

Juno Steel and the Infernal Grind  
(Part One)

By

Kevin Vibert and Harley Takagi Kaner

[Trigger Warnings](#)

## INTRO

(THE PENUMBRA EXPRESS: A TROLLEY TRAVELING  
ALONG A TRACK WHICH CUTS THROUGH AN ENDLESS  
PLANE OF FOG AND SHAPES WHICH SHIFT IN THE DARK)

SOUND: RAIN.

MUSIC: PENUMBRA THEME.

CONDUCTOR:

Ah, good evening, Traveler. And welcome to Penumbra.

Tonight's tale is...

SOUND: DOOR CREAKS OPEN.

*Juno Steel and the Infernal Grind.*

SOUND: RAIN FADES OUT.

MUSIC: FADES OUT.

Scene: 1

(A SMALL CELL IN A HUGE PRISON-MACHINE FLOATING  
IN SPACE: THE AURINKO PERMANENT CORRECTIONS FACILITY.)

MUSIC: GENTLE MEDITATION MUSIC.

JUNO:

(SNORING AND MUTTERING IN HIS SLEEP)

PALOMINE:

(THROUGH COMMS)

Good morning! It is five o'clock AM, and you know what that means:

SOUND: LOUD WHISTLE.

JUNO:

(STRUGGLES AWAKE)

PALOMINE:

Calisthenics!

MUSIC: PEPPY ELECTRONIC WORKOUT MUSIC.

JUNO:

(PANTING AND GRUMBLING)

PALOMINE:

Feet apart, stomach engaged, and knee UP, two, three, four,  
and SWITCH, two, three, four...

Number ninety-two, off your rump and on your feet, now!

JUNO:

(PANTING AND GRUMBLING)

SOUND: JUNO STRUGGLES THROUGH A WORKOUT MOVE.

PALOMINE:

Arms UP, two, three, four, and LEFT...

Ninety-two, this means you!

SOUND: HISSING GAS IN JUNO'S CELL.

Two, three, four, and RIGHT, two, three, four, TWIST, six, seven, eight, WIDE! SWINGS! seven, eight...

JUNO:

That smell....! What the hell is that *smell*?!

SOUND: METALLIC RAP ON THE CELL.

PALOMINE (GUARD):

(THROUGH VOICE MODULATOR)

You heard the tape, Ninety-two. On your feet or we move up from smells to shocks.

JUNO:

(GROWLS)

SOUND: HE GETS UP AND STARTS THE WORKOUT. ALL SOUND FADES.

MUSIC: MUSIC FADES.

PUCK (NARRATOR):

Five AM's wakeup, then Calisthenics. You're gonna wanna keep up with the tape, and I mean *sharp*. You don't want to climb up the Punishment Ladder first thing in the day. The workout ends at 5:30. Showers start at 5:30 on the dot.

JUNO (NARRATOR):

... You just said 5:30 twice.

PUCK (NARRATOR):

Yeah, I know what I said.

SOUND: PRISON AMBIENCE FADES IN.

MUSIC: WORKOUT MUSIC FADES IN.

JUNO:

(PANTING)

PALOMINE:

... two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, SHOWERS!

JUNO:

What?

SOUND: THE LIGHTS SHORT OUT.

MUSIC: MUSIC ENDS.

Hey, who turned out the--

SOUND: A SHOWER STARTS SPRAYING FROM THE CELL'S CEILING.

(YELP)  
Ah! Cold!  
(SHIVERS)

SOUND: HE ATTEMPTS TO WASH HIMSELF. AMBIENCE FADES.

PUCK (NARRATOR):  
Showers off at 5:45. Get dressed and show up to your assigned seat for Breakfast With Rotating Conversation Partners by 6:00. The seat changes every day, so look for your number and *move*, cuz breakfast is over at 6:10.

SOUND: ECHOING CAFETERIA IN THE AURINKO PERMANENT CORRECTIONS FACILITY, CUTLERY CLINKING, PRISONERS EATING MESSILY.

JUNO:  
(CLEARS THROAT)  
So, uh, do they serve this junk every day?

Wow. You really like this stuff.

Hey pal, you haven't met a Buddy Aurinko in here, have you--

SOUND: A PIERCING WHISTLE.

(YELPS)

PALOMINE:  
(OVER THE INTERCOMMS)  
And that, good citizens, was breakfast.

SOUND: ELECTRIC WHIRRING. EVERYONE'S BREAKFAST-TABLES TILT AND SEND THE DISHES DOWN GARBAGE CHUTES.

JUNO:  
*Was?* I barely...

Hey, goddammit, I wasn't done!

PALOMINE:  
Constructive Work shifts start in fifteen minutes. Don't be late, now.

SOUND: EVERYONE IN THE CAFETERIA GETS UP AND STARTS HEADING FOR THE DOOR.

JUNO:

Hey! Where the hell... all right, okay, put the stunner down, pal, I get the picture.  
(SIGHS)

SOUND: HE FOLLOWS THE CROWD OUT. AMBIENCE FADES TO THE TOWN CENTRAL DINER IN PICKHAM POINT, IO.

PUCK (NARRATOR):

Constructive Work's next. They've got different jobs they take in from across the system: laundry, making license-plates, compressing three-course meals in those funny little pills in the commissary. They'll either sort you into whichever one you're best at or whichever one you hate most, I'm unclear on that. That ends at noon.

JUNO (NARRATOR):

They give me ten minutes for breakfast, then *six hours* to work?

RITA (NARRATOR):

More like seven, actually. At noon they got "Recess and Reading Approved Literature" for an hour.

JUNO (NARRATOR):

Recess doesn't sound like work.

PUCK (NARRATOR):

Palomine was a big supporter of "structured playtime." You'll be running a lot of laps.

RITA (NARRATOR):

Also, there's only one approved book, so they just play it over the loudspeaker for everyone.

SOUND: AMBIENCE OF THE PRISON YARD FADES IN. JUNO IS IN A GROUP OF OTHERS, RUNNING.

JUNO:

(PANTING)

PALOMINE:

(THROUGH A BULLHORN)

"Chapter Forty-Nine: My Terrible Twos, And What My Parents Should've Done, the Lazy Bums." Now, punishment is not necessary for the gifted child, and young Palomine was as gifted as they come...

SOUND: PRISON YARD AMBIENCE FADES TO DINER AMBIENCE.

JUNO (NARRATOR):

What is this place, *Hell*? I gotta sit there--

RITA (NARRATOR):

You'll be runnin', remember.

JUNO (NARRATOR):

-- I gotta run there and listen to some old shrink read his own biography to me?

PUCK (NARRATOR):

What, do you want to pull the plug on this plan? Because you know I'm all for that.

JUNO (NARRATOR):

(GROWLS)

PUCK (NARRATOR):

(SIGHS)

Ey, Pam, how's about another slice of that cherry pie? It's feeling like we're gonna be here a while.

RITA:

Oh, oh! Make that two! Plus Sheriff Falco's one, so three.

PUCK:

Juno. This plan... this one's too much.

JUNO:

Director W's doing something drastic in, like, three weeks, Falco. I'm not even sure "too much" is gonna be enough.

PUCK:

Then why the hell would you take the risk? You've gotten lucky. Dark Matters hasn't found you yet, and now what? You're like a mouse hiding in the cat's god-damn mouth!

JUNO:

Look, this was the deal. I talk to Mercury about finding some of the best phony paperwork creds can buy, you talk to his pirate-PA about her friend that escaped this prison--

PUCK:

I keep telling you, he didn't escape. He served his time. Thirty years!

JUNO:

No such thing as a prison nobody can escape from. Buddy taught me that one.

PUCK:

Then why the hell isn't she outta there yet?

JUNO:

We've been over this. That place is built so that it's impossible to escape without a backup from outside. Well, you're lookin' at the backup.

PUCK:

Nobody has ever escaped that prison, Juno. Nobody.

JUNO:

Sounds like they're due, then. Just like my bookie used to say: it's when you're on a losing streak that you double down and bet everything you've got.

PUCK:

Rita? Please tell me you got some way to talk sense into him. *Please.*

RITA:

What? Oh, sorry, I wasn't listenin'. I was thinkin' about how lucky Mista Mercury is to work with pirates all day.

JUNO:

Rita, we used to work with pirates.

RITA:

I know, and I miss it! But that don't mean I want you to go into a jail cell on your own. Then me and Mista Ransom are gonna be the only two not in jail, and who knows where he is, and I don't wanna be all alone!

JUNO:



I have to, Rita. That's where they're keeping them. Buddy, Vespa, Jet... they're all in Dark Matters's personal pen. The Aurinko Permanent Corrections Facility.

PUCK:

Stupid. Stupid, stupid, stupid...

SOUND: AMBIENCE FADES OUT.

MUSIC: JUNO'S THEME.

JUNO (NARRATOR):

In Hyperion City, there were only three real destinations for you when the jury said "Guilty." The Fortezza if you were useful; Hoosegow if you looked good on camera; and for everyone else there was the Slammer, where "rehabilitation" was a word people actually said, sure, but usually it was a few seconds before they locked the door and "rehabilitated" you right in the teeth.

"This is progress," they say. "You oughta see what prisons *used* to be like," they say. Hell, I used to say that, too, because when you show up to work every day and wreck yourself trying to be the good guy... you'll justify damn near anything to keep yourself feeling like the good guy. But "nice try" is for little league, not human rights violations.

My name's Juno Steel, and even though I used to send people to jail cells, and even though I used to know all the ways to keep myself from feeling bad about it, I can still say with absolute honesty that I never, *never* would have let a perp I caught go to the Aurinko Permanent Corrections Facility. Not if I could help it.

Which is a hell of a thing to say, since I just pulled every string I had to send *myself* there.

But maybe let's back up a second. Because, yeah, getting myself locked up was a dumb idea... but not quite as dumb as it sounds.

SOUND: DINER AMBIENCE.

PUCK:

You need to start taking this seriously, Juno. You've figured out how we can get into that prison, sure, but you don't even have an escape plan!

RITA:

Really? But Mista Steel, you told me--

JUNO:

I have a plan. Mx. Sheriff just doesn't like it.

MUSIC: JUNO THEME ENDS.

PUCK:

Do I need to pull out the dictionary again? 'Cuz I can tell you by freakin' definition this ain't a plan.

RITA:

Well... what is it?

JUNO:

Remember how Buddy always said there's no lock a dedicated enough thief can't crack? Well, I did my own research and tried to think of Aurinko Permanent Corrections like a lock: if I were going to pick it, what would I need?

A way to get to and from that place, for one thing. Aurinko Permanent's a satellite hidden way out in deep space, and they don't keep any transportation on site -- not even emergency escape pods. Even if an escapee got out of their cell and incapacitated every single guard, it wouldn't do them any good; they'd have no way to leave. Just lightyears and lightyears of empty space.

So you couldn't pull off the prison break just from the inside. You'd need someone on the outside to pick you up. But Aurinko Permanent doesn't allow visitors, phone calls, no contact with the outside world.

RITA:

Then... how could the people on the outside know when the people stuck in jail were gonna escape?

JUNO:

They couldn't. And that's why nobody's escaped from this place: there's no way to coordinate between the inside and the outside. Until *this*.

SOUND: JUNO DROPS SOMETHING SMALL ONTO THE TABLE.

RITA:

Until what?

JUNO:  
*Exactly.*

PUCK:  
Quit showboating and spit it out, already.

JUNO:  
This is a present from the terrifyingly deep pockets of Mr. Mick Mercury, Rita: a covert comms, almost invisible and so new that modern security scanners haven't been updated to detect it yet.

PUCK:  
So new it probably hasn't been QA tested yet, either.

JUNO:  
Give this to someone inside that prison and you will have an open line of communication whenever you want. The perfect way to coordinate a prison break from the outside and in.

RITA:  
Oh wow!!!

JUNO:  
Only problem is: if there's no visiting, no calls, no mail, how are we supposed to get this inside the prison?

RITA:  
How, Mista Steel, how??

JUNO:  
So here's the plan I supposedly don't have: I'm gonna wear that comms and you all are gonna send me to Aurinko Permanent Corrections. Mick's new PA Ms. Lately's broken her kids outta prison enough times that she's an old pro, so I asked her to come pick us up twenty-one days from today. That's three weeks for me to get in touch with Buddy, Vespa, and the big guy over in SuperJail, then we all break out of our cells, catch our ride, boom, we all fly home! Done! And I've got the comms to modify the details in case anything goes wrong.

RITA:  
Wow! That's so cool!

Wait, I knew about that already. But it's still cool! So what do you mean Mista Steel ain't got a plan, Sheriff?

PUCK:

You didn't notice that he skipped kind of a major step in there?

JUNO:

Didn't skip anything. Plan's airtight.

PUCK:

Okay, wise guy. So you figured out how to get away from the prison. We're all very proud. Now tell me how you're gonna do the "meet up with your old crime buddies and break out of your cells in a few weeks" part.

JUNO:

Eh, Buddy's probably got that one figured out.

PUCK:

So you *don't* have a plan.

RITA:

No, that sounds like a plan to me. Captain A's definitely gonna figure somethin' out.

PUCK:

Rita, this is not helping! You're leaving most of the goddamn prison break to three people who don't even know it's coming! There is no guarantee, here!

JUNO:

It's a "maybe," sure. But if "maybe's" all I've got, I'll take it. Stakes are too high.

PUCK:

You wanna talk about stakes, huh? I'll talk to you about stakes. How about we get back into the daily schedule you're gonna have to survive while you're hatching your amazing escape plan?

JUNO:

Love to.

SOUND: PUCK FLIPS THROUGH THEIR PAPER NOTES. THEY ALSO STUFF A  
CHUNK OF CHERRY PIE IN THEIR MOUTH. THE FORK CLINKS ON THE  
PLATE.

PUCK:

(MOUTH FULL)

All right, where the hell was I... Calisthenics at 5:00,  
ten-minute breakfast, manual labor for *six hours* and  
running laps for one...

There. After recess comes "Lunch With Rotating Conversation  
Partners," one o'clock.

JUNO:

Ten minutes again?

PUCK:

Ten minutes again.

RITA:

At least you'll make a lot of friends, Mista Steel.

JUNO:

Ten minutes isn't enough to eat. I don't think I'm gonna  
manage to strike up conversation in that time, either. I'm  
guessing that's by design.

PUCK:

"Behavioral science is a *science*, just like it says on the  
box. It requires precision, and limiting the variables that  
might affect your patient's development -- including  
outside media, provocative ideas, friends, and family -- is  
essential to behavior modification that works and that  
lasts." So, yeah, I don't think they want you talking to  
each other unsupervised. And since your meal buddies change  
every day--

JUNO:

... I'm not gonna make any friends through ten-minute  
conversations that are weeks or months apart.

RITA:

I wish you wouldn't read offa those creepy notes, Sheriff  
Falco. After all that research I hadda do...

(SHUDDERS)

... I just can't believe that creep was Captain A's *dad*,  
y'know?

PUCK:

It's what Juno's up against. He should know. Palomine Aurinko's dead, but Dark Matters rigged the place so you can barely tell. One of his, ehm, "re-educational principles" was that a strong bond needs to build between trainer and trainee, so the guards, the central computer, every voice except the other inmates' is rigged to sound like him, and everything runs on his... "behavior plan."

JUNO:

(SNORTS)

"Behavior plan."

(SNORTS)

I still don't get why Dark Matters gave a behavioral scientist free rein to build their jails. Did Palomine even have any experience with prisons?

RITA:

I couldn't find any.

PUCK:

Whatever their reasons were... his methods work. That's all I know.

(SHUDDERS)

Anyway. Lunch ends at 1:10. Then it's "Constructive Work" again.

SOUND: DINER AMBIENCE FADES. AMBIENCE CHANGES TO A WORKROOM WITH LOTS OF MACHINERY RUNNING. PALOMINE'S VOICE ECHOES FROM THE INTERCOMMS, SEVERAL GUARDS, AND SAFETY APPARATUS ATTACHED TO THE MACHINE JUNO IS USING.

PALOMINE:

Excellent work, friends! Remember always that hard work lies at the core of being a good citizen!

(GUARD)

Speed it up on the Nutrient Crusher, Ninety-two.

(GUARD)

Don't make me take the stunner out.

(GUARD)

Those pants are getting added to your fees, Forty-nine.

SOUND: WORKROOM AMBIENCE FADES BACK TO THE DINER.

PUCK:

That "Constructive Work" shift lasts 'til 6:00.

JUNO:

Then dinner, obviously.

PUCK:

Nope. "Group Therapy." Rita's already backlogged the details of your bogus identity on the Net, so nobody should know you're Juno Steel. But you need to study the story and stick to it, cuz if anyone in Dark Matters guesses who you are, it's all over.

JUNO:

Stick to the details. Got it.

Hang on, who came up with these details, exactly?

RITA:

I asked Mista Mercury to do it, Mista Steel. I thought, y'know, cuz he's a big writer now, that he could do a convincing... um...

How come you're makin' that face?

SOUND: DINER AMBIENCE FADES OUT. SOOTHING MEDITATION MUSIC  
AMBIENCE OF THE GROUP THERAPY ROOM FADES IN.

PALOMINE:

It looks like we'll have a new friend joining us from today on. Would you mind saying your name for the group, Ninety-two?

JUNO:

Hello.

(DEEP BREATH)

My name is... Max Action.

PALOMINE:

And the "Max" is short for...?

JUNO:

Maximum, it's short for Maximum, all right? I don't want to talk about it.

PALOMINE:

Welcome, Max. I think you'll fit in just right here.

SOUND: AMBIENCE FADES TO THE DINER.

JUNO:

So dinner must be after Group Therapy, right? 7:00 PM seems kind of late.

PUCK:

Later.

RITA:

8:00?

PUCK:

Try 10:30.

JUNO:

Wait a minute. Wait a goddamn minute. They spend the first three-quarters of the day starving us, then they lock us in a room together for "Group Therapy" and expect us to talk about our feelings for *four and a half hours*? We're gonna tear each other apart! We're gonna...

...that's the point, isn't it?

SOUND: AMBIENCE FADES TO GROUP THERAPY.

PALOMINE:

Now that Mr. Action is all settled in and comfortable... does anybody have something they'd like to share with the group to start us off?

SOUND: INMATES START SHOUTING, TOPPLING CHAIRS, BREAKING THINGS.

INMATES:

He keeps letting the Voidmice in!

She eats too damn loud!

They're always staring at me!

Williams told me she was thinking about how to escape!

I did NOT!



Every time I look at his stupid face I want to snap his scrawny neck!

SOUND: THE ARGUMENT ESCALATES. AMBIENCE FADES TO THE DINER.

PUCK:

Break them down, then build them back up however you like. Palomine knew how to wrap it up all nice and sciencey, but his methods for "behavior modification that lasts" were old, old, old. Starving, sleep deprivation, fostering distrust and paranoia, presenting a single figure as your only way out, carrot and stick. Toys for tyrants, whether they were the kind who ran a prison or government or dog kennel or boarding school. The last book of research he published got panned by damn near every human rights group in the galaxy.

JUNO:

Anything ever happen with that?

PUCK:

Yep. Dark Matters showed up and asked him to build a prison.

JUNO:

Shoulda seen that coming.

PUCK:

(CLEARS THROAT)  
After that mess, it's finally time for dinner. 10:30. They give you half an hour, at least. If you're looking to make any friends in there, that's your chance.

RITA:

But everyone's gonna be exhausted, ain't they? I don't think I could say two words after all that. And I can say a *lotta* words.

SOUND: PRISON CAFETERIA AMBIENCE FADES IN, CLINKING FORKS AND SPOONS, PRISONERS EATING.

JUNO:

Hey. Have you met anybody named...  
(SIGHS)  
Never mind.

SOUND: DINER AMBIENCE FADES IN.

PUCK:

She's right, Steel. That place is built to break you.

JUNO:

I can handle it. Just gimme the rest of the schedule.

PUCK:

Fine. Almost done anyway. Everyone's back in their cells at 11:00, then it's "Meditation" for forty-five minutes, followed by the "Evening Lecture" for another forty-five. If they catch you sleeping during either, that's a step up the Punishment Ladder.

RITA:

Punishment Ladder?

PUCK:

Behavioral science so basic it works on animals. If you want to reduce a behavior, you punish it. Every time. And if you don't get a response, you modify the punishment until you do. I don't know the specifics. I get the impression that Lately's friend didn't do much rule-breaking.

SOUND: PRISON AMBIENCE, CALMING MEDITATION TONES.

PALOMINE:

One should not overlook the effectiveness of extreme, weaponized boredom against the misbehaving mind. Boredom is a gateway to the deeper and more vital emotions that control behavior -- it has been standard procedure in police interrogations for thousands of years now to leave the subject alone for hours upon hours before questioning begins.

JUNO:

(HEAVY BREATHING, STARTING TO FALL ASLEEP)

PALOMINE:

Studies show that this technique leaves the subject so desperate for companionship and stimulus that they will give far more confessions far more readily.

JUNO:

(SNORING)

SOUND: THE SHOWERS IN JUNO'S CELL TURN ON FOR A QUICK BLAST OF COLD WATER.

(YELPS AWAKE)

PALOMINE:

The rate of false confessions is admittedly high in these circumstances, but to the behaviorist who gets results this minor flaw hardly outweighs the benefits.

PALOMINE (GUARD):

Eyes open, Ninety-two. The next spray will be even colder.

SOUND: DINER AMBIENCE FADES IN.

JUNO:

So when do I sleep?

PUCK:

Twelve-thirty AM.

JUNO:

12:30 to 5:00... four and a half hours. I've lived on worse--

PUCK:

Then it's time for sleep again at 1:30, 2:30, and 3:30.

JUNO:

... what?

PUCK:

Sleep checks. The guards come by every cell to make sure you're still in there. They hit the bars, you wake up, give them a salute, and go back to bed for an hour or two. Like I said: sleep deprivation.

SOUND: PRISON AMBIENCE. A GUARD RAPS ON THE BARS.

PALOMINE (GUARD):

Sleep check!

SOUND: JUNO IMMEDIATELY, BUT INCOHERENTLY, WAKES UP AND SALUTES.

PALOMINE (GUARD):

That's more like it, Ninety-two. See you in an hour.

SOUND: DINER AMBIENCE.

PUCK:

And then you're up again at 5:00 for Calisthenics.

JUNO:

That's it? Hell, that doesn't sound so bad.

PUCK:

It's every single day, Juno.

JUNO:

Every single day until I get a hold of Buddy, Vespa, or Jet. It shouldn't take long.

RITA:

It *could* take forever, for all we know.

PUCK:

Oh, that's very possible. Just like everything else in your psycho plan, you're counting on good luck.

JUNO:

Not even. I'm counting on totally neutral luck. You said the conversation partners at meals are random, and Aurinko Permanent Corrections only has a hundred inmates at a time, so: ninety-nine other inmates, I need to meet with one of three, three meals a day... that's a one in eleven chance each day. I'll be done in two weeks.

PUCK:

You can't guarantee that!

RITA:

Mista Steel... there's gotta be another way.

JUNO:

Oh, yeah, there probably is.

RITA:

Then why--

JUNO:

Because we've got no time to think it up, Rita. Lately said that Dark Matters was planning some big space-crime-ending Event around three weeks from now, and they've already announced some kind of press conference at Aurinko

Permanent Corrections in the same time frame. Dark Matters has other prisons, but Buddy, Vespa, and Jet all ended up at this one. They are not safe in there. The clock's ticking *fast*.

PUCK:

Just hearsay and hunch, Steel, and neither is enough to bet your sanity on. This is your most dangerous plan yet and you're rushing into it. Why not wait until after the press conference so we can adapt to whatever Dark Matters tries to pull? Then you can do your crazy prison break thing.

JUNO:

I know Director W. I know how she thinks. And if we don't get our family out of her hands before that event twenty-one days from now, I don't think we're ever getting them out. Not the way they went in, anyway.

PUCK:

Juno--

JUNO:

I can't take the risk. Not on Buddy, Vespa, and Jet.

(SNORTS)

So if either of you have any ideas that *don't* involve me locking myself in Dark Matters's superjail, I'd love to hear 'em. But if you don't... I'm taking the shot I have.

RITA:

Um.

PUCK:

(GROWLS)

JUNO:

Yeah, that's what I thought.

So I'm asking Lately to pick us all up one day before the big press conference. Maybe that is rushing, but that's what the comms is for. If we need more time, I'll call her and say so.

RITA:

That's smart.

JUNO:

Damn right it is. Besides that, all I gotta do is hang out a few weeks in a weird prison. No problem.

PUCK:

That's what I keep telling you, Juno. It *is* a problem.

JUNO:

Look, Puck, you're not gonna talk me out of this.

PUCK:

I've given up on that now. All right? You win the grand-prize vacation package to the prison planetoid. But I'm telling you that you will not just be "hanging out." This place was designed by a galaxy-class behavioral scientist to change criminals into not-criminals by changing how their minds *work*. It's as close to brainwashing as it gets.

JUNO:

I'm pretty stubborn. I'll be fine.

PUCK:

Don't even start with that! "It can't happen to me" is the last thing anyone says right before *it* happens to *them*. It ever occur to you to wonder how we know the daily schedule to a secret prison?

JUNO:

Lately's friend told you.

PUCK:

I said Lately learned it from an old friend, but that friend didn't say jack. Lately's friend doesn't respond when people talk to him anymore.

JUNO:

What--

PUCK:

He's still doing that daily schedule. Every day, on his own. Five AM calisthenics--

JUNO:

Sounds healthy.

PUCK:

He wakes himself up at one-thirty, two-thirty, three-thirty AM on the dot and salutes a guard who ain't even there!

JUNO:

Structure's good for a growing dame.

PUCK:

For four and a half hours each day, he screams himself down and calls it "Group Therapy!"

JUNO:

Look, it's *prison*, Falco, I'm not expecting a five-star resort planet.

PUCK:

No, but I don't think you're expecting what you're gonna get either. From your first day in that place the clock is ticking. It's a machine, Steel, one that takes in people and spits out... I don't know what they are anymore, but it's gotta be hell, having every piece of yourself shaved down to nothing.

JUNO:

Yeah, and I know that going in. I'll be careful.

PUCK:

Will you? You gotta promise me that, Juno. First they have you drooling every time they ring a bell, before you know it you've got all the free will and personality of this goddamn table. So promise me.

SOUND: THEY SLAM THEIR HAND ON THE TABLE. DISHES RATTLE.

JUNO:

I promise. I'll keep myself together. Even in the worst case, it's just twenty days before Lately picks me up.

PUCK:

In the worst case you miss your ride and come out like Lately's friend. I want you to think about that and look me in the eyes and tell me the risk's still worth it to you.

JUNO:

It is.

PUCK:

This is so stupid. If it were that easy to break out of Aurinko Permanent, Steel, don't you think someone else would've done it by now?

RITA:

You could get stuck in there. For good.

JUNO:

I know. But if it means a shot at saving them, I'll do it. And no matter how bad it is, I've definitely dealt with worse.

You'll see. I'll be in and out of there in no time flat.

SOUND: AMBIENCE FADES OUT.



Scene: 2

(ABOUT TWO WEEKS LATER, STILL INSIDE  
THE AURINKO PERMANENT CORRECTIONS FACILITY.)

JUNO (NARRATOR):

Maybe all that doesn't sound so bad to you. Maybe your real name is Juno Steel, and you've made getting your face beaten in your bread-and-butter for so long that you think getting your brain beaten in can't be much worse. Maybe--

SOUND: PRISON WHISTLE. JUNO'S NARRATION IN THE DINER AND SCENES FROM THE PRISON OVERLAP.

MUSIC: WORKOUT MUSIC.

PALOMINE:

Calisthenics! Feet apart, that's right, count with me now...

JUNO (NARRATOR):

(PANTING)

Maybe... maybe...

PALOMINE:

Showers!

SOUND: WATER SPRAYS FROM THE CEILING.

MUSIC: WORKOUT MUSIC ENDS.

JUNO (NARRATOR):

(YELPS, THEN SHUDDERS)

What were we talking about again? Sorry, it's kind of hard to think straight when you haven't had more than an hour of sleep at a stretch in two weeks.

SOUND: WATER STOPS. A WHISTLE BLOWS.

MUSIC: MILITARY DRUMS AND ELECTRONIC MUSIC.

PALOMINE:

Breakfast!

JUNO (NARRATOR):

(MOUTH FULL)

I held up all right in Aurinko Permanent Corrections for the first few days. And the next few days after that, hell, sleep deprivation doesn't feel all that different from a hangover or a concussion, and I've had plenty of both, so.

SOUND: WHISTLE.

PALOMINE:  
Constructive work!

JUNO (NARRATOR):  
And then the next day came.

PALOMINE (GUARD):  
Keep an eye on the vat, Ninety-two, or you'll burn  
everyone's lunch.

JUNO (NARRATOR):  
And the next.

PALOMINE:  
Remember to clean your stations like good citizens! We  
don't want to invite the Voidmice into our kitchen, do we?

JUNO (NARRATOR):  
Every day the same exact tasks at the same exact time.

SOUND: WHISTLE.

PALOMINE:  
Recess!

JUNO (NARRATOR):  
(HUFFING AND PUFFING)  
I had no energy left at all by day four. By day ten the  
slop in those meals was actually tasting kinda good. By  
week two I was really, finally sweating.

MUSIC: RAVEL'S BOLERO OVER THE MILITARY DRUMS.

SOUND: WHISTLE.

PALOMINE:  
Lunch!

JUNO (NARRATOR):  
Cuz I only had six days left, and whatever the numbers game  
said...

SOUND: WHISTLE.

PALOMINE:  
Constructive work!

JUNO (NARRATOR):

... I'd never been paired up with...

SOUND: WHISTLE.

PALOMINE:

Group therapy!

CROWD:

(SHOUTING OVER ONE ANOTHER)

You come over here and say that!

I can't stand how she *chews*.

If I have to listen to one more word outta him--

JUNO (NARRATOR):

... I'd never been paired up with Buddy or Vespa or the big guy. Hell, because the guards always split us up into groups of twenty or so, I'd never even seen the three of them.

SOUND: WHISTLE.

PALOMINE:

Dinner!

JUNO (NARRATOR):

We'd been banking on the odds, and that was my big mistake: only luck I can ever count on is bad luck.

SOUND: WHISTLE.

PALOMINE:

Meditation!

SOUND: WHISTLE.

Evening lecture!

JUNO (NARRATOR):

I didn't think they'd be able to get to me after just two weeks. But...

MUSIC: BOLERO WARPS ELECTRONICALLY.

I gotta tell you, I don't say this lightly: I was losing my mind in there.

SOUND: METALLIC KNOCKING.

PALOMINE:  
Sleep *check!*

SOUND: JUNO SALUTES SLEEPILY.

JUNO (NARRATOR):  
It felt like I couldn't think two words in a row without--

SOUND: METALLIC KNOCKING.

PALOMINE:  
Sleep *check!*

JUNO (NARRATOR):  
... hearing that voice in my head, telling me--

SOUND: METALLIC KNOCKING.

PALOMINE:  
(ECHOING)  
Sleep *check!*

JUNO (NARRATOR):  
... what I was supposed to be doing, where I was supposed to be, who I was supposed to be.

SOUND: WHISTLE.

PALOMINE:  
Calisthenics!

JUNO (NARRATOR):  
(OUT OF BREATH)  
There was no break. No chance to be Juno Steel.

SOUND: PRISONERS RUNNING. WHISTLE.

PALOMINE:  
Breakfast!

JUNO (NARRATOR):

And when you live long enough like that you start to forget  
how to think your own CONSTRUCTIVE WORK!

SOUND: WHISTLE.

PALOMINE:

(WITH JUNO)

Constructive work! Hurry along now, good citizens.

SOUND: RUNNING PRISONERS.

JUNO (NARRATOR):

Right. Constructive work. Don't be late.

I think two weeks in there could've completely done me in,  
to be honest... if I hadn't smuggled in that covert comms  
Mercury bought for me. Every morning, when Puck or Rita  
called me... those were the only times I felt like Juno  
Steel anymore.

SOUND: MACHINERY IN THE WORK ROOM. RADIO TUNING STATIC.

PUCK:

(OVER COMMS)

Mornin', Action! How's day fourteen treating you?

JUNO:

(GRUNTS)

PUCK:

So any updates on your cadre of crooks? You must've seen  
one of 'em by now, right?

JUNO:

What do you think?

PUCK:

That's... too bad. Any leads? Something has to be new over  
there.

JUNO:

Ever spend three hours staring at a Nutrient Crusher  
wondering what would happen if you put your hand in it?

PUCK:

Not really--

JUNO:

Well, between the constant noise and the four hundred tons of monotony every day, that's about as rich an inner life as I've got right now.

PUCK:

That's Palomine's behavior modification 101. Anything to make the mental walls fall apart -- then they can build you back up however they want.

JUNO:

Listen, Puck, if I wanted a plot summary from one of your dumb sci-fi comics I would've asked.

PUCK:

I'm doin' research for your sorry keister, Steel. It's not like you're any goddamn closer to gettin' outta there than you were two weeks ago!

(GRUMBLES)

I'll see if there's anything Rita can do about changing up the seating plan over there. Ridiculous you haven't seen one of them yet. Just our luck.

SOUND: AN ALARM GOES OFF.

MUSIC: ENDS.

The hell was that?

JUNO:

Something *new*!

PALOMINE (GUARD):

Wrap it up in here, everyone. We have a demonstration to get to.

JUNO:

Demonstration? What's a demonstration?

PALOMINE (GUARD):

Keep asking and we'll demonstrate on you too, Ninety-two. Machines off, out the door, let's go!

SOUND: THEY ALL MARCH OUT.

PUCK:

Keep me updated. Something about a schedule change in a place that buttoned-up makes me nervous.

SOUND: AMBIENCE FADES.

JUNO (NARRATOR):

Puck wasn't the only one. Repetition, the rhythm of your days... there's something comforting in it, even when it's hell. Ma used to wake up at 11:00 almost every morning, in her rough days. When I still lived with her, every tick of the clock from 10:00 on felt like a hammer to my nerves. But years after I moved out, my nerves would still be tuned and ready for plucking by 10:00 AM... and without Ma's first explosive volley of the day at 11:00, I had nothing to chill my nerves out with, so usually I'd just explode instead. Falco used to call it my "midmorning scuffle." In return I called them a lot of things I'd rather not repeat.

Which means that stupid schedule had been pinning me to the ground for two weeks straight, but even in these few seconds without it, I felt... weightless, and not in a good way. Like an untied balloon, floating higher and higher until it bursts.

SOUND: THE GROUP MARCHES INTO THE YARD.

PALOMINE (GUARD):

All right, everyone, line up by number, let's go, let's go.

JUNO (NARRATOR):

They lined us up in one of the exercise yards where we usually did our laps and listened to "The Life and Times of Palomine" on repeat, but a big podium had been set up in the middle of it.

PUCK:

Any idea what this demonstration thing is yet?

JUNO:

Looks like a public execution, to be honest.

PALOMINE (GUARD):

Quiet! The demonstration is about to start.

SOUND: JUNO GETS ZAPPED BY THE GUARD.

PUCK:

(CRACKLING THROUGH COMMS)  
The hell is going on over there?

JUNO:

Ow! Watch where you put that thing, pal!

SOUND: ANOTHER ZAP.

Oww!

PALMONINE (GUARD):

Keep talkin', Ninety-two. Every time you do, I get to push the voltage a little higher.

PALOMINE (GUARD):

(DISTANT)

Bring in Number Seventy-eight!

JUNO (NARRATOR):

I looked around and saw that I wasn't the only one feeling the freedom of breaking out of that goddamn schedule. The faces around me were all trained up at the podium wearing anxiety in their eyes and giggly giddiness in their lips, like kids who'd eaten nothing but candy for the last week. They were cheerier than I'd seen them... but they didn't look *okay*, if you know what I mean.

PUCK:

(GARBLED)

They're bringing up some special prisoner for an execution? That's not one of yours, is it?

JUNO:

Don't know. Shut up.

SOUND: AMBIENCE FADES SLIGHTLY.

JUNO (NARRATOR):

Whoever they were marching up there was blocked by the podium, but I could barely make out their shape through the scaffolding supporting it. They were big, with broad shoulders, and for a second of cold fear I was convinced it was Jet Siquliak, marching to his death.

Wrong on both counts. It wasn't Jet, but an execution might've been easier to watch.

SOUND: AMBIENCE GROWS LOUDER. FEEDBACK FROM THE INTERCOMMS SCREECHES.



JUNO:  
(WINCES)

PALOMINE:  
Welcome, patients of Doctor Aurinko. I expect everyone is very excited to begin the work before us, and to reward you for your therapeutic assistance I am happy to announce that dinner tonight will be extended by two minutes.

SOUND: THE CROWD MURMURS.

PALOMINE:  
Quiet, now. Control yourselves, please.

SOUND: THE CROWD DIES DOWN.

PALOMINE:  
Very good. Now as you all know, we are assembled here today because Number Seventy-eight has climbed the Punishment Ladder far enough that the behavior plan algorithm needs your assistance to improve his therapy. This is an exercise we call Deconstructive Criticism.

For those of you who have never participated before: please join in when you feel comfortable to do so. And remember, this is a house of rehabilitation. We believe in the individual's power to change, to become better. And isn't that what makes Seventy-eight so disappointing?

SOUND: THE CROWD RUMBLES IMPATIENTLY.

PALOMINE:  
Here are some conversation topics about Seventy-eight you may wish to explore: a history of resisting authority; a record of serial arson; a failed career in Stream Poetry; an unpleasant face. Failure to participate may push you up the Punishment Ladder, so be sure to speak up, now. And three... two... one... begin.

SOUND: THE CROWD STARTS TO RIOT.

CROWD:  
You monster!  
  
What would your momma think?

Your metaphors are cliché and your prose is tepid!

You deserve this!

MUSIC: BOLERO.

JUNO (NARRATOR):

The crowd went off like dynamite. A wall of sound and spit and hate, impossible to make out at first, only clear once the first and largest blast had settled:

CROWD:

Aw, why you crying? It's just a little criticism!

I hope you die!

SOUND: AMBIENCE FADES SLIGHTLY.

JUNO (NARRATOR):

I was horrified by these people, and at the same time... I... I felt a scream building up in my guts, too. It hadn't started in that exercise yard. It started the first day I'd set foot in Aurinko Permanent Corrections, and it built up every time I'd followed a stupid order without question, every time I'd bit my tongue. Hell, earlier: it started when the love of my life made me read about his goddamn kisses, when my best friend tried to shoot me, every time I'd ever wanted to scream and hadn't done it, and now they'd all gathered together and they were here, a long and violent scream so animal I could feel my teeth go to fangs just thinking about it.

I've never exchanged a word with Seventy-eight. But that moment, surrounded by people screaming at him, felt like permission to unload everything I'd ever pent up, all at once.

"He must deserve it," the scream said to me. "Just look at how angry everyone else is."

So I looked. And that was when I saw her -- and the shock of seeing her was the only thing that kept me from unloading.

SOUND: AMBIENCE GROWS.

BUDDY:

You pathetic firebug! You're beyond forgiveness, you *animal*! Find a nice hole and die in it!

SOUND: AMBIENCE FADES SLIGHTLY.

JUNO (NARRATOR):

Red hair. One eye a twisting, flashing camera-shutter, chomping like jaws in her socket as she screamed. Buddy Aurinko.

Finally, I understood what Falco had been trying to tell me about this place. And finally, I was really, truly scared.

MUSIC: ENDS.

SOUND: AMBIENCE GROWS.

PALOMINE:

And that is the end of our exercise.

SOUND: THE CROWD STOPS RIOTING.

78:

(SOFT SOBBING)

PALOMINE:

Well, Seventy-eight? How do you feel?

78:

(LOUDER SOBBING)

I'm... I'm sorry... I'm so sorry... I'll never do it again, never...

PALOMINE:

You will never do *what* again, Seventy-eight?

78:

Anything! I'll never do anything again, I promise! Just don't... please...

PALOMINE:

Very good. Guards, would you return Seventy-eight to his cell? Standard procedure, please.

SOUND: THREE SETS OF RECEDING FOOTSTEPS.

78:

I'll never write another word... I'll wear a bag over my head... Just please, tell them to stop screaming, please--!

SOUND: HEAVY DOORS CLOSE.

PALOMINE:

Thank you, everyone. You've all been an excellent help with Seventy-eight's therapy. Today you've helped us tear down this man's maladaptive behavior set so that we can rebuild him to be better. You should be very proud of yourselves.

SOUND: AMBIENCE FADES.

JUNO (NARRATOR):

To the crowd's credit, at least... they didn't look proud. Buddy's cheeks were still purple with blood but the rage had fallen out of her. She couldn't even look up at that podium anymore, kept casting her eyes down and away and ashamed in a way that I'd never seen before.

It was hard to watch. It also meant more bad luck for me, because even as the guards started to file us out of there, Buddy didn't look up -- and that meant she *still* hadn't seen me.

SOUND: PRISONERS MARCHING OUT OF THE YARD.

JUNO:

Buddy.

Buddy! Buddy, I--

SOUND: HE GETS ZAPPED.

(YELPS)

PUCK:

(GARBLED)

Steel? What the hell is going on over there?

Come on, talk to me!

PALOMINE (GUARD):

Time to head back to Constructive Work, Ninety-two. And you are well past your final warning, so if I hear one more word, I'm cranking the voltage. Got it?

JUNO:

(BREATHING HARD)

Right. Constructive Work. Don't be late.

PUCK:

Goddammit, are you still there?

JUNO:

Stop screaming. I'm here. I just saw Buddy, and she was...

I really have to thank you, Falco. I didn't believe it until I saw everyone out here screaming like that, but... I think I might really have lost my marbles in here without you. Done something really stupid.

PUCK:

Hey, pal, come on--

JUNO:

No. No, I mean it. Seeing how they even got through to Buddy, I...

She still hasn't seen me, so she doesn't even know I'm here yet. But I gotta get to her. No matter what it takes.

PUCK:

... Okay. Just don't do anything stupid, all right? I've been on your case kind of a lot, but... we need you to come home in one piece. Rita and me and your pal Mercury, too. Seriously.

JUNO:

Thanks, Falco. I think I needed that.

(SHAKY BREATH)

I'll be smart. I've got you to keep my head on straight, don't I?

PALOMINE (GUARD):

Move it, Ninety-two.

SOUND: THE GUARD ZAPS JUNO TWICE. THE COMMS CRACKLES.

PUCK:

(GARBLED)

Goddamn feedback! Steel, what the hell is that noise? Is the comms all right? Juno!!

SOUND: THE COMMS SHATTERS.

JUNO:  
(GASPS)

SOUND: AMBIENCE AND MARCHING FOOTSTEPS FADE.

JUNO (NARRATOR):  
I put a finger to my ear, but I knew what had happened  
before it got there. That last shock had turned my covert  
comms to dust.

SOUND: AMBIENCE AND MARCHING FOOTSTEPS FADE IN.

PALOMINE (GUARD):  
You've been a pain all goddamn day, Ninety-two -- just a  
few more rungs up the Punishment Ladder and you'll be up on  
the big stage, just like Seventy-eight was.

SOUND: AMBIENCE AND MARCHING FOOTSTEPS FADE.

JUNO (NARRATOR):  
Maybe it was because I'd lost my line to Puck, maybe it was  
because I'd lost my marbles, maybe it was that scream  
boiling up inside me, unable to hold me back any more,  
but...

... well. Let's just say a few rungs up the Punishment  
Ladder sounded like just the thing I was looking for.

SOUND: AMBIENCE AND MARCHING FOOTSTEPS FADE IN.

PALOMINE (GUARD):  
Ninety-two? What do you think you're--

SOUND: JUNO PUNCHES THE GUARD.

(OOFs)

PALOMINE (GUARDS):  
Prisoner's assaulted a guard.

Taking him out now.

JUNO:  
Try me! It'll take a hundred of you to--!  
(GROANS)

SOUND: SEVERAL ZAPS, THEN HE FALLS AND HITS THE GROUND.  
MUSIC: BOLERO DRUMS.

PALOMINE (GUARDS):

Get him on resisting, too. That's two rungs up.

Where do we take him?

Algorithm's on it... wait... got it. Take him to  
Intensive...

Scene: 3

(A ROOM IN THE BOWELS OF AURINKO PERMANENT CORRECTIONS.)

SOUND: BASEMENT AMBIENCE.

PALOMINE:

Yoo-hoo? Mr. Action?

Maximum. I've been in this line of work a long, long time. If you think I can't tell the difference between someone who's unconscious and someone who's trying to squeeze in a nap, well...

JUNO:

(YAWNING)

Yeah, all right, you got me. This dentist chair you got me tied to is pretty cozy. Lady's gotta sneak in some Z's sometime.

PALOMINE:

There will be plenty of time for "Z's" once you're a well-behaved member of society, Mr. Action. But if you keep acting like this, those days are far, far away.

JUNO:

I've behaved myself two weeks straight now, Doc. I think I'm entitled to a cheat day.

PALOMINE:

You consider yourself a rebel.

JUNO:

I consider myself a problem, actually.

PALOMINE:

A typical extinction burst. Nothing some intensive behavior modification can't solve.

SOUND: MACHINES START TO WHIR AND HUM TO LIFE.

Mr. Action, please allow the machine a moment to boot up. And don't be alarmed if it--

SOUND: EVERYTHING POWERS DOWN.

JUNO:



Hey doc, your lights went out! Ooh, real scary, your brainwashing machine can't even turn on without blowing a fuse!

SOUND: A SUCTION MACHINE STARTS.

... Doc?

SOUND: AIRLESS POP AS A HOSE WITH A MASK GRABS JUNO BY THE FACE. A MACHINE WHIRS AND DROPS JUNO INTO A WATER TUB WITH A SPLASH. ROOM AMBIENCE GROWS MUFFLED.

(MUFFLED STRUGGLING, THEN GASPING BREATHS)

PALOMINE:

Maximum? Can you hear me?

JUNO:

The hell did you just do to me?

PALOMINE:

A Sensory Deprivation Tank. When the therapeutic situation progresses as... *rockily* as yours has, I find a *tête-à-tête* to be useful. And without any sensory distractions to separate us, I'd say that I'm as far in your *tête* as I could be.

(GIGGLES)

JUNO:

That's a whole lot of words to say "you were a bad kid and now I'm gonna scare you straight."

PALOMINE:

Change can be very frightening. But you must remember that you are here for your own good. The way that you behave has been rejected by the society that you live in, and they've caged you for it. I'm offering you a way out: a way to change yourself so that the bars aren't needed. I believed that in life, and the algorithm in charge of your behavior plan now is set to help you in that endeavor.

JUNO:

So who am I talking to now? The algorithm? Or some shrink playing with a voice-changer?

PALOMINE:

It's questions like that that have gotten you here in the first place, I think. I would recommend you focus on yourself if you want this to move smoothly.

JUNO:

And what if I don't--  
(YELPS)

SOUND: JUNO GETS ZAPPED.

... Ow.

PALOMINE:

Now. Your role in this private therapy is very simple. I'm going to say a series of words and you're going to evaluate them for me, "Good" or "Bad." Based on your responses, the helmet I've placed on you will electrically stimulate your nervous system to present both punishment and reward. If you answer as a well-behaved citizen might...

SOUND: A SOOTHING BUZZING TONE.

JUNO:

(SNIFFS, THEN GAGS)

PALOMINE:

... I will stimulate the olfactory sensors in your brain until you smell something pleasant, based on your file -- a traditional meal from your home planet of Saturn, say.

JUNO:

Hoo boy. Yeah. Methane Meatballs, just like Momma used to make.

PALOMINE:

(CLEARS THROAT)

And if you answer in a socially inappropriate way, you will receive the shock. Now. Are you ready to begin?

JUNO:

Hit me.

PALOMINE:

Murder.

JUNO:

Bad.

SOUND: PLEASANT BUZZING.

(GAGGING)

PALOMINE:

Very good, and here is the scent of your childhood pet: a Swollen Gas-Yak. Query two: robbery.

JUNO:

Well, it depends on who--

SOUND: JUNO GETS ZAPPED.

(WINCES)

PALOMINE:

"Good" or "Bad" only, please.

JUNO:

Fine, then. Bad.

SOUND: HE GETS ZAPPED.

(YELPS)

What gives? I said the right one that time!

PALOMINE:

Ah, but you did not *believe* it, did you? No, I don't think you did. And that helmet I've made you wear, its analysis of the electrical patterns in your brain doesn't think so, either. Try again, and think very carefully. Is robbery good or bad?

JUNO:

... Good?

SOUND: JUNO GETS ZAPPED.

What the hell?! What do you want from me?

PALOMINE:

You are participating in the exercise exactly as you need to.

JUNO:

Then why do you keep shocking me?

PALOMINE:

Punishment following a behavior reduces the incidence of that behavior. Reward increases it. I am identifying behaviors for you to reduce, and signaling to your body that this is the aim.

JUNO:

What behavior? I've tried everything you'll let me do!

PALOMINE:

Not all behavior is outward.

JUNO:

But--

PALOMINE:

If I may quote my own work for a moment, "To call this scientific art form 'behavior modification' is like calling a course of antibiotics 'sneeze modification': it centers the outward symptoms and obscures the real site of change. To change a person's behavior in a way that lasts, you must fundamentally change the *person*."

So I don't want your words, Mr. Action. And I don't want your behavior, not really. I want that which defines you most -- the most secret self at the very center of you. Not the story of the man you tell yourself you are, but the amorphous mass of morals and reflexes and hungers and fears that makes your every decision moments before you're aware you've even made it.

Your *self*, Mr. Action. For lack of a more scientific word, I will settle for no less than that which makes you you. And with that in line, your behavior is certain to follow.

Now. If we were to continue, would you consider that "Good" or "Bad"?

JUNO:

You lousy--!

SOUND: HE GETS ZAPPED.

(YELPS)

PALOMINE:

Thank you for your cooperation. Let's pick up the pace,  
shall we?

JUNO (NARRATOR):

I have no idea how long they kept me in there.

SOUND: SURREAL WHIRRING AND BUZZING.

JUNO:

Good.

SOUND: ZAP.

(WINCES)

PALOMINE:

Thank you.

JUNO:

Bad.

(GAGGING)

SOUND: ZAP.

PALOMINE:

Try again, please.

JUNO (NARRATOR):

But they made one big mistake: they'd dropped me into the  
perfect mind-melting tool for Max Action... but I'm not  
him.

SOUND: BASEMENT AMBIENCE.

PALOMINE:

Very good. And as a special treat, here's a sonata  
performed by the Smogpipe Bellows, which your record states  
you are a connoisseur of:

SOUND: DISTORTED BAGPIPES.

JUNO:

Beautiful.

JUNO (NARRATOR):

So instead of being excited about being a good little doll  
and sick at the thought of "misbehaving," I was just sick

at the thought of everything. And let me tell you: Juno Steel has a lot of experience at being sick at the thought of everything.

SOUND: MACHINE WHIRRING. JUNO IS PULLED OUT OF THE WATER AND RELEASED FROM THE HELMET.

JUNO:  
(RAGGED BREATHING)

PALOMINE:  
I think that should be enough for today, Mr. Action. I expect I will see you back here again soon, but there is no requirement: all that depends on your behavior.

SOUND: WATER DRIPPING.

These guards will escort you back to your quarters. I will see you in three hours for Calisthenics.

SOUND: THE DOOR OPENS. FOOTSTEPS ENTER. AMBIENCE FADES.

JUNO (NARRATOR):  
So when one of those masked and smarmy-voiced guards asked me the million-cred question...

SOUND: AMBIENCE FADES IN.

PALOMINE (GUARD):  
So? Are you ready to behave, Ninety-two?

SOUND: AMBIENCE FADES.

JUNO (NARRATOR):  
I answered just like I always do.

SOUND: AMBIENCE FADES IN.

PALOMINE (GUARD):  
Ninety-two?

JUNO:  
(CHUCKLES)

SOUND: JUNO SPITS IN THE GUARD'S FACE, THEN GETS ZAPPED. COMMS BEEP.  
MUSIC: BOLERO.

PALOMINE (GUARD):

Get everyone ready for a demonstration. We have another  
Deconstructive Criticism coming up today.

SOUND: MUFFLED ALARM.

JUNO (NARRATOR):

And y'know what's weird? For the few hours I had to wait  
for the crowd to tear me apart, I felt kinda like...  
laughing.

I mean, I felt terrible, obviously, like someone'd been  
using my skull for a pencil sharpener. But I'd dodged a  
bullet, taking Max Action's punishment instead of my own,  
and that, that just made me think about Mick and THAT...

(LAUGHS)

"Hey, Jayjay, you're not gonna believe what I came up with  
for ya, he's this Saturnian air-pirate so I said his pirate  
ship was called the 'Big Red Hole!' Whaddaya mean that's  
not on Saturn, whaddaya mean it's not called the 'Hole,'  
whaddaya mean..."

(LAUGHS)

I mean, who the hell comes up with this stuff?

(LAUGHS)

PALOMINE (GUARD):

Collect yourself, Ninety-two. We're bringing you out.

SOUND: THE DOORS OPEN. FOOTSTEPS CRUNCHING INTO THE YARD.

JUNO (NARRATOR):

And thinking about Mick, I mean, of course that got me  
thinking about Rita, duping every police department in the  
system into thinking the "Big Red Hole" had been on their  
no-fly list for years and none of 'em had ever noticed. And  
thinking about Rita meant thinking about the rest of the  
Aurinkos, thinking about Buddy, the way that she'd been at  
her wedding, and... And y'know, I must've looked completely  
nuts walking up to that podium chuckling to myself, but I  
felt saner than I had in weeks.

PALOMINE:

Welcome once again to Deconstructive Criticism. If you  
haven't had the pleasure of meeting Ninety-two, here are  
some conversation topics you may wish to utilize: a history  
of resisting authority; violent outbursts; a smart mouth.

JUNO:  
(LAUGHS)

PALOMINE:  
Failure to participate may push you up the Punishment  
Ladder, so be sure to speak up, now. And three... two...  
one...

SOUND: THE CROWD EXPLODES.

CROWD:  
You *suck*!

How dare you!

SOUND: AMBIENCE FADES SLIGHTLY.

JUNO (NARRATOR):  
I could see Buddy in the crowd, but I wasn't sure she  
recognized me. She was far away, and her eye was waxy with  
exhaustion. It was scary as hell, looking in that eye -- it  
didn't look like the Buddy I knew at all.

I don't blame her. It had been months since they threw her  
in here, and after just two weeks I felt like I was ready  
to crack. Like Falco said: they know how to break you, and  
if you let 'em, they'll do it.

But I wasn't going down without a fight.

SOUND: AMBIENCE GROWS.

CROWD:  
I'll kill you!

Making all of us look bad!

Be better, you gas-sucking Saturnian bum!

JUNO:  
Yeah, bring it! Oooh, wow, you hate me? You wanna beat me  
up? Get in line, pal! Name's Max Action, look it up!  
(RUDE NOISE)

JUNO (NARRATOR):



Cuz when the goons in charge tell you to lie down, you stand up. They want you frozen, stuck, still, because a world of frozen things is easy to control. So don't just break the ice because it's wrong they ever put ice on you in the first place. Shatter it because if they freeze your outsides long enough they'll freeze your insides, too.

So with all the heat I had left, I looked Buddy in her slowly-awakening eye and I shouted:

JUNO:

Hey, you! Yeah, you with the red hair! You staring at me? You wanna say something to me?

BUDDY:

Wh... what?

JUNO:

Well come and get me, buddy -- cuz, mark my words, I'm taking you out!

BUDDY:

(SMALL CHUCKLE, THEN HUGE LAUGH)

Boo!

(LAUGHING)

Boooo! Boooo!

JUNO (NARRATOR):

There could've been a million cons out there threatening me a million times each, and not one of 'em could've scared me -- cuz I'd just made Buddy laugh. I'd just seen the Buddy I remembered in her eyes, and I knew this crummy prison didn't have a chance against the Aurinko Crime Family.

SOUND: AMBIENCE FADES OUT.

MUSIC: BOLERO MELODY ENDS, THEN DRUMS END.

TO BE CONTINUED

OUTRO

(THE PENUMBRA EXPRESS.)

MUSIC: MAIN THEME PLAYS OVER THE RADIO.

SOUND: RAIN.

CONDUCTOR:

If you've enjoyed this tale, please consider donating to The Penumbra on Patreon. Our artists work tirelessly to bring you these stories, and if you have the means, we hope you will support our efforts. Every dollar helps. You can find that page at [patreon.com/thepenumbrapodcast](https://patreon.com/thepenumbrapodcast).

If you support us on Patreon at the \$10 level or higher, you will receive access to commentary tracks, like this one from co-creators Harley Takagi Kaner and Kevin Vibert:

SOUND: DOOR OPENS.

HARLEY:

... I was inspired by Pint Slice, and that makes me think she must be relatively new.

KEVIN:

Right, right. No, yeah, I remember that we had made some - a kind of Pavlovian connection early.

HARLEY:

Right. I had said, what if Palomine had dogs and was a dog trainer-

KEVIN:

Yes.

HARLEY:

And so he ran his prison along the same principles.

KEVIN:

Yep. Yeah, and so-

HARLEY:

And that's where that came from.

KEVIN:

I kind of took that and I elaborated on it based on my experience-

SOUND: DOOR CLOSES.

CONDUCTOR:

We would like to give thanks to all who support us on Patreon, but especially to [Patreon supporters] for their incredibly generous contributions per episode. Thank you.

This tale - "Juno Steel and the Infernal Grind" - was told by the following people:

Joshua Ilon as Juno Steel;  
Stewart Evan Smith as the Voice of Palomine Aurinko;  
Chelsea Ruscio as Puck Falco;  
Kate Jones as Rita;  
Sarah Gazdowicz as Buddy Aurinko;  
And Lydian Meloccaro, Tyler Rosati, and Mertz as the Ensemble.

The Penumbra is created and produced by Harley Takagi Kaner and Kevin Vibert. If you wish to know more about our ever-expanding infinitely-creative team of artists, musicians, editors, designers, and managers, you can read about them in the show notes of this episode.

I'm afraid this is the end of the line for today, dear Traveler. We hope you will join us again soon.

SOUND: RAIN FADES OUT.

MUSIC: FADES OUT.

THE END

### Trigger Warnings:

- Incarceration and prison
- Enclosed spaces and sudden loud noises
- Torture
- Mob violence
- Emotional abuse
- Threats of violence and death
- Manipulation and "brainwashing"
- Abuse by mental health professionals
- Self-inflicted harm
- Starvation and sleep deprivation

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