

A CHILD'S FAIRY TALE (DERIVED FROM A LETTER PULLED FROM A BOTTLE DREDGED FROM THE BOTTOM OF THE BORDER RIVER)

As a child I never believed the ridiculous, contradictory myths about humans who lived in the machine city. Growing up on the Border, I only had to look across the brown sludge masquerading as a river to confirm the inhumanness of our enemy city, colossal and featureless, opening up only to spew the legions of death. No man could live there, plain and simple.

I don't remember much of the day I was torn from the battlefield in the black claws of one of the Host, and taken into the realm of myth. I don't remember the battle, my capture, my arrival in enemy territory. All I really remember is *her*, leaning over me and saying, "I have a good feeling about this one."

Her name is Saki, and she was brought up amongst machines. There are very few like her, born and raised in the city. I've never met her parents (who were brought here, like me), but I hear she sees them quite regularly. She is my constant companion, now: in the first few days, when I was locked in solitary, she visited daily, and asked a lot of questions. I started off giving her canned replies we were taught in training, but ended up telling her more about myself than I ever thought I would. She has a bewitching smile, Saki. The machines plan well.

Eventually she started taking me out, showing me the city. It was a shock, those first few days, how the machines responded to us when they saw us: respectful caution, reverence, even. And then there were the legions of Priests who followed us everywhere. Bowing and scraping at every surface we touched.

"They're cleaning," she explained, as we grew closer. "Celebrating the organic essence of humanity."

Machines are fastidiously clean. We are not. We leave behind sweat, skin cells, oils, everywhere we go. But they treasure these sheddings, these proofs of our humanity. Our sacred droppings.

The first Consecration ceremony I witnessed was a eye-opener. I was taken to a massive hall, filled with what must have been hundreds, if not thousands of machines, waiting in line. Saki sat naked on a platform on a raised dais, her legs spread, and as the line of supplicants shuffled past the two Priests took turns touching her and anointing each one in her juices. The machines mumbled exhortations as they went past, things like "Great Princess", "Goddess of Genesis",

et cetera. The line always outlasted the ceremony. "They'll be back," Saki said of the supplicants. Each one was awarded their Consecration for service rendered to machine society.

She explained their worship. "Machines know they are a foreign presence in an organic world. Man makes machine, man makes man. But machine cannot make man. We created them, and we are superior to them in every way. Our sex to them is sacred, the pinnacle of existence."

It wasn't just her sex that was sacred. Several times I was taken to a room and restrained, and one machine would be brought in to receive special commendation. No Priests were needed--Saki did the honors. She always apologized profusely for having to do it. Me, I'd think about the number of times I'd jerked off and wiped up in my life, how the machines would respond to that wastage.

"He was punished," she once said, completely randomly, during sex. "The Host that brought you in. He touched you. Only Priests are allowed to do that."

(What was the name we had for the Hosts, again? Crushers? I'm starting to forget the terms)

"But not too harshly," she added. "He saved you. Your suit was on the verge of overloading, it would have killed you."

It baffles sometimes, the machines' devotion to the human flesh they have no qualms destroying. But Saki always has an explanation for everything. "We believe in the co-existence of human and machine, but most humans don't. They would rather subjugate machines, take away their thoughts. We have to fight: to survive, to teach humanity about our way of life."

The way she says is, as though she isn't human, even though she is.

I'm thinking of asking her not to restrain me the next time we do a special consecration. It's really not so bad, and where else could I go, anyway? I'd rather keep some semblance of dignity.

I don't know.

I really don't know.