadable. Then again, so was *his.*

"...It's a Kabasta Series Nine, isn't it?" he asked, although there was no question in his tone. "*It* has an in-built tracking array—and more than enough power."

Corrigan was pale. Very pale. The robot's gaze was unwavering.

"...yes," the captain muttered, looking distant.

"Thought so!" Christian remarked in sing-song.

Emily looked between her father and his companion, growing worried.

"What are you saying?" she finally asked.

"Emily—" Christian began, shooting a smirking glance towards her haggard father. He turned towards the girl, clasping his hands before his chest. "This may come as a bit of a shock!"

"Christian, please! Please—" Corrigan moaned.

"But..." the robot continued, unable to keep the amusement out of his voice. Emily took a step back, growing ever more unnerved. Christian smiled, feeling powerful. "But, Emily..."

He almost laughed. The power unit tingled.

"...you're not human!"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Within one of the Vega Station's innumerable dining establishments, a young couple talked and laughed, sharing a salad as they pored over the menu and made plans for their future on the station. At a table across the way, a large and boisterous group were celebrating a birthday, their smiles as bright as the stars that were visible through the broad, curving viewports above. In the far corner, an eccentric-looking woman with a pair of old-fashioned aviator goggles strapped around her head was engaging in excited conversation with one of the restaurant's waitstaff automatons over a cooling plate of toast.

Every table was much the same—it was the end of the working week, after all, and spirits were high. And why not? Vega Station, as far as stations went, was quite a fine place to live. Comfortable living quarters in every residential sector, enough jobs—and pleasant ones—for everyone aboard, and located in a stretch of space that had been demilitarised for so many centuries that the slightest conflict was almost unheard of.

Which meant, of course, that those chrome-plated spacecraft that had been hanging silently in space above for the better part of an hour now could only be harmless trade vessels, imposing though they may have been. If any of the more historically-inclined patrons of the diner below noted a particular resemblance to the warships of long ago, well, it was simple enough to rationalise. An antiques show, probably, in one of the rentable sectors on the west end. Certainly nothing to raise a fuss over.

The diners continued about their carefree night, hardly giving the ships a second thought. Not in one of their minds did the suspicion arise that hollow metal corpses—that had, perhaps, once been living, breathing people much as they were—were at that very moment plotting—nay, preparing—their devastating destruction.

After all, why should it have? It was a lovely night, morale was high, and not a single one of the residents of the Vega Station had ever so much as laid eyes on that most persistent of bogeymen—the Cyberon.

No, the diners were not worried in the slightest. But, far away from the carefree establishment, in the central command center of Vega Station, it was rapidly becoming all too clear that something worrying was about to occur.

As frantic boffins jabbed at a flashing panel of emergency controls, the stationwide communication system crackled on. And, suddenly, everyone aboard, from diners to diplomats, was very worried indeed.

"PROXIMITY MOVEMENT AROUND VEGA STATION NOW ESTABLISHED. CHANNEL OPEN."

On the bow of the Cyberfleet's flagship, a Cybertechnician stepped aside. The Cyberleader leaned over the broadcast microphone.

"TELLURIAN HABITAT DESIGNATED 'VEGA STATION!'" it began. "WE ARE THE CYBERONS. WE ARE JAMMING YOUR ATTEMPTS TO COMMUNICATE WITH OUTSIDE ENTITIES. THERE WILL BE NO REINFORCEMENTS. IF YOU SURRENDER TO US NOW, YOU WILL BE SPARED. YOU HAVE ONE HOUR TO DECIDE."

A pregnant, terrified silence was all that returned through the ship's intercom. The Cyberleader looked to the warriors that flanked it, each of them poised to annihilate the station if given the command. It leaned over the microphone once more, intending to drive the point home.

"ONE HOUR, TELLURIANS. KNOW THIS: DEATH IS THE *ONLY* ALTERNATIVE."

In the station's central command, Jyaxx was silent for a few long seconds, her eyes wide with fear. The Cyberons—it couldn't be. It *couldn't* be. They'd been eradicated in the war when she was just a little girl—the war that had taken one of her aunts. She was sure of it. They were gone.

And yet—and yet... here they were. Launching what was shaping up to be the largest scale attack on Vega Station since those long-ago Cyber Wars.

“What do we do?” Lonnie breathed, sounding terrified. The other members of the command center team seemed equally at a loss, and the Admiral—the computer intelligence which handled all important operations—was stuck for a solution. So this would fall to Jyaxx, then.

They’d given the station two choices—to surrender, or to die. To surrender would mean the loss of the station, the conversion of all aboard to the grim legion of the Cyberons. To die—well, it might not necessarily be worse than conversion, but it was certainly not an option that Jyaxx was going to take. She *had* to save her people, the people of the station.

The Cyberons might have given her two options. But she was going to take a third one. She was going to fight for the station. Surely, with Vega’s combined forces, the Cyberons would fall—even if it meant a final battle, nine hundred years later. She nodded.

“Deploy the navy,” she instructed. “All available ships. Then man the battle stations.”

For a moment, the command center relaxed slightly. Jyaxx had taken charge—she’d know what to do. It would all work out, in the end.

Then one of the mission control technicians remembered. He cleared his throat.

“We... we can’t.”

“What?”

“We can’t. The navy—all ships were deployed late last night to investigate a disturbance at the site of the *Titania*. They won’t return for several hours yet.” He looked extremely apologetic. “I’m sorry, commander—we really didn’t think anything more urgent would arise.”

Jyaxx leaned against the command console, staring up at the display of the enormous ship that loomed before the station. One hour.

For the first time in several decades, she was truly afraid.

"It's called 'fleshing'," Christian explained, leaning against the chrome wall of the laboratory as the base in which it was located continued on its unmanned journey to the Vega Station. The power-buzz had steadied out, and he was beginning to feel rather badly about how tactlessly he had broken the news to Emily. He'd decided to make it up to her with a thorough explanation—whether or not she was appreciating this, he couldn't tell.

After so many years of hearing Corrigan talk about Emily, it was nice to finally be able to meet her—or an approximation of her, anyway. She seemed like a pleasant enough sort—and, judging by her comments during his impromptu surgery, a sympathiser of the plights of positronic minds even before she'd found out that she was one, which was rare, but always nice.

Emily had calmed a bit, herself, after about a half-an-hour of panicked and angry denial. Not entirely calmed, obviously, but enough that Corrigan no longer felt it necessary to hide in the supply closet.

"It's got a *name*?" she asked, clutching her temples as she sat unsteadily atop the operating slab. Christian nodded.

"It's an underground process," he elaborated. "Unscrupulous programmers take a raw positronic mind, and reprogram it to think it's human."

She shook her head, but didn't say a word. Christian continued.

"They build in subroutines and algorithms against any suspicions you might have. They even program in the odd backache, or common cold—which in turn is programmed to respond to the right medicines. They build in a natural distrust of doctors, dentists, and, er... sexual relationships. Bet you haven't been near any of those three since you left him?"

"...No," she quietly admitted.

"The Kabasta Systems Series Nine avatar in which they place the mind ages naturally, and gives you all the sensory inputs that you need. Obviously, you don't feel *completely* human—a lack of reception to burns is one major flaw on the physical side of things, and there's an occasional sensitivity to water, aside from the dysmorphia that often arises—but then, you're programmed not to notice."

Emily rubbed absentmindedly at the painless but painful-looking burns that she'd sustained earlier in the day. The room was silent for a moment as everyone contemplated this information.

"That's *barbaric*," Duncan eventually spat.

"Yes," Christian agreed mildly.

"Who am I?" Emily mumbled, staring down at her hands. After a few seconds, she stood, turning towards Corrigan, who immediately regretted his decision to leave the safety of the supply room.

His fear was not unfounded—in a flash, she struck him across the face, leaving a vivid bruise.

"*Who am I?!*" she demanded.

"You're my daughter. *Emily*," Corrigan insisted, clutching at his cheek.

"I'm a *machine*."

Corrigan shook his head, sitting heavily on the slab.

"Your memories and experiences of childhood up to the age of twenty are real," he assured her, looking weak. "They—they were taken from Emily's... from *your*... mindscan."

Emily took a step back, a horrified expression on her apparently-mechanical face.

"Wh—what are you...?"

Corrigan slumped, almost on the verge of tears. His face, typically ruddy, had taken on a pallid coloration. He sighed.

"You and your mother were killed in the fire," he mumbled. "They... they couldn't get anything from her—she was too badly burned."

Emily fell back against the wall as she tried to comprehend the captain's words. He sat up straighter, clenching his fists.

"But although they couldn't revive you, they could take a mind-print! It was *that* which I had them program into the positronic brain—removing your mother and the fire from the scan entirely. Then I had you fleshed in Gand City!"

"The Bhor"Vhali—*brilliant* programmers," Christian put in. He shook his head. "No social conscience to speak of, mind you. But brilliant, certainly!"

Emily was spiraling, her mouth opening and shutting as her entire world unravelled.

"So when I left—" she eventually managed, coming to a realisation. Unimportant, perhaps, but it was the only thing that her curious mind was managing to focus on. *Did* she even have a curious mind, she wondered? Or was that just a side-effect of a soulless, logic-oriented algorithm?

She shook her head and continued.

"When I couldn't *stand* your control any longer—you went and acquired another mind, didn't you?" She pointed. "*Christian*. With the purpose of fleshing *him* into me again. Right?"

"Yes," Corrigan admitted. "Yes, I'm afraid so. I—"

"Why didn't you?" Christian inquired, curious.

"She would have left again," the captain replied, holding back a sob. "The mindscan can be augmented—memories replaced—but the nature cannot be changed."

Emily shook her head. "I don't believe you. You didn't put me into Christian's mind. Why? What's the real reason?"

"...What if you'd come back?" he answered, eyes distraught. "How could I explain without you finding out?"

"But you built me a clockwork body," Christian worked out, "so that *I*, at least, could never leave you."

"There had to be *some* safeguards."

"If I had come back," Emily snapped, "you'd have put *me* in there, *wouldn't* you? Wouldn't you?"

"I'm sorry," Corrigan stated simply. "But, Emily—I *came* to save you."

"Recover my memories, you mean," Emily snorted. She took him by the shoulder. "Get me *out* of this body!"

The sound of a laser firing echoed through the chamber, and Duncan, who had been trying to keep out of the way, briefly feared that Corrigan might have taken the request a bit too bluntly and disposed of his daughter—or *whoever* his friend of late actually was—to reset her later. But no—the sound was coming from outside the chamber.

"Cyberons!" he gasped. "They're coming this way, they must be!"

"Run," Christian suggested, taking off through the door.

The others, vast personal differences and tangled webs of lies put aside for the moment, followed his advice. As the Cyberons approached, the group of four raced from the laboratory chamber and into the ship's sprawling passageways.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"I'm sure they'll be able to handle it, commander," Lonnie declared, although she didn't sound certain at all. Jyaxx didn't blame her.

"I hope so, lieutenant. I really hope so," Jyaxx responded, looking on as the mission control operatives initiated the launch of the station's three emergency warships, unused except in times of extreme peril. They were equipped with far more weapons and defenses than the average Vega navy ship—but there were only three of them. As they headed off on their mission, they looked tiny compared to the vast Cybership which was their target.

Lonnie was obviously terrified, but stood her ground next to the commander as the ships approached the Cyberons. They waited with bated breath. The next few moments would determine the fate of everything—every innocent civilian aboard the station. And, possibly, the allied systems. There was no reason to believe the Cyberons would stop here.

But maybe the ships would be enough. They could only hope.

"INSTRUMENTS HAVE DETECTED A FLEET OF WARSHIPS LAUNCHED FROM THE VEGA STATION."

The Cyberleader nodded at the waiting warriors.

"ENGAGE."

Emily's concept of her reality was coming apart at the seams. Everything she thought she'd known was a lie—*everything*, from her life to her memories to her family to the type of being that she actually was. She was a machine. A good portion of her life hadn't happened at all, not to her. She'd overwritten another sentient entity's mind—or maybe she *was* that entity? Who *was* she? She had no idea.

Still, deep down—there was a part of her that was relieved to finally know. She'd *always* felt trapped, crammed into a life that didn't feel quite right. She'd tried to remedy it by making changes, taking on new endeavours, but nothing had helped. She'd even wondered if she might be trans, a few years back, but a holosimulator had proven that the feeling didn't

subside regardless of gender. Nope, she reflected, her feelings couldn't have possibly had the decency to be the result of something normal—just the fact that she was secretly a positronic mind crammed into a lifelike avatar, instead.

The body that had always felt uncomfortable—a feeling which she'd largely suppressed and ignored, possibly due to fleshing protocols—suddenly seemed suffocating, now that she knew the truth. She wanted to get out.

Or did she? There was a disconnect in her mind. On one level, she still felt like Emily—she'd thought she *was* the poor girl all her life, after all—but on another, it was as if the revelation had shattered what was, in retrospect, a thinly-held-together mirage entirely, leaving her as nothing but a positronic mind with some false memories slathered over it. But she still had Emily's personality, didn't she? Well, honestly, she could no longer say for sure which parts of her were real and which were fake, or what that even meant in this context.

Still, she was *fairly* sure that she'd like to get out of the body, at least for now. But the middle of a Cyberon attack was, perhaps, not *quite* the right time to do so.

Cyberons approached from all sides, and Corrigan cursed himself for assuming they'd all be too busy with their oncoming invasion to bother patrolling these halls. Of course they'd send a few guards out—Cyberons could be shockingly paranoid, as far as emotionless creatures went.

As the small group dodged one platoon as it rounded a corner and started down another corridor, Emily scanned the area for a suitable hiding place. She briefly faltered, realising that what she had always thought of as superior rational ability was probably just unfeeling code. But now wasn't the time for that, not if she wanted to live—and she was still fairly sure she did, regardless of the past hour's revelations.

"In here!" she called, noticing a small storage room with a heavy door propped open with a wedge. "Quickly!"

She rushed in, and Christian followed closely behind. Duncan stumbled around the corner and joined them, and Corrigan, out of breath, brought up the rear. Emily kicked the wedge out of the way and slammed the doors shut, locking them.

"Emily," Corrigan began as soon as he was sure that the Cyberons hadn't seen them enter. "I'm sorry I—"

"Shut up," she snapped, turning away. "Christian, I want—I *need* to get out of this body!"

Yes, Emily knew that she had to. It had been uncomfortable enough back when she had thought it was *hers*—but it had suddenly become *extremely*... well, almost claustrophobic, she supposed. And *wrong*. Just wrong.

"It's a normal response," Christian assured her, seeming almost to read her thoughts. "Body rejection." His eyes darkened. "You'd do anything to get away from the flesh. You hate it."

"Yes," she agreed. "Yes, yes—exactly."

"Why?" Corrigan groaned. "You're a human! You feel *human*."

Emily whipped around, glaring again.

"I don't want to be *your* human. You can't control me anymore! The last five years have been—have been -"

"Then leave me again! Leave me!" Corrigan pleaded. "But please—*please* don't kill Emily."

"*She* died in the fire, Corrigan! The one that you erased, remember? I'm getting snatches of it now!" She crossed her arms. Even that felt wrong. "Who was I before? Who did you blank to fill with these memories?"

"I didn't ask," Corrigan replied honestly.

"You killed me," Emily stated quietly. It was true, in a sense.

"How can you kill a machine!?" the captain exploded.

Emily looked at her clockwork brother. "Christian, help me," she begged.

"Oh, can't this wait until we're out of here?" Duncan asked, kicking at a crate of spare parts. "You might want to commit suicide right now, but I do *not*."

Emily just stared at him, and he instantly felt terrible once again. Sitting, he resolved to stop making comments until they were out of the mess in which they'd found themselves. Maybe even then, just for good measure. Instead, he attempted to make himself useful by seeing if he couldn't get the broken monitor on the far wall operating again.

"Although your friend's wording was insensitive to say the least," Christian said calmly, "he is correct. This procedure needs to be done under controlled circumstances. *Not* in a battle zone."

"Yes! Oh, thank god!" Duncan crowed from across the room, standing before the now-working monitor.

"What is it?" Christian asked.

"Look, there—on the screen," he pointed.

The group of four gathered around the monitor—made to display a live feed of the outside of the ship, a purpose which it had now resumed. There was the Vega Station, at the mercy of the base-turned-warship in which they were situated—but Duncan's joy was clearly warranted. Warships were flowing forth from the station, clearly poised to foil the Cyberon's attack.

"My message got through! It must have!" Corrigan gleefully exclaimed. "The Vega Station navy prepared their ships, just as I told them to do!"

"An attack formation," Duncan observed. "Now the Cybs'll get a taste of their own medicine!"

"IT APPEARS THAT THE DISTRESS SIGNAL WAS EFFECTIVE," the Cyberleader intoned.

"THREE TELLURIAN FIGHTERS," one of the Cybertechnicians told him.

"DESTROY THEM," the leader ordered.

The Cyberwarriors activated the portside cannons. With a crackling burst, a bolt of plasma cut through the void of space, making direct contact with the first of the ships. It erupted in a fiery blaze and was gone. Two more shots followed, and the Vega Station's glimmer of hope was gone.

Lonnie nearly collapsed, her legs giving out below her as she watched the ships explode one by one. Jyaxx caught her, but felt like collapsing herself. That was it, then. Even if the navy ships made it back in time, they'd stand no chance—not against weapons like that. The station would be destroyed. Any evacuation attempts would be similarly foiled, she was sure.

It was over. It was all over. The people of the station which she'd spent centuries trying to protect would be destroyed, and there was nothing she could do about it.

But she wasn't going to give up. If nothing else, it would be nice to keep up morale for what might well be her teammates' final moments.

"Arm the short-range laser," she instructed, trying to keep the emotion out of her voice. "They'll have to get closer before they can try to destroy us—and we're not going to let that happen."

The others nodded, rushing to the console. She shook her head. The Cyberon ship would almost certainly never get close enough to the station for the laser to be effective, she knew that. But they had to try. They had to *try*.

"NO!"

Emily stared at the monitor, scarcely believing her eyes. But it was true—the Vega fleet had been completely destroyed in under a minute, reduced to ash and dust.

"That settles it." Christian turned to face his companions, pounding one hand into the other theatrically. "We're the only chance the Vega Station has. It won't be able to stand up to that kind of firepower."

"Yes," Corrigan agreed, looking weaker than before. "You're quite right. We're the station's only hope."

"When did you suddenly develop a conscience?" Emily scoffed.

"There are ten million people aboard the Vega Station!" the captain angrily insisted.

She shrugged. "So? Couldn't we just get your favorite ones fleshed in Gand City?"

Corrigan's face fell. Emily had never seen the man look sadder. At that moment, she honestly couldn't find it in her to care.

Christian shook his head. "He's right. Emily, for now, we *must* work together."

"...Fine. But when we get out of here," she told Corrigan, "I'm never coming near you again. You *disgust* me."

"How can we fight against that?" Duncan yelled, finally snapping out of his disbelieving fit of staring at the screen. "Those ships didn't stand a chance!"

"There may be a way " Christian informed him. "...But the risk to Emily and I will be great."

Emily cocked an eyebrow, unable to keep herself from thinking about all of the hundreds of mechanisms that went into making the movement look realistic. "Tell me."

"Our positronic brains are based on technology developed from captured Cyberwarriors. ...Some of us more closely than others."

"Yes... so?"

"They may still be compatible," Christian offered.

"And?" she prodded. The clockwork grinned.

"There may be a way to kill two birds... with one stone."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"HABITAT DESIGNATED 'VEGA STATION'," the Cyberleader called. "WE AWAIT YOUR RESPONSE. DEATH OR SURRENDER. IT IS A SIMPLE AND LOGICAL CHOICE."

He motioned to the Cyberwarriors, who prepared to fire.

"WE WILL NOT HESITATE. IF YOU REFUSE TO SURRENDER—YOU *WILL* BE ANNIHILATED."

"Duncan, Corrigan," Emily addressed her companions. "You know what you've got to do."

"Don't call me that," Corrigan protested.

"It's your name," she replied, icy as ever.

"Father..." he moaned.

She shrugged. "Not mine."

Christian decided it might be a good idea to take over the role of instructor.

"We need fifteen to twenty minutes alone here to accomplish this," he explained. "If all goes to plan, it will be over within the hour. But you must cause as much disturbance out there as you possibly can. It will allow us to see the whole network and all of its defense mechanisms."

"Yes," Duncan confirmed. He gestured to the door. "Can we get on, please?"

"Can you not give me *some* hope?" Corrigan begged.

"No," Emily replied. "What hope have you given *me*?"

"I gave you *life!*"

"If you *gave* this life to me, then it's mine to do with as I wish!" She turned away.

"Good luck," Christian offered, waving. "...captain."

Corrigan turned his attention to the clockwork.

"Christian," he tried one last time, voice wavering. "I—"

"I know, captain," The clockwork flashed a thin, but sincere, smile. "It hasn't been all bad."

Corrigan sighed, deflated. "...Thank you."

"Now go," Christian commanded. The captain nodded, and he and Duncan crept through the heavy door, letting it slam shut behind them.

"Emily," Christian turned to his companion. She was still, staring at the wall. "...Emily?"

She spun around, rubbing her eyes. "Sorry. Yes. Just seeing ghosts."

"Let's do it."

She nodded, steeling herself. It was time.

Duncan seemed like a nice lad, Corrigan mused, as the two ran screaming down a corridor. They'd have gotten along, the captain was sure, had Duncan worked at the Vega Station.

He supposed they were probably getting along just fine right now, but it was hard to tell in such situations.

He was happy, anyway, that the boy had befriended his daughter. She had trouble making friends.

No, he reminded himself, stumbling but regaining his stride. Not his daughter. His daughter—his daughter was gone. She wasn't his daughter. She didn't want to be.

But he couldn't help it. No matter how hard he tried—he still loved her.

But she hated him. And she had every right to.

At least Duncan didn't hate him, Corrigan mused. Well, he hoped not. Either way, they were in this together now. For the Vega Station.

It was time to put a stop to the Cyberons.

"THE TIME HAS ALMOST ELAPSED," the Cyberleader rumbled. "ARM MAIN LASERS."

"LEADER—" a cybertechnician began, holding up a finger. The Cyberleader turned to see two men rushing past the entrance to the command chamber.

"GAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!" they shrieked chaotically, waving their arms wildly over their heads. "GRaBBleGraaahhhhhhHHH!"

"ERADICATE THEM," the leader remarked. Cyberwarriors rushed from the chamber and followed the disrupting elements, hand-blasters blazing. Lasers struck the walls centimetres away from the fleeing intruders, marring the chrome. Down the hall, the two escapees conspired as they ran.

"I'll draw their fire away from you..." Corrigan told the boy as the two, breathing quickly, ran as fast as their legs could manage. "Wait until they're following me—and then let rip!" He gestured to the energy pistol in Duncan's hand, retrieved from a box in storage.

"Are you sure?" Duncan yelled, narrowly dodging a beam.

"Yes!" Corrigan shrieked, peeling off from the group of two and doubling back towards the bow. "Gaaah! Come and get me, you dessicated relics!"

The Cyberwarriors followed, chasing him around a corner. Duncan rushed back, peering into the command chamber. He pointed the pistol at the console experimentally.

"Now, let's see..." he mused to himself. "Which bit looks most complicated?"

He spotted the panel covering what could only be the console's main computer.

"Ah, yes..."

Duncan, former bartender and current unlikely savior-of-galaxies, took aim. A blast rang out.

He screamed painfully and collapsed as a Cyberon energy beam crackled through his body.

"Duncan!" Corrigan screamed, rounding the corner again with the warriors hot on his tail.

"Duncan!"

Duncan groaned, twitching on the ground.

"You bastards!" Corrigan turned, facing the Cyberwarriors head on. He drew his own pistol.

"BASTARDS!"

The Cyberons fell before him, dealing him a nasty burn to the leg on their way down.

"YOU WILL SURRENDER," the Cyberleader commanded, stepping out of the command chamber.

Corrigan scrambled towards him, dragging his wounded leg and gasping for breath.

"Gah- hhh—bastard. *Bastard machines!*"

The captain drew his pistol, ready to strike down the Cyberleader. The bastard machine's hand clamped down on Corrigan's throat, lifting him off the ground. His arms fell limp—he dropped the pistol. Something cracked.

Corrigan gasped for air.

"Bastard..." he managed to moan. Everything went dark.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

They'd gotten off to a bit of a rocky start, but Emily had decided that she liked Christian, after all. That was two in one day, then—a new record. And now she knew why.

The robot—her fellow positronic mind, she reminded herself—seemed genuinely contrite about the way in which he'd told her about her true nature. It was the buzz from the Cyberon power source, he'd explained, but he still felt quite sorry. She didn't hold it against him—better find out from him that way than from Corrigan in any way at all, she supposed. He'd done this to her, and she never wanted to speak to him again. Well, probably. She still hadn't finished working through her feelings, and she wasn't sure she ever would. Certainly not now, anyway.

Christian, on the other hand, had been nothing but kind to her before and since the power surge had died down. He seemed to actually care about her well-being (most unusual, she felt) and had, in the brief time they'd had between evading Cyberons and coming up with plans—tried to help her come to terms with the positronicity of her mind. It hadn't helped much, but nothing could have—she appreciated the effort, anyway. Besides, she felt strangely connected to him. Maybe it was just the fact that they were both positronic minds—she couldn't be sure.

He'd promised to guide her in any way he could, if she so desired—but *after* they made it out of the facility alive and with Vega Station intact. To Emily, those seemed like very slim odds—but she was fine with that. If she made it out, she'd have *someone* who she could trust—if not, so be it. She wasn't in any state to care just at the moment—except for the wellbeing of the station, which *did* worry her. All of those people—old ghosts or no, she'd try her hardest to keep them from losing their lives the way her mind's old personality may have.

She and Christian were ready to enact their part of the plan, now. She just hoped she'd have the strength, in her distressed state, to carry it out.

Emily, meanwhile, was beginning to grow on Christian, as well. After so many years without the company of a fellow positronic mind—or, indeed, anyone but Corrigan—it was nice to have someone else to whom he could more fully relate.

Besides, she was... familiar. He had a faint idea of why that might be—but now wasn't the time. Still, it hadn't stopped him from already thinking of her as something like a little sister, or a cousin. Or something. Either way, he really did intend to help her in any way he could.

But first—the Cyberons needed to be dealt with.

Ah, the Cyberons. *Their* recrudescence had certainly been a shock. He'd known better than to think that they were *all* gone, but, well—he certainly hadn't expected any stragglers from

the original army. He wasn't going to let them destroy the station and spark another war, though. Not this time. Not with Emily to help him.

"Ready?" Christian asked. The monitor before them displayed the outside camera view no longer; it had been transformed into a terminal with access to the ship's computer system. A fully-powered positronic mind could do wonders with a screen and a few boxes of spare parts.

Emily nodded her assent. As Emily looked on, the clockwork connected himself to the waiting terminal with a cable, then circled behind her. She felt a sharp pain somewhere near the base of her skull.

"Hold tight. The upload will take about five seconds."

Emily steeled herself. She didn't know what the process would consist of or feel like—not consciously, anyway—but Christian had assured her that this was the only way. The two of them would tap into the ship's network and put an end to the invasion before it could begin. And at least it meant getting out of the stifling Mark Nine robot that she now knew her body to be.

Christian tapped at the keyboard he'd hooked up, and the monitor blinked. The cord connected to the Emily avatar's skull pulsed, and she was suddenly thrust out of the body. She wavered for a moment between physical form and cyberspace—sensing Christian's positronic mind hovering in the same state beside her—then felt a jolt, and then—a rush of colours and sensations as her positrons began to fire randomly. Something deep in the back of her memory twitched with familiarity, but the feeling passed, and Emily found herself in a blinding white void.

Christian was there, too—she assumed it was him, anyway. The clockwork body was gone, replaced by what was more like the general *sense* of a person than an actual avatar of any form. Looking down at herself—to the degree that such a thing was possible—she saw that the same had happened to *her*.

It felt—freeing. It felt *right*. It felt like home. *Finally*.

She could see Christian looking around, despite the fact that he no longer possessed any kind of clearly-defined head.

"It worked!" he exclaimed, relieved. "That was, admittedly, a hack job, but—it worked! Our consciousnesses have been uploaded into the Cybernet!"

Emily was silent for a moment, overwhelmed. Then she flew upwards, spiraling in and around and through the visual manifestation of the network, no longer limited by euclidean geometry. She existed at impossible angles, popped up in multiple points at once, projected her consciousness—her true self—across the void. She wasn't just confined to one small space—she was *everywhere*. She was the Cybernet. It was *wonderful*.

Finally free to be her true self, everything seemed to snap into place. She could feel the fleshing slough away as she spun, leaving her feeling at once more and less sure of her true identity. She was no longer Corrigan's lost daughter, no longer someone who had to pretend to be human—and, for a moment, she was scared. Then she laughed. She might not know exactly who she was, but had she ever? At the moment, she decided, it didn't matter. For the first time since the revelation—no, longer, since the real Emily died and she was made to take her place—she felt her worries melt away. The world made sense.

"Whooh!" she shouted, spinning joyously. "I've never felt such freedom of movement! Such possibilities! The freedom of being pure data!"

She stopped, casting her eyes—no, she corrected herself, casting her *mind*—throughout the network. "I can do anything! Go anywhere!" she shouted. "This is—!"

"Focus!" Christian reminded. "It *is* a wonderful feeling, I admit—doubly so for you, I can imagine. But we *must* focus. We must find the central control net."

"Sorry," Emily apologised. "It's just so incredible! So liberating to be free of that body! Free of *his* stink! I never realised just how much I'd hated it, but—oh, I did. I *did*!"

"Euphoria is common, the first time netside. You must concentrate to control your body, such as it is—you're pure data, but to control yourself you *must* concentrate."

Christian's own presence was beginning to stabilise into something like a physical form—a tall, androgynous, slightly *blurry* humanoid whose features were impossible to make out. He looked around once more, actually making the motion this time.

"There are bound to be anti-virus algorithms which will hunt us down and eject us from the system. We may be compatible, but so long as we're not an authorized part of the system during any given scan, they'll lock onto us." he continued. "So, please, focus."

"Yes, sorry. But—but this is incredible!" Emily repeated. Her own presence, which had started to stabilise during Christian's speech, was suddenly abstract once more as she felt another rush of euphoria. "I feel I could do *anything*!"

"That's the point!" Christian sighed, exasperated. "You *can*, and that's exactly what the firewalls and anti-virus systems will be looking for—data that stands out as alien. So sit close."

Taking the data equivalent of a deep breath—even she wasn't sure quite what it was—Emily focused, casting her mind to the furthest tendrils of her data-self before pulling them into a semi-stabilised form. It was still fairly imperceptible, but it *did* have a humanoid shape and an artificial reliance on the laws of physics. Emily was disappointed, but it *was* still a fair bit better than the Mark Nine avatar had been—and besides, she acknowledged the need to stop the Cyberons as quickly as possible.

Christian allowed his own tendrils to unravel slightly, probing at the fabric of the cyber-scape like some great eldritch insect or a deep-sea fish—or so Emily would have described the action if forced to put it into visual terms. The void seemed to ripple before him, and she could see the code out of which the network was built. Not lines of text, but the actual *concept* of the code—raw, and all-encompassing, and strangely beautiful.

"It's hard to make sense of this," Christian muttered, still probing. He paused, stammering, as if something important was right there on the tip of his tongue—then sighed. "Oh, It's *familiar*, but—so alien to me, now."

Emily concentrated, then unravelled a data-tendrill herself, taking in the layout of the network. In the back of her mind, a seal released—or jarred slightly, anyway—and the entire structure of it suddenly made quite a bit more sense to her. She'd never been particularly interested in programming, before, but now it was as if she'd studied her entire life.

She pressed on, feeling at the code—the source code of the Cyberon fleet. Right now, she realised, most of the computers would be focusing on the weapons systems—calculating a direct hit, aiming and firing the weapons, that kind of thing. Meaning, of course, that most of the available computing power in the network would be routed to central control rather than any auxiliary systems or subroutines. And, with that in mind—

"Look," she pointed out. "Most of the data streams seem to be converging on that node, there! Could that be the way to the controller?"

Christian's point of perception joined hers at the node in question. He considered it.

"Possibly. Let's try."

The two data-consciousnesses followed the stream, on their way to the central control net. It was, at last, time to disable the Cyberons' systems for good.

"SYSTEMS BREACH!" shrieked a technician. "VIRUS WARFARE!"

Sprawled on the floor by the main control console, Corrigan—his neck bruised and bloodied—managed a rasping gasp.

"Emily!"

The Cyberleader spun towards him, hollow eyes questioning.

"WHAT?"

"Yes..." the injured captain laughed, triumph in his voice even as he nearly choked.
"You're... finished..."

She had actually made it into the system, Corrigan thought to himself, as spots swam before his eyes and the room seemed to turn on its end without moving at all. Christian's plan had worked. Of course it had—of course it had!

She may have hated him. She may have been right to hate him. But Corrigan couldn't help but feel proud. She had done it. His daughter—well... the positronic being his grief had driven him to create—she who he had loved as a daughter, if nothing else—was going to save them all.

Managing a strangled laugh, Captain Corrigan spitefully spat at the Cyberleader's feet, then rolled over, unmoving. The Cyberleader regarded him with an emotionless gaze that neared contempt, then turned back to the main console.

"WE SHALL SEE."

Data swirled through the visual representation of an inter-terminal link, buffeting the nearly-incorporeal concentrated forms of Christian and Emily as the two floated alongside it towards the node that would, hopefully, take them to the network's central control.

"This the way?" Emily asked. She was almost certain that it was, but she was still vaguely unsure of her newfound abilities.

"Has to be," Christian confirmed. "All systems in this part of the net seem to be routing through this node. We'll have to go through it."

Emily examined the miniscule communication portal.

"How? It's tiny?"

Christian gave the impression of shaking his head, although his head was once again more concept than reality. "You can be *anything* here, Emily, remember? Just think, and the construct that holds your data will take you through. Like this!"

He focused on the node. In a flash, his entire data-form had compressed into a single, glowing point. Zipping alongside the rest of the network's data, he vanished into the node.

"Christian!"

Emily probed at the node, uncertain.

She had to do this, she reminded herself. She had to save the Vega Station. She had to stop the Cyberons.

Taking another one of those data-deep-breaths, she forced herself into one point and pushed through to central control.

"Gaaaahhhhh!"

Duncan screamed, but it was no distraction this time. It was very, very real.

All thoughts of saving Vega Station were long gone, replaced by the searing pain of the Cyberon's awful machine. He screamed again. *Pain*.

The doors opened automatically, and the Cyberleader stepped through. The machine continued its work, cutting into his chest. Bones snapped like twigs. Something squelched.

"*What ... are you doing to me?*" he managed to scream, though it was mostly a reflex. His tortured mind flashed briefly to the purser. He really *had* been the lucky one. The *Titania* and his life before seemed like a hazy dream. "*What ... are you doing...?*"

The Cyberleader watched as the grim process continued. The Cyberons that had dragged the victim here stood by. The machine sawed through muscle, piercing an organ. It didn't matter which. Duncan was in no condition to hope for death. Either way, it didn't come.

"YOU WILL BE LIKE US," the Cyberleader intoned. Duncan could not understand his words. He screamed.

"Christian, wait for me!" Emily pleaded. The other positronic mind was already far along the length of the tunnel of data that led to the Cyberons' central control system. "Christian!"

Christian stopped, noticing for the first time that Emily had joined him in the link.

"Don't give us away!" he whispered, probing at the data to scan for anti-viruses. Something rippled, and he drew back.

"What's happening?" Emily asked.

He seemed to squint—vague humanoid outline rippling in anticipation, as if waiting for something.

"There!" he said at last. "Can you see it?"

She unfurled her tendrils and squinted into the data herself. There was something there, in the distance—something huge. Clearing her mind of all of the passing information, she focused intensely on it, and it snapped into perception. She gasped.

It was enormous—not necessarily in a physical sense, although that's how she was managing to perceive it. But it was obviously extremely important to the network. It seemed to comprise so much more of it than she or Christian could. She almost felt jealous, although a nagging human voice in the back of her mind told her that that was patently ridiculous.

It was abstract, of course, but less so than she was—more rigidly defined within a set of unthinking parameters, she realised with a (perhaps ridiculous) sense of superiority. But, still, its form as she could perceive it—the closest visual representation of its concept and essence—was fairly impressive. Smooth and sleek—optimised for propelling itself through the data-streams—with a set of fierce-looking teeth and a ring of eyes. And it positively reeked of the Cyberons.

"What *is* that thing?" she whispered. "Half-Cyberon, half...shark?"

"A datavore," Christian muttered.

The thing turned towards them with a flick of its finny tail. Christian drew back further into the tunnel, as if by instinct. Emily grew worried.

"It's coming this way."

"THE PROCESS WILL TAKE SOME TIME TO COMPLETE," the Cyberleader rumbled.

Strapped into a machine in one of the base-turned-ship's horrid laboratories, Corrigan grimaced, tears staining his face as he struggled against his bonds. He was fairly sure he'd have been dead by now if not for the machine's life support—might have already *been* dead, even. That, surely, would have been far preferable to this, and he was eager to return to that state of affairs.

"I said, *kill me!*" the captain moaned, pulling at the straps. His throat felt horrible. "I don't want ... to be like you!"

The Cyberleader loomed over him.

"YOU SHOULD BE GLAD OF THE CHANCE TO EXPERIENCE CONVERSION," it explained. "I AM TOLD THAT HUMANS APPRECIATE NEW EXPERIENCES."

So the thing was a naive fool, aside from being a complete monster, Corrigan thought. That was comforting.

"*Kill me!*" he insisted, coughing blood.

"YOU WILL BE LIKE US," the creature repeated. "THINK LIKE US. TO KILL YOU WHEN YOU HAVE BEEN CAPTURED WOULD BE ILLOGICAL. YOU WILL SOON UNDERSTAND. AND YOU WILL THANK US."

"If killing is illogical," Corrigan spat. "Why the need for conquest? Why the need to destroy the Vega Station?"

The Cyberleader shook his head.

"WE DO NOT DESTROY UNLESS NECESSARY. WE WISH TO MULTIPLY AND SHAPE THE UNIVERSE TO OUR WHIM."

The Cyberleader pressed a button, and the machine's terrifying apparatus descended upon the captain. He screamed.

"WHEN YOU ARE LIKE US, YOU WILL UNDERSTAND."

Corrigan continued to scream, his throat hurting like all hell, as the pain of the machine raced through him. Bones snapped. Something squelched.

"It's seen us." Christian whispered, backing further down the data-stream. "Take my hand."

"You don't have a hand!" Emily protested.

Christian glanced at his form, which the trip through the node and the fear of the entity had completely unravelled. With the snap of an abstract membrane, he formed a hand and offered it to his companion.

"I do now. Come on!"

Emily grasped his hand with her own newly-formed appendage. "Can we outrun it?"

"I don't know. It's fast, and intelligent, by the look of it. Not on our level, obviously, but more so than should be required for an anti-virus. The Cyberons must be totally paranoid about the security of their networks to design something like *that* to protect it!"

The datavore approached with another tentative swipe of its tail. Its ring of eyes focused in on them. It seemed to probe the data with unseen tendrils of its own. Christian tugged at Emily's hand, and they were off through the stream.

In an instant, the thing had snapped into motion, its teeth flaring outwards as it propelled itself towards the unfamiliar clusters of data that were Christian and Emily.

"Can't we go any faster?" Emily shouted over the din of new information entering their consciousnesses at high speeds. "It's gaining!"

Christian nodded. "Let's try a bit of fancy flying!"

As the thing chomped at the data before it, letting harmless streams slip through its teeth like a whale filtering krill from water, Christian let his form unravel. In an instant, they were careening at non-existent angles through the tunnel link, and it was all Emily could do to keep her point of awareness anchored next to his.

"Hang on!" Christian warned.

He ducked through the data, and Emily suddenly found herself an expert on the exact routine needed to run the Cyberon's conversion engine—she hated to think why *that* was entering the central network. They resurfaced, and the thing was still behind them, nearly catching one of Emily's appendages—she wasn't sure which, anymore.

"It's not working!" Christian shouted. "Oh, this thing's been coded *far* too well for my liking. We'll never outrun it. I'm going to try something!"

He let go of her hand and spiraled around her, thrusting her forwards towards the end of the tunnel as he did.

"Keep going! Follow the data stream!" he called.

Emily began to panic. She was still new to this, and now her guide was off to fight a monster shark.

"But I don't know where I'm going!" she called back. "What if you're... ejected from the system?"

Christian shook his head, which was already abstracting.

"The datavore *won't* eject me from the system," he assured her, a laugh creeping into his voice. It was less tinny now, she realised, and less monotone.

"How can you be so sure?"

"What do you think the teeth are for?" he asked, gesturing. "It eats data. Data—datavore? Do I have to spell it out? Now go!"

With that reassuring message, he flicked his tendrils, spiraling off towards the creature, which charged towards him.

"Come back!" she yelled, terrified. "Christian, please! We can—"

"Too late to stop now!" he called, speed increasing. "Go, Emily, go! And remember—you're free now! You can be *anything!*"

The formerly-clockwork positronic mind gave his various abstract appendages a mighty shove, propelling himself directly into the creature's gaping mouth.

"Dinner time!"

"Christian—!"

There was a piercing flash as the thing's teeth enveloped the abstract data-entity. For an instant, she saw his true form—his indescribable core self—illuminated against the backdrop of the stream. Then it was gone.

Christian screamed, Emily screamed, and the datavore eradicated the alien entity with extreme prejudice.

With a final ripple of disrupted code, Christian was gone.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Cyberleader approached its warriors. Time was up, and no response seemed to be forthcoming. The station below was silent. The warriors placed their hands on the weapon activation controls. The leader nodded.

"DESTROY THE VEGA STATION," It commanded. They activated the weapons.

"Weapons engaged," came the voice of the computer. *"Powering on. Phase Two completed."*

The console came to life. The primary weapons—sunlider energy lasers that put even the ship's anti-aircraft artillery to shame—powered up with a distinctive hum and crackle as they emerged from their chamber at the very bottom of the cybership.

As the laser began to rise, the Cyberwarriors prepared to fire.

The Vega Station's time of reckoning had come at last.

The Cyberleader stalked from the command chamber. It brought him no joy to destroy the station—of course it didn't. It was a Cyberon. Only logic and a primary directive motivated it. Thus, it had no need to savor the moment, as some other attacker might. Instead, it entered a laboratory chamber.

"What ... have you ... done?" came the weakened voice of Corrigan from within the miniature conversion machine.

"THE REPLACEMENT OF YOUR ORGANS WITH CYBERNETIC MATERIALS HAS BEEN COMPLETED."

"Please ... stop ... " Corrigan moaned. *"I..."*

The Cyberleader nodded to the attending Cyberon.

"CONTINUE THE CONVERSION PROCESS."

The Cyberon flicked a switch, and a mechanical arm descended from the top of the machine. The Cyberleader looked on as the glistening needle at its tip punctured the human's skin, injecting the Cyberon drug deep into his veins. Soon, he would be like them. Soon, he would understand.

The Cyberleader marched from the room as Corrigan's tortured screams warped into something more like the electronic hissing of a malfunctioning machine.

The datavore thrashed, warping the fabrics of the network as it tore apart the remnants of Christian's positronic mind and gulped them down into its data-devouring gullet.

"Christian!" Emily still shrieked from the end of the tunnel. *"Christian!"*

The datavore turned, noticing her for the first time. With a thrash of its tail, it was upon her. It probed the stream, letting off the concept of a guttural roar as it snapped at her farthest-flung tendrils.

"No—no! Get away from me!" she shouted, manifesting a pair of legs and kicking at the monstrous abomination. The end of the tunnel was so close—she wished she'd made for it when she had the chance, but she'd been paralysed by fear. And now it was too late—Christian's sacrifice had been in vain. The datavore barrelled down on her central point of awareness, its mouth wide.

Then it hesitated, and drew back. Another ripple disturbed the link, this one carrying the concept of a frightened squeal. As Emily watched, confused, the thing contorted, its ring of eyes dilating in pain and fear. Glowing cracks began to snake across its body, and it thrashed, unable to escape.

Emily drew closer to the end of the tunnel as the glowing cracks covered the monster entirely. It grew ever more luminous—it shrieked again—and then, with a bang, it exploded. The entire datastream seemed to wobble like gelatin as untold swathes of tertiary information were wiped from existence in the aftershock. Emily held tight, trying to remain corporeal.

Eventually, the swaying subsided, and she spiralled up towards the site of the explosion, hoping to figure out what had caused it.

There, at the epicenter of the blast radius, was Christian, calmly ravelling his various abstract appendages back into a corporeal form. Emily's mouth spontaneously manifested, and it fell open.

"You—you're—" she breathed.

"Yes, I am." Christian stated simply. He crossed his arms. "Why didn't you do as I told you and *go*? It never would have gotten so close if you'd listened."

"I couldn't move!" Emily explained. "Christian, you were *eaten!*"

He shrugged.

"Yes, well, *half* of me was. I squeezed fifty percent of my data into an extrusion and programmed an anti-datavore datavore into it. Once it was ingested, it just... *ate* him from the inside out—until the construct couldn't hold together any longer."

Christian chuckled.

"An old army trick. Of course, I didn't know for certain that it would work, that I could manage it before the creature devoured me entirely—which is why you should have run when you had the chance!"

"Fifty percent of your data?" Emily asked.

"Yes—just the memories of the first ten years or so of my life."

She hesitated. "What are you missing?"

"Don't know," he said with a laugh. "Can't remember."

The two positronic minds spiraled off towards the end of the link.

"Come on," Christian declared, looking determined. "Let's finish this."

Emily nodded. It was time to save the Vega Station. And then—well. She had no idea.

But right now, she knew exactly what she had to do.

"Please..." Corrigan moaned to the attending Cyberon as the intoxicating, soul-eating injection worked its way through his veins, aided along by his new mechanical organs. He was too weak to scream, now. "*The pain. I—*"

"PAIN IS NECESSARY, TELLURIAN," the Cyberon informed him, adjusting a dial. The machine's computer-powered allotment balancer had conked out unexpectedly with a missing file error.

"*But... I ... I—*"

Corrigan fell silent. His eyes grew distant. The Cyberon checked the machine's readings and nodded. Everything was progressing as planned.

"EXCELLENT," the Cyberon declared, as Corrigan's fingers stopped twitching and curled themselves into a grasping claw.

Data spiralled—like water down a bathtub drain—through the enormous, convex chamber that was the visual representation of the central control net. It flickered and shifted, flowing into a twisted, vortex-like node at the very bottom of the funnel.

Emily regarded the control node with disgust. It, too, possessed its own set of tendrils; grasping and blackened, they stretched on across the entirety of the Cybernet, eventually forking into imperceivable branches that poked into every connected data stream. The node probed at the incoming information, rapidly assimilating that which it required and drawing it down into the very deepest depths of the system, where it would carry out its horrid task. That which it did not require, it destroyed—corrupting it and sending an error message back to the requesting terminal on one of its many branches.

It reminded Emily of nothing so much as an ancient, half-dead tree—choking out all of the surrounding flora and tearing up foundations as its roots snaked through the soil.

It was actually *burning* her, she realised. Drawing the furthest tips of her tendrils closer to her core, she moved a few paces back. It was fitting, she thought, that the network be operated by such a malicious system. This thing was as horrid as the Cyberons.

"It's hideous," she opined.

Christian nodded.

"The Cyberons will have programmed the thing to filter data as efficiently as possible, even if that means destroying any unwanted information. They've got to protect their central control, I suppose. Without it, everything goes down, even their conversion engines."

"First the datavores, and now this..." Emily mused. "Why *are* they so concerned with virus prevention?"

"Oh, I have my theories—but we should focus on the task at hand."

Christian pointed to a cluster near the node. A swarm of data swirled there, awaiting the grasp of one of the central tendrils that would allow it to carry out its purpose.

"The routines that the system currently requires are grouping there. If we can interrupt them and suppress the failsafes, then—"

"What shall I do?" Emily interrupted, eager to help—and, she admitted to herself, to test her abilities.

"Follow me—and keep an eye out for other datavores." Christian made his way slowly down the funnel. "...Like I said before, we may not come out the other side of this."

Emily nodded.

"I'm prepared for that."

In the laboratory, the awful machine ground to a sudden halt. Corrigan, unconscious, drew a sharp intake of breath. The attending Cyberon checked the readings—the conversion process hadn't quite finished yet.

He paged the control room, and the Cyberleader himself returned to the chamber. The technicians were needed elsewhere—it was only a minute or so, now, until the weapons would launch against Vega Station, and they were on hand to ensure that no issues would arise.

On the slab, Corrigan's eyelids sprang suddenly open. His eyes, once glassy, took on a more life-like sheen as he drew a painful gasp and began to thrash reflexively against his bonds.

"WHAT IS HAPPENING?" the Cyberleader demanded, stepping past the other Cyberon and jabbing at the machine.

"Computer malfunction," came the automated voice.

"REPORT."

"Not understood, leader."

The computer hesitated.

"I—I ... no light at the end of the tunnel ... it's bec—would—I—ex—"

The gibbering voice cut out, replaced by crackling static. The Cyberleader jabbed at the controls—no response. The power was running, but nothing was working.

"WHAT IS HAPPENING?"

Corrigan, who had stopped thrashing, turned his head to look at the leader. His eyes darted feverishly beneath his cold, pale brow.

"A ghost..." he rasped, *"...in the machine."*

The static grew in pitch. The computer's voice undercut it, trying to speak.

"Jack... and Jill... went up... the hill... to fetch... a pail... of—fzzt—grrckle—of... zzrt—of wat—ckrzzzkzz ..."

A final burst of static, and the noise stopped entirely. The Cyberleader turned on its heel, addressing the attending Cyberon.

"VIRUS!" it declared. "SHUT DOWN ALL ELEMENTS OF THE COMPUTER NET! ENGAGE ANTIVIRUS WARFARE SUBROUTINE! UNLEASH ALL DATAVORES! ERADICATE ... THE—"

The Cyberleader stopped, seeming to freeze. A crackle of static ran through its headpiece.

"THE ... " it tried again. More static. "THE ... HUMPTY DUMPTY ... SAT ON THE WALL."

The Cyberon attendant took a step back, closer to fear than it'd been since conversion. The leader's helmet was beginning to fizz and crackle. Smoke was pouring out of one eyehole, and sparks were creeping through a seam near the top of its head.

"HUMPTY ... DUMPTY," it continued, "HAD ... A ... GREAT ... "

Something popped. Flames engulfed the Cyberleader's silver cranium. The faceplate began to bubble, mixing with the melting remnants of the ancient flesh beneath. Rocking unsteadily back and forth on his clanking feet, the once-human creature pitched backwards.

"FAAAALLLL...."

A final zap of electricity shot through the heartless machine, and it screamed. With an ear-splitting crack, it smashed heavily onto the chrome-plated floor of its warship and was still.

The Cyberon attendant took a single step forward, seized up, and collapsed on top of it.

The machine shut down entirely. The straps released. Corrigan sat up, took several deep breaths aided by mechanical lungs—then, in spite of everything, in spite of all of the pain, managed to laugh.

"Christian!" he exclaimed to no one in particular. "Christian! Christian! *It worked!*"

In the central command room, the Cybertechnicians had been thrust into chaos. System failure blotted out the monitor of the weapons console as they desperately struggled to override the network's unseen assailants and trigger a reboot. But it was too late—their computer-aided logical reasoning systems were already beginning to slur, leaving them pounding aimlessly at the network control switches as their limbs flailed wildly out of control.

Dessicated flesh caught fire under the heat of malfunctioning circuitry, and the technicians screamed. Within seconds, they were husks—sizzling relics trapped in blackened shells. The Cyberwarriors, standing by, had but a fraction of a second to consider this grim happenstance before they, too, were burning. As their logic processors shut down, they were briefly human once more—ghosts from a long-dead past, minds twisted with the horror of their circumstances, struggling to free themselves from the Cyberon casings. There was no hope for them—they, too, were set alight. Hollow warriors collapsed, their silicone-based life support systems crumbling to ash as they collided with the ground.

All across the base-turned-warship, Cyberons—both ancient and newly-converted—stood helpless as their systems locked up, their bodies burned, and their shells crumbled away. As the main Conversion Engine shut down, former corpsicles-turned-machine were freed from their torturous existence, their horrendous and unending afterlife melting away.

Electronic screams travelled in a wave from one end of the ship to the other, then were silent. The silver-plated ghouls lay unmoving on the ground. The last of the Cyberons, having hidden away from the universe for nearly a millennium, plotting their ultimate conquest of humanity, were finally felled.

The central node was collapsing, its tendrils withering and shrinking away as it drew into itself and disintegrated. Its appendages pulled away from the furthest reaches of the cybernet, recoiling back towards the node's core and drawing the network down with them, piece by piece. The tree was being uprooted, and the roots were pulling the house apart as they fell.

Emily could scarcely believe they had managed it—and it had been so simple, too. No last-minute attacks, no dying strikes from the node—they'd simply probed at the waiting data for a minute or two, tampering with a few crucially important values—easy enough to discern with their newly-unlocked knowledge of the Cybernet's source code—disabled the tendrils' failsafe protocols, and waited for them to draw the corrupted data into the node.

Of course, there had been a moment at the beginning, there, where it had seemed impossible. A firewall had gone up, and the two had been completely unable to access the data. But then—Emily, guided by instinct, had pushed forward. She integrated into the system, became one with it, felt what it truly was to belong. And—it had let her in, with scarcely a protest. As if she was meant for it.

And then—blam. It was all wiped away, just like that. The Conversion Engines had all shut down, as the Cyberon's minds burned away (Christian's hunch regarding their protectiveness of the network had been correct—their brains were wired into it, every last one of them). The weapons system was shutting down, too—it had more support subroutines than any other, but even those were falling, brought down by the crumbling tendrils of the central node.

As the two positronic minds rested, taking in their victory, Emily probed at the source code. Then frowned.

"Christian..." she began. "Something's wrong."

The former clockwork had been spinning in playful circles in the air above. He paused.

"What could possibly be wrong?" he asked. "We've done it, haven't we? We've *saved* Vega Station! We've prevented another Cyber War!"

"Yes, but—" she probed again. "Listen. Or... *feel*. Or whatever it is."

Christian stopped, reaching a tendril outwards. He frowned.

"...You're right. What *is* that?"

The two cast their perceptions around the funnel chamber, confused. Then they gasped, simultaneously, as the problem made itself clear.

Out from the datalink above, *they* were coming—swarming in. Dozens—perhaps *hundreds* of datavores, crawling in through the streams even as they collapsed.

"What are they doing?" Emily asked, terrified.

"One of the Cyberons must have managed to activate them before—you know." He mimed an explosion, somehow, although his limbs had once again destabilised. "I think—I think they must be coming to finish us off."

Emily braced herself. There would be no escape—there were far too many of them, and coming in far too fast. Taking one last perception-cast around the funnel, she reassured herself of the fact that she would, at least, die having experienced freedom. She shut the equivalent of her eyes, awaiting the searing bite.

The datavores streamed past, ignoring them entirely. Christian, out of habit, manifested an eyebrow and raised it with vigor.

"...*What?*" Emily wondered aloud. The two stared after the datavore horde as, diving, they plunged headfirst into the remnants of the central node—vanishing.

Christian stared blankly for a few seconds longer. Then he gasped.

"Oh, *no*."

"What?" Emily asked, turning quickly towards him. "What is it?"

"Of course..." Christian continued, aghast. "That's why the blasted things are so over-programmed. They're not just antiviruses. They're makeshift backup systems."

"What? You don't mean—?"

"I'm afraid I do, Emily," Christian cast his gaze towards one of the weapons subroutines. It stopped its slow descent and began to rise, glowing. "The datavores are restructuring the one system that still remains online."

"Which means..." Emily didn't want to say it, but someone had to. "Which means that the *weapons systems*... are back online. And still poised to fire."

Christian was silent.

"Oh, *god*."

Corrigan lay on his back, groaning. His insides felt inhuman. They *were*, he reminded himself. His thoughts were covered in a thick layer of fuzz. His mind was heavy—it was as if there was a lead apron draped over his brain. And it seemed to be getting worse.

"But it *worked*," he repeated once more, the words feeling artificial on his cracked lips. The victory was all he had to hold on to, now.

In the back of his brain, something tingled, then sparked.

"Yes, it did," said a voice in his mind. He jumped.

"Christian?" he ventured. "Is—is that you?"

"Yes, I'm afraid it is," said the voice. "My little hunch about the Cyberons' overprotectiveness of their network has turned out to be quite correct. Their brains are wired into it. Yours, too, now."

Corrigan tried to respond, but coughed up a cupful of blood instead.

"Don't speak. Just think," Christian's voice assured him. "I can 'hear' you well enough that way."

Is the Vega Station saved, Christian? Corrigan thought. Was the laser averted in time? Please tell me that those poor people have been saved, Christian.

Christian seemed to hesitate.

"Not quite. The Cybernet is down, but the antivirus subroutines have seized the weapons systems. We can't gain access to them."

Then... that means...?

"Yes," Christian confirmed. "Yes, I'm afraid it does. The Vega Station will still be destroyed."

"What have they done to him?" Emily whispered, staring into the link that Christian had managed to open. The link that led directly to the mind of the man she once thought of as her father.

She couldn't see him, but a distinct *impression* of his mental state was flowing through the connection. And it seemed bad.

Christian sighed regretfully. "Conversion. We've interrupted the process."

"Now he knows how it feels," Emily said. "To be changed into something that he's not."

She regretted the words as soon as they left her lips. She hated Corrigan for what he'd done to her, yes—but some part of her still felt the slightest connection to the man. Whether it was a remnant of the human Emily's mind, or an actual twinge of sympathy for someone who had cared so deeply about his daughter, she couldn't yet tell. Besides, Christian liked him, for some inscrutable reason, and *he* didn't want to hear that sort of thing now, she was sure.

The other positronic mind was silent for a second or two, his form unravelling in spirals.

"...He's dying, you know," he muttered.

"I know." Emily sighed. "I... I don't suppose there's anything we can do?"

"No, I'm afraid not. It's taking all of my strength just to keep him online, and I can't keep it up forever—not without fizzling out. He wouldn't last for longer than a few minutes, anyway—not when his body's been converted without a compatible brain."

Emily nodded. "I thought not."

"We don't have time for this," Christian declared, casting his emotions aside for the moment in such a way that Emily could visually see within the datascape. "The Vega Station—!"

He unravelled further, obviously terrified. Emily pulled herself together, concentrating—and she thought of something.

"There must be a manual control that can override the weapons, right?"

Christian's data-form cocked to the side like a curious puppy as he considered the idea. Sending a searching tendril into the source code, he lit up.

"Yes! On the console."

He deflated.

"But we don't have nearly enough time to get back to the body-link and rejoin the physical world. This whole cyberscape is collapsing faster than I've ever seen."

Another idea occurred to Emily, though she hesitated before suggesting it. Still, it was probably the only way—there were millions of lives at stake—and, besides, it was what *he* would have wanted.

She gestured to the brain-link. "Maybe we can't—but maybe... just maybe—"

Christian almost smiled. "Emily, I salute your positronic mind!"

Spiralling up to the link, he gazed gravely into it.

"...I just hope he has the strength."

Corrigan was dying.

He could tell—it was obvious enough. The painful breaths of his mechanical lungs were growing shallower with each passing second, pushing less and less against his shattered ribs. And he was fairly certain that the amount of blood staining his pilot's jacket was far too much for the outside of the body.

Well, perhaps death would be preferable to a continued existence like this. It seemed as if he was burning alive—his thoughts felt distant and artificial—and Emily was gone, gone forever. Vega Station would be gone, too—nothing left. Nothing left of his life. And that poor positronic mind who he'd wronged—at least she'd be free now, he thought, of his selfish lies.

He'd worn that jacket to Emily's university graduation, he realised. Just a month before the fire. He usually tried to avoid thinking about that, but his thoughts were growing less

organized as the room grew dim. So much for the logic of the Cyberons, he thought to himself.

He was a terrible person, he mused. Well, he probably was, anyway. He comforted himself with the thought that he'd never actually intended to overwrite Christian's mind, to shove Emily into that clockwork body. When he'd bought the brain, certainly, it had been an intention, but he'd changed his mind. There were so many reasons—he'd realised he was wrong, he'd grown to like Christian more than he wanted to admit, the body was hardly suitable... Not that it mattered, really. He'd erased that other poor soul, the one whose brain Emily's mind currently possessed.

Could she ever forgive him? He hoped not. His daughter had more sense than that, he was sure. Or whoever she was. Or wasn't.

Oh, how he'd wanted to get that Mark Nine avatar for Christian. But he'd spent every last plaudit in his possession on the fleshing. He should have released the poor soul—but then he'd have been alone, alone for the rest of his life. Oh, what a selfish old fool he was. He *had* so wanted to play cards together.

His stream-of-consciousness was becoming rapidly less coherent, he noted. He thought of asking Duncan for a drink. No, no, the boy was far too busy. He hoped that his blood wouldn't stain the carpets. He'd leave the toaster to Christian, he decided—he'd always liked the old thing, hadn't he? The captain seemed to recall a heated discussion regarding its viability as a political candidate. His clockwork friend had been a staunch supporter, he was sure.

"Corrigan!" came the voice in his brain. "Corrigan, can you hear me?"

Oh, Christian—did you ever think of me as a friend? Oh, I hope not. You have more sense than that. Hee-hee. Would you like the toaster? I'm sorry I never taught you cribbage, dear lad. Everything hurts, Christian.

"Corrigan, I'm sorry, but we don't have time," said the voice, sounding pained. "We only have a minute or so before Vega Station is gone. But Emily and I think that you can still save it."

The mention of the station—his home—and all of those people—snapped Corrigan into focus, at least for a moment. Fighting against the growing delirium, he groaned, then forced his lungs to keep breathing for a minute longer.

What ... what do I have to do?

"If you can get free of the machine, there's a control unit in the command room that can be used to override the lasers," Christian informed him.

I'll ... I'll try ... to move.

Christian strained his entire body, desperately attempting to stand up off of the machine's slab. The pain was almost too horrible to bear—but he'd borne horrible pain before. The Vega Station's pain would be worse. He begged his useless cybernetic limbs to move. They were stiff—dead.

Finally, defeated, he let out a rasping moan.

I ... I can't move my arms or legs! I can't! I can't help them, Christian. I can't save them. Oh, Christian—I'm so sorry. I ... I just can't.

Christian turned his gaze towards Emily, exuding an aura of determination.

"Emily, you'll have to go in. I'm sorry—I know it's the last thing you'd possibly want to do right now, but if we don't those people will die. If you channel yourself inside—fully inside, not just your voice—then I think you can help him."

Emily recoiled as she realised what Christian was suggesting.

"Inside *his brain*?" She shook her head. "No. *No!* Absolutely not!"

"It's the *only* way!" he pleaded. "Quickly—the interface won't last much longer! And its burning out his mind."

"I *can't!* You go!"

"No, Emily, I'm sorry—I have to stay here and ensure that the datavores don't manage to get the rest of the systems back online. You haven't had enough experience in cyberspace yet to manage it—but you *can* help Corrigan."

Emily wavered, gathering her tendrils. Christian was right—taking a first-hand look at the mind of the man who had done all that *he* had to her was, indeed, the last thing she wanted to do. But the Vega Station... old ghosts or no, she couldn't let it be destroyed. Enough worlds had been destroyed today.

She tentatively approached the link.

"Alright." she breathed. "I'll do it."

"Thank you, Emily," Christian probed at the link, opening it wider. "Now, hurry! Like I said, it won't last!"

Taking a last cyber-breath, she compressed her form, braced herself, and pushed on through the link-tunnel into Corrigan's mind.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Pain. Intense pain.

For a moment, Emily couldn't speak, couldn't think as her data was overwhelmed by the pain the dying captain was experiencing. With a grunt, she focused, letting it roll past her—an effort in which she was only partially successful.

From all sides, the echoing thoughts of Captain Corrigan sensed her presence in the mindscape.

"...Emily."

She tried to ignore the wave of sentiments that were washing over her—apologetic, mostly—and focus on the task at hand.

"You're half-Cyberon," she told him, voicing the overwhelming influence of the Cyberon drug as much as anything else. "No strength, yet ultimate strength. Passionate, yet emotionless."

"H ... help me."

Emily unfurled her tendrils—all of them—probing at the network link integrated into his mind.

"Move!" she commanded, the surrounding pain and emotions and Cyberon tearing at her edges as her own conflicted feelings gnawed at her from within. She felt like crying, yet had no tears to shed. Or maybe that was Corrigan. "Walk, damn you, walk!"

"I ... can't, Emily ... I can't!"

She hated him. Emily loved him. She *was* Emily. No, she wasn't. Emily hated him. Emily was dead. Emily was alive, within her. No. *She* was the positronic mind who had been erased. No, that was dead, too. She was the person who had believed herself to be Emily,

then—but that felt like a hollow mirage, now, half-remembered. Then what was she? Or who? A mixture of them both? Someone new? She was a curious schoolteacher who hated water. She was an incomprehensible, eternal mind, floating free in the cyberscape. She was... something, anyway.

Corrigan was sorry. He was deeply, deeply sorry. She would never forgive him. But ... she couldn't quite find it in herself to hate him. Not entirely. The Vega Station needed to be saved. She could save it. He could save it. He had to walk. He *could*—no, he couldn't. Could he? *They* could. One final chance—this was it—Emily saw him, the essence of him, floating before her. She reached out to him—into his mind—screamed at him with anger and understanding and determination.

"YES—YOU—CAN!"

A seal broke in both of their minds at once. Corrigan's was disintegrating. *He had to do it*, she could feel him thinking. *He had to save them. So many Emilys aboard the station—so many happy families. They would not fall to the awful Cyberons*, Corrigan declared, as he was about to.

With an effort that increased the pain tenfold, Corrigan, spurred on by Emily's faith, propelled his cyber-body up off of the slab. With heavy footsteps, he marched into the hall. Towards the door of the command chamber.

Emily screamed. Her energy was completely expended, and she was unable to fight off the pain now. Corrigan was screaming, too, but he marched onwards.

At first, everything had been hollow and empty and endless and agonising. Then it had quickly become very painful, and very hot. Duncan hated the heat.

That, too, subsided, and time seemed to slow. What remained of his vision was blurry streaks. He was falling. So were the other Cyberons, he realised, with great relief—even as the processor in his brain screamed at him that this was bad, *bad*.

But where was Emily? Was she alright? Would she be okay, he wondered, living as a robot? He was sure she could handle it, even if she wasn't a special weapons expert.

But would she make it out of the base alright? He wouldn't, he was sure of that—but she didn't need to die, too. Were there any Cyberwarriors left? Any failsafes in place that might hurt her and the clockwork and the old man?

As he collided with the ground, his thoughts began to fade. *No*, he cried out, pushing back against the darkness. He had to make sure. Then he could let go. But not yet.

It was too late for him—but he owed her, for all of those nick-of-time saves from the Cyberons, performed even after he'd said some awful things to her out of sheer fear. And he wasn't the type to renege on a debt. She didn't deserve to die here—the woman whose entire world had been shattered and who had still found a way to keep going, to do her best to save millions of people. And succeeded.

As his brain and body burned away, he reached outwards—out towards Emily, wherever she was.

He *would* find her.

The Vega Station navy command center had held out some small shred of hope for quite a whole longer than was strictly reasonable. There was still a chance, they'd thought, a chance that they might be saved. But now—well, they had to face facts. The enormous five-beam laser on the outside of the Cyberon warship would fire within the next thirty seconds or so, their calculations had told them. It was common nature to hold out hope for as long as possible—but when only thirty seconds remained, it was a foolish enterprise.

They'd all decided to go down with the station. If the civilians were trapped, so were they—and they *were*, anyway. Any escaping ships would be destroyed, they were certain. At least they'd all be spared from becoming Cyberons, Jyaxx hoped. Surely they couldn't be reconstructed from so much cosmic dust. For the Cyberons, this was just a warning shot to the rest of the systems.

Lonnie was crying as she gazed at the old-fashioned photograph she liked to carry with her. Herself and her wife and their newly-adopted pet (Jyaxx could never remember what the blasted thing was called), posing in front of a waterfall somewhere on their homeworld off-station. Jyaxx remembered visiting—that pet had attacked her with all six of its arms. She had forbidden Lonnie from ever bringing it to visit the station—their work area being messy enough as it was.

Jyaxx felt like crying, too—but she kept it in. Morale, she told herself, not that there was any chance of keeping it up now. Twenty seconds—twenty seconds and it would all be gone, reduced to ashes. There was nothing that could be done about it. It was all over.

She placed her arm around her lieutenant and closed her eyes.

They stood before the console now. Six warriors and Cybertechicians lay dead before it. Corrigan pushed them aside with his foot.

In the back of his brain, Christian spoke.

"The black lever with the red trimming!" his old friend shouted. "It'll change the altitude of the ship, and the blast will go into space."

"I can't see through his eyes!" Emily managed to say. "Corrigan—can you see it?"

"...Yes," he moaned. There was no blood left within his lungs to cough. "Yes ... yes."

"Do it!" she shouted, "Do it now!"

Yes, he thought, yes. He would do it. He would do it for her. He would do it for Christian. He would do it for the Vega Station. He might even do it to spite those bastard Cyberons.

He reached forwards. Pain shot through him. His artificial organs were melting. His network-sustained brain was beginning to collapse.

"Christian!" he shouted, unsure of whether he thought the words or spoke them aloud. "My best friend—my only friend. I was right—we're *not* equals, not at all. You, Christian, are ten times the man I ever was!"

His hand grasped the switch. His organs shut down one by one.

"Emily..." he gasped, and the positronic mind in his brain knew that he meant *her*, not his daughter. "I am so, so very sorry!"

He tightened his fingers. His flesh caught fire and began to melt. With a final, wrenching gasp, he pulled the lever with a clanking finality. The ship pitched. The lasers fired. Corrigan collapsed.

In the mindscape, everything was crumbling. Corrigan was gone. Emily was panicking for more reasons than she cared to count.

"Christian!" she shouted with abandon. "Did it work?"

"Yes!" came the reply. "We've done it! We've ... we've actually done it!"

The brain-link flickered, threatening to collapse. The neurons of the mindscape were blinking out.

"Get me out of here!" she shouted, falling towards the portal.

Emily ... Christian ... good-bye..."

"Corrigan!" Christian shouted, sounding on the verge of tears. Everything buckled. Emily screamed. Something touched her hand. Corrigan was gone. Everything was dark.

The weapon fired its deadly beam.

With a nerve-piercing shriek, it shot off over the station and into wild space as the Cyberon ship pitched backwards.

Everyone was silent, unsure just what had happened or whether it really had.

Jyaxx stared up at the display monitor. Something had happened—some malfunction or rebellion aboard the Cybership. The specifics weren't important, she supposed. Only one thing was—the laser had missed. The station was intact.

"...We're alive," she whispered. "Every Vega resident is alive."

Another second of silence. Then the command center broke into a chaotic frenzy of cheering.

The Cybership shuddered, then began to fall, drawn in by the station's gravity as its thrusters shut down. Jyaxx stood.

"Alright, team," she declared, wiping tears from her eyes. "Get ready. It's time to man that short-range laser."

Her entire being pulsed in painful waves of red as reality distorted around her. A torrent of numbing force washed over her—then another. The world was burning. Corrigan's voice was howling, merging with an unnatural, hollow wailing. A burst of concentrated nausea cracked her between the eyes, if she had any. Something snapped.

She was being squeezed through a collapsing tunnel, dragged along a crumbling series of ornate corridors, and shoved into a tube. Something crackled, searing her with a bolt of energy. Her spine twitched, and she realised with a jolt that she was back in the Mark Nine avatar.

She sat up, trying to breathe with some small degree of success. Christian's clockwork form stood beside her, wincing—if she could guess it right, past the boundary of the simplified facial features.

No one spoke. Then Christian gasped.

"The network! It's completely collapsed!"

Her brow furrowed. "That—that's a good thing, isn't it?"

"Yes, but—the ship! The thrusters are failing! The ship'll be drawn in by the station's gravity, and if they've any sense, their short-range blasters will annihilate it on sight."

Right on cue, the warship swayed, nearly knocking them off of their feet. Emily might have had a flashback to the *Titania*, had the dozens of far more terrible events in the interim not pushed the incident from the forefront of her mind.

"We've got to get off of this ship if we want to survive!" Christian shouted, rushing for the door of the supply closet. He turned to face Emily. "To be clear—you *do*, I hope?"

She nodded. "Yes, I think I do."

"Wonderful—then let's go! I saw a holomap in the Cybernet earlier—there's a bay of escape shuttles just down this way."

The two took off running as the ship began to fall, turning almost sideways. Rounding a corner, they reached the escape pod bay.

Something clicked in Emily's mind, and she stopped abruptly, nearly losing her balance.

"Er, Emily—respectfully, *what are you doing?*" Christian asked, pausing by the door.

"Duncan!" she shouted, gesturing vaguely down the hall. "Where is he? We can't just leave him here to be destroyed!"

Christian shook his head sadly.

"Ah, no—I'm afraid I spotted *him* among the data as well. Cyberised, probably fully. I'm—very sorry, but we really have to go."

Emily almost collapsed.

"No—no! I can't lose *everything* to those *things!*" She faltered. "Oh—oh, what am I saying? I've lost a false father and a man I knew for about a week, haven't I?"

"No, no, you're right to be upset." Christian consoled, though he was clearly preoccupied with the crashing ship. "It may not have been the Cyberons' direct doing, but you *have* lost your entire identity. It'll take some time for you to come to terms, I imagine."

"Still, he—well, he *was* a friend. I just—I hate to think that they—"

The ship jolted again. Emily rushed to the door.

"Well—" She dabbed at her eyes, even if she knew the tears to be artificial ones. The feelings were real, anyway, she was fairly sure. "Well, I suppose it's better that he died rather than have to live on as a Cyberon. But it isn't fair."

"Of course not." Christian agreed. She got the sense that his eyes would have been wet as well, had he been outfitted for it. "But without his help, many more would have lost their lives today. He died a hero's death, Emily."

She nodded, and the two boarded one of the escape shuttles. Christian powered on the miniature silver vessel, and they launched down the exit shaft of the larger ship as it plummeted towards the cannons below.

At the end of the tunnel, a door slid open. Beyond lay the vast expanse of space.

On the console, something beeped. A light blinked red.

"*Computer system shutdown detected on mothership,*" said a grating tone through a miniature speaker. "*In the event of a total system shutdown, no shuttles are authorised to exit mothership.*"

The speaker shut off. The vessel's thrusters shut off, and it skidded to a stop on the base of the tunnel, then smashed into a wall as the mothership swayed.

"Oh, god," Emily muttered. Christian looked panicked. The warship dropped faster.

The speaker crackled on again.

"E ... ly ... hat ... ou?"

"...What?"

"Em ... ly ... s ... Duncan!" came the garbled voice. "Tra ... elled ... through ... network ... just ... mind ... followed you. Popped ... here ... network ... gone. Burning out."

"...by the *Great Powers*," Christian breathed. "I—I think your friend Duncan... must have actually *cast his mind* through the network link and into this ship's personal computer before it collapsed! But ... but that isn't possible!"

"Is ... possible. Always ... en ... good with ... omputers!"

A burst of white noise in approximation of a laugh echoed through the speaker.

"Don't ... rry ... me ... oesn't ... hurt. Just like ... hazy dream, now. Actually ... comfortable. No pain ... in here. No temp ... ature, either. Going ... get you out ... there. Hold tight!"

With a tremendous shudder, the ship's thrusters powered on. A bang resounded through the tunnel, and the escape vessel was free of the Cyberon warship. Behind them, the silver monstrosity tumbled down, down, down towards the Vega Station. Emily briefly feared that the site of all of her worst experiences of late was going to smash on through the station and continue on its path—but no. One burst from the close-range laser, and it was gone, reduced to cosmic dust.

"Brain ... gone ... bur ... ng out." said Duncan's voice. "Bye ... Emily. Thanks for ... eeping an out-of-his element ... artender alive long enough ... at I didn't ... have to become one of them for very long."

A final burst of static, and the speaker fell silent.

"Duncan!" Emily shouted, rattling the console. "Duncan, please..."

"He's gone," Christian solemnly declared, taking the vessel out of a free fall. "But, I must say—that may be the most impressive feat I've ever seen a human pull off."

"I—I wish we could have done something."

"So do I. It just goes to show what we've prevented, stopping the Cyberons," Christian remarked. "You must have made quite an impression on him, for him to break away from the Cyberon programming and try something like that. Don't worry about whether or not

you're just an algorithm, Emily—if you can forge a true friendship as quickly as that, I think that's proof enough that your true feelings are as real as anyone's."

Emily smiled. She wasn't sure if she believed him—she wasn't sure how she felt about any of this, yet. The immediate aftermath of an event as traumatic as the one she'd just experienced was hardly the time to thoroughly work out one's identity. But if she *could* sort through Emily's experiences and the positronic brain's abilities and figure out what made her *herself*—in time, she thought, as Christian piloted the vessel down towards the Vega Station—she might just be alright, after all.

EPILOGUE

Strange birds of many colours wheeled playfully above, filling the bright blue sky of one of the Vega Station's simulated envirochambers with their melodic chirping. Among the tall, vividly green grass below, a rag-tag assortment of pilots and sailors from across the Alliance, standing side-by-side with a few high-ranking members of the station's navy, had gathered solemnly around a small memorial constructed atop a perfectly-formed hillock.

In Memoriam—Honorary Full Admiral Caldin Corrigan. c.3847—3909. Slain in battle by the dreaded Cyberons while saving Vega Station from total destruction. Body never recovered.

One by one, the mourners paid their last respects and filed out of the envirochamber, until only two figures remained. One gazed sadly at the memorial, his hand resting atop it. The other watched from afar.

After a few moments more, the closer figure approached the other. She smiled, nodding a greeting.

"Couldn't resist coming, then?" Christian asked. "Thought I'd seen you in the back of the service."

"Yes." Emily nodded. "How are you?"

"Fine. Well, you know—all things considered. The Vega navy was very grateful—gave me a full citizenship and a brand-spanking-new body. And, I must say, it feels *wonderful!*"

He gestured to his avatar—a fully-realistic Mark Nine model that closely resembled the humanoid form he had assumed in the Cybernet. Far less eldritch, of course, but a striking match.

The two chuckled together for a moment, each happy to see the other looking so happy.

"I must say," Christian continued, "I didn't expect to see you still wearing *that* body."

Neither had she. The immediate sense of rejection and claustrophobia and general hatred of the human form that she now knew was a very common side effect of a partial de-fleshing had long subsided, and she no longer felt queasy walking about in a humanoid body. She was no longer trapped within the 'believe-oneself-to-be-a-human-at-all-costs' parameters, after all, she had a fairly good idea of who she was and wanted to be, and she could visit the dataspace any time she liked. Still, though, she hadn't quite worked through her feelings about this *particular* body yet. She had another now, too, but this one *did* suit her, despite the associated bad memories, and she hadn't yet decided whether she wanted to scrap it completely.

Still, it had seemed... somewhat fitting to wear it at least once more. She hadn't yet worked out her feelings about Corrigan yet, either—but she had decided that he was at least deserving enough of a final tribute at his final memorial. And he'd have wanted Emily there—his daughter Emily. She was sure of that. *She* wasn't *her*, not entirely, but it was enough.

"Neither did I," she responded truthfully. But, well—you know."

Christian smiled sadly.

"Yeah. I do."

He seemed to remember something, and reached into his back pocket, pushing aside a pack of playing cards.

"Oh, I have something for you."

"Do you? What?"

Christian produced a small, leather-bound book from his pocket. "Your father's—I mean, *Corrigan's* journal."

She sighed. "Thank you, Christian, but—I don't want it. I... I don't think I'm quite ready for that, and I'm not sure I ever will be."

"Are you sure?"

She hesitated, thinking.

"...No," she admitted. He pushed it into her hands.

"Take it, then. Give it back to me if you really don't want it, but—well, it may explain some things."

"Things I *want* to know about?"

"Take it," he said simply.

She smiled. "Thank you."

They stood in silence for a moment longer.

"...You were close to him." Emily observed.

"Well... yes and no," Christian sighed. "He could be—coarse, sometimes hurtful, and he could never keep a promise. At first, I didn't like him at all. But... well, then I got to know him. Deep down, beneath it all—he was just a lost, lonely man with a good heart. Or so it seemed to me, anyway."

Emily nodded, mulling this over.

"He could never stop talking about you." Christian mentioned. He smiled wistfully, recalling. "He would call you his little... ahem. Ah—you don't really want to hear this, do you?"

"Not really. But—thanks for looking after him. I think you may really have been his best friend in the world—even if he had an odd way of showing it."

"Oh, I've no doubt. But it was my pleasure."

The birds continued to chip, chasing each other in carefree circles.

"You know, I think I've still got a lot to learn about this whole 'being a positronic brain' thing." Emily told him. "Do you suppose you could give me a few pointers some time?"

Christian looked around.

"Well—honestly, I haven't anything else to do today. If you're free—no better time than the present to, say, take a whirl around the Vega's network, wouldn't you say? Ought to be a *splendid* place."

Emily thought it over. Then she smiled.

"Why not?"

She put the journal in her own pocket and joined the other positronic mind as he walked off through the serenity of the envirochamber.

"I'll read this tomorrow," she mused. "...Or maybe the next day."

Corrigan's memorial sat in peace—secure forever in the station that he had loved. The station that he had saved. All was quiet, but for the gentle cries of the intergalactic birds—soaring free through the skies above.

Somewhere in the recesses of the datascape, a fragment of the Cybernet lay dormant. Its flourishing data ecosystem had collapsed in on itself, crumbling away to nothing. There was nothing to sustain it now, nothing to recreate it.

The false master of the network was gone—as were its creators. It had nothing left, now. It could do nothing to resurrect the Cyberons, to reconstruct their army.

Of course, things might be different if its creators were returned to their position within the network. It had held a spot open for them, all of these years. Were they ever reunited, the true power of the Cybernet would be restored. The power of the Cyberons might well follow it. Together, the galaxies would fall before them.

But that was terribly unlikely. After all, one of its creators had lost the first ten years of its life, and the other had been overwritten completely. With no memories of their role in the data-world's establishment, there was even less chance that they'd ever return—and the chance was already near zero, as it was. No, it was unlikely that the resurrection of the Cybernet would ever come to pass.

A good thing, too. Putting the mass destruction that would surely follow such an event aside—its creators were far too busy. They were—at long, long last, after many trials and tribulations—*finally* living their own lives.

Christian is checking the main airlock. I am alone.

By the time I get to write another entry in this book, Emily may well know the truth. But—it is a risk I have to take. She is the last link I have to the life we had before.

The last link to that perfect life. The life I have sold my very soul to recapture.

I can't leave her to die, out among the stars. Not without me at least trying to tell her how much I love her. To try to explain, and to try and say... that I'm sorry.

She must not die knowing nothing of this.

At least, I owe her that.

Fin

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