

## Cyborgs Aren't Experiments

Dice pushed open the door to her ground-floor apartment, her cybernetic right arm creaking in protest. The sound made her wince, another reminder that her worn synthetic skin needed replacing. Its pale tone contrasted with her warm, honey-colored natural skin. She reached the couch, carefully favoring her left side as she lowered her backpack to the floor. The cyborg lottery protest she'd passed on her way home from the lab had been particularly volatile today.

"If I want any real maintenance done, I'll need a small fortune," she muttered, unconsciously tapping out chemical formulas with her left hand as she pulled her tablet from her bag. "Between college debt and basic upkeep..."

A bark of laughter from the kitchen made her jump, her right side responding with a fraction of delay that still felt foreign after all these years. "Ain't that the truth," Duman called out, his gentle Southern charm not entirely covering bitterness. "Your arm acting up again? Think we got some spares around here somewhere." His lips tilt into a cheeky grin. "Though knowing you, they're probably color-coded all wrong."

Dice shook her head in amusement, briefly distracted by his teasing. However, she quickly frowns, getting up to join him in the kitchen. Duman being home at this hour, in the early afternoon, was unusual enough to override her initial startle. "What are you doing here?" she asked carefully, though she already knew. How he unconsciously adjusted his exposed mechanical arm, no synthetic skin, a choice that was part practicality, part protest, told her everything.

He grimaced, took a deep breath, then forced himself to stand slightly taller, a habit she recognized from their shared physical therapy days. "What do you think happened?"

Several emotions hit Dice at once: empathy, sadness, and rejection. But anger won out.

“Are you serious? You got fired again?”

“Dice, relax. We both knew it was coming.” He raised his hand in that placating way he always did when he was all too ready for the same argument. The metal catches the afternoon light, the glint making her eyes squint as much as her emotion.

“Why?” Dice demanded, though the question was already answered. They both knew why. Everyone knows why. The job market’s “unofficial” policies regarding visible cybernetics were an open secret, especially in the service sector.

Before Duman could respond, Dice’s phone chimed with a familiar tone. One look at the number had her sighing deeply. The local police precinct. Again.

Dice doesn’t take a breath and pulls the screen to her ear. “Audrina.” She bit out, barely refraining from a growl.

“Bad day?” Audrina’s high-pitched voice came through, sounding both sheepish and defiant.

“What did you do?” Dice asked, her tone slipping from barely contained irritation into what Duman called her “lab supervisor voice.” She caught Duman’s knowing face, somewhere between an amused smirk and bone deep exasperation. He was already grabbing his pod keys.

“Well... um... could you come get me? Please, Dicey?” Dice could hear the puppy dog eyes and batting lashes clearer than the words. “I’ll tell you all about it when we get home.” The forced innocence in Audrina’s voice did nothing to mask their underlying excitement. Seems something went well *this* time.

Dice rubbed her face with her left hand, a habit from before she’d learned to modulate the pressure sensitivity on her right. “Yes, we’ll come get you.”

“See you soon!” Audrina chirped before hanging up.

“Our resident activist?” Duman asked, though it wasn’t really a question.

“Who else?” Dice confirmed with a deep sigh. “Let’s go.”

The two headed out to Duman’s pod, a 2991 Chalo Magnesia that was as efficient as it was as ugly. Audrina constantly complained about the vomit-yellow exterior and rumble engine, which sounded like it belonged in the previous century. Still, it ran reliably on water spinning, managing a hundred miles per tank.

They didn’t even need to ask at the station, and the officers recognized Dice and Duman immediately, which said more about Audrina’s protest habits than any lecture could. When they brought them out, they practically bounced with endless energy, their auburn hair disheveled and their designer clothes rumpled.

“So what was it this time, pipsqueak?” Duman asked as they all piled into the pod, Audrina making their usual face at the worn seats. No amount of adjustment would pull their distaste for the run-down gal.

“I am not a pipsqueak,” they protested, smoothing their flowy top. “And you know, I was at the lottery protest. Someone had to stand up to those corporate vultures, thinking registration, that saves lives, gives them ownership rights over people’s bodies.”

Dice kept her eyes forward, having heard variations of this speech before. But then Audrina noticed something off about the timing.

“Wait, Duman, it’s only, like, 2 pm. What are you doing here?”

The pod went silent. Dice could see Duman’s grip tighten on the steering wheel, the servos in his arm whirring slightly with the pressure.

“He got fired,” Dice said quietly when it became clear Duman wouldn’t, couldn’t.

Audrina's reaction was immediate and explosive. "What? Why? No, don't tell me, visible cybernetics again? That's exactly why we need these protests! This systematic discrimination has to stop. I don't understand why you two don't join us. Don't you want things to change?" Audrina has always been earnest but naive.

"We don't have your safety nets," Duman said, his voice tight. "Some of us can't afford a protest record on top of everything else." He doesn't like to rub it in, for them or himself.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Audrina's face scrunches up, already knowing the answer but refusing to back down.

"It means your fathers' wealth gives you options I don't have," he said bluntly. "My parents can barely afford Mom's treatments. I can't afford basic maintenance and wouldn't have any if Dr. Calen didn't come around." He forces out a harsh breath.

It wasn't a secret. Dice's mother, the illustrious scientist Dr. Cala Calen, is known for a stoic face, crude temperament, ever-inflating ego, and an intellect to back it all. The woman was never maternal, but she isn't a terrible mother to Dice. Tough love always seemed to be her only mode of affection. Dice had to work for everything, even after the accident. If anything, she got worse after Dice got hurt. But that woman keeps her daughter and Duman as topped off as possible. Working for the state has pros and cons. Access to resources, but more eyes, harder to slip parts through the cracks. Salary is nothing to snuff at when working directly for the government, but not kind enough to afford the pieces truly needed for upper-level augmentations like Dice or Dumans.

"I may have my mother, my aunt," Dice starts, "but I'm still in school. And even with proper coverage, I have to work twice as hard as my fully organic peers. If I want to finish my

degree, keep the respect I've earned, I can't drop everything to protest." She sighs, leaning against the window and watching the world pass by.

Audrina sank back into the cracked seats, rolling their shoulders and frowning. They knew already. They had known since they moved in with Dice nearly three years ago.

The rest of the ride passed in tense silence.

Back at the apartment, they separated quickly. Duman went to his room to resume work on his arm maintenance, Audrina went to the kitchen to stress-clean, and Dice went to the living room, where her biochem work waited.

Her eyes fell on the pamphlet on the coffee table: "Cyborgs Aren't Experiments." She picked it up, thumb brushing over the title as she considered the day's events. The pamphlet's message was right, but the path to change wasn't as simple as Audrina believed. Not when every step forward required calculating risks against survival.

Dice unconsciously tapped out the formula for synthetic nerve conduction as she opened her tablet to, once again, begin her research. Perhaps her way of fighting wasn't as visible as protests. Still, every breakthrough in her lab brought them closer to a world where cybernetic integration wasn't a sentence to the outskirts or outcasts.

For now, though, she had to focus on minor victories, like finishing her degree, keeping their little family together, and maybe earning enough to replace her worn-out synthetic skin without depending on handouts, with something that didn't creak quite so loudly in the quiet moments between battles.