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WoB Short Story Contest Entry
12/3/2020

Failure Number 4,398,001

I turn twenty eight tomorrow.

And I'm scared. So scared.

Your first Assessment is on the day you turn eighteen; when the Machine measures your success and determines your lifespan. That's when they give you your Dial too. A programmable tattoo they put on top of your left wrist. It's just a black ring when you first get it, but after your first Assessment it glows a certain color; green if you're deemed a success, red if you're doomed to death. Small tick marks appear along the inner edge, each disappearing with every month you live. A number in the middle counts down the days, hours, minutes, and seconds of each month.

It's a dismal way to live, knowing exactly when you're going to die. The number on your wrist always reminds you that your time is limited. But even if you're deemed a failure on your first Assessment, you're still guaranteed ten more years to try for a second chance. That's the boat I'm in right now. Tomorrow will determine the rest of my life.

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"How?!" I screamed, slamming my fists against the plexiglass, "*How?!*"

I broke down into tears, sobbing as I slid down the wall. I knew it was no use arguing with the Machine. Its software was programmed to handle this kind of outrage. I knew what would happen next. The plexiglass door would slide open and a transporter bot would take me out and send me away. *You have twenty four hours until elimination. Resistance will be met with immediate destruction*, it would say in its perfect, horrible, robotic voice. My Dial would turn red and the numbers in the center would count down from 00:24:00:00 until they all reached zero. And that would be it. Then I would be gone.

Most people go to their families to say goodbye. Some run to the dark parts of the city to take their rage out on the criminals and outlaws who hide there buying their time. Most of those people are killed before their twenty four hours are up. I've heard of a few who killed themselves too, not wanting to leave their death in someone else's hands. *Something* else's hands.

I just wanted to be alone. My family was all gone, so in the end, my death wouldn't matter to anyone anyway. I would just be another failure eliminated. Failure number 4,398,001 to be exact.

I laid on my bed, the shades pulled and lights off. I covered up my Dial, banishing the red glow from the room, and basked in the darkness. After all, this was all I would know in

exactly 00:23:43:57. I lost myself in my thoughts and memories. I tried to think about all the good times I had had in my life, but I couldn't get past the fact that I was worth nothing in the eyes of the Machine. In the eyes of society.

Feeling numb, I slowly went through all the years of my life. A tear rolled down my cheek as I thought about the day I turned eighteen. That's when it all started really. When life ceased to be happy and became a mad race. The Machine considers wealth and popularity to be success. To survive, you have to be ruthless, but it isn't in my nature. In the beginning, I didn't care. I lived generously and figured the best people always die young anyway. But three years ago, the fact that I was going to die really hit me. I freaked out, spending every waking minute trying to conform to society, in hopes it would save me from the Machine. It didn't work.

*Knock, knock, knock.*

I looked up, the painful memories disappearing for a moment. The blanket over my wrist fell off and introduced a soft red glow to the room, but I hardly noticed. No one knocked these days. Every house had a built in bell system that rang when an unfamiliar Dial was sensed near the door. I was the only one familiar to my apartment's system, so why hadn't it gone off?

*Knock, knock, knock.*

I slowly got out of bed and carefully made my way to the bedroom door. I cracked it open, squinting at the blinding light beyond. When my eyes had adjusted, I slipped out and made my way to the front door. As I came around the corner, I saw the silhouette of a woman in the frosted glass. Her hand raised to the door frame and rapped three more urgent times.

Suspicious, I slowly slid the door open. A woman, slightly younger than me, stood in the doorway. She clutched her left wrist in her hand, pulling at her sleeve. I instantly felt like something was off about her. She looked normal enough at first glance, wearing a dark green tunic with black leggings and tall boots. Then I saw her eyes. They had that shine to them that you didn't see anymore nowadays. It was the shine kids have before they're loaded with the stress of survival. It was as if she didn't give a single thought to her death date.

"Are you Adra Williams? My name is Iris," she said as she glanced towards the road nervously, "I need to speak with you."

I nodded "Yeah, I'm Adra. Come in," I stepped aside as she glided through the door. The second it was closed her mannerisms changed completely. I now stood before a confident young woman with an air about her that screamed she knew more than she let on.

"Can I see your wrist, please? We don't have much time," she reached towards my left wrist.

"Sorry," I said, taking a step back, "did I miss something? Why do you want to see my wrist?"

"Right, sorry," she smiled, "I should explain first." She pulled two chairs together, "Come sit."

I sat next to her uneasily, "You'd better explain what's going on. It's not very often I get invited to sit in my own living room."

She chuckled, "Like I said, my name is Iris. I'm the granddaughter of Carson Newbauer."

I gasped. Everyone knew who Carson Newbauer was. Nearly a century ago, he'd unlocked the secret to immortality and invented the Machine. No one had seen him in over

twenty years. Rumor has it that he made himself immortal, but no one knows what happened to him after that.

"Relax," Iris said as I half stood up, "I'm not here to doom you." I slowly sat back down, figuring if she was lying, I would be dead tomorrow anyway. Then she caught my attention. "I'm here to save you. About twenty years ago, my grandfather realized that something was going wrong with the Machine. It had started Assessing people by its own rules."

"You mean it developed a consciousness?"

Iris nodded, "Then it denied Grandpa's authorization code when he tried to shut it down. We even tried sabotaging it, but the thing had figured out how to use its own wiring as defensive weapons. We couldn't even get into the room."

I blinked, "Wait, let me get this straight. For twenty years, the Machine has been killing people who shouldn't be killed, and letting people live who wouldn't have made it had the Machine still been following your grandpa's rules?" Iris nodded in confirmation. "And you've just been sitting around the whole time letting that happen?!" I said, feeling hot tears in my eyes.

"No! No, let me explain. While Grandpa can't alter the Machine, he can still monitor it. So that's what we've been doing, every time someone is Assessed and deemed a failure, we look to see what kind of a person they are and save them if they meet our standards."

"What are your standards?" I asked, once again suspicious.

"We want people who are successful in a different way than what the Machine thinks. People who give more than they take, listen more than they speak, and understand that life isn't about what you have, but what you do... we want people like you," Iris said softly.

"Like me? But what do you do with them? Once you identify the people you want, how do you save them?"

"Give me your wrist and I'll show you."

Reluctantly, I placed my left wrist on my knee, the red numbers counting down silently.

00:18:01:02...

00:18:01:01...

00:17:59:59...

Iris took a small circular device out of her pocket. I watched her nervously as she gently took my wrist in her hand and placed the device on my Dial. It was just a little bigger and had a series of buttons clustered around a small screen on top. She quickly tapped something into it and numbers lit up the screen. I recognized them as my own.

00:17:59:51...

00:17:59:50...

00:17:59:49...

"I synced it to your Dial," Iris explained, still holding the device firmly against my wrist, "Now tell me this; do you want to live?"

"Yes!" I said without entirely understanding why she was asking. I gasped as a sharp pain suddenly shot into my wrist and up through my arm to my head. I yelled out in pain and jerked my hand back. Pressing the heels of my hands against my temples, I squeezed my eyes shut. Slowly, the searing pain subsided and I sat up in my chair, a dull ache still lingering in my head.

Iris had replaced the device in her pocket and was standing beside me. She put a hand on my shoulder, "You'll be okay," she said soothingly, "Look at your Dial."

I took a shuddering breath and did as she said. At first, I wasn't sure what to think. The Dial was just... dead. It reminded me of when you first get it, before it's activated; inky black and nothing more than a ring with a series of small tick marks along the inner edge. But now the black was faded and the threatening numbers that appear when the disk is activated were simply gone. I stared at it, mystified. Iris smiled and pulled up her sleeve revealing her own Dial, also dead and even more faded than mine.

"How did you..."

"Despite everything he's done, at his core, my grandpa is still an inventor," Iris smiled, "We're forming a resistance group, secret for now, but someday, we'll take over and bring the Machine down. Come on, we need to get you out of here before they come looking for your body. The device tricks your Dial into thinking you're dead, which deactivates it, but also alerts the government and the Machine."

I nodded, feeling a bit wobbly on my feet as I stood up to follow her. "That'll wear off in a couple minutes," she assured me, "Is there anything you want to take with you before we go? Once we get where we're going, there's no coming back."

I gazed at my small apartment and realized that nothing in it was really that important to me. Not the antique silverware or polished furniture. None of the trendy clothes in my dresser, nor the fancy shoes lined up beneath it. Not even the pictures on the wall really mattered.

"No," I said, "Just this." I went to the hall closet and grabbed my old waist length cloak I had been bullied out of wearing. I swung it around my shoulders, smiling as I remembered how happy I used to be when I wore it. "Ready," I said as I pulled the hood over my head.

Iris smiled as she led the way through the front door and towards my second chance. She and the Secret Society she came from were my kind of people, and together, we would make things right. I didn't look back as I closed the door behind me. This was the start of a Revolution.