Maypole

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“We gather here today to honor Soldier 54313009 and ultimately present him, for his outstanding valor and service, the title of the Red Eagle.”

Mechanical applause.

President’s shrill, metallic voice from the speakers overhead echoed off of the cracked sepia ground. The sound jutted off into the grey sky. Antsy and sweating under the drowning heat waves, the crowd shuffled quietly. To the helicopters above, they sat like a thick sea of poppy seeds organized on the flattened desert ground of what used to be, many years ago, a place called Michigan. Each genderless individual wore a sleek black coat and was void of hair. Each had green eyes, slender waists, and stood at 2 meters tall. Each genderless mannequin stood shoulder to shoulder in a tight circular formation, surrounding the stage. From the stage, the sea of humans went on for several kilometers. No one spoke. No one blinked.

The only human who looked different was President. On stage, he stroked his feathery brown hair in between words. He donned an antique white tuxedo and smiled behind the titanium podium. On this particular day, President had declared a mass celebration for an honorary individual who had proved his excellence in the war.

They needed to identify him. They needed to celebrate him.

“54313009, you have served us well. Ameriga would like to thank you and honor you for your bravery and outstanding duty. You will be remembered.”

President turned to look at the crowd. He smiled again. With a biologically engineered arm of muscle, he motioned to an armed guard. Five more joined, and surrounded 54313009. 54313009 let his head fall and held his arms out. Without any verbal instruction, he began to undress completely. He stood next to President, and began to
undress in front of the indiscernible citizens. Finally, he placed his shoes on the edge of the stage at the foot of President's podium. It was getting hotter, and his neck began to sweat. He bowed.

The first guard placed two gloved hands on 54313009’s shoulders and nudged him down to his knees. No one noticed that the guard seemed to whisper something into the soldier’s ear before pushing him down further. 54313009 focused on the ground. Arms to his naked sides, he lay prostrate on the silver stage, waiting. Waiting, like the thirsty earth had been waiting for rain for over 200 years now.

President nodded and pushed a small button on the side of his podium. The stage groaned and started to shift. A tall black pole sprouted from the center. Like an ancient flagpole, it rose higher and higher, establishing itself as the only contrast to the bitter, flat terrain. Twenty meters high, it stood like a cursed thorn. Upon reaching maximum height, it released long white streamers and four black chains into the windless air. The brazen chains repelled downward, surrounding 54313009 with four massive hooks.

He shuddered.

The ribbons looked on.

Four guards grabbed a hook and yanked; one guard assigned to each limb. Without making eye contact, they sank the tips of each hook into 54313009’s body. Springs of crimson blood spurted onto the stage. Silent, 54313009 lay like a pierced keg of red wine shuddering in its own leaks. Struggling, the guards jabbed the fat barbs into his muscle. More guards lent their assistance. They thrust the four hooks through shoulders and hips until the curved tips peeped out like black horns on a gruesome back. Sopping and mangled, 54313009 was with four new limbs of chain. After the few minutes of struggle, the soldier was secured.
The first guard pulled out a piece of rolled tobacco and lit it. President walked over and took it. He placed it in between 54313009's teeth. When 54313009 didn't immediately bite down, President placed a hand on the soldier's stark head and assisted him. President admired himself for his kindness. He walked back to his place.

Breathing heavily, a hot, dripping 54313009 was strewn up and ready for his commemoration.

"Ameriga, let us honor our valiant hero."

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Like a broken tape recording, the sentence echoed a deafening bellow. In a gust of wind, President's cheery voice swept over the barren land, awakening the dead. The people stopped fidgeting. They looked up. Their eyes dilated at the sight of their bloodied champion.

Then they began to hum.

What rose from the diaphragms of each human welded itself into the sound of the next. The mass's low hums swam into the darkened sky. Like a medley of a million singing earthly gongs, the sounds started softly. But soon the audible waves began to rise and crescendo. Within minutes the eerie sound resonated through the throats of each focused spectator.

The dark maypole began to grow once again. It rose several more meters into the air, lifting the soldier higher and higher. The ivory streamers fluttered under the moving air and tickled his lacerated back. The four chains creaked and groaned. The soldier closed his eyes. The black needle began to spin and faint trails of cigarette smoke left pencil marks in the air. Like an ancient carnival ride, the mangled soldier ascended into the air, and circled the stage slowly like...
a wounded eagle. The eagle bore four small wings of tearing flesh and grimaced as he flew his lopsided journey over the crowd. Around he flew. Faster and faster, he sailed over the hums of the audience like a dizzy fly hovering over smoke. The white streamers violently whipped and chased each other like hundreds of snakes hanging from their tails.

President looked on.

Blood began to spew. The soldier’s insides sprinkled the hot earth and fell upon the thirsty people. A mangled arm hurled into the crowd. Another dangled from its disfigured mother; its umbilical cord stretched taut as the growing momentum pried it away. The soldier’s eyes rolled back.

The sea of prolonged hums warped into beastly cheers. The people began to whoop and jump. They flailed their arms and opened their hungry mouths wide like baby birds. The drought was over! They had been awakened. The blessed scent of blood made red clouds in the sky. They hugged and cheered and reveled under the scarlet mist.

For the first time in a long time, it had finally rained.