

The Hanging: A Futuristic Retelling

By Aigner Loren Wilson

When I was a girl, my father used to read me war stories to put me to sleep.

I'm in the Demo-Republic of Congo, soaked through down to my boxers. The rising sun lights the jail yard's grid making it reflect yellow like a thousand gallons of spilled piss. We wait outside the magnetic cells, a block of containers thick with cement. Each is no more than a closet's measurements and holds only one item. Strange, in most of them they just stand, unmoving, for hours on end, but in a few cases, they pace in the small space they have.

One Z class medic droid stands at the far end of the lot. I can hear the rain hitting its exterior as the drops pick up like sudden rainstorms in the summer tend to do before they die. Its purple casing changes like gasoline. A single woman guards it. I

can smell her hair cream from here, and feel guilty for thinking about touching her skin. She's so close to it the thought crosses my mind to go make sure everything is ok. But I let it go; none of them ever fight back.

Ten o'clock causes the generators to hum in excitement for what is to come. The lead programmer on duty, who is hiding beneath the shelter of the gallows, cannot hear it so is not comforted by the odd nature of the overworked machines. She is a white lady with a terrible scar across her neck.

Angela, the woman with the body I dream about more than anything else, motions to the programmer that she and it are ready. The programmer inclines her head like she has better places to be than at an execution.

Jeff and I stalk Angela and the ZMed as they begin to walk. Other soldiers and guards follow as well. Suddenly, I see a small bit of green out of the corner of my eye. A moth, so light and dusty, caresses my cheek and flies between the gathering crowd. It flutters around our legs and dares to circle near the dirty openings of our weapons. Its markings display that of a full-grown male. For a moment, a young black worker reaches out to it, but the Emerald Pearl refuses to be caught. The young man curses like a child.

His boss reprimands him with a slap to his head. He yelps, and we laugh. The moth continues on in the aftermath of rain.

The droid does not turn around to the commotion. Then, it lands on the upper part of the ZMed's exterior causing it to stop, which makes everything stop. The droid and moth share a kiss before it flies up, up, up, into the sky. And the procession to the gallows continues in silence.

My eyes watch the ever-changing polynano skin of the ZMed. I believe I am the only one that notices when about forty yards from the execution tent the droid stops its chameleon routine and settles on an unsettling black the color of a starless sky.

Deeply, and more than I realize, I cry.

One of the first things you learn when you sign up, maybe even before you learn how to hold a gun, you learn how to watch someone cry. A few soldiers see my tears but know to look away. Jeff's hand grazes mine, but I pull away to use my sleeve to wipe away my tears and to dab at the snot pooling in my cupid's heart.

This was the twenty-third bot that had tasted the current of the city since the passing of the thirteenth robot law: all combative robots that fail at their duty to serve their humans will face immediate disfranchising. But this is the first one that touches me. Maybe it's the fact that I haven't been sleeping because I've been dreaming of Angela or maybe it's because this has become an everyday ordeal.

Programmers slack the responsibility of the fielders' safety onto these detached machines. It cannot hear the cries of a dying comrade and know that it's time to put your salt to the test. It doesn't understand life or death, but yet we are taking away its life.

Soon the moving ZMed would be a blank slate. We would have to carry it to a container with enough room to fit the recycled droid. Did it know? Had it seen and recorded previous executions? Seen what we do with it once its purpose has been taken away? Is that why it turns black under the burning morning sky?

The programmer does not address the crowd. She knows why we are here, for the light show beneath the tent. Erected in the center, stood the electric chamber. Soldiers with families in the area say that when the robot is fully deleted, and the process is complete, the whole city blinks. Once we crowd into the tent, Angela goes to help the ZMed into the chamber, but it walks before her unassisted.

We form a loose circle around the clear chamber. The wires work of their own accord and attach themselves to the droid's body. It does not fight against the working away of its exterior so the nods can connect to the right ports. Finally, in place, they stop their work to hang loose. Audrey, the programmer,

walks to the keyboard of the terminal as large as the chamber itself. Her fingers rattle the long pad.

Though I cannot see what she types, I can hear the agitation over the rain beginning to drum on the canopy above my head.

It takes five minutes for the code to run its initial startup. The humming that had faded away into the background kicks into overdrive. It turns from a rumble to a roar. Purple tendrils of electricity spark to life, connecting to turn green only to die once blue. The rain makes it smell as if the robot has a soul being set aflame within glass. Some of the soldiers cover their noses like idiots. At some point, the droid as it was, ceases to be.

The process is noiseless, except at the end when something extraordinary happens. A phenomenon called a death-note builds in pitch. It happens on occasion if all the air is not sucked from the chamber before the code begins. Every so often it drops and changes like a song.

I inch with the others to get closer to the dying flicks of electricity. The robot looks the same as it ever did. The holes reflecting odd eyes turn us on ourselves; I hate what I see.

"Excuse me," Audrey says pushing through the crowd of soldiers surrounding the ZMed. She opens the case. For a moment,

I think the robot will move. Reach out to strangle her or even worse yet, caress her.

Cold wind creeps up my back. Most of the others have already begun to walk away leaving me exposed. When I turn to look, a dozen, maybe more, butterflies swarm the yard in the light morning rain. Is it their wings that drive the wind?

The smell of meat mixes with rain and electricity. My stomach grumbles and Jeff comes up beside me, laughing.

"Let's settle that," he says putting an arm around my shoulders.

I look for Angela. She is still at the glass container looking in on the disenfranchised bot. Pulling me away before I can call out to her, Jeff asks like it's a joke, "How about the show?"

Paulie joins us. "I thought it was just fantastic. I hate it when it's all lights and no action."

Jeff agrees with a nod and squeezes my shoulder.

I want Angela and her curls to place trembles on my flesh. This rain is too much, and that hit me hard, harder than I thought. Smiling to keep the boys at bay, I turn back around to steal a glance at Angela, but she is in the programmer's arms, sobbing. I can see her shaking from one hundred yards away.