

The Button

by Albatross, October 2015



Colonel Sirewan was a fierce soldier, a loyal soldier, but nothing frightened him as much as the idea of being a traitor to humanity. When the Ruani captured him he knew that soon he could be facing this eventuality. The only time he saw their gray, disgusting faces is when they brought him food. He had held out while he was imprisoned with his men, but now that they had placed him in solitary he finally ate. You had to give it to the Ruani, they had done their homework. They knew exactly how to mess with us humans, he thought. It was a white, featureless room with four blank walls, and even the mark of the doorway was obscured until they opened it. They've created Purgatory! he thought. There was one feature to the room actually — the button. A great silver button rising three feet off of the floor on a white pedestal. The button was his only frame of reference in the void of the room and at first he laughed at its game-show like appearance. Only the button existed. The Ruani had told him that when he was ready, to push it.

When he was ready? The way he figured, it meant one of two things: when he was ready to talk, to spill, to betray his brothers and sisters, or when he was ready to die. Not exactly a game show button. Either way he would hold out. They wouldn't get to him.

He had no idea of direction or how much time had passed. For a while he simply lay down and slept, but he couldn't anymore. The shock of opening his eyes to that flat white nothing was worse than nightmare. He tried working out — pushups, sit-ups, running in place. The more he could tire himself, the more he could sleep and the longer he could hold out, he thought. However, every moment he rested he realized that he was staring at the button, the only focal point.

Frustrated, he decided to face the wall. I will meditate, he said to himself. He hadn't tried to meditate since he was a child. The martial arts classes, he chuckled, picturing himself sitting crosslegged and peeking slyly through his squint around the room when the Sifu wasn't watching. The old dojo was vivid and he could see it clearly: the soft mats, weapons against the wall, his fellow cadets training. I was fierce even then, he said as he watched himself tossing cadets about the room. Nobody was my equal. That was what led me to the top of the officers training, and to Sara.

He squirmed. She was there as he first saw her, lovely in her fatigues. The evenings they spent together in R&R, just a glow of loveliness. The only perfect thing I ever did in this life was marry her, he thought. He wanted to hold her again. A wash of warmth, like a bath swept over him as he reached out to touch her face. His hand collided with the white wall.

“Damn it!” he yelled, jumping up and stomping about the room trying not to glimpse the button.

“It wasn't my fault!” he hollered into nothing. But it was his fault. All of it.

He could see the arguments. She was against the war.

“But we were soldiers,” he cried. “We had to strike first. We had to.”

He sunk back down against the wall.

All of the men he had led, all of the men he had lost marched before him. Those damned Ruani! he cringed. They were changing people. Their ideas, their psychology was an infestation that started the moment we started relations with them. Don't you see what they're doing? he could hear himself yelling. They're rotting us from the inside out, our way of life, our humanity! But they have done nothing to provoke us, she said in return. They are trying to show us something else. You and all the others need to look at things through this new age. You need to change your thinking... NO! Dangerous! That's dangerous! They're dangerous! We will fight! We will fight to preserve what is ours! Besides, what else were we trained for?

The assault on the Ruani stations had been an absolute failure. He had led the first and second waves. A rain of destruction. Beams and explosions, fire lit up the skies, but the sound... the sound was haunting. It rang in his ears even now. He beat his head. It was the human howl. Sara had died in the second wave.

Colonel Sirewan watched again through tears as he melted onto the white floor. It's all my fault, he wept. We were annihilated. The war is over. He lifted his head and looked at the silver button which almost seemed an eye staring at him. What else can they want from me? What else could I possibly have to give them, for they have taken everything from me. He saw Sara's face in the rubble. I... I have taken everything from me.

Slowly he scraped himself off the floor and walked up to the pedestal. He could see his stretched reflection in the button. He looked old and tired, defeated. I can no longer fight, he thought. This button is the end. It is the end of everything I was, everything I am. It is the end of my world. It is death. I have changed Sara, he said aloud and pressed the silver button.

The door hissed open on his right and one of the Ruani came into the room to lead him out.

"Are you going to torture me?" Colonel Sirewan asked.

"We have no need of torture, Colonel Sirewan," replied the strange voice of the Ruani.