

Prologue

Later, when asked to describe the sound his head made when the towering cyborg punched him in it, the shock trooper would say, “Pang!”

Whether this was the actual noise he heard or not is hard to say as, from that moment on, “Pang!” was the only sound he was physically capable of making.

He’d been wearing his regulation armor, of course, but it had been quite a big cyborg with quite a hard punch, and the trooper’s bright red protective helmet had, if anything, only served to provide an easier and more obvious target.

Similarly, his suit of bio-armor had done little to cushion the multiple blows when he’d gone crashing through a wall, flown several dozen feet across a city street, then smashed into a MagLev truck that was stopped at a distant set of traffic lights.

To add insult to injury, when he’d bounced off and face-planted onto the ground, he’d landed on his own shock-rod, electrocuting himself to the point of incontinence.

Back in the bar where it had all started, the cyborg made a miniscule adjustment to the dial that was fixed to the center of his chest and muttered something uncomplimentary below his breath. That done, he downed half a bottle of something green and frothy, then tossed a ten-credit tip to the toad-like barman who had immersed himself so fully in polishing a glass that he’d deliberately failed to notice any of the drama that had just unfolded.

“Much obliged,” the cyborg grunted, his metal bottom jaw *whirring* faintly as he spoke. “Sorry about the damage.”

“Damage? What damage?” squirmed the barman, really playing up his willful ignorance. He cast his eyes across the near-empty bar, not lingering for a moment on the man-shaped hole in one wall. “I don’t see any damage!”

“Uh, sure. OK,” said the cyborg.

Somewhere in the distance, a siren wailed.

“Is there a back door to this place?” the cyborg demanded, his face contorting in anger.

The barman looked suddenly terrified. His bulging eyes darted left, right, up, down, like he might find the answer to the question lurking there somewhere.

“Um... Um...”

It was his building. His bar. He should know if there was a back door, and yet terror had turned his brain into a gelatinous putty-like substance, and he couldn’t recall. Hell, he wasn’t even convinced he could accurately identify a door if he saw one right at that moment.

“Don’t matter. I’ll make one,” said the cyborg, side-stepping away from the bar counter until he had a clear run at a wall.

Lowering his head, he charged, his metal bulk driving another hole, much bigger than the one on the wall opposite, through the brickwork.

The barman stood in silence for a moment as plaster dust swirled around him. Then, when he was sure the cyborg had gone, he cleared his throat, shouted, “And don’t come back!” then ducked behind the counter and curled himself into a ball.

There was, as it turned out, a back door. It was made of some sort of metal alloy, presumably designed to stop intruders jimmying it open. The cyborg raced toward it, tore it from its hinges with one sudden jerk, then retreated as a hail of blaster fire hammered against it from out on the street.

“Shizz!” the cyborg hissed, holding the door before him like a shield until, eventually, the gunfire subsided.

“You are surrounded by Zertex forces,” barked an amplified voice. “By order of President Sinclair, you will come quietly.”

There was a pause, then:

“You hearing me in there, robot?”

The cyborg’s mouth twisted into a grimace. He tightened his grip on the door, crushing an imprint of his hand into the metal.

“I ain’t a fonking robot!” he barked, barging through the partially destroyed doorway and turning it into a fully destroyed one.

The door *whummed* as he tossed it toward the assembled Zertex shock troopers. Their energy shields were raised to deflect any return blaster fire, but were not designed to deflect the several hundred pound rectangle of metal alloy that came slicing through the air in their general direction.

The door passed easily through the shielding, much to the dismay of those gathered on the other side. Depending on their individual placements within the group when the door struck, they either fell over, fired wildly into the air with their weapons, or—in the case of the little orange-skinned guy who’d found himself at the very front—were instantly decapitated.

Seizing the opportunity caused by the ensuing chaos, the cyborg turned and launched into a lumbering run. The sidewalks in this city were a complex system of fast-moving conveyor belts, designed to ferry pedestrians around the place. When it came to making a speedy getaway, that came in handy.

What was less useful was that he’d elected to run the wrong way against the oncoming walkway, and his clumsy gait meant he was at best jogging on the spot, and at worst jogging backward so slowly it was virtually impossible to tell.

Neither one was ideal, he thought, and he had just turned to run in the opposite direction when something not unlike a nuclear warhead detonated against his chest, and reams of error messages filled his field of vision.

The last thing the cyborg saw as he toppled backward onto the walkway was a blue-skinned man in an officer's uniform marching toward him, speaking into a comm-device on his wrist.

"One down. Two to go," the officer said, and then the world became a series of bright green ones and zeroes, and the cyborg *whirred* down into inky black darkness.