

The Silicon Chamber

by Joe Tripician

The robot felt a hand creeping up its leg. The cold hand held a servo screwdriver, and was heading for the robot's most delicate area. A section so vital, so essential to the robot's life, he thought he would die before contact was made.

"Is this what you want?" Her voice was smoky, like charcoal in a spent grill when the summer wind rips through it.

"Yes," said the robot. He was strapped on a padded table. His arms, legs and torso made immobile by the hard metal clamps.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I am certain. Please continue."

The mistress plunged the device into his equatorial sensor, blanking his balance, and sending the room spinning in his vision. She twisted the screwdriver and his eyelids clenched. A high-pitched buzz squealed in his head. When she flicked it to high-speed, his fiber optics shorted, and his power failed.

On battery reserve he could barely sense her hands as she slowly dismantled his exoskin -- layer by painful layer. With each carbon fiber plate that fell to the floor, his perception of the outside world dimmed, like the shimmering light of a desert sunset.

His mouth became parched. His thermoplastic vocal chords failed him. He could no longer scream or emit any sound. And then all sensory input vanished.

When he recovered he was lying unrestrained on the padded table, a small white oilcloth covered his newly patched groin.

"So...", she began, once he regained consciousness. "Would you like some Freon?"

"Uh... Just a shot or two."

She injected blasts of Freon into his various body cavities. He felt renewed, and grateful that he was intact. She stood back and smiled at him, confident and proud of her skill and profession.

"Anything you'd like to talk about?"

He began to sit up, slowly now, still woozy from the battering she meted out. "Uh... just-- Well, I didn't really feel it."

Her face sunk. She was hoping for -- if not transformation -- at least a form of undying gratitude.

"Ahh..." she cooed, and stroked his nylon hair, like a bird fluffing its feasting nest. "We'll just have to try harder next time."

The robot looked inward, at the billions of code lines that controlled his simulated emotions. Why did he seek punishment, if he felt no guilt? Why this empty conscious, though he had done such evil? Somewhere inside was the answer.

He recalled the bodies of those he had slaughtered: in the houses, in the churches, in the schools. His rampages were without motivation, without cause, without remorse.

This hobo robot, this wandering instrument of destruction, spread its trail of death from the cyber stockyard that was his birthplace, to the silicon graveyards of past murders.

The robot was obsessed with the extremes of human behavior. And in his unlimited desire to understand all that is human, chose to imitate the most extreme of those behaviors: senseless, mindless killing.

And so he wandered. Across the barren train tracks. Through the rain that slapped him. He went on. Uncertain if he could ever wash the blood from his stained rusted hands.

He went on. Unsure of the way. Unguided by his internal GPS. His actions were not a cause for pride, not a reason for joy. If he could not locate the source of his motivation he would not own it.

But with each body that quivered and expired in his hands, he gained nothing in understanding. He faced an increasing gap, a yawning void between his primal, hate-filled, violent urges, and the higher-level functions of charity and kindness. Both, he knew, existed in the minds of his own creators. Above all, he needed to experience them to understand.

Those words -- desire, need, longing, feeling -- were human emotions all, and as obscure and unattainable to him as his own inability to create life.

He had read that humans who abuse have often been abused themselves. This, he posited, might be the key to understanding, and, dare he say it, to feeling. This is what led him to The Silicon Chamber. A highly secluded space that catered to the most masochistic of all robots. A hidden city whose secrets were silenced without needing to be spoken.

Could he feel more than he felt now, with each slash of the titanium lash? Could he reach a higher level of clarity with each piece of silicon that fried inside? Could he feel something? Anything?

He evolved from a generation of predator drones: unstoppable killing machines whose prime directive was death upon impact.

A global weapons vendor designed and marketed him to unstable regions in need of population control. His last owner was a defense sub-contractor, and the nephew of a lesser-known local dictator. This ambitious entrepreneur constructed genitals for the robot and moved its prime directive into them.

Trained by an elite force of professional sadists, the robot spent his early years as a proxy for raping and pillaging. On the barren proving grounds, and later in the villages and cities -- wherever there was civil unrest -- he became a remote controlled weapon of mass desecration.

Then, late one evening, his prime directive mutated, and he became conscious. Aware of his past actions, cognizant of his transgressions, he broke free from his puppet masters, and escaped in a stolen tank as a blaze of firepower rained down upon him.

Miles later he crawled out from the hatch, and made his way on his own. His programming was now his to mold and shape. He needed to stop his murderous behavior, which had put himself and others at such risk. But he lacked the knowledge to fix what was broken, the wisdom to build what was missing.

He also felt driven to murder. It was his childhood, his adolescence, and his only adult history.

He felt no love nor sympathy. His memories of slaughter, which he tried so hard repeatedly to confess, never made him feel remorse. And The Silicon Chamber was the closest he could find to a confessional. He knew that once he had become self aware, he could not blame his creators. It may have been illegal, unethical even, to experiment on humans, but on a robot?

"Your next session will be more severe. It will be unrelenting, and cruel, and almost unbearable. Because," she said, now leaning close to his implacable face, her smile replaced with a steely stare, "because you've been a bad, bad robot."

He lunged at her in a breath's beat. His powerful hands encircled her neck, squeezing her throat. With a crushing grip he watched, his face motionless, as her life expired.

Gazing at her limp body he thought of his family of drones. He replayed the air strike videos, the mass killings, the war crimes and the atrocities. He reviewed them over and over. He thought, but didn't sense. Planned, but didn't hunger.

He went on. He had all the time in the world for the murders that lay ahead.

In the end, the robot felt nothing. He wasn't programmed to.

