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Utility.

By

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Jarred watched from a distance as small groups of soldiers, each with a priest at its head, worked amongst the mud and the bloody body parts attending to the fallen. Progress was slow as there weren't enough priests of each religion to give the fallen the last rights or the proper goodbyes. Each of the bodies was placed reverently in a black body bag, or as reverently as weary soldiers could manage. The bags went on stretchers and then into a waiting truck.

At the depot, once the name of the fallen had been cross-checked, the body was placed in a box. The fashion these days was something quickly compostable. The box was lowered into a hole in the ground. The dead no longer received a headstone but instead a small brass plaque next to a newly planted sapling. The hope was these saplings would grow into a forest of remembrance so that something good would come out of the war.

Disposal of the retired was much quicker, more efficient and more productive. A processing truck was waiting. The retired were carried to a collapsible conveyer. Inside the machine, the retired were chopped and munched and then pumped into a tanker that sat next to the truck. When full, the tanker drove off to the portable processing plant waiting just outside camp and the tanker was quickly replaced by another. Tankers came and went in an endless line from dawn till dusk.

‘Pity to waste it,’ private Shelby said, picking up a stray arm. His battle dress, where his apron didn’t cover, was splattered with the blood of the retired.

‘You from Mars, or something?’ Corporal Haley asked.

Fear came into Shelby’s eyes that perhaps he’d said something stupid. They picked on him, and he hated that.

‘No,’ he said, though tentatively, not sure what the correct answer was.

‘Slimes aren’t human. You can’t use ‘em. Anyway, they make enough parts for us, if you need ‘em.’

Shelby tossed the arm onto the conveyer belt and watched as it travelled into the maw of the machine.

‘Just saying it’s a waste.’

‘It gets used; they all do. Ain’t that right, Tom?’

Jarred was searching the battlefield. The wounded had been recovered early in the morning, once the hill was secured.

Inefficient, Jarred thought. If the Major had only listened to him and reenforced the platoons on the right flank with synthetics as he’d suggested, there would now be fewer dead and fewer retired. While it was regrettable, he reflected, so many humans had died, the retirement of the outdated syns meant soon there would be more of the Jarred model. That would be a good thing.

‘There are no “Tom” series yet, corporal,’ Jarred said, looking at the soldier. ‘The “Jarred’s” are the latest.’

Haley shook his head and laughed.

‘Give’s a hand, will ya,’ he ordered Shelby.

Together they hauled a retired Jake onto the conveyer.

‘That’s why Toms is only good as gun fodder and fertiliser,’ Haley said. ‘Dumb as
shit.’