

Juno Steel: Game Over

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Juno Steel: Game Over

by [valproate semisodium](#)

Summary

“There's levels to this thing? Like a video game? What the hell, why would you send her in there without any backup?”

“It was dangerous. But you refused to cooperate.”

The platform hit the floor and so did my stomach. I could have prevented this.

“There is still an answer Juno. You find Rita, help her retrieve the source, and get out together. Do I have your cooperation?”

I glanced at Rita, suspended above a glowing table in the middle of the room. Wires snaked from her skin to all kinds of machines, and a feeding tube sprouted from her mouth.

I'd never seen Rita this still. Even when she naps she snores and rolls around every five minutes. Hell, sometimes she even talks. I once had a whole conversation with her before I realized she was fast asleep at her desk. If it weren't for the shallow rise and fall of her chest, I would have thought she was dead.

I clenched my teeth.

“Fine.”

Juni Cortez's opening monologue in spy kids 3-D reminded me of Juno, and so this was born. Juno steel, private eye, stars in spy kids 3-D: game over, with some backrooms, pod racing, and the matrix mixed in for good measure.

I will update tags along with the chapters.

Notes

potential tw; canon typical recklessness, including self injury, Solitary confinement, Anesthetic

This story picks up after season 3, except the Aurinko crime family was kidnapped by dark matters after everything went down, and didn't get sent to jail.

1. classified.

I hadn't seen Rita pace by her cell window in two days now. Before I would see her flit past every couple of minutes.

I thought maybe they had moved her cell, but her name was still beside the door. I was surprised that they had put us across from each other in the first place. After what we pulled on the ship, Dark Matters had gotten paranoid.

That was why I hadn't spoken to any of the family in over a week. Or anyone for that matter. Well- I talked to myself. And Sasha when she pulled me out to talk about some mission she wanted me to do for her.

"Much of it is classified, but I will tell you what I can. Dark Matters has been working on a virtual reality program involving experimental AI. One of our tests went wrong and has disrupted the landscape with programming of its own-"

"Yeah, sorry, I'm not really into all that computer stuff. Or Dark Matters business. You can take your virtual reality and shove it up your-"

"There is no need for this outburst Juno."

"Why would I EVER help you?"

"Suit yourself. I was hoping we could come to an arrangement."

That pissed me off. So I started thinking.

I knew we couldn't escape without coordinating somehow. I got Rita's attention easily enough, but there wasn't much we could do to communicate. We were working with tiny windows embedded in the doors of soundproof cells. Sure we were across from each other, but the hallway was crawling with guards. And Rita's eyes barely made it past the bottom of the window.

I could tell by the way her eyebrows were moving that she had been talking to me, but I had no idea what she was saying. That didn't stop her.

A voice crackled over the intercom.

"You have 15 minutes before the box closes," it said. The shoebox sized compartment beside the bottom of the door slid open. Inside was a built-in tray full of sad gray looking food. I sighed, and sat down to eat.

As I chewed, I stared at the metal hatch door in front of the tray. My fuzzy silhouette was warped by its stainless steel surface. I took another bite, then reached out and rapped my knuckles against the metal. It was solid, but the sound carried.

"Hey can you hear me through this?" I asked. My mouth was still half full of food. I swallowed.

"Hey!" I called again.

The guard's voice returned over the intercom.

"Eat your food," they said curtly. They sounded annoyed. I smiled.

"What did you do with Rita?" I took another bite as I waited for a response. None came. I knocked on the door again, harder this time, and raised my voice.

"What did you do with Rita?"

"024 this is your Third and final warning," said the intercom.

"Third? Where were the other two?" No response. I pounded on the metal door with my fist,

“Where is RITA?” I shouted. The door snapped closed so quick it almost took my hand off. I stood and banged on the door.

“Hey!” I shouted. I could see a guard out of my periphery. They didn’t react.

“I know you can hear this!” I hit harder, “What did you do to Rita goddammit!”

My fury made me feel like I could split the door in two. My hands said otherwise. I hit until they bruised.

Out of breath, I gazed out at the empty cell across from me. The sign beside the door still read:

023

RITA

I didn’t see the guard reach up and slide the hatch closed.

“HEY!” I shouted, and banged my fist against the door again.

“Ow. Okay. Bad idea.”

I laid across the floor of my cell and took a couple deep breaths. Like Buddy had taught me.

I steadied myself and spoke to the room.

“Hey *Agent Wire*. I’m willing to bet you can hear me right now. Or someone can, in which case would be a dear and put Sasha on? I’ve got a couple choice words for her. I know you have Rita somewhere, and If I find out you so much as touched a hair on her goddamn head, I will-”

The door to my cell opened. I raised my head.

“Oh, hey there.”

“Get to your feet 024,” The guard said.

“I don't know, my legs might not be working. Do I get to know where Rita is?” The guard pulled out their taser.

“Get to your feet,” They said.

“Okay, fine, damn.”

The guards gripped my arms so tight that by the time we reached the interrogation room my hands had fallen asleep. The guards searched me, then strapped my hands into the manacles on the table, and left.

Sasha walked through the door.

If it weren’t for the cuffs I would have knocked that smug smile right off her face.

“Hey Sasha. Glad you got my message.”

“Hello Juno. Good to see you.”

“What did you do with Rita?”

“That is what I’m here to discuss. I was hoping we could come to an agreement so you can learn the information you want. I was notified of your episode, and decided this would be a good opportunity to provide you a second chance. Do you remember the mission I told you about?”

“Vaguely. It was a lot of computer stuff.”

“Dark Matter’s virtual reality was disrupted by a rogue AI. The recovery process was risky, and we needed a team to enter at landscape level to retrieve the source. Riva volunteered to help our mission-”

“Yeah right, volunteered.”

“She consented to our terms.”

“And what were those?”

“That’s classified.”

I spat at her. It landed on the table.

“Really Juno?”

“What did you do to her?”

“We sent her inside to retrieve the source and she disappeared.”

“That doesn’t make any sense. How can she disappear inside a virtual reality?”

“She didn’t physically. In fact, she’s right here in the building.”

“Show me.”

Sasha sighed.

“It is in your best interest to cooperate here, Juno.”

“Sasha, you know me. When have I been concerned about my best interests?”

“It is in Rita’s best interest as well.”

“Yeah well, I’m not going to cooperate until I know she’s alive.”

“Interesting. If I show you that Rita is physically unharmed, will you agree to the mission?”

“Show me she’s fine and then we can talk.”

She sighed again. Then spoke into her comms.

“Agents, would you please escort Mr. Steel and myself to 8FN4X0?”

Room 8FN4X0 looked exactly how I thought an evil hacker operation would. Like the inside of a colander. Wires strung between different bumps and holes in the dome. Blinking lights running up the walls.

We entered on a catwalk platform circling the edge of the room. Below us sat a bunch of people in lab coats typing away at computers. A huge monitor at the far end of the room rained green symbols that descended in lines. Looking at them gave me a headache. I didn’t see Rita.

“Where is she?” I asked.

“Below this main deck,” Sasha said.

We descended a short flight of stairs, then stood on a silver disk in the middle of the room. It lurched and began to slowly descend to a lower level. Real supervillain stuff.

I crouched as much as I could to see the room below us. It was bright white, there were a couple lab coats scurrying around. The agents pulled me upright.

I did spot Rita before we reached the ground. She was suspended above a glowing table in the middle of the room- you couldn’t miss her. Wires snaked from her skin to all kinds of different machines, and a feeding tube sprouted from her mouth. Her eyes were closed. She looked deathly still.

“Rita? Rita!”

“She can’t hear you. She is in stasis.”

“RITA!”

“You have your confirmation Juno. Her bodily needs are being met, and as far as we know, Rita is unharmed.”

“What do you mean as far as we know?”

“She got as far as level four. We lost communications at the beginning of level two, and were able to keep track of her location. But she has disappeared somewhere in level four.”

“There's levels to this thing? Like a video game? What the hell, why would you send her in

there without any backup?"

"It was dangerous. But you refused to cooperate."

The platform hit the floor and so did my stomach. I could have prevented this.

"There is still an answer Juno. You find Rita, help her retrieve the source, and get out together. Do I have your cooperation?"

I clenched my teeth.

"Fine."

They laid me down on the table beside Rita and started poking around. I didn't fight it. I keep my eyes on her. I'd never seen Rita this still. Even when she naps she snores and rolls around every five minutes. Hell, sometimes she even talks. I once had a whole conversation with her before I realized she was fast asleep at her desk. I had to make sure she was really breathing. If it weren't for the shallow rise and fall of her chest, I would have thought she was dead. I turned back to Sasha. She was explaining something to me.

"-has a form, you will kill it, Rita will retrieve the source. The landscape is experimental, so there may be some untested territory you encounter, including the AI. The one you are after can not under any circumstances leave the confines of the virtual reality landscape. It has been trying to escape since we imprisoned it there."

"Why would you do that?"

"Who knows. It was years ago. You'll have to start on level one like everyone else. Find Rita on level 4, then proceed to level 5 to locate the AI."

"And what do these levels look like?"

"That's classified."

"Great."

Someone hooked a gas mask over my nose and mouth. I felt air rise beneath me, and I began to float above the table.

"We will provide a comms with a link to Rita's. You should be able to contact her once you are on the same level. When you are in the virtual reality landscape, things will feel real to you."

"Are they real?"

"Good luck Juno."

"Hey wait-"

The anesthetic started to take hold just as every question I didn't ask swarms my head.

How did they know it would work?

Why wouldn't the Dark Matters agents enter themselves?

Was this an elaborate trap?

How were we supposed to find this AI?

If I was heading straight into these "classified" levels, then why wouldn't they tell me what they were?

How much control did Dark Matters have on their end if they couldn't unplug us remotely?

And how were we supposed to get out if they couldn't?

The last thing I saw before I blacked out was Rita, dead still on the table beside me.

2. worse than an echo

Chapter Notes

potential tws; disassociation, canon typical recklessness including self injury, mentions of sarah steel

My feet had stopped carrying me days ago. They still hit the floor. I could still feel them ache, but the walls were the things that moved. They wouldn't stop shifting, stumbling past me. They changed their mind, played games, and led me in circles.

I didn't get hungry, Dark Matters made sure of that outside the game. But I almost wished I could. Any indication that time was passing.

I couldn't sleep either. No matter how exhausted I was, I just kept going.

At first I searched. I scoured every room. I took notes. I called out for Rita. Then for anyone. The walls swallowed my shouts, no matter how large the room was. It was worse than an echo, and gave me a feeling twice as large. I stopped.

Each time I entered a new room, I was convinced; this was the one that would lead me to level two. No matter how blank and similar they looked, I scoured every inch. I wasted time retracing my steps, convinced there was some hidden panel, or secret doorway that I had missed. Maybe I had.

My drive lasted longer than it should have. I stopped counting at room 671. The room where I bloodied my nails trying to dig up a corner of the carpet I could have sworn felt a little different from the others. The fear set in alongside the realization that this corner was exactly the same as all the rest.

Exactly the same.

Room after room of exactly the same calloused carpet, ridged wallpaper, and those awful fluorescent lights. The ache of gut wrenching loneliness set in, followed by a boredom so deep it was violent.

As I continued, the rooms began to blur. It felt like they were messing with me. Moving doorways in the time it took me to blink.

Trying to focus on any aspect of these rooms felt like trying to focus on breathing, or blinking. There's always a smell you can't quite place, and the more you search for it, the farther it falls away. If you stare at the fluorescents too long, the light starts to fracture like strobe lights. I learned that the hard way, after staring into one trying to figure out if it was the light that stained everything yellow, or if that was just the color of the walls.

There are two solid indicators of a lifelong indoor smoker. The first is of course, is the smell. The second is the color of the walls. When a person smokes a pack a day on their living room couch, the plaster walls start to turn *this* shade of yellow. Move one picture frame and you'll see years of residue.

I'd learned that fact from my mother, over the course of 17 years.

I don't know how long I stared at that wallpaper. Examined it, asked it to move. All I knew was that when I looked back to the room I was in, it was now a hallway. It stretched so far in either direction I couldn't see the beginning or end. And I had no way of telling which was which. So I picked a direction, and started moving.

I was thinking about that wallpaper as I walked. It was the same no matter where you cared to look, and I had memorized every detail.

Which was maybe the only reason I stopped.

There was a rip in the wallpaper. Barely noticeable, just above the baseboard.

I had helped Benton hide this tear from our mother when we were five.

It was exactly the same. I was sure of it. I could almost smell the cigarette smoke. I could almost hear her exhale. I stumbled back and slid down the wall opposite.

Rooms can't rifle through your head, even when they're made of ones and zeros. So how had this place grabbed a memory from me that I didn't even know I had.

Unless it wasn't a memory. Unless I was fixating on this rip in the wallpaper because it's the first goddamn thing that's looked different in who knows how long, and I needed so badly for it to be familiar, that my brain made it so. My memories of those days are patchy enough as it is. Recognizing some ripped up wallpaper fits right in with the quilt of crazy Sarah Steel started for me.

It took me 20 minutes staring at that wall to realize it didn't matter if it was real or not, this place was getting inside my head either way. I had to keep moving.

The distance between the hallway lights grew further apart as I continued. This narrow, never ending hallway grew dim, then dark, then so black I started to drown in it. Every light that passed me was a gasp for sour air at the surface. I kept checking baseboards. The tear never reappeared, but I couldn't shake that phantom smell.

Maybe this hallway was leading me out of the level, but with each step my stomach only sank.

If this was only level one, what could I expect at level two? How had Rita gotten all the way to level four? The thought of Rita wandering through these halls is enough to make my heart stop.

To my surprise, the tunnel ended. It spat me out into yet another big blank room the size of a gymnasium. On the far wall, the only feature; a plain wooden door.

I felt myself push towards it, but the walls refused to pass me by. so I pushed harder, and harder, until I fell over. The rug hit my face, and knocked me back into my body. Knocked the wind out of me too. I inhaled, expecting that same smell I couldn't place. Instead, smoke. I couldn't even trust my own senses anymore.

I got to my feet.

Each step forward felt like pulling the ground beneath my feet. Like white knuckle scaling a mountain and gritted teeth. I kept my eyes on the door. They started to burn but I couldn't blink. I had made that mistake one too many times, letting rooms slip through my eyelashes like sand between fingers. I grabbed the knob with both hands, and collapsed through the door.

I took a second, let my eyes close, let myself breath. I could hear Buddy counting the seconds between my inhales and exhales.

*In two three, out two three, Oh come on, you can do better than that. Add a second to each.
In two three four, out two three four, good, longer on the exhale Juno.
In two three four, out two three four five, focus Juno.
In two three four five, out two three four five six, now you're getting it,
In two three four-*

Leave it to Buddy Aurinko to turn meditation into a competition. Surprisingly effective. I couldn't get rid of the smell. The more I tried to push it away, the stronger it got. I opened my eyes. There was a coffee table next to me. I sat up.

This was it. This had to be the end of the level. My ticket out was hidden somewhere among a musty break room sofa, a coffee table, a filing cabinet, and a vase. I searched every inch of that tiny room. There wasn't so much as lint between the couch cushions. The only anomaly I could find was a small dark stain on the underside of the left pillow. The filing cabinet was empty, the vase was slightly heavier than it looked, and the coffee table looked about as old as it was new. Hope had seized me before I could squash it, yet again. I opened the door to the next room, and froze.

It was identical to the last one. Coffee table floating out at that same odd angle. Filing cabinet tucked into the corner beside that musty break room couch. I flipped over the left cushion. Same brown stain. I opened the next door, and the next, and the next. Exactly the same. I rushed through door after door, hoping and praying for any change at all. Until finally, after hours, I came to a room with curtains hanging on the far wall. I threw them open. The wall stared back at me. I grabbed the vase and hurled it at the wall. Then the coffee table. Then I ripped the curtains down and collapsed to the floor along with them. I let out a yell and it sounded halfway between a roar and a sob. I did it again. And again. I shouted until my voice gave out underneath me and I doubled over. In the distance, something else continued to yell. Before I could stop myself, I called out to it.

"Hello?"

The shrieking stopped. Then started again. Muffled. It sounded like they were two floors below me. I pressed my ear to the ground.

"HELLO?"

They responded. Two syllables.

"PLEASE."

A word. They were saying a word.

"PLEASE!"

Two syllables.

Juno.

Someone was in here with me, and they knew my name.

3. 8 missed calls

This is RITA! I'm on a SUPER DUPER SECRET *spy mission*, so I'm not sure how you got this number. But if you went to all that trouble you probably got something real important to say- like THE WORLD IS ABOUT TO END, and I'm the ONLY ONE THAT CAN SAVE IT! Like how in Miss Timetraveler's Super-Space-Time-Continuum Special, the lady that invented time travel has to use her time travel machine to SAVE THE UNIVERSE, only the machine is broken, and she's the only one that can fix it, and she's stuck a bajillion years in the past, and so she has to REND REALITY with *nothing but her WITS!* Anyways, if you really gotta say something, l-

beep

Message one.

Juno laughs at the voice message

God it's good to hear your voice. I know you probably aren't going to get this message but...

I don't know where you are. I think I took a wrong turn, or several. Maybe every turn I've taken in this goddamn maze has been a wrong turn. Rita, this place *doesn't end*. I don't know how you got out. I hope you got out.

I've been wandering around for days, and I don't know if I'm starting to hallucinate, or if this place is messing with me. It's started repeating itself more and more. But I found a cigarette butt, and it was still warm when I picked it up. I've been smelling smoke for the past few days, and then I thought I heard someone screaming my name...

Rita I think there might be someone in here with me. It may be a trick, but it's all I've got to go on, and that's a hell of a lot better than nothing. I hope you're-

Message two.

I keep hearing footsteps, and I can't tell where they're coming from anymore. They sound like they're getting closer, but as soon as I think I've reached the source it stops. I'm starting to wonder if I'm hearing things I want to hear. Maybe this is all another trick.

But I still have the cigarette butt. I haven't let go of it. It feels real. I have to believe they're real. That's what the big guy would say.

I have to believe you're still out there.

Message three.

I thought I heard footsteps on the other side of this wall. There's no door that leads there. When I called out they didn't respond. That scares me worse than the screaming. Maybe something has already got to them, maybe I'm next.

footsteps

Did you hear that?

footsteps fade

Hey!

silence

I have to go.

Message four.

It's been a few days... I think. I haven't seen anything in a while. Wait-

Juno runs towards something

I found a shoe! It's a weird leather boot, and it's still warm. Ha! Looks like something Sasha would've worn during her goth phase... never mind that. Why would somebody drop their shoe? Were they running from something? Or if it's the same person that called to me, maybe they know I'm tracking them. I'll keep you updated.

Message five.

I just stepped on someone's gum.

Message six.

Rita, I think I'm trapped. There are these two rooms, and no matter which door I walk through, I just keep passing between one and the other. I've been walking back and forth between them for hours hoping something will change. I searched everything. What am I missing? How did you get out? I don't know how to get out. I don't know how to get out, Rita. I don't know-

Message seven.

footsteps

Message eight.

(whispered)

Rita.

I think they found me.

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