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Short Story I

**Anonymous**

Pressure from the steel bindings on Toley's wrists began to grind uncomfortably against the bone. The feeling, however, was lost in the wave of nausea that washed through him as he starred sickly at the circular walls spinning around. Light from floors above whitewashed the steel cylinder that incased him. Beneath, the diamond embossed aluminum surface rumbled against his bare feet numbly. The platform was corkscrewing him upwards to the faceless who would decide his fate.

He reached the opening in the metal chute and emerged head first into the Hall of Impudence slowly spinning to a halt. The Hall, it seemed to Toley was a misnomer for it reached higher than it did across as if the circular corridor had been turned on its side. It reminded him too much of a large version of the cylindrical prison he had just left. The hum of the moving platform had stopped but its echo still resonated against the unadorned walls. There was a click as the platform fused perfectly into the floor.

Toley shivered in the unnatural light of the Hall. It looked as if the steel walls were being self-illuminated. No windows, no sun. No other human presence. That's what unnerved him the

most. He could fight another person, tear out pieces of flesh, even with his hands bound. But the lifeless, overbearing presence of machines embittered and deeply frightened him.

There was a flash of hot yellow that hit him in the chest, blasted his hands free, and lifted him into the air as if being caught underneath an explosion. Toley was familiar to militaristic demolitions. He had fought against the soulless Insentients. He remembered facing the robotic machines pregnant with heavy shells in copper wombs. Walking in lines, they would advance. Walking! It burned Toley that they didn't have the respect enough to run. They functioned to relinquish their lifelessness with the hope to trade for more.

The blast Toley was in felt enough to rip limbs, but instead of falling to the ground mangled, he remained suspended and completely whole. Golden arms of energy held him beneath the shoulders and stabilized his body. The enveloping source emanated from the walls on either side of him and began to lift. In the shape of a "T", Toley began to rise.

Stunned, he went stiff and waited. He hated having no control over his body. Some of his airborne brothers in arms might have enjoyed this free-floating experience, but nothing could change the fact that a machine had him locked. Minutes pressed on as he ascended higher into the Hall which was remarkably featureless. The occasional rivet could be seen where sheets of metal had been fastened together with minute uniformity.

He reached his final destination. The Hall had not given a clue as to how long he had risen or how fast, but he could feel in his stomach the momentum slow. The muscles tightened in his forearms and his upper lip twitched as he braced for what was to come. The only sound was the energy keeping him from falling to a lonely end. It buzzed softly like standing underneath the

high voltage power lines that stretched across the old battlegrounds. The beams flickered for a moment, crackling into the empty space.

Toley starred as the hidden source from the wall finally blinked off. Much slower than he had expected, the life-giving arms began to disintegrate from the wall. In moments he would tumble downwards feet first. A shot of resentment for the emotionless system hit him and he felt like yelling. Was this the way they deal with insurgents? Pick them up and drop them down the Hall of Impudence? He felt the faceless Insentients starring at him from behind their blank metal masks and laughing. He wondered vindictively on how he would make them feel pain.

His volatile support at last disappeared completely.

Again, he was surprised to remain where he was. Under his feet was materializing yet another metal surface. It was solid within seconds and he realized it was tinted a strange purple. After collecting himself and feeling his pulse slow he found significance in the floor. Figures, Toley thought to himself, they would choose a royal color.

"Captain Toley Fangron."

He had never heard his name spoken so hollow and void of emotion. Whoever was speaking, was doing so through a voice modifier. The effect was a mechanical monotone of the real version. He searched for the one who called his name.

Toley saw from where he was standing that there was a ceiling the same shade of purple above him. It was curved into a perfect dome, no deviations from absolutely spherical. It irritated him greatly. Straight in front of was the only visual indication that he wasn't alone.

He studied a panel on the wall. It wasn't much of anything but a square outline a few feet across but it was unmistakably purposeful in this place of geometrical idealism. In the middle of the panel was thin slits carved from a common center. It was no doubt a speaker, most likely the one that spoke his name. Above the speaker, he noticed, was a small red LED. As he was starring at it, the red glow went dark.

"Captain Fangron, you have been summoned and charged with rebellion against the Integrated," spoke the same inhuman voice yet this time it came from his left.

He observed another LED come to life above a similar speaker. Inspecting the room, he saw that multiple panels were in place each with their own pair of electronics. There were eight in total and he turned to face the one that had just spoken.

"Who the hell are you?" Toley barked.

"The Board of Selection will commence Captain Fangron's trial." This time the voice spoke from behind him.

"Does the Integrated remember that I fought for their freedom? Remember the bodies of the Insentients?" He glared at the pin-sized light that signaled the current speaker.

Beside him came the same voice, "The defendant has proven his guilt."

"You cowards want to come out here and say that?" He advanced on one of the speakers and pounded it with his fist. There was a metallic thud that vibrated from the panel. "Stop hiding your faces like the gawd-damn Insentients." He leaned against the panel with both hands, face to face with its speaker.

“The Board is anonymous.” An LED lit above his head. This is going to be as close he was going to get, he thought bitterly. He imagined the owner of this voice just across the steel barrier in front of him. It spoke again. “It is for the benefit of the defendant, please understand.”

Toley hesitated. He was thrown off guard by the rare entreaty. It was not as though the sentiment itself was anything special; it was the tone of voice. He might have been mistaken but not even the voice modifier could remove all the femininity. This was a woman speaking. He knew it.

“Explain to me,” he demanded, “why I was put on those god-forsaken battlefields to fight against the lifeless ones, only to have you renounce those who risked everything for your freedom.”

“You failed,” Toley felt the words cut, “that is why.”

Images of his company being torn down one blast after another raced into his mind. It had been an utter failure both in a military sense as well as a chance to save the Free Roamers.

From his left, “You fought in opposition to the one thing that now keeps us alive.” There was a tiny red annoyance in his peripheral. He wanted to speak to the woman. She was the closest thing to a real person.

“You fail to realize that your continual defiance of the Integrated laws of propriety justify your condemnation.”

“Captain Fangron has displayed on numerous occasions outright violence to the Integrating process and those that facilitate it.”

“He typifies the bigotry we wish to erase.”

It was coming from all around now.

“He does not understand the advantages of Integration.”

“There is no reason to deliberate any longer.”

“Agreed.”

“Yes...”

Red lights were blinking on and off faster than he could find them.

“Wait!” Toley erupted. Things were spiraling into disaster and he couldn’t stop it. They had already made up their mind before he had opened his mouth. He also noticed the woman had not entered the conversation since first speaking. “Please, listen!

“Only a few months ago, we were fighting to retain our independence. You spoke correctly. I was part of the failure that led to our fall and occupation.”

“Integration,” the voice corrected without passion from one of the panels.

Toley chose to disregard the interruption. “But, please,” he pleaded into the woman’s speaker, “please let me contend my innocence in person. We are humans despite the bloody Integration, despite how many machines nest in our home. Act humane!”

There was a slight pause.

The woman spoke first. “We hide our faces so that we make decisions rationally.” The voice was slow as if she was choosing her words.

“Detecting reality is difficult when the object of interest is a person. Adding a degree of separation is only placing more uncertainty.”

“Truth is neither good nor bad,” she answered. “Yet it can be made to seem so by those it touches. This is why we detach emotion.”

“You are not one of them!” Toley shouted. “Emotion is having souls and we have not given over our souls. They have not obtruded past our moral standings and crowded our minds. Life is something that has to be actively sought. Do not hide behind the silver prisons that they create for you, do not retreat. Meet me here in the center.” He was breathless as he finished. Frustration was making his heart beat harder.

None of the LED’s were on. His own voice was ringing in his ears. Probing the walls for a sign of compliance, he waited and caught his breath.

Moments passed uneasily as he listened to each inhale and exhale. He wanted to know what they were thinking. He hoped they were thinking at all. It wouldn’t surprise him if they had a mandatory silence before a sentence. They always go by the book.

He remembered how it used to be when there was at least the fight to hold on to. The idea of hope was still alive. It felt like a search for something lost; feeling that glimmer of expectation which says it will be at the next place you look. He had given up a real life, of course, or anything you might call a real life. Living through death-bringing waves of robotic armies seems to make a man only want life more. That was what he clung to the most. He knew he was alive because he wanted it more than anyone else. None of this bullshit Integration - relying on machines to define who he was. Where was the feeling, the urge, the evolutionary bias towards life? It made him want to rip each and every panel from their fixture.

A low grumble shook the violet floor. He stepped away from the wall apprehensively. The Hall of Impudence had already caused more than one unpleasant shock and he stood weary.

The room suddenly began to open at the base. There was a circular aperture that was increasing in size as purple fins, unnoticeable at first due to their precise fitting to the floor, began to rotate away. A smell of antiseptics wafted from the hole and caught in Toley's throat making him gag. Pneumatic pumps under the flooring swished to a halt as the movement ceased.

As if rising from a steel grave, a woman rose into the heart of the room.

Her russet hair cascaded downwards yet lay completely motionless like she had stolen a single moment from an unearthly waterfall. Her face was petite but her features fit exactly on it like pieces of a puzzle. She lifted her head and Toley saw her azure eyes. They created a counter to her dark skin which gave the effect of intensity and mysteriousness about her. She was wearing a midnight blue robe that covered her entirely save a triangle starting from her neck and ending at a point between her breasts.

Toley wanted to say something but he felt weak and his words caught in his throat. He blamed the terrible smell.

She saved him from the silence. "This is highly irregular."

Her voice sounded as smooth as the ceiling above him. There was the distinctive femininity that he had detected earlier through the voice modifier. It was much prettier than he had imagined across the speaker. He counted himself fortunate they had sent her.

"I need your help." Toley found his words but they came fragile and thin. "You can help."

“I am a member of the Board of Selection. Our duty is to select who remains a part of the Integration and who will be cast out,” she stated. Her expression was placid. Yet, her eyes, though - he thought they seemed almost sad.

“You’re a woman as well. A woman who knows full well that armies fought for her and her family.”

“Irrelevant.” Her eyebrows twitched downwards. “You do not tell the Integration Authority where you are. You refuse to keep your Guardian in your bedroom. You have dismantled the Eyes in your home. You continue the hostility. Why do you refuse to accept the inevitable?”

Toley noticed his hands were shaking. “Don’t you have any sympathy? Any gratitude towards me? What is your name? Tell me.”

“We have relinquished our names to become members of the Board.” This time Toley caught the flicker of sorrow in her blue eyes.

“Pathetic!” he spat. She didn’t flinch. “Your safety came at a price. These machines might have provided you what you want, a home and a plate full of food, but they stole much more.” He stepped forward, driving closer to her.

It hurt him to see such a figure of beauty to have lost the liveliness he valued. She drew forbidden feelings from him, feelings he had almost forgotten. Her eyes bore deep inside him and his fingers tingled to trace across her curves. He desperately wished the robe were gone and he could explore her more freely. Yet, what was inside her appalled him. It was enough to cast away the longing he had.

She was just another empty vessel like the machines that surrounded him, that locked him into submission. There was no appreciation left for the remnants of the Free Roamers, the last defenders of humanity. They had lost, and now he was staring into the face of one of the ungrateful. She was just one of the others who had buckled to an oppressive force. That's why she couldn't hide her mourning. She hadn't the vitality enough to put up a fight. In short, she was deplorable.

"You must rectify your wrongs," she whispered.

He let her words touch him for only a moment.

Lunging forward, he hunted for his goal with his hands. As his thumbs touched the soft flesh beside her Adam's apple, his fingers clamped shut. He heard a small gasp escape her lips. Blood was pounding in his ears. Her skin was so smooth, so different than the robotic limbs he had fought against. She was so little in his hands but he would not let her change his mind. She was the problem, not the Insentients! Nothing had the power to take away your freewill. His actions were a testament to that. She had surrendered without thought like an animal being led to slaughter. He would treat her as such. There was no justification to her life.

She struggled for only a second before the restrainers flashed on. Openings appeared in the ceiling and burning rings exploded from them. They constricted around his hands and feet, shocking open his grip. Toley and the robe-clad women toppled to the floor. He convulsed there as the rings shifted to hogtie his limbs together and emitting pulses of electricity. As the rings united into one, holding him fast, the rings hardened into a bright metal that cast a glow around him.

He looked over at the woman. Her blue robe was spread out across the floor, clashing in colors with the purple. Her dark skin was much paler than before and her hair had been awakened from its motionless sleep and was now covering part of her face.

“Captain Fangron,” the nightmarish voice filled the room again. “You have been found guilty of impeding the progress of the Integration. Your hostility to life has cost you yours.”

Toley managed a sadistic laugh as his head was trying to stop spinning.

“This display has hopefully proven to you why we have laws that prevent violence and barbarity.”

He watched as the woman attempted to stand. Putting her hand against the floor she pushed vehemently.

“Your life will forfeit for the betterment of the Integration...”

She rose naked from the purple and blue, emerging pristinely white in the unnatural light of Toley’s binding ring.

“...and we hope you understand the judgment that has been made.”

Toley watched in awe at the beauty of the woman standing before him. She was angelic and pure. Nothing he had seen before this could compare, nothing could be more inspiring in life.

She tossed her hair from her face and Toley could see a tear run from her light blue eyes down across her cheek and fall against her breast.

“Captain Fangron will now be escorted for execution.”

Small purplish bruises were forming on her neck but Toley didn't seem to notice.