

FALSE POSITIVE

NUREN IFTKHAR

The light that drenched the man on the rooftop had no warmth to it. The light shifted and morphed with the changing visuals on the billboard, making the silhouette of his crouching body move around like a puppet on a string. The man was shivering. His rain-soaked cloak offered little to no comfort on this rainy evening in district DHK South.

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The billboard blared through the silence of the night. But the man could still make out the sound of the footsteps behind him.

"You don't need to sneak up on me to put me down," the man said softly. "I'm not armed."

"That's quite perceptive of you. Augmented hearing?" the voice of a young woman asked from the shadow.

"Just survival," he said, amused.

"One of those things you learn growing up in DHK South. I know what you mean," she calmly added.

The man finally raised his head. He looked to be in his fifties. The neon of the billboard flashed across his face.

"Is that who you think I am? A southern rebel hiding in your precious DHK North?"

"A rebel? You got me wrong. I'm not one of those anti-rebellion fanatics. I honestly find it quite silly, if you ask me," she replied.

"And what's so funny about the southerners waging an armed revolution against class discrimination?" he asked with a measured tone.

"The futility of it," she answered. "I'm rather more wary of the Android project. Humans are predictable when they go rogue. Androids like you, however, are a bigger worry," she mused.

The man finally turned around to take a good look at this intruder. A young woman in her twenties. The lack of a badge made it hard to tell if she was with IMCO Inc, the authoritarian corporation running District DHK. But the air of confidence in her stance and the look of death in her eyes cleared his doubts.

"So you're here to put down a rogue Android. Tell me,

stranger, what gives me away as an Android other than the beep on your module?" he asked

"Nothing physically. Except if I put a bullet through your head right now the blood that would sputter out will be a murky blue," she answered with humour in her voice.

"And mentally?" he asked after a pause.

"Empathy. And every single thing that makes us humans. Your kind serves a purpose that you are programmed for. Your talk of philosophy won't convince me otherwise," she replied with a sudden tone of seriousness.

"And have you bothered to think why the Androids have been going rogue? The sheer amount of unreported Androids in District DHK that IMCO didn't tell you about? Have you wondered if maybe, just maybe, you were one as well?"

The silence that ensued came to an end with the sound of a plasma gun. The intruder took slow steps towards the body of the man. Under the neon glow of the billboard, she realised the blood that poured towards her feet was red. She frantically looked at the module in her hand, the beep in her GPS location still present.

Unauthorized Android Nearby

She turned towards the man's still body. She could now see two eyes between his arms glowing a violent green. The tiny figure of a cat jumped towards her.

Nuren Iftkhar keeps a presentation ready to convince you that Tame Impala has been the best thing to happen to music in the last decade. Send him unorthodox food recipes at n.iftkhar18@gmail.com



ILLUSTRATION: FAIAZ RAFID

MASKS

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Fifty years ago. That's when they put up the field separating the two zones of District DHK.

The prime differentiating factor between the two zones? Wealth and social status. If you lived up North, you were what some would term as the modern-day aristocracy, while all the "peasants" who lived in the South were considered to be unfit to live amongst the upper echelons of society.

The government had bowed down to the power of IMCO Inc., the sole creator and distributor of Android and augmentation technology.

Whispers in the backstreet alleys would often say that they took control by replacing important government officials with Android copies of them, but really, it didn't matter. Fifty years had passed, and this little rumour could do little to

change the status quo.

The people of the South had no power; no weapons. Even getting past the forcefield separating the two DHKs was impossible. So what could one do?

What could we do?

All rations were sold for social points, at least in the South, and the only way one could have enough points was to give their lives to IMCO Inc.

No augmentation works on the first try, it goes through a meticulous process of testing, before finally being perfected for human use. At least, for human use in the North.

But experiments needed guinea pigs, and that was the whole point of DHK South. There were a lot more of us on this side of the field, and why wouldn't we be the test subjects so that the Northerners could have one more "improve-

ment" to add to their list.

From memory retention chips to microchips that could increase your IQ, they had it all. Anything you could ever fathom wanting, they had it. But it was never enough; the Northerners always wanted more. I guess, how else could you keep yourself busy but with the latest augmentations and prosthesis. And the only way to up your status was to be the first one to own the latest model.

I'm tired of rethinking the same thoughts every time I step into this room. Every time I walked on the outer boundaries of the field to see the amazing world beyond it. Of flying vehicles, zero air pollution and unending technological marvel.

"Today we'll be running quite an interesting experiment," said the man in the white lab coat. "Instant facial reconstruction technology. I bet this will be fun."

He gave us a menacing smile, the same one he'd give at the start of every experiment.

"This might hurt just a little bit."

I don't know what happened back there. Or what came over me. But as I walk towards the field, wearing someone else's face over mine, I can't help but think.

"Name and ID?" the guard yells at me from behind the checkpoint.

"Dr. Shahid Kamal," I say, instinctively flashing the identity card from inside my lab coat.

And as I step into the outskirts of DHK North through the opening in the field, I think.

"Maybe there is something I can do."

Aaqib doesn't know what he is doing anymore. Send help at aaqibhasib94@gmail.com