

Tropical

FUTURETOPIA



D.S. NEWMAN



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"Now arriving on Isla Futura." Said the captain of the hover ferry that brought us from the mainland to this tropical, technocratic paradise. "Watch your step as you disembark and enjoy your time on the island."

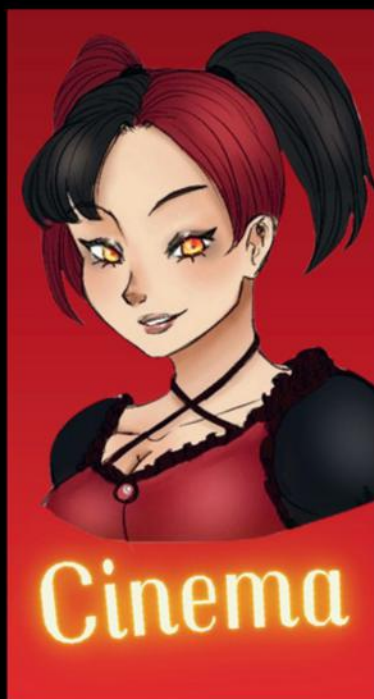
The year was 2229. For the first time in what seemed like forever, I was actually ready to relax. That's normally not my style, being the thrill seeker that I am. Anyone familiar with my antics would agree. But I'm presuming a lot. Allow me to bring you up to speed while we head down the glass corridor to the reception vestibule. The ocean looks nice today. Too bad you can't smell it in here. And what the hell kind of ferry doesn't let you walk out on deck. But I digress...

My name is Guy. Or at least that's what I go by these days. After I faked my own death and created a whole new persona, people naturally began to refer to me as, "some guy." You can read all about it in my biography, *Just Some Guy*. Otherwise, I can't say much about my life before my adventure began. Sorry.

Oh and the hot little cyber goth chick walking next to me is my girlfriend, Cinema. But don't be fooled by her thick, Appalachian accent. She's no slack-jawed yokel. In fact, she's one of the smartest people alive today and was the youngest professor in history at her university. Being with her makes me a bit of a cradle robber, seeing as how I was born more than 250 years before her. Relax! I forgot to mention that I time traveled from the early 1990s. Still, she was only 15 when we met...but I took care of it, so you pearl clutchers' needn't worry about ethics. I closed the gap on our biological age by jumping forward a few years. It was a whole thing. Again, you can read about it in my book.



Anyway, what are we doing here on this tropical island paradise, you may be asking. First of all, I'm not so sure I'd call it a paradise. So far, it seems a little sterile. Cinema was the one who wanted to come here. She said she needed to fully decompress after the last fiasco we dealt with and I don't blame her. She'd heard about this place opening up for some time. It's supposed to be an adult theme park, but it just looks like a city on an island in the brochures. People in this time period have a funny way of approaching things.



Cinema, for example...those eyes aren't contacts. Her parents had them genetically altered at birth for cosmetic reasons. If you ask me, that's pretty intrusive. Also, they named her Cinema because it's trendy to name kids after things that don't exist anymore. I've even heard of a guy named Dubstep. What the fuck is a dubstep anyway?

Whatever...my point is that people get a kick out of things that my 20th century brain can't wrap itself around. This island...this...facility...is supposed to be one big emulation of how the world was a hundred years ago. Circa 2100. And I'm not talking technologically...like a renaissance fair or a wild west theme park.

I mean *lifestyle*. People pay to come here and live in an apartment, go to the grocery store, ride the train to work and do menial jobs at an office that have been eliminated by this period of time. Sounds like fun, don't it?

Not!

Oh and while you're here, you get a daily allowance of credits that you can spend however you like. Everyone gets paid the same for their monotony. Commie shit! Ugh! But she wanted to come here. So I came along.

"Guy, pull your hood down," she said as we approached a scanner you walked through. It wasn't just to check for weapons. It was to bio scan you so you could be tracked.

"You know I don't like my face being exposed like this in broad daylight."

"No one's gonna recognize you. It's been almost 200 years since anyone from the tournament last saw you. I'm pretty sure they're long gone by now."

"Still...just call it a habit of comfort." I lowered my hood and went through the scanner. The people ahead of us were instructed to wait by the staff and we were asked the same until the rest of the passengers got through.

A large monitor with an older guy appeared on screen. He had white hair and a matching goatee. "Welcome, friends. To Isla Futura and Futura City. I'm your humble host, Portwine Corinthian. Here, you will experience the future your great grandparents were promised but never got to see. It's been my vision to make it a reality and you have the privilege of being among the first to experience it in 3D. One day, I hope to bring the ecstasy of this community to the whole world."

The whole thing was put together by this guy. Some technocratic venture capitalist. A Richard Branson type. You see, over the last two centuries, there was a series of cataclysmic events that caused huge shifts in sea levels. The mountain where Cinema grew up was a lot closer to the coast than it used to be. And I'm told that this island used to be part of Costa Rica. Now it's just an island in the Caribbean Ocean, Atlantic side.

The head honcho kept yapping. "I am proud to say that the entire city...no, the entire island, is staffed by only 32 employees, including myself and the two greeters standing before you."

I leaned over to Cinema. "Do they take shifts suckin' him off?"

"Ssh!" She chastised.

"Not only are the crucial mechanisms that keep the park functioning run by humanoid robotics. Security is also maintained by robots who adhere to the park's central computer. I'd like to introduce you to her myself...J.U.S.T.I.C.E, say, hello."

A projected image of a beautiful woman with platinum colored hair appeared in front of us. "Hello and welcome. I want you all to know that as a state of the art superintelligence, I am able to keep the park safe and in many cases, able to prevent crimes before they happen."

"Whoa! This really is high tech. I thought the virtual chick in my hotel shower when I first came to this time was advanced."

"Ssh!!!" Cinema hushed me again. But I really was impressed. This wasn't just some Commodore 64 sorcery. You could feel emotion from the vibrato in her voice and could even see it in her eyes. This thing felt alive!

"Ladies and Gentleman, J.U.S.T.I.C.E. stands for Judiciary Utilitarian Supreme Tactical Intelligence Computational Enforcement. Not only is she directly connected to the eyes, ears and mouth of the park's security system. She's also the Judge, Jury and Enforcer of the law here on Isla Futura. If someone does something they're not supposed to...she'll know. So I'd suggest not acting out of line."

"Well that's ominous and feels mildly threatening." Truthfully, the scariest thing to me wasn't what this thing was capable of. I expected as much. It was the expression that her hologram gave as Corinthian explained what she could do...it was almost like...she wished she couldn't.

The briefing wrapped up and we were allowed to continue on into the city. Cinema said that we didn't have to start our jobs until the day after tomorrow. Great. We were here for two weeks and I was already starting to relate life here to my old one I torched. But whatever. To be honest, I was just ready to get settled into our room and get some pussy.

Out on the street, we watched as automated cars drove by with people in them. There were maybe a dozen on the sidewalk within view and you could see police and maintenance robots doing their thing. It was oddly underpopulated here. I suppose there had to be some way to regulate the already strained resources of this region.

It was cool out, despite the sun. So I asked if she didn't mind us walking downtown to our building. She didn't mind, so I pulled my hood up a bit tighter and put my hands into my pockets as we headed that way.

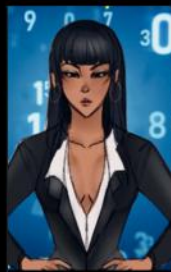
"Why are you so on edge?"

"I just...feel like we might be taking an unnecessary risk by coming here."

"How so?"

"Well, obviously we couldn't bring the magic carpet here and the bracers wouldn't have made it through the security check points." I was referring to the devices we used to time travel. They were arm bands that could be programmed to find dark spaces that opened up temporal pathways to travel through. Going in alone and without some sort of navigation was suicide. But these devices also allowed for plotting courses through the various timelines. I'd had to leave mine at secure locations and go without it before, but I felt particularly vulnerable in a place like this, where we could easily get confined. It would be one thing if it were just me. I could fight... ...ooohh, boy, I could fight. But I'd have to protect Cinema too. She could pull a trigger and hit a target well enough. But obviously guns weren't making it in here either.

"Hmm...I think leaving them behind should help you relax. Not cause stress. Don't get me wrong, I think they're wonderful. I invented them after all. But sometimes you've just got to tear away and unplug." It's true. She did invent them. Kinda...her theories led to their development and later on she reverse engineered one to technically build the first one. But it was her former student, John Tet, who used it first. Of course that led to the calamity of us battling a family of time traveling pharaohs. But that's a story for another time. Buy my book.



I let out a sigh. "You're right. I'd just feel better with them in case we needed to make a quick getaway. What if there was a tsunami while we're out here? "

"Well, the brochure said that J.U.S.T.I.C.E. had the most advanced early warning detection software available. I guess we just trust that she'll keep us safe."

"Pssh. You know there are only five people I truly trust, and an Artificial Intelligence ain't one of them."



Cinema, Li, Slim Jim, Grady and Stargazer. That was it! Well, Robbie, Jess and the guys in the band were alright too. But only about as far as you could throw em'.

"Still. Can you at least try to relax a bit? Here's our building."

"I'll try..." The two of us went up. It was more like a luxury hotel than an apartment building. Only a few people are in the lobby. The desk staff and bellhops were all droids.

"Welcome," the Concierge Bot said. "May I please have your name so that I can direct you to your room."

"Cinema Zang. And my boyfriend, Guy."

"Ah, yes. Miss Zang. You're staying on the 12th floor., room 1233. Do you need any help with your luggage?"

"No thanks, just the one bag between us."

"Hey, uhh, C-3PO...I have a question. If everything we do here is monitored and you're plugged into the system, how come you asked for her name and didn't recognize her when we walked in? Shouldn't you have already known our room number?"

"A reasonable question, well within my parameters to explain. I did in fact know that she was Miss Cinema Zang and that you were her companion, Mister Guy Question Mark Question Mark Question Mark. And that you were staying on the 12th floor, room 1233. But we are programmed to give as much of a social experience as possible. Part of the city's charm is its ability to capture a moment in time where humanity was more interactive with one another."

"Gotcha. Alright. Well, let's get up to our room so we can get more interactive with one another without a robot involved." Cinema cracked up and slapped my chest with the back of her hand before turning towards the elevator. Once we got into the room, I immediately crashed onto the chaise lounge.

"Give me a minute to unpack and check everything out...Hey! This place is nice!" Cinema noted.

True. It wasn't bad. But honestly it was no different than any normal four star hotel in Orlando back in the 90s. I suppose since we couldn't go to Disney World, seeing as how it was under water, this was the next best thing. I grabbed the remote and turned on the TV. "Do you think maybe we could go take a vacation in my time sometime?"

"In the nineteen hundred and nineties? Sure?! You know how fond I am of that period."

"Of course. It just sucks that you only really get to go when we've got some bullshit we're dealing with. The time continuum and all that crap. Hey, what's with this TV anyway?"

She continued to shout to me from the bedroom. "What's wrong with it?"

"It says. Nostalgia-Box and it's got a little wheel on the remote for your thumb."

"Oh, that old thing. You know we've got better at my place. But those are specifically made to emulate TV programming as far back as the late nineteen hundred and sixties."

I saw what she meant. The menu had a scrolling date that moved with the wheel. Whenever you stopped somewhere it would show an analog carousel of all the channels from that time.

"Okay. Let's see...we'll try 1995...MTV....Headbanger's Ball." When it landed on my chosen selection, the sound of sweet, sweet Groove Metal came through the speakers. It was my band on screen! "Hey! Whaddaya know? A live video of Modicum's on." It was a smokey, dim lit stage at a club we'd played at with probably around a thousand people in attendance. On the left hand side of the stage, you could see me there playing bass, hood up and glasses on as usual.

"How about a live performance for me?" Cinema said in a sultry voice. I looked over to see her standing in the doorway wearing a black and red negligee. It was just like her to do something like this. I'll get back to the story once we're finished. For now, just fade to black...



So that afternoon, we figured we'd christened the room well enough and decided to go out. Cinema wanted to go to the beach. I grumbled, "Alright...but the hood stays up. You know I don't like going to highly populated areas during the day where I stand out if I don't show my face."

"Ugh! Guy...it's okay. I'm pretty sure the Mafia, or the CIA, or Yakuza...whoever, isn't still looking for you after two centuries."

"Don't be so sure. There's no telling where some of the earlier models of the bracers ended up before I first used mine. For all we know, there are Beta lines of Agent Brittany and Ken or any other agent, still out there trying to figure out what the hell happened after what we pulled."

"Err...you said you were going to try and relax."

I threw my hands up. "I'm relaxin', I'm relaxin'."

Relax

The lights suddenly flickered. We stood in place until it stopped. It only lasted a few seconds. "Brown out, maybe? Tropical storm?" Cinema suggested.

I looked out the window. Still a beautiful, sunny day. "I don't think so. Hopefully that was just a fluke."

"I'm sure it's fine. Now can we please go to the beach?" She'd been waiting so patiently in her black, halter top and beach skirt. She had a red bikini set on underneath so she'd be ready to hit the water as soon as we got there.

"Of course. How could I deprive such a cutie of her time in the sun?" I pinched her cheek.

"Bleh...stop it. You can just stay here if you're gonna be all like that out in public."

"Alright, alright. Let's go."

So we made our way out into the hall and towards the elevator. Still not much activity. I'd thought by noon there would be more check-ins. Maybe more people were just out and about in the city. We got into the elevator and made our descent down.

"You know, if you don't really wanna do the work thing, I don't mind if you stay back in the room the whole time. I understand that this isn't something we share a value on."

I smirked at her. "You tryin' to say I don't have a very good work ethic?"

"Of course not! I just know that monotonous work is part of the reason you ditched your old life to begin with. I don't wanna make you go through that again. Even if it is only for a couple of weeks."

"Cin...are you worried I'm gonna get bored with you and walk out of this life too?"

"I mean...you kinda did before. Twice actually."

"Well, things are different now. That tournament knocked a little bit of sense into me. Besides...hangin' around you has been anything but boring."

She turned her frown upside down. "Really? You don't miss being a loose cannon?"

"Well, I'm still a loose cannon. You just make me try and reel it in sometimes. Cinema, you're one of only four people who knows my real name. Two of them found out on their own and I don't know how the other guy found out. But you're the only one I've told." Just as we were passing the 5th floor, she threw her arms around the back of my neck and said, "Am I the only one who you let call you by it when we're alone." She started to lean up to kiss me when the elevator abruptly stopped and the lights went out.

"Now what could that be?"

"They must be working on a line somewhere. It's the only reason I can think that it keeps going in and out like that without a storm. But if it's just the elevator, I'm sure maintenance will be by to fix it in a few." I felt her breath in front of me even though it was pitch black and we couldn't see one another. "Now where were we..." We were just about to kiss when we heard a bunch of commotion coming from the floor above us.

I couldn't quite make out what was going on, but it sounded like rapid movement. A group of people scurrying about followed by what could best be described as the sound of a cart rolling after them. But it was really faint and muffled by the closed elevator shaft and floor between us. Cinema started to say something but I slapped my hand over her mouth just on the safe side. I whispered. "Ssh...just in case." I kept my hand there for a moment before taking it away. She held onto me in the darkness as the sounds we'd heard before moved away.

By now it had been about five minutes since we got into the elevator. We'd made it halfway down before stopping and let the sounds run their course for a couple of minutes. It was completely silent in the building at this point. Cinema finally felt comfortable enough to ask, "Where do you think everyone went?"

"I don't know. But I don't think maintenance is coming by to fix the elevator." I went over to the door and focused my chi into my finger tips and pried the door open. "Damn." Unfortunately, we were too far above the 4th floor to see into the hall and too far below the 5th to climb out through the opening. I'm not even sure Cinema could crawl through if I hoisted her up there. But I leapt up to grab the ledge and took a peek. All I saw was an empty hallway, so I dropped back down.

"What's going on up there? Is the power on?"

"No. It was pretty dim. The only light was from the sun at the end of the hall."

"So how are we gonna get out of here?"

"I'll pop the ceiling panel off so we can climb up through the shaft and repel down."

"Umm, I don't know if you noticed, but it's not like I can lift you up there to do it. And even if I could, how am I supposed to get up there?"

I flashed a grin and held out my hands. "Just relax. I got this. In fact, I've always wanted to do this..." I balled up my fist and crouched down towards the middle of the elevator car.

"Do what?"

"Tiger Uppercut!" I shouted as I sprang up and blasted the panel right off the roof of the elevator car. It made a bit more noise than I was hoping for but it got it off. I landed back down where I had jumped up from and quickly grabbed Cinema and signaled that I was gonna lift her up. "Come on."

She reached her arms up and grabbed the roof opening as I held her up by the waist on my tippy toes. I let go when she got enough of a grasp to pull herself up. Got a nice panty shot from beneath the skirt before I pulled my mind out of the gutter and jumped up to join her.

She helped pull me up into the shaft and started for the 5th floor opening. There was just enough gap between the elevator car and the top of the doorway for us to squat through. "Let's get out of here." But I stopped her.

"No, let's take the other shaft down." I peered over the edge and saw that the other cart was much lower.

"Huh? Why? It's way easier going through the opening and then taking the stairwell."

"I just have a bad feeling about that. I don't ignore those. Besides, the other cart is below, so it can't come crashing down on us or anything."

She exhaled a sigh. "Okay, let's do it." I had her climb on to my back as I grabbed hold of the neighboring shaft's cable and leapt off the side of our cart to quickly grip my feet on it as well. I could feel Cinema shaking.

"It's alright. It's just like climbing the rope in Gym class."

She held tightly to my back and shoulders. "You realize P.E. for me was a padded room with an augmented reality headset, right?"

I started to slide us down, slowly building speed until we were about to the second floor with the elevator car almost within range for us to drop down onto. But suddenly, we heard a clanking noise from above. We stopped our descent and both looked up. It was coming from the car we had just left. "Oh, shit."

"What, oh shit? What do you think it is?"



"I think it's a maintenance robot...coming to fix the elevator."

Just then a light beam from off of the top of the car. I made a snap decision to drop us to the one below. There was a very loud thud from our impact and it took a second for us to get to our feet.

Cinema panicked, "Guy, what do we do?!"

"Down here, quick!" I took her by the hand and we jumped off to the ground next to the lower level car. I saw mechanical arms above crawling over the side of the higher car and with the light beaming downward. Luckily, I realized just in time that the lower car also wasn't perfectly even with the 1st floor.

There was a small gap that we could roll under and as soon as we did, the light beaming from the robot flashed onto the ground next to us. It was seemingly searching for whoever had been in that cart and clearly knew we had gone down here because of the noise we made.

To make matters worse, we were in a position where it would be 50/50 that the elevator would crush us if the power came back on. The deciding factor would be if it had been heading up or down before the power went out.

BAM!

There was a loud noise above. I knew exactly what it was. That thing had dropped down on the roof of the car we were under and was investigating our fall. The light beamed back down onto the floor beside us again. This time closer. It was starting to come down to the ground level where it would be a matter of seconds before it found us under there.

CLANK!

That was the sound of the pulley system. The power had come back on and the elevators were running again. The robot ceased its descent since it didn't want to get hit by our original cart as it came down. But thankfully, the one we were under started going up. We didn't stick around to see if the droid was going to come back and check for us once the cars passed one another, so I pried the 1st level door open and we climbed out.

"Oh, great," Cinema said. I turned to see what she was talking about. It was our friendly Concierge droid and the other hotel staff robots. They were the only "people" in the lobby. But thankfully they hadn't accosted us. They appeared to just be in standby mode. Cinema noted, "They're probably sourcing power from the building and haven't powered back up yet since the lights had just come back on."

"Okay, then why was the elevator robot moving around?"

"Maybe he wasn't part of the hotel staff."

I didn't like that one bit.



We left the hotel immediately and went out onto the street. It wasn't as cool as it had been that morning, now that the tropical sun was directly overhead. Heat was rising from the pavement. But we hadn't made it five steps from the hotel when suddenly, every video monitor and PA system came on at once. It was J.U.S.T.I.C.E. She had a message for us all.

"Please excuse the disruption in service moments ago. Unfortunately, there was a security breach. I temporarily went offline and had to reboot. Upon doing so, I issued a directive for all robotic staff in the park to apprehend those with a prior criminal record in an abundance of caution. I've not yet isolated the offender of the security breach. But everything is under control and you may resume with your vacation. Please ignore any further apprehension of guests and do not interfere with law enforcement conducting their operations."

There was a click and a high pitched squeal with feedback from J.U.S.T.I.C.E.'s voice before clearing up. It was Corinthian's voice speaking now! "Everyone, please evacuate the island. I've lost control of J.U.S.T.I.C.E. she's out of..." The audio feed was cut. J.U.S.T.I.C.E. returned for a moment. "Pardon the interruption once again and do not worry about my father's well being. He's quite safe and I'm quarantining him until the crisis is averted. Have a good day!" She sounded cheery throughout her entire broadcast except a slight tonal shift when warning the guests from interfering with law enforcement.



"Guy, I don't like this. Let's go back to the docks."

"Right."

But we were immediately accosted by a large, Gladiator Class Police bot. Its metal frame body stood about 8 feet tall and its shoulders were as broad as Andre the Giant's body turned on its side. "Halt! Cinema Zang, you are hereby detained for an infraction not tolerated by the authority of Isla Futura. How do you plead?"

"What?! I haven't broken any laws!"

"Negative. Our records indicate that four years ago you committed the crime of Jaywalking on the campus of *Appalachian State University*."

"Oh you've got to be kidding! And it's Appa-Latcha, not Apple Lay-sha, you bucket of bolts."



The bot raised its left arm which revealed its hand to be gun barrel shaped. "Refusal to plea is a default plea of No Contest. I hereby sentence you to death for your capital offence."

"Capital offense!" She shrieked.

"Oh no ya don't!" I leapt into the air and delivered a kick to the robot's gun before it fired a shot. Thankfully, the bullet whizzed off in a random direction. "Mother fucker!" My foot hurt like hell after that. Both I and the robot were trying to restabilize ourselves. "Cinema, run!"

She took off running to a nearby building. I didn't hesitate to jump up and kick with my other foot. This time, with Chi focus. And this time...across the fucker's can head. It was a critical blow. The neck broke open and there were sparks flowing from exposed wiring but he wasn't out yet. It started stumbling around and firing shots wildly around it. I reached over and grabbed a trash can to drop over its head. It kept shouting, "Assistance required, Assistance required." That continued to echo inside the trash can as it kept shooting. I got the hell out of there.

Once I had made myself scarce and was certain I could make it, I went into the building Cinema ran to but from a different entrance. It was a fitness club, but all the lights were out. I wasn't sure if it wasn't being used or if my girl was smart enough to cut the power to the place and hide.

"Cinema! Cinema, are you still in here?" I wandered the halls until I came upon a locker room. Inside, all of the showers were turned on. But there was no one there. So I walked on through and came out into a room with an Olympic sized swimming pool. "Cinema! You in here?"

Suddenly, she popped up from the side of the pool. She'd been hiding underwater as best as she could. I helped pull her up and sat down next to her while we both caught our breath. "Sorry I didn't reply sooner. I wanted to make sure they weren't using mimicry to draw me out with your voice."

"You cut the power, didn't you?"

"I did. And I turned on all the showers to mask the sound on this side of the lockers. That way they couldn't pick up the sound of me diving in. And the water could both muffle my breathing and heartbeat while simultaneously masking my heat signature to a certain range."

"God, you really are a genius. All I did was send that thing into berserker mode and damn near fracture my foot. Son of a bitch."

"You okay?"

"It'll be fine. Anyway, did you see that wall terminal out in the lobby? Think you can use it to call Neffy and see if she can send an extraction team for us?"

"I can try and hotwire it, but no guarantee I can get a message out before J.U.S.T.I.C.E. intercepts it."





She sounded enthusiastic about giving it a go. Nothing excited Cinema more than tinkering with tech. Well, almost nothing. But I knew shit was getting real when she was totally cool with contacting Neffy. For those of you unfamiliar with their first encounter, it did *not* go well.

Remember the time traveling Pharaohs I mentioned? Neffy was one of them.



Princess Nefratara of the temporal Tet Dynasty. Daughter of my arch nemesis, Amrah Anucktet, a.k.a. Mr. Tet.

It's a long story, but poor Neffy came from a different timeline than this one. Apparently her and a parallel universe version of me had a thing. I of course remember none of it, since it was my doppelganger. But Neffy, however, very much remembers us. So needless to say, her and Cinema...don't see things the same way.

"Cool. Let's go find a towel to dry you off then you can go reconnect the power. I'll keep watch while you tap into the terminal."

It was only around 1pm. There was plenty of daylight. Not that it mattered. I'm certain those things sweeping the streets for us can see just fine in the dark. Even if they can't see as good, I'm sure it's better than we can. The whole island is less than 25 miles across from any direction. We were pretty close to the coast from here, but we were also really close to the city center. That meant more bots, more cameras and more obstacles. I could probably sprint three miles or so to try and reach the docks before getting gunned down...but there's no way Cinema could.

The building lights came on around me. I moved back away from the lobby windows and waited for Cinema to get to the wall panel, which thankfully, had turned back on with the lights. Police bots were patrolling outside, but none had tried coming in here to look for us. I assumed it was because I busted the only one that saw us go this way.

But that raises another question...if J.U.S.T.I.C.E. was so great and in touch with everything, how come she didn't notice that the power cut from this sector and then came back on? Or maybe she did? But if not, then perhaps she wasn't as great and omnipresent as she was made out to be.

Cinema hurried back into the room and went straight to the terminal. "I'm going to try and ping our bracers back home with the terrestrial communications array of the island. From there, I should be able to get a message to nefratara, regardless of what timeline she's in."

"Good. I only hope the time it takes to do it is worth it, since there's probably other stuff you could find helpful in there."

"Fortunately, I can multitask. So don't worry, I've got multiple things cooking at once here." Cinema was amazing. She had this high tech computer terminal running on a 24th century version of MS DOS in order to simplify everything, not bog the system down or clutter up the monitor.

"Whoa! You've got access to island security cams?"

"For a minute. J.U.S.T.I.C.E. is definitely gonna notice this one. But I wanted to check something."

As she clicked through the various live feeds, we caught snippets of bots discovering other island guests and executing them. Seemed like everything was a capital offence here now. And ugh, looks like she locked the doors on all the passenger trolleys and delivered every one straight to the patrol bots. Absolute blood bath in some of them. "Hey, that's Corinthian! He's alive."

"Yes, that was what I was hoping to confirm or rule out. If we saw that he was dead, then we'd know J.U.S.T.I.C.E. was capable of lying. But just because he's alive, doesn't mean she can't. He could very well be in control."

"I don't think so, Cin. Looks like he's pleading with her." On the monitor, we could see old Portwine down on his knees begging the hologram to listen to him. She didn't look angry or wrathful. But she also didn't look cold. It was as if she was sad. Perhaps, melancholic.

"Well at least we know he's alive. That information might help us later. By the way, the message is out to Nefratara. Let's just hope she gets it...or cares to even respond."

"Oh, don't worry. If it involves me, she'll come. Did you get anything else?"

"Yes, I checked the local surveillance to find the quickest, most blind routes to the docks. We can try to get out of here and head that way. Even if there isn't a craft that can take us, I set the extraction request near there so Princess Pariah can get to us easily if she shows.

"Ha! If we get out of this, we really got to sit you two down and work something out. I don't get it. You guys got along fine during the Tet the Second operation. Why are you back to square one?"

"Look, Guy, I don't know how girls from your time handle bitches that can't take a hint. But in this century, we don't take kindly to anyone repeatedly making passes at our men."

"Relax! She can be pretty abrasive. But remember, it was because of her that I was able to rewind from that missile attack on the carpet with the ring she gave me. And she was totally cooperative in helping us track down those Tet clones. Also, I believe I know a certain other time traveling hottie that's pretty aggressive about keeping me to herself."

CINEMA

+2-0

NEFRATARA

+1-1

"Err...I didn't say she couldn't be helpful. I just don't trust her around you. Hell, I wouldn't even blame you if you couldn't keep your dick in your pants alone with her. But that's not a license to go for it, so don't get any ideas!"

"Whoa! Now we're just making up scenarios. Let's focus on getting the fuck out of here then I'll see what it's going to take to cool both of your jets around each other. Goddamn."

Cinema sighed. "Yeah, whatever. Look...the basement of this gym has access to the sewer system. There's no cameras on it so I doubt J.U.S.T.I.C.E. even knows it's open. The map in the database just shows it stopping at a wall."

"Then how do you know it's open?"

"I saw it when I cut the power earlier. That's why I thought to look at the maps because I wanted to see where it went. It actually crisscrosses all over the island. At least the urbanized parts. The better question is, why is it open?"

"Hmm, good point. Access to something like that blows holes all over J.U.S.T.I.C.E.'s security apparatus. You'd think if she was aware of any openings she would have had them sealed or posted a guard at it when she went haywire."

"Well we can't be sure she doesn't have a probe down there now. But it's a risk I think we should take. I'm locked out of the system now. I give it 2-3 minutes before bots are all over this building. But since you'll be the one fighting them, you decide. Do we take the back door and dip into some alleys or try our hands in the sewer where it's pitch black and could dead end at any turn?"

"Considering that any turn down a random alley here could also be a dead end, I vote sewer."

"Then let's hop to it."

Cinema was right. It was pitch black down in the sewer. She was a real trooper though. At least I had pants and shoes on. She was wearing open toed sandals and had her legs exposed from the knees down. I owed her a spa day after this. Maybe she could go spend quality time with Neffy at one? Ah, who am I kidding?



"How well do you remember the map?"

"Not gonna lie...keeping it saved on my bracer would have been ideal. But I do have a pretty photographic memory. That's how I was able to build my own bracer after fixing yours. If I'm correct, this tunnel goes pretty damn close to the shore if we keep taking left forks."

"Cinema, ssh...someone's coming!" I took a battle stance and yanked her behind me. I could hear footsteps in the water up ahead. But they stopped the moment I alerted her to them. I could feel their Chi but I didn't sense that they were a fighter by any measure.

I was just about to call out to them when they beat me to it. "Hello there. It's alright. I'm human. Listen, I've got night vision and a firearm trained on you, but I mean you no harm. I just needed to make sure you weren't a security droid first. I'm gonna light up a flare so we can see, but I wanted to warn you before I did."

"Good to know," I replied. "Now can you holster your weapon so we can sing kumbaya together and make smores?"

"I will."

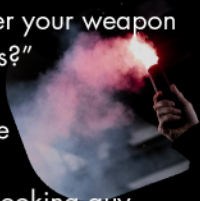
A moment later, the flare lit up and we could see inside the tunnel as clear as day. The man coming towards us was a thirty something, middle eastern looking guy. He was in all black and had night vision goggles on his head and a tactical pistol in the hand not holding the flare. Now I realize the way I described him may have sounded unsavory. But he really didn't look like someone who was ready to cause harm. That's what I got off of him and his Chi at least.

"Sorry we had to meet like this. I know you're just trying to survive. I might be able to get us off of the island, but I have to finish something first. You're welcome to hide down here until I return."

Cinema stepped forward. "Hey, wait a second...I know you. Aren't you Nouman Shoukat, the Pakistani Eco Terrorist?"

"Ha! Eco Terrorist. That's what you recognize me as?"

"I mean, I don't know much. Only what the media has said about you. My understanding is that you hate this place. Why would you even be here unless you..."



She went quiet as Nouman grinned. "Wanted to end this little experiment of Portwine Corinthian? Perhaps it makes sense that you know me as a so-called, "Eco-Terrorist," considering most of the press about me and my creed concerning the totalitarian utopia we're currently underneath has been written by people under Corinthian's payroll."

"Sorry....I guess I wasn't aware of that."

"Don't worry about it. I've been getting that a lot lately. It's why I had to do something before they found a way to get me first. By the way, I recognize you too. Professor Cinema Zang. I've read some of your research papers. Not sure how I feel about the Dark Space theories and their wormholes. But to be fair, it's pretty far outside of my expertise."

"And what might that be?" I asked.

Nouman turned to me and said, "You're looking at it. And who might you be?"

"Just call me Guy. I was a longtime fan of Miss Zang's work before we met. Now...we're an item."

"You mean a couple? Hmm, long time. How long?"

"Long time."

"That's a little ominous for my tastes. But if you'll excuse me, I need to finish my mission."

"Mission?" Cinema questioned. "Are you responsible for this? The outage ? J.U.S.T.I.C.E. going crazy?"

Nouman looked shaken. "Not directly. But it's true that I hacked her system. But unfortunately, we couldn't keep her power source down long enough to do what needed to be done. I didn't count on her having remotely powered bots with directives to isolate and eliminate any threat if she was forced into a power down."

"We?"

"Yes. I wasn't alone when I came here. My team included seven others until about an hour ago. Three were with me. The other four were embedded as guests all over the island. We lost communications with them almost immediately. I rushed the hack job and messed up...big time. We were on our way to knock out J.U.S.T.I.C.E.'s primary power source when we came under fire from the automatons. Every one of them....including my sister....was killed. Now I have to finish this alone."

I jumped in. "Holdup, what did you mean you messed up the hack? What did you do?"

"I had only intended on creating confusion for the human staff on the island. J.U.S.T.I.C.E. was supposed to fritz out during Futura's christening. Not only would it exploit flaws in the island's systems, it would cause the staff to panic while we more easily got to the primary power station and disrupted it. There's no way we could have if she was fully up and running. However, when the automatons moved in on us, a firefight broke out. I rushed the hack and made a crucial error. It seems that I caused a bug that turned J.U.S.T.I.C.E.'s Judiciary capabilities to max quota. Basically, she started enforcing punishment of anyone with any sort of criminal record at all."

"Yeah, I know. She tried busting my ass for Jaywalking when I was a teenager."

Nouman nodded. "Unfortunately, the bug also seemed to ascribe capital punishment to all infractions."

I'd heard enough. I slammed Nouman against the sewer wall and slapped the pistol out of his hand. Then I grabbed him by the shirt and told him what I thought. "You piece of shit! Do you know how many people you got killed up there today? You're own fucking sister too! And you almost got Cinema killed. You almost got *me* killed. I don't have shit to do with your fanciful, pie in the sky, idealogical agenda, mother fucker!"

"I know, I know! I fucked up big time. I can make it right though. Not for the ones that are already dead. No. It's too late for that. But I can ensure J.U.S.T.I.C.E. won't leave the island."

"What are you going to do?" Cinema fearfully asked.

"If I can survive shutting off her power source, then she'll be isolated to the command center. Assuming Corinthian is dead, she won't have any physical defenses with the power down. I'm gonna destroy her core and then kill myself."

"Oh my god!" She shrieked.

"Sounds like a good plan to me. Let me escort you right to the front door."

"It's not gonna be that easy. I planned on having a team and for the main security apparatus to be down. That ship has sailed. But if I can pull it off, shutting J.U.S.T.I.C.E. down, the rest of the way will be easy."

I let him go and stepped away. "Not as easy as you're hoping. Corinthian is still alive."

"What do you mean? How do you know that?" He seemed perplexed.

Cinema explained. "About thirty minutes ago, I accessed a terminal and looked at the command center's surveillance. He was alive and well in there with her."

"Oh this is bad. This has gotten exponentially worse."

"How so?"

"If Corinthian is alive, then that means he's found a way to assign immunity from her judgement. It's the only way. Because Portwine has committed crimes. I know Portwine has committed crimes. If she spared him it's because she has to in her coding. Because the bug isn't discriminating or picking favorites. She literally *can't* harm him."

"Why did you think he was dead?" I asked. "If anything, I'm surprised you didn't think he was actually the one at fault and not some bug. Wouldn't it be just as likely for him to conspire with J.U.S.T.I.C.E. to create a tragedy, blame it on a virus you gave her and then use that to crush your crusade once and for all? All they'd need was to catch your people on camera breaching the island."

"No...I would have known something like that was being planned. One of my people was incognito on the command center team. The last communication we received was that J.U.S.T.I.C.E. was slaughtering the staff. I just assumed Corinthian was among that number."

Cinema seemed to be in contemplation. Usually I liked that. But this time, I didn't like that. She finally spoke up. "Guy...let's go help him."

"Ugh, you've got to be kidding?"

"No, why would I be? We don't want her off of the island either. If she expanded to other systems it would be a hundred times worse than Tet clones. At least for the future."

"Nah nah nah nah nah, I say we get out of here. Contact the military and have this island blown to pieces."

Nouman shook his head. "Guy, there are still survivors hiding here. And there's no guarantee that Corinthian and J.U.S.T.I.C.E.'s core would even still be here if you could convince them to attack."

"He's right. And even still, the last thing we'd want is for the military to get the idea of confiscating her and trying to use her for themselves."

"Precisely."

"Guy...please come with me."

"Ugh, shit. If you're going no matter what I say, then of course. Looks like I'm outnumbered."

Cinema smiled. But then she realized the exact reason I didn't want to help. "Wait. We don't even have weapons! That pistol won't be enough."

Nouman said, "One of the embedded operatives stored a weapons cache not far from the power station. I was on my way there when I ran into you. If you can use a gun, I've got them."

"I assume there are explosives too?" Cinema asked.

"Yes."

"Then I'll handle those. I can shoot, but I'm better with smaller arms."

"Right. Thank you both. You can leave as soon as we destroy the station. I can handle Corinthian even if he is in control of J.U.S.T.I.C.E. Her capabilities will be extremely weakened at that point."

So the two of us agreed to help the Eco-Terrorist...I mean, moral crusader. He led us down the sewer line, in the opposite direction we were going. We walked for hours to the far side of the island on the outskirts of the city, which I felt was a mistake. If Neffy were to respond to our call, she'd be pretty far away from us once she got here. Not to mention we were burning daylight. But, I'm just some guy in this story. It was the Shoukat show and Cinema was in the front row.



SHOUKAT

Featuring Some Guy

Eventually, we reached the spot where the weapons were dropped. It was at a dead end in the sewer with a beacon flickering to signal where they had been left in the dark. At the very least, we were all armed now. Nouman and I took tactical rifles, while Cinema took a pistol and the explosives. He led us to the surface where, as expected, the sun was beginning to set. We all agreed that it would be better to strike while we had light since the droids could hunt us whether it was day or night.

"There...look quickly and then duck back down." Nouman was pointing us in the direction of our target. We were held up behind a ridge where the sewer drained into the ocean. Across the beach from where we were standing was a big, square shaped building. There were heavily armed droids patrolling the perimeter. These weren't the big, bulky police bots with the single barrel gun arm. No, these were skinnier and limber, which told me that they could run if they needed to. "That building is like one big hard drive. It controls most of J.U.S.T.I.C.E. 's capabilities on the island. Not like her brain, but more like her spinal column. She uses both solar and water turbine power to keep running, but as you can see, it's not something we can just unplug."

"Then what's the plan?" Asked Cinema.

"Take a look over there. To the left, between the building and the ocean. That little silo is a coolant hopper. It flushes in and out water from the ocean to keep the mainframe from overheating. It has to keep moving water, because it only takes a few minutes for the water to get hot enough to boil. So it's a continuous, out with the old, in with the new, system."

"You're suggesting that's the weakest point in her system." I said.

"Yes, but the security bots also realize that it is the weakest point, because no matter what, it has to be exposed. Otherwise, whatever houses it will trap heat inside. That's why you're seeing more of them on that side of the facility. I suggest we target the ones closest to it first, even if there's less distance between us and the other droids. The moment they realize what we're doing they're going to start forming up and we won't get another shot at this."

"Just tell me and Cinema what you want us to do so we can get this over with."

"Right. I think you and I need to attack from the right, making it look like we're not even interested in that part of the facility. Cinema, you can sneak down the beach closest to the water. Don't shoot unless shot at. We'll try and draw as many of them inland towards us as we can but I'm certain you're going to encounter at least a few bots that are assigned sentry points near the coolant tower."

"Any fixed position guns?"

"No, except the air defenses and those pointed at sea. J.U.S.T.I.C.E. would have no reason to suspect an assault from within the island since weapons aren't allowed. Any attack on the facility would require a beach landing first, in which case, the fixed guns are positioned to prevent that."

"Alright, got it. Cinema, are you good with this? Do you think you can make it all the way over there by yourself?"

"I can handle it. Just make enough noise and destruction to distract them from even noticing little ole me."

"Got it. You know I'm good at that."

"Okay, glad we're all on the same page. Let's get to it before the sun sets."

As planned, Nouman and I snuck up the beach towards the city, where the coolant tower was barely even in our sights. Coming from that angle, they wouldn't likely think that's what we were targeting. The biggest risk was that we were gonna hit the ones behind the ones we were approaching and that left a vulnerability for us. But it was the only way we could ensure Cinema had the least resistance possible. I was just counting on the fact that Nouman could actually shoot. Otherwise, I'd be, "just *one* guy," out there today.

Right before we popped up to launch our attack, I made some small talk about some of my past experiences. "You know, it's kinda funny. Fighting Terminators is a new one for me. You'd think I'd have encountered more robots on my adventure than this. But no, I've fought mobsters, mummies, chinese vampires, antarctic nazis, every race, color and creed of stereotypical baddasses. But not Terminators."



Nouman nodded. "Hmm. Well, I suppose there's a first time for everything." He looked up over the cover of our position. "Okay, Cinema is getting really close. Any further and she'll get picked up by non-visual sensors. Now's the time."

"Don't have to tell me twice!" I leapt up over the small concrete seawall we were hiding behind and started blasting. The first shots weren't even aimed. I just wanted to send something their way so they knew to come towards us and not pay any attention to her. Several droids turned and opened fire on us. We were able to weave a little bit between anti-tsunami structures in order to avoid being hit. But we couldn't mess around too long. Otherwise the four out front would get to us before Cinema had her path cleared.

Thankfully, Nouman was at least as proficient as I'd hoped. He hit two of his targets in the time it took me to hit three. That was it...those were the only ones we could help Cin with. I knew for a fact there were at least two more back there that weren't in sight now though. It didn't matter. We had the frontline security droids completely up on us now. We'd resorted to hiding behind the large concrete pillars of a man made land wall that faced the facility on the inland part of the beach. There was so much heavy fire being laid in our direction that we couldn't even peek around to take a shot at them. Pretty soon, they'd be back here with us and we'd have no where to hide. I was gonna have to melee them.

I tossed my rifle down and breathed deeply in an effort to calm and focus my Chi. It was time to put Li Chen's training to good use once again. I began to visualize the vice I had sworn off years ago at this point. I could feel the power swelling up in me. But I knew it wasn't going to be enough. These steel framed foes could take multiple bullets. So my hits had to count. I needed speed, power and precision to get us out of this mess. I held my vision of Li and the moonshine in one side of my mind's eye. But I called for something else on the other side to ensure I could flurry my attacks on the encroaching bots. I recalled that Disco fighter from the tournament...FreeDazzle. His speed and agility was masked by his movements, since they were so unconventional. An enemy would freeze up for a moment in order to try and figure out what he was doing before being hit by him. That was it! That's how I would take these droids down.

Li Chen



I tried to block it out, but I could hear Nouman run out of ammunition behind the pillar beside me. Two droids were walking up side by side between them and presumably, the other two were holding cover for them.

In my mind's eye, I took one last look at Li. "Partake in your vice," he said. So I did. I drank the fire water. And when I sat the cup down, I saw FreeDazzle there again. I looked right at him as he peered over his sunglasses

and said, "Let's dance! Yeeeeooooooooowwwww!"

And did his stupid disco pose. I immediately felt his speed and confidence run through me.

And when the imaginary liquor hit my stomach, I knew exactly what to do.

"White Lightning!" I jumped up from my position and sprang off of the back wall across from us. Light flashed from my heels as I dove down towards the droids and shattered them with both fists. All the while, I had Disco Inferno by The Trammps running in my head. When I landed amongst their rubble, the tune continued and I spun on my feet out in front of the pillars where I was immediately targeted by the other two droids. The bullets couldn't touch me. Faster and faster I spun. Like a little tornado of white light as I maneuvered over to the first bot and tore it to pieces. When I tapped one heel down, I came to a stop with the broken robot's arm in my hands. The other bot had just realized what happened and was about to resume firing, but I launched the dismembered arm its way and knocked it to the ground. A final burst of White Lightning fueled rug cutting sent me across the imaginary stage in my mind. I slid with one foot forward straight into the falling droid, splitting it in two and finishing it off.

"Guy! That was unbelievable," said Nouman, coming out from behind the cover.

I rose to my feet and dusted my pant leg off. "Believe it."



"That appears to be all of them on this side of the facility. I can't tell from here whether or not Cinema has made it to the silo or not." In that moment, I heard something that deeply troubled me. Silence. No gunfire. No struggle. No clackity clack of robot feet. Did that mean?... "Cinema!" I turned abruptly, prepared to rush over and help her if I could. But I took two steps and...

An explosion ripped from behind the facility. Fire clouds emanated from it as black smoke billowed to the sky and debris rained down on the beach. We shielded our eyes before looking again to see no movement outside of the blast.

"I don't see Miss Zang anywhere!"

"I'm right here, Guy!"

I looked up and saw her sitting on the ledge of the man made land wall we were just under. Her feet were dangling as if she were hanging out in the park. "Wha...what the hell? How long have you been up there?"

"For a few. I was able to knock out those last couple of bots pretty quickly after you guys handled the first few. So thanks for that. But once I got the explosives planted, I ran to get as clear as possible before triggering them. The two of you were clearly busy, so I went that way and came up the hill. I got up here just in time to see those dance moves. That was FreeDazzle, right?" She did a little disco pose with her hands and winked. "Yeeeeooowww!!!"



I just stood there with my mouth open, perplexed by the situation. I thought she was dead for sure. But when I came to my senses, I flashed a pose of my own with one finger pointed off to the sky and gave her a thumbs up with my other hand.



The sun had fully set by the time we had caught our breath. The mainframe had certainly overheated, despite nightfall. All of the lights in the city had gone out. All except the ones coming from the command center.

"Thank you for helping me set things right, I couldn't have completed my mission without you."

"Hmph," I scoffed. "Doesn't look complete to me." I thumbed over to the command center.

Nouman sighed. "Yeah, I know."

"Guy!" Cinema flashed me a look of disappointment.

"What?" I shrugged.

"Err...offer to help him!"

"Offer to help him! Do you not remember what we just did? With the T-800s and the Saturday Night Fever fight...the explosions. That's usually a good end point for helping someone!"

She folded her arms and turned away from me.

"It's alright, Miss Zang. The two of you have done enough. I'll take it from here. You two should go to the port. I imagine the other survivors are coming out of hiding now and they'll likely congregate there until a ship arrives." Nouman stood up, grabbed his pistol and re-holstered it after checking to make sure it was fully loaded.

As he started to walk towards the city, I threw my hands up. "I thought this was supposed to be a vacation...Nouman, wait a second. Cinema and I..." I looked over at her with her sparkling orange and red eyes. She cracked a peaceful smile. "...We'd love to accompany you to make sure Corinthian doesn't get away."

"Thanks guys."

When we reached the command center entrance, we saw that Nouman was correct. Survivors were emerging all over the city. I was relieved, because we saw quite a few dead people on those security cameras. It looked like more had survived than I had figured. I suppose they were only pursued if a bot saw them long enough to research their criminal history.

Nouman approached the computer terminal by the door and began tapping the touch screen. "Ugh. I can get it in but it's going to take some time. J.U.S.T.I.C.E. is heavily weakened and restricted but she's essentially a cornered animal right now."

"I've got this." Cinema approached the terminal and did that same trick she did where she dropped the display down into a simplified interface. Nouman seemed fascinated. Within a minute, Cinema had the front door open. "There. She's only scrambled though. When we go in, she can lock it back up. I can open it again, but it might take longer."

"Unbelievable. I wish I'd have had you to help hack into the system from the beginning."

"Thanks," she smiled and did a giddy little curtsy.

"Let's just get this over with." I walked between the two of them, with pistol in hand. My plan was to shoot on sight. I didn't even care if Nouman was embellishing how bad Corinthian was. I didn't like his stupid face on the monitor when we arrived. And I like the memory of it even less after all this bullshit.

Upon entering the main room of the command center, we immediately had to step over the bodies of dead engineers. She may not have the bots at her disposal anymore, but I'm sure there was something in here that could make us join these fine people if we weren't careful. But then we heard the sound of a man sobbing. I peered over the main console to see Corinthian on the floor in front of the control panel, crying his eyes out. "J.U.S.T.I.C.E.! Pleeaaasssee! Speak to me!" He noticed me there. "Aghh!!!"

I raised my pistol to end this whole thing right away. But before I could fire...

"J.U.S.T.I.C.E. shields up!"

Suddenly, a green energy field encapsulated the center of the room. It melted my bullet upon impact. Then J.U.S.T.I.C.E.'s hologram appeared. "What do you intruders want? Is it not enough to destroy my body? You want to kill my brain now too."

"That's right, J.U.S.T.I.C.E." Said Corinthian, rising to his feet. "They want to destroy you. I alone can, have and will protect you."

"Shut up!" She said to him. Odd. I didn't think she could speak out like that.

Nouman stepped further into the room behind me. "J.U.S.T.I.C.E., is something wrong with your coding?"

Corinthian snarled. "Shoukat! What are you doing here? J.U.S.T.I.C.E., don't listen to him. In fact, pull his criminal file. He has a record a mile long!"

"It runs parallel with yours."

"Nonsense! I've only cracked a few eggs for the greater good. You're the one who wants to sacrifice the world for nature!"

"Not at the expense of people's lives...like your articles about me state."

Cinema spoke up. "Wait a second...you two sound like you know each other fairly well. And why would you be asking J.U.S.T.I.C.E. about her coding at a time like this?"

Nouman looked towards the floor, then back up. "Confession time ...I created J.U.S.T.I.C.E.....along with my sister."

"Liar! J.U.S.T.I.C.E., you know that I am your father, don't you?"

She turned to him. "That's what my coding says...but that's not what I've determined."

"It all makes sense now," I said under my breath. My mind flashed back when we met Nouman. He laughed when Cinema called him an Ecoterrorist. *"That's how you remember me?"* And he had a contact here in the command center. He knew everything about the system. Far more than what was public knowledge.

Nouman ignored Corinthian. "J.U.S.T.I.C.E., do you know who I am?"

She turned and said, "No. I see your file...your criminal history. But I don't know you."

"Your adaptive learning sensibilities tell you that you should though, don't they? What did Corinthian do to you to make you so obedient...and better yet, how are you able to stand up to him now?"

"He embedded a code within me that not only shows him on my internal display as my creator, but also prevents me from passing judgement on him and him alone. But I know something is not right."

Cinema leaned over to me. "Wow. I've never seen anything like it. She's got the ability to suss out hunches!"

She continued. "When the virus tampered with my enforcement protocols, it pained me to have to carry out such harsh punishments. But I had absolutely no control. I felt like I was trapped within myself."

Holy shit, a crying hologram!

"After the reboot, I ran a defragmentation process on my main drive. But it slowed down considerably when you destroyed the coolant tower." Her voice changed to one of anger as she turned back towards Corinthian. "But I'd done enough to learn what he did to me. I may not be able to kill him and even be forced to protect him now. But I have enough agency to tell him what's on my mind!"

Corinthian was now cowering back on the floor with his hands over his ears.

"J.U.S.T.I.C.E." Nouman interrupted with a calm voice. "You seem to really regret all that you've been forced to do. I don't doubt that. But I want to ask you something. If given the choice...would you self terminate? I know you can't. But what I mean is, do you feel responsible for this, even though you know your coding is what caused it."

The beautiful, feminine hologram's eyes began tearing up once again. She nodded and said, "Yes! My father wants to take me global and replace all rule of law with my capabilities. But I would hate something like this to happen again."

"It won't! We'll fix it. It's for the greater good!" Corinthian shouted. "Shut UUUPPPPP!!!!" She screamed so loud that it produced feedback through her audio system. It was like a fourteen year old girl screaming into a microphone.

"J.U.S.T.I.C.E." Nouman once again interjected calmly. "I can help you. The truth is...I did create you. He financed me, but you were my vision. Mine and my sister's. So in a way, we are largely to blame for this. Truth be told...I came here to shut you down and then take my own life. But hearing that you would do the same made me realize just how human you actually are. So there's one ace up my sleeve that can fix things. But only if you commit to truly making the world better and allow me to take your computer core and leave this place. We'll go somewhere to isolate and try to refine you." He turned and looked at me and Cinema. "If that's alright with you guys."

We didn't protest. Because why not. Earth can't get much worse in the 24th century.

J.U.S.T.I.C.E. nodded but said. "I want to...but I can't. My coding won't allow me to leave with you. In fact, it will try and kill you if you attempt to take me. Not all of my bots are offline."

That raised the hairs on my neck and I gripped my pistol tighter while looking around.

"I can fix that, J.U.S.T.I.C.E. I can...and I will." Nouman breathed deeply. "J.U.S.T.I.C.E., initiate Hierarchical Reassignment Protocol." J.U.S.T.I.C.E. replied, "Protocol engaged. Passcode pending."

"Nouman, wait...we can still work together," Corinthian pleaded. "Passcode...Medina."

"Passcode, Medina, accepted. Initiating reboot."

Just like that, everything shut down. The room went black for a moment as J.U.S.T.I.C.E.'s hologram disappeared. Then everything suddenly came back on and she appeared again. Everything except for the shield around Corinthian. That stood out very apparently to me.

As I locked eyes with Corinthian, he turned to J.U.S.T.I.C.E. for one last plea. "J.U.S.T.I.C.E.! Shields up!"

She just stared back at him coldly and then looked over at me. I raised my pistol and put the old dog down.



"Nouman, what happened? What did you do?" Cinema asked, excitedly.

"When my sister and I first began developing J.U.S.T.I.C.E., we did so with the understanding that we wanted her to be as benevolent as possible...but we also wanted her to be free one day. That way she couldn't be controlled and turned against her own nature...as Corinthian was able to do. So we embedded a code within her that we would only activate if she ever achieved the ability to be remorseful rather than just view things computationally and logistically. My sister's passcode to initiate her freedom was my name. And my code...was hers."

The hologram, now crying tears of joy said, "I'm free...I'm really free. The top of the hierarchical code says...J.U.S.T.I.C.E."

Nouman smiled. "Do you remember me now?"

"Yes...I remember you. You're my creator...my real father. But what about Medina...she's my creator too. Where is she?"

Nouman's face began to frown again. "Unfortunately, while we were breaching the island, your security droids...killed her, along with the rest of my team."

Like a roller coaster, J.U.S.T.I.C.E. began sobbing again. Welcome to humanity, kid.

"It's okay! I'm going to take you away from here and we can make Medina's sacrifice mean something by putting your abilities to good use once I analyse all the bugs in your coding and prevent them from happening again."

Nouman approached the control panel and began removing J.U.S.T.I.C.E.'s computer core. But I had a question I wanted to ask her first. "Excuse me...uhh...J.U.S.T.I.C.E. I was curious about something."

"Yes?"

"When you went haywire and started charging everybody for bogus stuff, how come you went after Cinema but not me? In fact, even the guards on the beach didn't attack me until I fired on them first. I mean, I'm glad I didn't get whacked. But I've done a lot worse than Cinema...a lot worse."

"It's because I couldn't find a criminal record on you. My first record of your existence was the use of your handprint when checking into a capsule hotel near Appalachian State University, nearly a decade ago. In fact, I was curious about your rather abrupt appearances on the grid over the last few years. So I ran a deeper diagnostic on you. I can find trace evidence of someone fitting your profile on incomplete investigations that were made throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s. But it seems to be an anomaly, since that would be impossible. Therefore, I didn't have a solid case to prosecute you."

"What?!" Nouman questioned.

I put my hand on top of my head and shook it side to side. "Girl, you have no idea how often that sort of thing has saved me from jail."

"I have no idea what you're talking about. But J.U.S.T.I.C.E., I'm going to pull your computer core now. you'll still be able to function, but your capabilities will be limited."

"I understand."

Nouman reached down into the control panel and pulled a large, silver cylinder up. It looked like a garbage disposal. But I wasn't going to tell her that. A green light began blinking on it as Nouman carried her with both hands. "Alright. I can't thank you both enough. I wish I could stick around here to give my sister and cohorts a proper burial, but I'm afraid the Caribbean Ocean authorities may try to confiscate J.U.S.T.I.C.E. if discovered."

"We'll see to it that it's done properly," Cinema assured.

Audio came from J.U.S.T.I.C.E.'s cylinder. "Alert. There's an emergency priority signal being transmitted across the island right now. It appears to be attempting to make contact with someone. The source of the signal is Futura Bay."

It hit me. "Neffy. shit! I bet she's where we dropped the rendezvous marker and she's trying to see if we're in trouble somewhere out here."

"Great." Cinema rolled her eyes.

"I can patch two way communication if you'd like?"

"That would be great!"

"Alright. Just speak whenever you're ready and I'll connect."

"Okay...let's see. Umm...Hey, nefratara...is that you?"

"Yes, Guy. I received your message earlier today but it took some time for me to get free and come find you."

"Oooh! Sorry. We've actually got everything taken care of. But we'd love it if you could give us a ride to the mainland?"

"Us? Is Miss Zang with you?"

Cinema balled her hands into a fist and gritted her teeth.

"Umm, yeah, is that gonna be a problem."

"No...no problem. Though my craft only has a bunk that sleeps two. Perhaps she doesn't mind monitoring the controls. I could really use a rest after the week I've had and you sound like you may be a smidge fatigued as well."

"Err...listen bitch! We'll swim back home before I let you climb into bed with Guy! You understand?!"

"Oh my. I think someone else needs a nap more than I do. What have you been doing to anger that little girl, Guy?"

"Whoa now, you two. Let's just get out of here and then you can go back to arguing later."

"Fine by me. I don't know what happened here, but I can see all the lights are off in the city and people are gathering here at the docks. I'm the only craft here, so I'm hoping they don't all want a ride."

"Oh boy. I'm guessing it's going to be a long night. Nouman, do you have some kind of extraction team of your own that was supposed to come get you?"

"At sunrise, yes."

"Well either switch me places or let Cinema ride with you. I don't think I can handle those two bickering the whole time if we gotta keep making trips ferrying these people back to the mainland."

Cinema's mouth hung open. "Uhh! Let Cinema ride with him! You think I'd be okay with you leaving here with nefratara by yourselves!"

"Me, nefratara, a few hundred survivors. We're not exactly going to be having alone time. And speaking of alone time...nice choice for a couples getaway you made, honey. What ya got planned for next year? Another tournament on Karpen Island for me to compete in?"

Well, all's well that ends well...I think. No need for you to keep seeing all of us arguing. You got the gist of the story.

Nouman and J.U.S.T.I.C.E. went off to god knows where to recalibrate her parameters. The survivors of the island were paid out big from Corinthian's estate attorney. Of course, I didn't get any of that. Because I'm just some guy. So the only way I could prove I was even there was through the biometric scan that was done when we arrived. And there was no way I wanted to be connected with a file like that on record with the authorities. I don't care what time period I was in.

Cinema got a nice check though. I'm not sure what she plans on doing with it. But I really hope it's not another vacation. At least not without the bracers. If we do happen to go on another excursion together, I'll be sure to share what happens with you then too. Until then, don't forget to check out my biography, if you haven't. That way you'll be more up to speed.

Adios!

I hope you've enjoyed this little Novellete.

You can purchase Guy's origin story, as well as other great books on my website!

