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THE SPEED OF
CLOUDS

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Ladies and Gentlemen, Humanoids, Cyborgs and Androids, Reptilians, Gonfarrians, other respected members of the known Universe, and any otherwise embodied Dear Readers:

I'm happy to announce this, Issue Nine of "Voice of the Cyborg"! We got a little behind schedule, but you know how it is with getting a zine printed, stapled, stuffed and mailed. Maybe some future zine will be able to whoosh through the ether to your email inboxes! Think about it: we've got just a few months to go till the year 2000 kicks in. Some people are spreading doom about the Y2K bug, saying we're heading for massive computer crashes when the digital calendars click over at midnight this coming New Year's Eve. I choose to be optimistic. The way I see it, the future is getting closer, ready or not!

Back to our new issue, let me welcome a new writer to our pages, Tad Fishkin. Tad's story involves some kind of showdown between the Santak and the Mesh—two of SkyLog's more fascinating alien species. He's done his homework, so let's give a high five for this brand-new contributor to the Voice. Even though his story doesn't include our beloved Roi, IMHO the best cyborg of the 23rd century. But I promise this look at the Mesh, who are all cyborgs, of course, will be illuminating. Roi isn't the only one we can learn from—we're open to all corners of the SkyLog universe! Send us your androids, your romance bots, your battle-weary Meshers yearning to be free!

We've also got a new installment of Angie Madden's Roi—Dr. Braxton romance, set in the alternate timeline where Roi is secretly still able to feel emotions. Whoa, is it getting hot in here? I call timeout to cool down.

Lastly, where are all you contributors? Seriously—this issue's coming out a bit thinner than the last one. We've got to keep going, now more than ever, since the Disastrous Cancellation Event that cut down *SkyLog: Century 23* in its prime. It's up to us to imagine what happens next, and even what might have happened, like Angie's doing in her new story. Plus, "Voice of the Cyborg" should be a place where we can throw around the big questions that attracted us in the first place, before we got hung up on attractive cyborgs and other non-conventional creatures. Are you all too busy consoling yourselves with old SkyLog episodes in syndication? We've seen a couple of zines biting the dust in the last year or so. If things don't pick up here, I may have to inflict some longer editorials on you.

Don't forget, I'm accepting submissions by email now—except for artwork of course. Till I get a better modem, just snail-mail that to me.

One more note: This publication is no longer associated in any way with the Cyborg Appreciation Society. The Society will conduct their fannish business separately, and I am publishing and editing "Voice of the Cyborg" myself. So I expect an appropriate increase in respect around here.

Reporting some anomalous signals from the outer shell—radiation barriers may be affected . . .

"WHAT IS IT, MA?" I hit save and close but don't turn around. I know she's standing in the door of my room.

"I've been calling you for the last five minutes."

"Don't exaggerate."

"I called a couple times, you didn't answer." She picks her way around the bed. "Don't you want to eat before your meeting?"

She leans over my shoulder and squints at the screen, as if narrowing her eyes could force it to make more sense. How could such a little woman have given birth to me? Her head barely clears the monitor. Even with me in the wheelchair, Janine's face isn't

that much higher than mine. If I could stand up next to her, I'd be way taller, I think. It's been a while.

"I'm not going to the meeting."

She turns to me. "Honey, you look so nice! What did you do to your hair?" Did she even hear me? I want to bat her hand off my head. Why did I get dressed up anyway? Regulation Transortium Fleet officer's uniform. I guess it's my way of saying I'm still the Commander here, even if Sheryl's in charge of the club.

"I told you I'm not going, Ma."

"But—it's Thursday, right? You always go to your meeting the first Thursday of the month."

I turn the chair so I can see her straight on. Other than the alarm on her face, she's looking kind of perky, with a flowery blouse over her turquoise leggings.

"What are *you* all dressed up for?"

She looks down at her outfit. "Your father is coming over later. He's gonna help me bring some boxes down to the basement." Message received, Captain.

"I'll be in here. You and Irv can have your fun, or whatever. You won't even know I'm home."

"Do you want him to do anything for you while he's here? Move those boxes?"

"Negative." She means the boxes of old issues of "Voice of the Cyborg" stacked next to the desk. But I like having them right there in case I get a request for a back copy. I glance around the room, at my bookshelf, overflowing with my prized sci-fi book collection, including the SkyLog novelizations from the first TV series. The *SkyLog II* poster right over my bed, since it features the *Century 23* cast's introduction to the big screen. My collection of autographed headshots of SL stars from both series, which I got personally at various Cons over the last ten years. I can tell you which of them were nice, who was cruising on autopilot, and who were high or beery while signing their photos. Okay, my desk is a bit overcrowded, but that's "Voice of the Cyborg" HQ.

"Mindy, honey—you haven't missed a meeting in, what—a couple of years! Except when you were in the hospital that last

time . . .” That was for the kidney infection. No big deal, in the scheme of things.

“I’m not going, okay?” I turn back to the monitor.

“What happened? Did something happen?”

“I told you already! I’m not the Commander anymore,” I say, trying to keep my voice level. “Sheryl’s in charge tonight, and I don’t want to spoil her party.”

“But you’re friends! Aren’t you friends with Sheryl?”

“No, we are not friends.” I mean that to sound frosty and cyborgish, but it barely comes out at all. Before, I would have said all the members of the CAS were my friends. Obviously Sheryl wasn’t, I see that now. What kind of friend goes around behind your back, contacting everybody, campaigning to throw you out of office?

“But your meetings are—so much fun for you!” By which she means, they’re the high point of my social life and her last hope for me to meet some nice boy, even though the club is over ninety percent female.

“I’ll still be doing the magazine.”

“Right, you said.” Janine takes this in. “Then you can have supper with us—I’m making ravioli.”

“I’m not hungry. And don’t ask me again, I really don’t want to eat anything.”

She looks at me with her raised eyebrow thing. I know she wants to touch my cheek, but she’s holding back.

“I’ll bring you something later,” she says. “And you’ll come out and say hi to your father.”

“Whatever.” Lots of static. Signal’s breaking down, we can’t hold the com feed much longer.

The door shuts. I turn back to the screen, and start up the artificial-life program that Zuzana gave me, watching it as it generates growth patterns by itself. From just a few little random lines, pinwheel shapes start spiraling out. And the colors keep changing, on some hidden algorithm: now they’re pink going to red at the tips. You never know how they’ll end up. I’ve been thinking of asking Zu if she could make it work as a screensaver—but I’d probably go right back to my old, classic advancing-stars

screensaver anyway. I always do. Zuzana's still my friend, I think. She emailed me a few times after the meeting, but I couldn't figure out what to say to her, too embarrassed over the whole thing. Remembering, I squeeze my eyes shut, and the forms curlicue along on the inside of my eyelids, glowing a sick yellow-green.

I wheel over and shut the bedroom door. Before I can turn around, I'm caught by the reflection in the mirror on the back of the door. It's somebody I don't know. That SkyLog uniform is stretching in all the wrong places like some cheap Halloween costume—the top over the big boobs and middle, the pants stretching too tight over those thighs. The face, weary and off-kilter. Is this what happens when my rank is taken away—I crumple down into my chair like some crucial part of my skeleton was removed? Or did I look like this before and didn't notice, only seeing the Fleet officer in the mirror? I feel old. Next birthday I'll be twenty-four, which rounds up to twenty-five. Then it's just a step till thirty. Nerdy girl in a wheelchair, living with Mom. Without the CAS, what have I got? The zine, I remind myself and that person grimacing back at me, for the hundredth time since the last meeting. My fanzine. The place where SkyLoggers can let loose and bravely imagine things that are about more than how we look.

Stupid fucking mirror. I jab the light switch off. That's better, cloaked in half-darkness, the curtains drawn. But now I'm back in the meeting, caught again in that horrible moment—the fluorescent lights buzzing in the silence as I look around the table in the library's conference room, at the raised hands among the eight members who showed up, except for Zu, voting Sheryl in as our new Commander. Sheryl avoiding my eyes as she declares herself the winner. It happened so fast. First she introduced the new by-laws, new because we never had any before, and written by her. Right after that, she called for a vote. And then she just kept talking in her droning-on monotone, moving past the vote like it was no big deal, right into something about planning for the next Con. I sat there, my skin turning cold. Couldn't say anything, like my voice was stuck in my throat, making it hard to breathe. Me, with the zingers always ready, couldn't say a thing.

I started the CAS, for fuck's sake—it never occurred to me to step down after a while. And Sheryl, mousy little Sheryl, who joined just last year, who said she left the Synergy because it was so disorganized. Not that we were super-organized, but we're smaller than the Synergy. She showed up for the meetings every month, and was always so helpful in her ultra-quiet way. I figured she was a fellow Roi lover, even though she didn't say much when we talked about his important episodes, things like that—but she did jump in to talk about planning for the next Con, membership dues, or to point out when we wandered off the agenda. She volunteered to do the minutes—nobody wants to do the minutes. Then she offered to clean up the various lists: the Voice subscriber list, the membership list, and to send out subscription and dues reminders. That's when I should have started worrying. With the membership records, she went around to everyone behind my back, setting the whole thing up. Up till the last meeting, the worst thing that had happened this year was *SkyLog: C23* getting canceled. Which was upsetting enough, even if the constant rumors about that meant it was no surprise.

In the near dark, the blue hush of the monitor calls me back. The growth program kept going without me, the pinwheels now paisley-shaped blotches bumping against each other. The screensaver will come on soon. There it is: the white pinpricks of stars moving toward me from the blackness of space, unending waves of them.

THE DOOR OF my cabin pings. I know who it is.

Enter, I say.

The door slides away as he walks in, then shuts behind him. Roi.

He stands there in the doorway, with his grave expression and putty-gray skin. His Wuvian antenna buds exposed on his hairless skull.

Come and sit, I say. He walks over, not too slow or too fast, no wasted movement. I know he unnerves many of the ship's crew. It's not only how he looks and moves but what he represents. For me, though, instead of being disturbed, I'm fascinated by how he

sits on the uneasy boundary between humanoid and artificial life-form. An Enmeshed humanoid—the only one ever to escape the Mesh alive.

I put my hand on his, feeling his hardened, leathery skin.

I'm happy to see you again, I tell him.

He looks at me, says nothing. I tell myself again that the emotional responses he was born with have been crushed, twisted beyond recognition by his Enmeshment. He can't respond freely to anything. Can't prefer anything, or make any choice between options that are presented to him. Even after all this time on the ship, he needs to be told what to do.

To fill the silence, I talk. I tell him about the mission I just returned from, to the Ixaran moon colony. The sting of failure, the shame of being kicked off Ixara 3, victim of my apparent inability to read the intentions of the colony representatives. Dr. Braxton says it's good to talk about my feelings with Roi. She thinks that hearing humanoid emotions described in real time as they're experienced will help to rehabilitate his own damaged functioning. Watching his face, I don't know. I only know he's listening.

I stop talking, and look around the cabin. Stark and cool, with only one decorative touch—the branching figurine on the table, its tips lazily shifting colors. There's the never-ending hum of the ship, reminding me that I'm a tiny unit in a much larger mission. But even here, with Roi beside me, the pain of my recent mission failure wells up. Sighing, I signal the lights to lower. Nothing will happen unless I demand it.

I feel sad, I say. I need you to comfort me. He knows what this means. I lie back on the couch and pull him to me. He circles me with his arms, strokes my hair. We kiss. I want him to want this too, but he can't want anything, not after what he's been through. I pull off his tunic and trace the raised line that runs up and down his arms on both sides. I know it continues down to his feet, the same line that meets at the top of his bare head. It's the most visible reminder that he's a creature both of pumping blood and coursing electricity. We start to move together. It's a relief to both of us not to have the burden of talking anymore. I wait for the zing of electricity, the charge that escapes from him, a sign of his

rising excitement. It's a charge that can stun or even kill someone at full force. We move faster. There it is. The buzz, frightening and exciting both at once, a taste of his own hybrid being moving through me.