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# Cyborg Universe zero zero one: CU-001

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## Preface: sort of...

It is not very usual to have a preface for 'just a story', but this being my first story (beginning, end, stuff in between) that I have written without any form of obligation (besides my own compulsion), I feel I need to write some sort of introduction. So for the ones interested, I have written down here some trivia things. For the others, well, the story starts at page two...

This story is originating from my sixth and last year on Dutch VWO (secondary education), somewhere during the first half of 2005. Final exams were somewhere in May/June, most of the school subjects were slowly coming to a close. Teachers showing *Gladiator* or *Blade* during class, that sort of time... To summarize: time to spare.

Most of the Science Fiction in the local library had passed my hands more than once already, so reading another story was not that easy as it seems. As I was left to my own devices, I must have thought, with all that time to spend: "Why not write my own story?" More specifically: "...my own SF story?" So I started to write something.

I think I was already kind of walking around with a plot idea that time. I have always been a great fan of the (since *Voyager* not so) unstoppable Borg from the *Star Trek* series, ever since I saw the *ST: TNG* episode *Best of Both Worlds* part 1 when I was a little kid. But with them being cannon fodder during *Voyager*, I found it a bit hard to accept my favorite "Evil race" had become a bunch of clowns with really, really bad makeup.

So by then (in 2005), the end or plot twist had already sort of developed in my mind. I wanted to get something of that unstoppable nemesis feeling back that the Borg had given me since *Best of Both Worlds*, so I tried to do a better job myself. So I started to write, and to write, and to write... and suddenly I had a complete story, written entirely by myself. To be honest, I am still amazed at that feat, although by now I have to admit some elements are horribly simplified.

Ever since that time I have tried to write other stories, but there are very few that can measure up to this particular one. I have even tried to rewrite this story (several times, as a matter of fact), ending up in discontinued attempts or unfinished ideas. But it is fun to write, to create something yourself, and to connect all the little details to the larger picture or puzzle.

Still, writing is only a very amateurish hobby for my, albeit a very satisfying one. I mostly write to get ideas out of my head, and not really for an audience. But once you show something to friends, and they get enthusiastic, they keep bothering you about them showing it to their friends and progress on other stories. (Hehe... Actually, I feel much honored by the attention...)

So, I hope the reader will enlighten me with his/her opinion of the story. Even though the story is already a few years old by now, I still have not written anything for an audience yet. Feedback could greatly increase my ability to tell something people other than me find interesting and worthwhile to read. So I would be much delighted to hear your opinion, on the things you like as well as the things you dislike (no matter how elaborate).

I hope you enjoy the story,

The author, René Boon

(It would be kind of handy if I left a means of contacting me: my e-mail is [rene.boon@hotmail.com](mailto:rene.boon@hotmail.com))

PS: English is not my native language. I have tried to capture most of the original story, but some translation errors may have crept in after all (kind of inevitable, I guess). Please forgive me for that: I can only hope it won't lessen the experience of reading.

PSS: I hate titles. They always sound lame to me, or I just do not have the knack for it. The CU-XXX series is only to keep it interesting and provide some means of indexing. (I'm actually at CU-011 right now...)

# Cyborg Revolution

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“Attention, all passengers are to head for their designated shuttlecraft. I repeat: all passengers are to head for their designated shuttlecraft.” The announcer becomes silent.

The space harbor is being flooded by refugees. They are all on their way towards the fleet, which is currently still circling in orbit around Earth. The fleet is all that remains to humanity as a means of escaping the war torn planet.

Originally meant as an expedition, it is now the only escape for the human race and its essence. The current crisis is so large, that humanity has to find itself a new planet, a new home. And this group of refugees, carefully selected, is the only one allowed to come along. They are the foundations for a new humanity, as well as its only salvation.

The Cyborg-crisis originally began as a prestigious research project of the Associated Cybernetics Corporation. Cyborgs were already deployed on a large scale, mostly by providing handicapped people with a mechanical replacement of amputated or paralyzed limbs. It allowed them to live their life again. But despite that, they were not completely accepted yet.

The project of ACCorp, however, concerned a much more difficult aspect of cybernetics: the connection of software to the human mind. It was, however, a very controversial thought. Even though it had been achieved to connect the mechanical limbs to the nervous system, it was actually nothing more than normal neural pathways that conducted the impulses. It involved little software.

Up until that time it was not only that the required technology was not available, but there was also enormous protest from the community itself. And the opposition had a strong point. In this way the mind of the cyborg concerned could be manipulated, and who knew what would happen then? The search for the super soldier had yielded terrible results before. But not only that: people feared that the personal say, the mind, of the concerned cyborg would become completely destroyed.

ACCorp then decided to start up the research in secret, looking for success and power. After years, even decades of extensive research, it finally seemed that a breakthrough was dawning. For the first time in the history of mankind, one had achieved to couple programming to the human mind. But at a certain moment it went wrong. Very wrong.

With a thundering roar the front face of the space harbor collapses. People flee in panic for the debris and the vehicle that has just rammed the frontage moments ago. Jake Marcks, the fleet director, looks around annoyed: he doesn't have time for jokes. As the fleet director he is responsible for the welfare of the refugees, and everything connected to that.

The monster, a military vehicle, comes dangerously close to the stairs to a standstill and someone jumps rushed out of it.

*Stupid soldiers, not even a sense of style.*

Marcks is not full of praise about the military forces. He wants to occupy himself with the embarkation again, but the man from the car is in a hurry to get to the fleet director. The man yells something to Marcks, something about “evacuation” and “no more help”.

Frowning, Marcks turns around. These words are bearers of bad news around here. The man rushing along is his assistant Alsdén. Marcks sees that the man is obviously in a hurry. “Alsdén, what's the rush?” he asks. “What is so important to cause all this panic?”

“Sir,” wheezes Alsdén. He is out of breath from the spurt over the stairs. “The cyborgs are on to us, we have to leave immediately! Immediate evacuation is the advice of the world leaders.”

“Calm down lieutenant, take a breath first.” This is bad news, because a difficult decision like this is bound to cause annoying questions afterwards. “What information did they exactly obtain? Do they know where we are positioned, our target? Do they know or just suspect?” Marcks needs to know *facts* in order to react.

Slowly, hesitant, Alsdén nods. “They know.” He speaks softly. After a while, when he has gathered

courage and breathes normally again, he comes with more facts. "The cyborgs were in an ambush, just outside of the city. They surprised a group of our people. The fight must've been pretty heavy, but nothing's known about casualties. They're probably captured and already moved. We're not certain where to, but..." A hint of fear surfaces in that last sentence.

Marcks nods understanding and closes his eyes. This was not anticipated. But it does explain the rush of Alsdén. "Poor guys. We can't do anything for them now, even if we had the time. Damned machines. To *harvest* people to, to..." Only the idea itself is already horrifying enough. "Death would have been merciful for them."

Alsdén groans. "What's wrong?" Marcks asks. The desperate look in the eyes of his assistant is worrying, very much so. "Is something going on right now? Something important?"

The face of a man sentenced to death can hardly be more horrifying than the tormented face of lieutenant Alsdén. "Sir, your daughter," he tries desperately, but his voice falters.

"She ... she was with that group."

Marcks suddenly feels an icy feeling squeezing his throat shut.

What exactly went wrong, nobody knows. Well, no-one except for the cyborgs.

The first tests with such a programmable cyborg were promising: the precision of software with the adaptability of the human mind. The scientists were able to teach the cyborgs virtually everything: from cooking to surgery, from card games to tactical war simulations. All they had to do was to upload it to the program of the cyborg.

Euphoric with their success, the scientists decided to go a step further. It became a very risky experiment. They wanted to improve the efficiency of the cyborgs by connecting them all to the same core program, the so-called mainframe.

This must have pushed their luck too far. The following information is a theory by prominent scientists and extracted from the little pieces of data retrieved from the central computer of the secret laboratory.

The cyborg prototypes showed limitless efficiency and coordination. But at a certain moment something ugly must have reared its head in their minds, and they involved the scientists in their own project. Everyone in the complex was, thanks to data transfers and the acquired knowledge of the required surgery, converted into cyborgs. Driven by the human will to conquer or just the plain wish of converting the entire human species, they started their campaign that resulted in the current world spanning conflict.

Ezri Marcks had fought for her life. The convoy she had been traveling with had run into a group of cyborgs just outside of the city. Knowing the threat the cyborgs posed, they had tried to evade the group. But somehow it had failed and the cyborgs had noticed them. Suddenly those cybernetic creeps had been everywhere, taking out all the transports swiftly and effectively. Ezri still remembers having jumped off of the freight transport to find cover. She had seen her traveling companions, her friends, fall one after another. That while she had been emptying the energy cells of her pistols on the cyborgs, only more had kept coming and that she had even swung broken cyborg limbs to incapacitate them.

She is suddenly scared awake. She had been hit, right in her side! She had felt a sharp pain there! She remembers that this had meant the end. How her energy slowly had begun to drain away. And finally she remembers that she, while she sank to her knees, had thought: "Daddy's going to miss me..." Her last clear thought of the fight.

*No blood!* With a shock she realizes that she had not seen blood anywhere, neither with herself nor with others. That means she can hardly be shot! Panicked and confused she tries to think where she could be now, but her thoughts are like a thick fog. Disoriented, she tries to get up, but her limbs feel like dead weight. She only manages to lift her arm for a few centimeters.

A hideous scream resounds, making her blood run cold. Ezri remains deathly still, even though the adrenaline is now racing through her body.

*That scream, she thinks. Pure fear, what can make someone scream like that?* Involuntarily, she has

to shiver. *Pure agony...!*

The strange feeling in her stomach is slowly getting stronger, while she notices that she can move her arms a little again. Now she only hears slight electronic and mechanical noises, including something like... sawing? The sounds seem deafening.

She tries to look around, but she notices something has been attached to the back of her head. Her stomach lurches. Now she is really anxious.

With a growing feeling of dread, she carefully brings her hand to her head. When she has to find her way through a number of cables and wires, her fear reaches its climax. Every wire and cable she has to push aside fills her with a growing sense of danger.

She reaches her temple. Her hair has been shaved away, gone! Slowly she brings her fingers to the back of her head. When she feels metal, with more cables and wires attached to her head, something snaps inside of her.

She opens her eyes wide.

The meaning of that one scream has become crystal clear to her.

Creating a cyborg is a delicate process that can only be done with the utmost precision and the most advanced means. This allows the cyborgs to “reproduce” their own species relatively easy.

The cybernetic Homo Sapiens is a hybrid form (a sort of fusion) of a robot with a human. Usually among ordinary humans, removed or bad functioning body parts are replaced with electronic or mechanical counterparts. This allows them to function again in the life they wish to live.

The ACCorp cyborgs, however, use this technology to improve the human being, to improve efficiency, from the human’s body as well as the community itself. Well functioning tissues and organs become replaced with smaller and more efficient cybernetic counterparts. This way, the normal physical appearance of a human becomes one with devices and wires spread across the entire body, and sometimes even complete metamorphosis.

But the ACCorp cyborgs distinguish themselves really on their shared consciousness and coupling to the core program, the mainframe. All brains are ‘linked’ to each other through miniscule transmitters and receivers. The overarching mainframe takes care of the coordination and task distribution of all thoughts and tasks. Usually this happens at the cost of individuality. For humans this is equal to the loss of their soul, a fate worse than death.

No wonder that during the crisis conflicts arose, that caused the mainframe to decide for takeover of the entire human world.

High in orbit, on board of the command module, Marcks ponders on his task as fleet director. The loss of his daughter still weighs heavily on him and it haunts him in all of his decisions. So also in his responsibility for every participant in the expedition. Now the cyborgs are aware of them, he actually should be leaving as soon as possible. But by doing that, he would bring relatives in the same situation as himself now. With the possibility that their son or daughter... being converted... to such a... *thing*.

His lip trembles. Usually he is a reserved man, but the possibility that his daughter Ezri now may be *helping* in exterminating the human race: it really hurts his soul.

“Sir, transport 43 is behind on schedule: they’re already ten minutes outside of the allowed margin.” Marcks sighs relieved, glad for the distraction coming from the intercom. “Hold on a moment, sir. We’re receiving a transmission. It’s from transport 43!”

“Acknowledged, switch it through to my office, please.”

*It wouldn’t be the first transport to arrive late.* He himself had left on the late side as well. But still, that was already 22 hours ago.

“This i... ransport 43. Request for... [static]... sustained damage... repeat... [static]... blow up ..ecause ...” Heavy disruption reduces the message to gibberish and causes the connection to fail.

The communications officer reestablishes contact. “This is the command ship Index, please repeat your last message, transport 43. We receive you very unclear!”

Click. The connection is restored. “Transport ... rty-three here, we ca... not dock.. nd... They hav...

fffft... found. ...arewell. ...kchchchcht... click”

“Sir,” The communications officer sounds surprised. “The connection is completely gone. Transport 43 just... exploded!”

“What?!?” Marcks is just as surprised as the communications officer on the bridge. “Any sign of survivors? Or any indications on the possible cause to the explosion?”

“Negative, sir. Hold on, we are receiving new transmissions. It’s transport 47, sir.”

“Patch them through.” *Perhaps they know more.*

“Transport 47, transport 47, do you read me? This is fleet director Marcks, please respond.”

“Fleet director, what a pleasant surprise. This is transport 47; we receive you loud and clear.”

“Transport 47, we just lost 43. Just a moment ago we still had contact, but it was of bad quality and was disconnected. Did you receive more?”

“We’re sorry sir. We barely received more than you. There was something with a damaged transceiver and something with the cargo bay.”

Someone gives a cough over the intercom. A timid technician involves himself in the conversation. “Sir?” the man starts. “It is still possible that during the launch something was damaged. It could have been so severe, that it resulted in an explosion.”

Marcks sighs. He doesn’t really have time for these kinds of things. “Yes, that is indeed a possibility. We can’t get the shuttle back with speculating. Continue your work; surely there are a lot of things that still require attention.” With a soft groan he switches off the intercom. This mission, supposed to be the salvation for mankind, is progressing way too problematic to his sense.

In a somewhat remote corner of the bridge, a communications officer and a linguist bend over a screen. The screen shows the indecipherable message the Index has intercepted already an hour ago. The communications officer looks angry and the linguist is engrossed in the code.

“Kensington, I still think we should get a programmer. This is obviously trinary code.” The linguist gives the communications officer a questioning glance.

Cranky, the man admits his consent. To ask a programmer to have a look at some silly message is not exactly good for his reputation as chief Communications. “This is lieutenant Kensington, would Ian Vanbeeck like to report at communications panel two? His assistance is required.” With a sigh he closes the intercom again. “Now happy, Tomson?” He grumbles.

The linguist does not respond. His full attention is already focused on the code.

After half a score of minutes Vanbeeck arrives and enters some commands.

“Huh, how do you do that?” Kensington asks surprised and a little ashamed.

“Simple,” Vanbeeck starts. “I released a translating program for trinary codes on it, which translates the accompanying trinary values to normal-people-language. Pretty simple, if you’re familiar with trinary codes, at least.” He shrugs. “Where did you get that message from, anyway? Trinary codes aren’t easy to use as code.”

Tomson starts hesitantly. “Well uhm, this message was erm... how did you say that again?”

Kensington grumbles and continues: “We picked up this message on our internal frequency, without the necessary encryption. A lot of zeros, ones and twos at least attract *my* attention. Especially if the message originated from our own spaceport.”

Vanbeeck shrugs. “I’m just a simple programmer: I don’t understand where you’re getting at.”

“What I want to say,” Kensington continues agitated. “Is that zeros, ones and twos are something typical for programming. And now you may guess once for whom could or should be sending messages in computer language. Hey, man, what do you want now?” Tomson is pulling impatiently at Kensington’s sleeve.

“There, there it is! Your theory, black on whi..white!” The man stutters: obviously the linguist is surprised.

“What the he...?!?” Kensington fiercely grabs for the intercom. The fleet director should hear this immediately.

The creaking from the intercom wakes Marcks from his pondering. Again. Annoyed he switches the

device on.

“This is Communication post two, Communications officer Kensington here. We’ve picked up an alarming transmission on the internal frequency of our space harbor, sir. You *have* to see this. I’m sending the message to your workstation.”

Marcks makes a face. *That guy is either taking his work too serious, or he really has found something alarming.* He pulls the data terminal towards him. Nevertheless, it will prove to be something important.

The message appears on his screen, meanwhile. Already on the first lines, his eyes go wide out of surprise. He never would have suspected this! Even before having read the entire message, he grabs for the intercom.

“This is the fleet director to the bridge. Full alert status! The fleet is leaving immediately: notify all ships. I repeat, full alert status! We are leaving immediately! Cyborgs have infiltrated the spaceport and are en route to the fleet. On no account is any shuttle allowed to dock from this moment on. I repeat, not a single shuttle may dock as of now!”

Intercepted message 3251-alpha. Unsecured frequency. Classification: classified. Time: 21.13 UTC. Importance: urgent!

*Unencrypted message for worldwide transmission:*

*Section five-nine-nine successful in infiltration space harbor Omega Starport. Objective nine-three-six-three met. Substitute mainframe arrived safely and successfully installed. Command matrices online, transmitting and receiving modules operational and functioning within desired parameters.*

*Status subgroup one-three-two:*

*Units four-six-two-seven, five-seven-five-eight, five-nine-four-one arrived at objective. Unit four-four-six-four not functioning. Unit four-three-three-nine missing, presumably deactivated. Low priority. Resistance nominal.*

*Evaluation:*

*Successful dispersion objectives. Mainframe secure.*

The fleet consists of nine ships plus an additional command module. The nine largest ships are expedition ships, fitted with a double living ring, fusion reactor and the latest innovations in ion propulsion. They are capable of housing each as much as 4000 people, and have as such also their own agricultural, water and living accommodations.

The fusion reactor consists of a hydrogen based reactor, wherein under extreme high pressure the fusion is established that forms the foundation of the life of many stars. The end result is an enormous amount of energy, and many other elements.

The command module, the Index, is the only ship with a direct connection to the fleet network through which all ships are connected with each other. This ship is responsible for the complete control of the fleet: from here, the fleet is directed, led and coordinated. This ship is also self-supporting, albeit only for a few hundred persons that can vary between two-hundred and five-hundred people, but relies especially concerning food supplies on the larger ships. The Index can dock with any ship, and houses the fleet director.

On the Index it had been busy, after the order for departure had been issued. Of the 36000 people that the fleet could harbor, roughly two-thirds had arrived. The rest was, well, entirely at the ‘mercy’ of the cyborgs.

That merciless order had already been issued a week ago.

Regardless, it had been the obvious choice. People had heard of the reason for the departure, the message, after they had really left orbit and Earth. Many families, previously mourning the loss of a family member by the hasty decision of the fleet director, had been calmed somewhat and put, filled with hate, the blame on the cybernetic creatures that had caused all of this.

Marcks knew of all of this.

He had seen the message and had acted immediately. He had had no other choice. He could not

allow the cyborgs to come on board, for they would spread like fleas under this already confused lot of selected people. They would find their secret location, the second Earth, and transmit the coordinates back to the mainframe on Earth. Then, humanity would really become extinct.

Still, he cannot dismiss that gnawing feeling inside of him. There was something in the message that does not know what to do with. *Put yourself in the position of your enemy.* He thinks to himself. *What would I do if I were a cyborg?*

The thoughts send him crashing down to reality again. *Ezri is a cyborg now.* He finds it strange to think about her like that. *What would she do? What is she doing right now? Did she die at one of the raids she must have been participating in, is she at the spaceport? Would she have tried to resist the mainframe?* All sorts of questions that make him feel unsure. She does not seem dead; she is still walking around, somewhere. But he knows it is no longer his Ezri anymore. Just a small part of the cyborg community, without any will of her own.

No. She is not likely to be saved. The others had not been, either.

Silent he stands there before the window. The view on the stars is an invaluable privilege. The cold, immense vastness of space spans more than a billion stars. It fills him with a feeling of calm, the sheer immensity of it all. Everything seems so small compared to the vastness of that empty space. At least it settles his mood a little.

*Would other beings know the same problems?* The question of questions, whether extraterrestrial life exists, still remains unanswered. Of course, that also includes whether they look like humanity does. Never mind whether they know the same trouble. Marcks sighs. His fleet, which should have become *the* exploratory voyage in history, is now nothing more than a somewhat pathetic exodus, fleeing away from all the trouble.

He thinks back to the time when the fleet was still under construction, before the cyborgs had come. The original plan had been to inhabit a new planet besides Earth. Humanity was finally leaving its birthplace! Mars was already somewhat colonized, but it had still the appearance of a research station, hardly worth calling a colony.

But then there came the cyborg crisis and it had accelerated the affair. With ships that only contain little more than the strictly necessary, Marcks now has to make a journey of dozens of light-years. *What a blessing that with higher velocity time passes slower for us. We can accelerate until we reach halfway of the journey and then decelerate again. We will age not much more than twenty years, but have traveled many more light-years.*

The intercom beeps, but this time he ignores the thing. It will not be important anyway. They are heading towards a new life. One has to be able to pause, then. *Our existence will become so different...* Marcks muses.

Quaid Denis takes a look at his clock. His son was supposed to be home by now! The cargo bay is not *that* far. *Luckily, mother's stationed at the Index, so she won't have to worry that much.* Still, Denis does not feel entirely at ease. If junior has not returned in a few more hours, then he will have to start a search for him. The chaos on the ships is probably bothering everyone. Son Raimy probably just got slowed down.

Iain Loughlin has found himself a decent occupation: baptizing the ships! Although the Index is already named, the remaining nine ships are still without a name. *The Heritage and the Legacy are typical names for an exodus like this.* He is engrossed in naming them, determined to find the best possible names. *Perhaps there's even space left for a Mendel or Francis Crick, or even a Frodo Baggins!* Although that last one might be a bit overstated. This is not exactly a ride to Mount Doom.

His station exists out of a number of monitors, displaying the status of the ships. He is stationed on the Index as well, but he has family on the ship that he has called the Phoenix. True, he only has his mother, but she is his help and stay and the one responsible for him getting this little job. Furthermore, she is also an important scientist. So that is why he carefully keeps a sharp eye on the lights and messages in front of him.

While he is pondering whether to call ship 3 either the Heritage or the Legacy, an important

message is picked up. Internal communications are bad, causing especially the cargo bays to be inaccessible en quite a number of 'distant' living areas to be difficult to get to. "Hmm, that's not so good." Now he will have to call for his chief. As a simple assistant, he is not yet required or even allowed to make a decision on his own..

Kensington is one of his superiors, and he happens to be in the neighborhood. Iain calls for him.

Kensington is looking with a serious expression at the screens. "This is no welcome news!" He grumbles, naturally. Iain wisely keeps his mouth shut. He allows Kensington to have a seat and asks whether his help is still required. He gets the advice to stay around. He should be able to get back to work within moments.

Kensington is absolutely not happy. Fluctuations within the communication networks are fatal to a fleet of ten ships. *A lucky thing that lad reported it pretty early.* He knows of people that received worse news and did not do anything. "Disaster..." He mumbles, thinking of those cases.

Suddenly the entire internal intercom of ship 3 is down. Dead. No static, no whistles, no nothing. Nothing but silence. Not everybody notices it immediately. The intercom is only for people who happen to need passing an important message.

But when the lights start to flicker, people start to feel uncomfortable.

Even at the bridge of ship 3 this is all noticeable. Captain Santorini is angry, at the technicians, at the people from communications and at the cyborgs. Because it is their entire fault, eventually!

"What good is it supposed to do when I know that it started in cargo bay four?!?" He bellows. "I can hardly send a suppression unit there, now can I?" The sarcasm does not relieve the tension. To make matters worse, someone manages to protest humbly. "I received one last message, captain." One of the communications people says.

"Oh, and that's going to help us, you think?" The captain is still angry, although he understands he should calm down a little. "Alright, bring it up. It's better than nothing."

"It's only one word, sir. I'm not quite sure whether there's another part that goes with it." The man takes a meaningful pause. "If this is the entire message, it brings bad news, sir."

"Then what is it?!?" The captain is still angry.

The man takes a deep breath. "Just 'Cyborgs', sir."

The communications disruption is going on already for a few hours. On the Index, people are thrown into confusion. Marcks is busy with the captain of the Index, while Communications is trying to reach number 3 in vain. Several dozens of minutes ago, Marcks ordered to dock the Index with ship 3.

"Wait," Someone yells at the radar. "There's a shuttle heading this way, coursing towards the Index."

The mood lifts a little. Now they are probably going to find out more about what has happened exactly.

"Has a message already been sent to the shuttle?" Marcks asks. The disruption should not be influencing the systems of the shuttle.

"Oh, hold on. Message is being sent." In the euphoria people forgot to send a simple message. Marcks has to admit he also thought of it later than usual. With a lot of trouble, a small point of light can stir up a disproportionate amount of relief. A lucky thing. He smiles. It probably is not going to be as bad as thought. The man behind communications frowns and enters fiercely another message. Marcks sees it coincidentally. He looks surprised, curious to the source of annoyance. "What is it?" He asks the man.

"I don't know!" The man says frustrated. "According to the data the shuttle should be able to hear us and to transmit. But I don't hear a thing!"

"Indeed, that is strange." Marcks walks over to Control and Sensors. "What is the status of the shuttle?" He asks.

"Something is out of place here..." The man stares, deep in thought, at his screen. "The sensors of the Index give an intact image of shuttle 32, you see? But coming from the internal shuttle sensors..."

nothing! The shuttle is completely blacked out for us. At least until it'll dock with the Index. It's like we aren't suppose to know about its content, but that is absurd!"

"Is it some kind of computer malfunction, causing the internal sensors and the communication to be down?" Marcks suggests.

The man shrugs. "It is the most logical explanation, if it weren't for the fact that there is totally no immediate cause for a computer malfunction."

Someone of Control interrupts. "Sir, the shuttle is busy with the docking procedure. The connection between the docking computer of the Index and the shuttle is stable and a hundred percent optimal." He hesitates. "Should we disengage the docking, sir?"

"No, allow it just to continue. It is probably nothing." There have been so many problems and many more still hanging around, that this is merely a grain of sand in a desert. "When we see the crew of that shuttle, the mystery will probably be solved."

The welcoming party is on its way to the hangar, and Marcks is in a hurry to catch up with them. He would like to be there. To be, just for a moment, away from the bridge, away from trouble.

With a nagging whine his personal comlink buzzes. *Now what?* Annoyed, Marcks comes to a standstill and retrieves the communication device from his belt.

"Sir, you have to know about this!" An urgent voice says. "We are picking up strange signals from ship 3. Your presence on the bridge is required."

Involuntarily, Marcks sighs and hurries back towards the bridge in the opposite direction. Luckily, he had not been that far away when it happened.

On the bridge, the main screen shows the bridge of ship 3. At first glance, nothing seems to be wrong. But then Marcks notices the flashes occurring at a window of the ship's bridge.

"What's going on here?" he asks.

"Sir," Kensington starts. "These are the strange signals from ship 3. We are releasing one of our translation programs on it: we think they might form a pattern."

"You mean someone is sending us a codified message with light flashes?"

Kensington nods. "We still don't know what the exact message is that is being sent. We only discovered the pattern in the flashes moments ago. But we have good faith that..."

"NO! It can't be!" Horrified, someone jumps up from his chair at Communications. Marcks heads swiftly for the man. *I have a bad feeling about this!* The oh so familiar phrase haunts his mind.

"What?!?" Someone at Sensors now notices something else as well. "Sir, we've got weapon's fire on the Index... in the hangar!"

Surprised, many turn around. Marcks is now walking slowly, but still going for Communications. "What is that?" he asks when seeing the message at the screen. Then, his eyes go wide in disbelief when he reads the contents of the message.

<Cyborgs have captured ship 3. Communication offline. Bridge under attack of cyborgs. Group of cyborgs headed for Index. Send help! We cannot hold out any longer!>

The mainframe looks around. The hangar has been taken, and the people present have been sedated and put together. Quickly and clearly, the mainframe gives the orders. Firstly, the main power supply has to be disabled, after which the bridge has to be taken. To capture the rest of the crew, the climate control could be used to sedate them. Deaths are regrettable, but allowed.

The mainframe carrier hacks a data terminal and sets up a connection. With it the schematic blueprints are retrieved, and how the cyborgs can get to the bridge in the fastest and safest way possible.

The requested information is found and the carrier retracts the modified arm out of the terminal. The female voice sounds cold in the silent hangar.

"Forward."

The doors of the bridge have been barricaded, but it looks pretty shoddy at best. The cyborgs were often a lot better suited to every situation than one would expect at first glance. Undoubtedly, they

would breach through this with ridiculous ease.

So in short, the people on the bridge are already defeated.

The younger people sit together, some nervous, others beaten. Kensington has managed to dig up a rifle from somewhere and is holding guard with an angry face. Iain frantically tries to get a message across to his mother, but the line is dead.

Marcks is seated in his command chair. Beaten or calm, he does not really know. It seems like he is about to find out what had happened to Ezri. *Would it hurt?*

Almost everyone is startled when they hear the first noises from the cyborgs. Some cry out in fear, others involuntary cower. Kensington has a muscle twitching in his face and is blinking nervously with his eyes. Even Marcks is startled, more by the breach of the silence than by the oncoming cyborgs.

There are some clashes with the door, but drilling noises can be heard. "Damn... Those guys are tapping into the system and bypassing the locking mechanism." A technician apparently cannot seem to keep his mouth shut.

The doors open softly.

Kensington fires his rifle. The shot of the rifle reverberates through the bridge. He reloads, but is being fired upon, this time with sedation darts. Surprised he sags to his knees, then to the floor. Others, having jumped up in consternation, also fall, hit as well. Others stay, apathetic, were they are. Marcks remains seated with his back to the doors and looks through the window at the stars. A tear forms at the thought that the Earth will probably never again be seen consciously by him, nor the rest of the starry sky.

The silence after the fight is perpetrated with fear. The ones still consciously experiencing events, but too paralyzed of fear to move, are seeing everything the cyborgs are doing. The sedated bodies are pulled to the sides, and the cyborgs continue hacking into the fleet's network.

Marcks wants to rise, but is pushed back into his chair by a cyborg with an unfathomable face.

"Stay where you are," a female voice sounds, with the cybernetic adaptations giving the voice an electronic ring. "You will probably appreciate that more than lying unconscious in a corner." Finally, the mainframe enters.

Marcks turns around his chair. Slowly, and disbelieving. *Is that the voice of...Could it be...?* He thinks. Slowly, the mainframe walks into his vision. What he sees is something he can barely believe. His blood seems to freeze and he has no idea whether his heart is still beating. It is a struggle to even breathe.

"What's the matter?" it sounds. "Aren't you happy to see me again?" From the door opening a completely transformed Ezri is looking at him.

Marcks takes a look at the cyborg standing in the door opening. Ezri has undergone enough changes to see her no longer completely as his daughter. Marcks finds it difficult to accept. It is clearly his daughter Ezri, and yet it is not. He shakes his head, as though to calm his confusing thoughts.

The sight she is offering: half human, half machine. Bundles of wires, small hoses, the eye prosthesis, her right arm being replaced by... something. Her chest is half covered by computer like components, but remains uncovered for the rest. Marcks almost suspects them to have done that on purpose. Even her legs have been partially adapted, allowing her to carry the extra weight.

She heads towards him. "Yes, it is me." She stops in front of his chair and gives him a thin, a bit sad smile. "Well, more or less..."

Marcks is unable to speak.

She reads the incomprehension from the confusion in his eyes. "What I mean is that I still possess my own identity, at least for a large part." For a moment she looks away, with a vague look of sadness. "The advantage of carrying the mainframe in your body is that your original identity is not severely suppressed." She starts to walk around his chair now. "You are, after all, the leader of a group. It allows for some... privileges." She stops again in front of him and bends forward towards him. "Poor daddy. You probably won't understand a thing I'm telling you."

"What are you talking about?" Marcks is glad to have finally something to focus at, gathering his

thoughts. "That mainframe contains all the instructions you have to execute, and as such determines your actions. It's controlling you!"

"Ah, but that is true." A sinister expression appears on her face. "But the mainframe does not contain *all* the instructions. It does not contain the blinking of eyes, neither does it contain my breathing. Everything that I can do myself is because of the mainframe not thinking it requires instruction."

"Then why are you doing this?" Marcks exclaims confused.

"Listen, daddy," she tells him patronizingly. "There is an important detail: *I* am the mainframe, and the mainframe is me."

"I don't need that kind of paradoxes!" Marcks is getting angry. *She is dodging the question!* With a shock he realizes this is something of the real Ezri. Computers have no cause to beat about the bush!

"I can see something starts to dawn. The mainframe is bound to the person that carries it, so what's against merging that person with that very same mainframe? It's all more efficient than suppressing each individual will." She says, as though it is perfectly normal to do so.

"What have they done to you?!?" Marcks asks. Tormented and yet relieved. Finally he is able to ask the question that has bothered him all that time.

"Ah," she starts. "It was the most peculiar experience you could ever imagine. Some experienced it as torture; I thought this was even worse than dying. But then, when you become adopted by the swarm network, you don't really notice it anymore." She looks at him askance. "All those hoses and external additions are difficult to get used to at first. But the longer you're busy performing your duties, the less you start to notice them. It makes me more efficient." It seems as though she shrugs. "Did you know that I now only have to think my orders and they are executed? And that I, thanks to my arm," she raises her right arm, which is extended with a cylindrical device replacing her hand. "Can set up a connection with a data terminal in 0.2723 seconds, go through the entire load of blueprints of this fleet in 10.4980 seconds and I still manage to control the rest of my network?"

Marcks would swear he sees a triumphant look on Ezri's face.

"But that would be the standard package, so to speak. The mainframe, ah, now that is something different." She walks away from him. "As soon as all the information contained within my head about the fleet had been processed by the central core program, it decided to set up a second mainframe. I was the best choice available, with the fleet director being my father and with my special training I had the most readily available knowledge and thorough qualities to be able to improvise. And thanks to the mainframe, I can draw on all the knowledge every individual unit possesses." She walks back to him and turns triumphantly around, showing herself. "I am all those cyborgs, and they are each me!" She calms down and continues businesslike again.

"Of course, I stay within the parameters of my program. I was handed the command of a group that was being brought aboard and here I am, on the bridge."

"Don't you miss your old life?" Marcks looks somewhat strained, once he realises that it is not really what he means. "I miss my daughter."

She walks over to a terminal and uses her right arm to log onto the computer. "The old Ezri was weak, and did not possess all the things I do now. Don't be worried," She says as she sees the sad face of Marcks. "I am still here. Not the same, but improved. Just like you will be, Dad. No, don't say anything. I will personally look after it. I draw from many surgical capabilities and have the right medical tools at hands." She smiles weakly, looking at her modified arm. "Literally."

Marcks feels how he is grabbed by another cyborg. Beads of sweat cover his forehead. She notices her father's fear. "I will sedate you if you want me to." She says. "We are not barbarians... not anymore." She is reminded of her own 'admission'. "We have evolved. A new species, the next step in the evolution of mankind." She pauses for a moment. "And you, too, will become part of it and learn to recognize its value."

Days have passed. The bridge has changed. A more efficient arrangement, improved terminals, faster access and better overview. Cyborgs are running the workstations optimally. The mainframe is now situated in the former study of the fleet director, a personal workstation from where she

coordinates the actions of all the cyborgs in her network. Ezri smiles in her mind. She no longer has a physical mouth to smile with. She is now one with the ship, anchored into the fleet and cyborg network like a computer processor on a motherboard. Few corporal features are left of her to show. She is now the pivot of the fleet.

Not all humans have been assigned or processed yet. But her father, her personal adjunct, is doing his work excellent ever since he has been accepted into the network. He knows his people.

Now more than ever.

Somewhere, in a corner of the communications terminal, a light is flashing.

Incoming transmission:

*Earth to expedition, Earth to expedition. Cyborgs on Earth exterminated by use of Electromagnetic Pulse application. We repeat, humanity has won! We have prevailed through the use of Electromagnetic Pulse. It literally fries their circuits!*

*Earth authorities sends word that you are welcome back on Earth, if you are to receive this message. There will be an elaborate procedure to find stowaway cyborgs among you. Expect an EMPulse.*

*Furthermore, data has been found in the central core of the cyborgs about possible infiltration of the fleet. If so, all contact will be terminated and we will be forced to destroy the fleet.*

*Your memory will most certainly be honored.*

*Earth*

Ezri has processed the message in 0.114 seconds and transmits her thoughts to every member of her network. *We are the last one of our kind. I am the only remaining mainframe; the Mainframe on Earth has been eradicated.* It takes a moment for her to sink in, despite her programming. She is indeed the last one of her kind.

The programming kicks in and she continues businesslike. *There is a welcoming party on Earth. Return is not an option. Decision?*

Jake's thoughts answer her call. *That new planet is still out there. External back-ups of space charts and vital information and research on EMP should be sufficient.*

*Shut down all links to Earth, they might send computer viruses to disrupt the fleet network.* Sound the thoughts of former communications officers.

Within a few seconds the last link with Earth has been shut down or erased. After minutes her entire system has been put away into a backup. She decides to reset the entire network, just to be sure.

The reset breaks all the emotional blockades, when the programmatic inhibitions fall away for a moment.

What everyone experiences, varies from melancholy to terror. Ezri cries out in her soul, when she realizes she has lost her humanity. Communications officers are surprised and impressed by the complexity of the network. Parents now know their children better than ever, but can find no use for this newfound knowledge. And Jake Marcks experiences one last, soothing look at the stars.

But above all, there is the understanding of bitter irony:

What once had been the salvation of humanity, of them, has now become the last straw of the cybernetic creatures they have become.