

## 2024 HIGH SCHOOL SHORT STORY CONTEST – HONORABLE MENTION

### Protocol 7

By Kalina Peterson

An alarm blared across Creya's consciousness, and she stirred, knowing what the sound meant, but not quite ready to acknowledge it.

"Time to wake up Creya," whispered a slightly motherly voice, right in her ear.

Creya let out a small moan and stretched. "Ugh Lexie, why?"

"Umm, school? Remember?"

"Oh." Creya promptly turned around and face-planted into her pillow.

"Creya," Lexie said warningly. "Do I have to initiate Protocol 7?"

"NO! No, no no. I'm up, I'm up." Creya thrust aside her covers and hopped out of bed. "See?"

Lexie laughed. "That's what I thought."

Creya glanced at the tiny device in her ear, which held her personal AI Lexie. She wondered how she'd gotten to the point in her life where a tiny AI got her out of bed and wide awake at the mere mention of Protocol 7. She had only experienced it twice since she'd gotten her iPro, and it was not something she wanted to relive anytime soon. Protocol 7 was an override program installed by the government, where the AI could take any measures necessary to have citizens keep the law. And since citizens were forbidden to remove the AI, Protocol 7 could get pretty ugly, pretty fast.

Sighing, Creya quickly made her bed in the military style her dad had taught her. Stomping over to her dresser, she plucked out a pair of black cargo pants and a gray T-shirt. Then she grabbed her green camo jacket, gaze lingering on the worn cuffs and slightly faded colors.

The jacket had once been her brother's before he had been drafted for the war. He had given it to Creya when he had to trade it in for his military uniform. Creya hadn't seen him ever since. She shrugged it on and sat on the edge of her bed, pulling on some socks.

Standing up, Creya walked down the stairs, grinning as she caught her first glimpse of the kitchen. It was decorated with pink and red streamers, and a banner that read "Happy Birthday Lia" was strewn across the wall. Two birthday presents sat under a triage of balloons, and a stack of pancakes sat right next to it.

Lia, Creya's now 6-year-old sister, sat at the table gobbling down some pancakes.

"Happy birthday!" Creya said, sitting beside her sister and pulling up a chair.

"Thanks!" Lia said through her breakfast.

Their dad, Lieutenant Venten, strode into the room, his uniform immaculately pressed and clean. “Lia! Happy birthday.”

“Daddy!” Lia ran towards him. He caught her and spun her around, laughing. She giggled and he set her down, squatting down so he was at her eye level.

“Are you excited?” he exclaimed.

“Super excited. I’m one of the first kindergarteners to get their iPro!”

“I’ll bet you are. So, do you have any idea what—” He cut off and looked straight ahead, standing up. “Incoming call,” he muttered. “sorry.”

He brought a hand to his black iPro and switched on his mike. “Yes, sir.” He paused to listen to whoever was on the other side. Creya and Lia shared a glance. “I’m moving to a discreet location now, sir.”

He gave his daughters a quick wave before stalking off down the hallway towards his office.

Creya boarded the school bus, choosing a seat near the front. She set down her backpack and, out of reflex, reached for the seatbelt, but then realized that it wasn’t there. After self-driving automobiles came out, the government made it mandatory for all vehicles to be self-driving. So, seatbelts weren’t needed anymore because car crashes became a thing of the past.

The bus started up and Creya gazed out the window, watching as apartment buildings sped by. Occasionally, she’d see a tree or two on the street, but nowadays, most gardens were on the roofs of the apartment buildings. As they sped by, Creya glimpsed multiple ads for the latest iPro model. War advertisements littered the streets, each one motivating young men to join the army and fight for their country. Occasionally, Creya would spot a Wanted poster for Alan Cypher, the most dangerous criminal in the nation.

From what the wanted ad claimed, he was an abolitionist, and he had been terrorizing the country for more than four years. He was the leader of a group of rebels that had been fighting the government for years. The attacks had gotten worse as he grew up, making him smarter, stronger, and faster. The government tried to cover up the damage that had ensued from his attacks, but some were harder to hide than others. One time, Cypher had blown up an entire fleet of military jets and got away clean. The government was still scrambling to figure out how he did it.

His wanted poster seemed like some sort of joke. The picture of what he looked like was just an extremely blurred photo of him running. Nobody had been able to make out any of his features, so the probability of citizens identifying him was pretty low. The reward for information about him varied, depending on how useful the information was, but the reward for bringing him in was enough to feed any citizen for a lifetime.

Creya leaned away from the window and sighed. Hopefully, Cypher would be caught soon.

Hours later, Creya sat on a bench at the bus stop after school, waiting for the bus that wouldn’t come for at least another twenty minutes. Lexie was quizzing her so she could study for the history test on Friday.

“What did the 53rd Amendment do?”

“It made self-driving cars mandatory.”

“Good,” said Lexie approvingly. “How did President Miachels solve the American housing problem?”

“He signed the Vertical Housing Act, which required all buildings to be at least three stories high and have a basement. It also cleared out a lot of rural land and replaced it with apartment buildings.”

“And?” Lexie prodded. “What else?”

Creya bit her lip. “Uh... it moved many farms onto rooftops?”

“Nope.” Lexie corrected crisply. “President Micheals ordered all of the—”

Lexie cut off abruptly.

Creya paused, waiting for the AI to finish her sentence. No audio came.

“Lexie?” She asked cautiously, tapping her iPro. No response. “Lexie, are you there?”

Nothing.

Creya’s brow furrowed. This had never happened before. The AIs never faltered. Confused, she tapped her iPro again. It couldn’t be broken, could it? And it couldn’t be an internet crash, all iPro’s ran on the government’s server. But why would the AI not respond? Creya couldn’t think of any plausible reason for Lexie’s disappearance.

Fear clutched at Creya’s throat. What if the government thought she had purposely disabled her AI? She could be thrown in prison!

“Lexie?” Creya asked frantically. “Where are you? What’s going on?”

Again, nothing. Creya racked her brain trying to figure out what she could do to get her AI back online. She didn’t dare take it out and inspect it, then she would certainly be breaking the law. The iPro didn’t come with a reset button, mainly because the government didn’t want people tampering with the device.

Creya glanced around hoping nobody else would realize that her AI was offline. But when she looked up, she was shocked. Time had seemed to stop. Everyone that had been walking purposefully to go about their business had stalled. Many stood still with confused and terrified expressions clear on their faces. And almost every voice seemed to be saying their AI’s name.

“Emma?”

“Mike?”

“Daniel?”

“Hunter?”

“What’s going on?”

“Layla?”

“Is this a prank?”

“Susan? Where are you?”

It slowly dawned on Creya that not only had her AI stopped working, but everyone’s iPro had seemed to crash. Nobody seemed sure what to do. The government had explained that, in an emergency, the AIs would explain what to do, or relay government messages to the public, so everyone was safe in an emergency. But the government had never explained what to do if the AIs crashed.

Creya swallowed nervously. What should she do? She couldn’t contact her dad, she couldn’t call for help, she wasn’t sure where the nearest safe location was, she didn’t know how to get home, she wasn’t even sure if the school was open so she could ask a teacher.

Looking around, Creya spotted yet another impossibility. The cars and trucks speeding on the road in front of her slowed, then stopped.

Every. Single. One.

Creya stood up to look at the road further ahead. Again, all the auto cars slowed, then stopped. The occupants seemed shocked. Automobiles never stopped unless they were at the desired location. Creya whipped her head around and stared at the street behind her. All the auto cars there had stopped too.

People slowly began filing out of the cars and buses, unsure what had happened. From the bewildered and panicked looks on their faces, Creya could tell that their AI had stopped working too.

Something flickered in the corner of her vision, and Creya turned, finding that all the TV screens showing ads were flickering. Some cut out into static. Others flicked back and forth from the ad, to a blank screen. A couple of gasps and shouts started. People pointed and whispered at the flickering screens, marveling at yet a third impossibility. Since when did TV screens all cut out at once? Then, suddenly all the billboards, all the TVs.

A teenage boy, probably a couple of years Creya’s senior, stood in front of the camera. He had dark brown hair and caramel eyes. His face was bloody and bruised, his nose crooked from what looked like a punch. He wore a black jacket with a singular white stripe on the sleeve. But most frightening of all, he had no iPro in his ear. Creya gasped as she realized who the young man must be.

Alan Cypher.

“Citizens of the US!” he cried. “My name is Alan Cypher, and, though many of you know me as a criminal, I want you to see that what our rebellion is doing is right! The government has been controlling you! The AIs, friends you trusted, monitor your every move, your every choice! You have no freedom. Your life is being controlled by a robot!”

“Your privacy has been stripped away the moment you first put on your iPro. The government has access to all of your legal and personal information. Our lead scientist investigated the device you all wear right now. It records every word you have ever said and sends it to the government. People of the US, stand with us! Realize that what the government has done is wrong and fight against it.

“This used to be a country of freedom and choice, where citizens had the right to privacy. Let’s make it that way again.”

Alan raised a hand, in it lay a black iPro.

“This used to control my life,” he said. Then he curled his fingers into a fist and smashed it, the CRUNCH of a broken iPro echoing across the streets. He looked straight into the camera. “Don’t let it control yours too.”

The feed cut out, leaving all the ad screens black.

The crowd stood in stunned silence.

Nobody seemed sure quite what to do. No one near Creya seemed brave enough to take the first step. Everyone either stared at the black screens in shock or glanced at the people around them, unsure how they would react if they decided to remove the convoluted device.

Creya’s mind was racing. Had it all really been a trick? Lexie had acted like her friend, but all along she had been sending everything to the government. Every message she sent, every call she made, every conversation, every minute of her life had been shown to people she didn’t know.

Creya felt like she could see clearly for the first time. How could she not have seen this? She had no control over life, and as if that wasn’t bad enough, the reason was a device she had willingly kept in her ear for eight years. Creya felt more afraid than she ever had in her life, yet somehow she knew that the decision she was about to make was the right one.

The lack of movement and sound seemed suffocating.

Her hand shaking, Creya slowly reached toward her iPro. Then it all went wrong.

Then the pain started. Pain she had only felt twice before.

Protocol 7.

It came in waves, each one more powerful than the one before. Creya cried out and tried to identify where the pain was coming from. She was tingling all over, like her entire body had fallen asleep. Each wave of pain was like an electrical shock. Then it began to fade, first in her head. Then her neck. shoulders, elbows, hands, hips, knees, feet. It was all gone. She was numb. She couldn’t move. The ground rushed up towards her and seconds later she realized she was lying sideways on the sidewalk.

She hadn’t felt the impact.

The noise sounded in her ear, loud enough to make her want to cry. Gunshots, train horns, doors slamming, trumpets playing sour notes, sirens wailing. Her head throbbed painfully. Tears filled her vision. She tried to blink it away, but she couldn't. She couldn't feel anything. Blobs lay on the ground beside her. Creya panicked as she realized they were the people who had been with her at the bus stop.

Protocol 7 had been initiated for everyone.

Creya tried to cry out for help, but she couldn't move her lips. She couldn't feel them. Trying to stem her rising panic, Creya began counting the seconds. Seven hundred fifty-three seconds had passed when Creya heard a strange sound. Jet engines. Faintly, she heard a hatch opening and footsteps approaching. Ears straining, Creya tried once more to cry out for help, but it was in vain.

The footsteps stopped a good distance away and someone sighed. "A shame, I know. But it had to be done." the voice said. It sounded male.

"Sir? What should we do with the bodies?"

Creya felt a surge of hope. That was her dad's voice! He'd see her and take her home. Relief washed over her, it felt like the first thing good that had happened in hours.

"Send battalions to return citizens to their homes. Tech support is working on sending out a nationwide memory wipe, by the time the numbness wears off, no one will remember Cypher's message."

"Yes, sir."

"Thankfully, we were able to trace the feed from the rebels. I've sent out troops to scour that area, they should be reporting back soon. Once I get that report, I want you to head to the area and see if you can find anything."

"Yes, sir."

"Good." A sigh came again. "Truly a shame. But it had to be done, for the good of the country." the man said.

"Yes, sir."