

Remade

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Who said that death has to signal the end? It may just be an opportunity.

A dark-skinned human with four arms walks towards me across the floor of the club, clad only in a belt strung with human skulls. Her hair forms a smoky wreath around her open and curious face. She's interested in me.

"You're new around here, aren't you?" she asks, pausing in front of my table.

I stare at her. Apart from the neatly articulated extra shoulder joints, the body she's wearing is roughly ortho, following the traditional human body-plan. The skulls are sub-sized, strung together on a necklace threaded with barbed wire and roses. "Yes, I'm a nube," I say. My parole ring makes my left index finger tingle, a little reminder. "I'm required to warn you that I'm undergoing identity reindexing and rehabilitation. People in my state may be prone to violent outbursts. Don't worry, that's just a statutory warning: I won't hurt you. What makes you ask?"

She shrugs. It's an elaborate rippling gesture that ends with a wiggle of her hips. "Because I haven't seen you here before, and I've been coming here most nights for the past twenty or thirty diurns. You can earn extra rehab credit by helping out. Don't worry about the parole ring, most of us here have them. I had to warn people myself a while ago."

I manage to force a smile. A fellow inmate? Further along the program? "Would you like a drink?" I ask, gesturing at the chair next to me. "And what are you called, if you don't mind me asking?"

"I'm Kay." She pulls out the chair and sits, flipping her great mass of dark hair over her shoulder and tucking her skulls under the table with two hands as she glances at the menu. "I'll have an iced double mocha pickup, easy on the coca." She looks at me again, staring at my eyes. "The clinic arranges things so that there's always a volunteer around to greet nubes. It's my turn this swing shift. Do you want to tell me your name? Or where you're from?"

"If you like." My ring tingles and I remember to smile. "My name's Robin, and you're right, I'm fresh out of the rehab tank. Only been out for a meg, to tell the truth." A bit over ten planetary days, a million seconds. "I'm from" - I go into quicktime for a few subseconds, trying to work out what story to give her, ending up with an approximation of the truth - "around these parts, actually. But just out of memory excision. I was getting stale and needed to do something about whatever it was I was getting stale over."

Kay smiles. She's got sharp cheekbones, bright teeth framed between perfect lips; she's got bilateral symmetry, three billion years of evolutionary heuristics and homeobox genes generating a face that's a mirror of itself - *and where did that thought come from?* I ask myself, annoyed. It's tough, not being able to tell the difference between your own thoughts and a post-surgical identity prosthesis.

"I haven't been human for long," she admits. "I just moved here from Zemlya." Pause. "For my surgery," she adds quietly.

I fiddle with the tassels dangling from my sword pommel. There's something not quite right about them, and it's bugging me intensely. "You lived with the ice ghouls?" I ask.

"Not quite - I was an ice ghoul." She crosses both pairs of arms defensively. "I'd feel like a liar looking like ..." She glances past me. There are a handful of other people in the bar, a few bushujo and a couple of cyborgs, but most of them are wearing orthohuman bodies. She's glancing at a woman with long blonde hair on one side of her head and stubble on the other, wearing a filmy white drape and a sword belt. The woman is braying loudly with laughter at something one of her companions just said: berserkers on the prowl for players. "Her, for example."

"But you were orthohuman once?"

"I still am, inside."

The penny drops: She wears xenohuman drag when she's in public because she's shy. I glance over at the group and accidentally make eye contact with the blonde woman. She looks at me, stiffens, then pointedly turns away. "How long has this bar been here?" I ask, my ears burning. *How dare she do that to me?*

"About three megs." Kay nods at the group of orthos across the room. "I really would avoid paying obvious attention to them, they're duellists."

"So am I." I nod at her. "I find it therapeutic."

She grimaces. "I don't play, myself. It's messy. And I don't like pain."

"Well, neither do I," I say slowly. "That's not the point." The point is that we get angry when we can't remember who we are, and we lash out at first; and a structured, formal framework means that nobody else needs to get hurt.

"Where do you live?" she asks.

"I'm in the" - she's transparently changing the subject, I realise - "clinic, still. I mean, everything I had, I" - liquidated and ran - "I travel light. I still haven't decided what to be in this new lifetime, so there doesn't seem much point in having lots of baggage."

"Another drink?" Kay asks. "I'm buying."

"Yes, please." A warning bell rings in my head as I sense Blondie heading towards our table. I pretend not to notice but I can feel a familiar warmth in my stomach, a tension in my back. Ancient reflexes and not a few modern cheat-codes take over and I surreptitiously loosen my sword in its scabbard. I think I know what Blondie wants and I'm perfectly happy to give it to her. She's not the only one around here prone to frequent flashes of murderous rage that take a while to cool. The counsellor told me to embrace it and give in, among consenting fellows: it should burn itself out in time. Which is why I'm carrying.

But the post-excision rages aren't my only irritant. In addition to memory edits I opted to have my age reset. Being post-adolescent again brings back forgotten hormonal torments. It makes me pace my apartment restlessly, until I pull on a duellist's sash and go out in search of random violence. Sex, too, has acquired an obsessive importance I'd forgotten. These urges are hard to fight off when you wake up empty and unable to remember who you used to be. And they're a lot less fun the second time through the cycle of rejuvenation.

"Listen, don't look round but you probably ought to know that someone is about to - "

Before I can finish the sentence Blondie leans over Kay's shoulder and spits in my face. "I demand satisfaction." She has a voice like a diamond drill.

"Why?" I ask stonily, heart thumping with tension as I wipe my cheek. I can feel the rage building but I force myself to keep it under control.

"You exist."

There's a certain look some post-rehab cases get while they're in the psychopathic dissociative stage, still re-knitting the ravelled threads of their personality and memories into a new identity. The insensate anger at the world, the existential hate, often directed at their previously whole self for putting them into this world, naked and stripped of memories, generates its own dynamic. Wild black-eyed hatred and the perfect musculature of the optimised phenotype combine to lend Blondie an intimidating, almost primal presence. Nevertheless she's got enough self-control to issue a challenge before she attacks.

Kay, shy and much further advanced in recovery than either of us, cowers in her seat as Blondie glares at me. *That* annoys me: Blondie's got no call to intimidate bystanders. And maybe I'm not as out of control as I feel.

"In that case..." I slowly stand up, not breaking eye contact for a moment. "How about we take this to the remilitarised zone? First death rules?"

"Yes," she hisses.

I glance at Kay: "Nice talking to you. Order me another drink. I'll be right back." I can feel her eyes on my back as I follow Blondie to the gate to the RMZ. Which is right beside the bar.

Blondie pauses on the threshold. "After you," she says.

"Au contraire: Challenger goes first."

She glares at me one more time, clearly furious, then strides into the T-gate and blinks out. I wipe my right palm on my leather kilt, grip the hilt of my sword, draw, and leap through the point-to-point wormhole.

Duelling etiquette calls for the challenger to clear the gate by a good ten paces, but Blondie isn't in a good mood and it is a very good thing that I'm on the defensive and ready to parry as I go through because she's waiting ready to shove her sword through my abdomen on the spot.

She's fast and vicious and utterly uninterested in playing by the rules, which is fine by me because my own existential rage now has an outlet and a face. The anger that has been eating me up since my surgery, the hatred of the war criminals who forced me into this, of the person I used to be who surrendered to the large-scale memory erasure - I can't even remember what sex I was, or how tall - has a focus, and on the other end of her circling blade Blondie's face is a glow of concentration and fury to mirror my own.

This part of the remilitarised zone is modelled on a ruined city of old Urth, shattered postnuclear concrete wastelands and strange creeping vegetation shrouding the statues of conquerors and the burned-out wreckage of wheeled cars. We could be alone here, marooned on a planet uninhabited by other sapientes. Alone to work out our grief and rage as the post-surgical fugue slowly dissipates.

Blondie tries to rush me and I fall back carefully, trying to spot some weakness in her attack. She prefers the edge to the point and the right to the left but she's not leaving me any openings. "Hurry up and die!" she snaps.

"After you." I feint and try to draw her off-balance, circling round her. Next to the gate we came in through there's a ruined stump of a tall building, rubble heaped up above head height. (The gate's beacon flashes red, signifying no egress until one of us is dead.) The rubble gives me an idea and I feint again,

then back off and leave an opening for her.

Blondie takes the opening and I just block her, because she's fast: but she's not sly, and she certainly wasn't expecting the knife in my left hand - taped to my left thigh before - and as she tries to guard against it I see my chance and run my sword through her belly.

She drops her weapon and falls to her knees. I sit down heavily opposite her, almost collapsing. *Oh dear. How did she manage to get my leg?* Maybe I shouldn't trust my instincts quite so totally.

"Done?" I ask, suddenly feeling faint.

"I - " There's a curious expression on her face as she holds onto the basket of my sword. "Uh." She tries to swallow. "Who?"

"I'm Robin," I say lightly, watching her with interest. I'm not sure I've ever watched somebody dying with a sword through the guts before. There's lots of blood, and a really vile smell of ruptured intestines: I'd have thought she'd be writhing and screaming, but maybe she's got an autonomic override. Anyway, I'm holding my leg together. Blood keeps welling up between my fingers. *Comradeship in pain.* "You are ...?"

"Gwyn." She swallows. The light of hatred is extinguished, leaving something - puzzlement? - behind.

"When did you last back up, Gwyn?"

She squints. "Unh. Hour. Ago."

"Well then. Would you like me to end this?"

It takes a moment for her to meet my eyes. She nods. "When. You?"

I lean over, grimacing, and pick up her blade. "When did I last back myself up? Since recovering from memory surgery, you mean?"

She nods, or maybe shudders. I raise the blade and frown, lining it up on her neck: it takes all my energy. "Good question - "

I slice through her throat. Blood sprays everywhere.

"Never."

I stumble to the exit - an A-gate - and tell it to rebuild my leg before returning me to the bar. It switches me off and a subjective instant later I wake up in the kiosk in the washroom at the back of the bar, my body remade as new. I feel empty but, curiously, at peace with myself. *Maybe I'll be ready for a backup, soon?* I flex my right leg. The assembler's done a good job of canonicalising it and the edited muscle works just fine.

Kay takes me to a charmingly rustic low-gee piazza of spun diamond foam and bonsai redwoods, where quaint steam-powered robots cook succulent baby hams over charcoal grills. Kay and I chat and it becomes clear that she's mightily intrigued to see me recovering visibly from the emotional after-effects of memory surgery. She has a quirky sense of humour. After we've eaten, I tell her, "I've been an idiot. I need to take a backup as soon as I go home."

Her eyes widen. "You've been walking around here wearing a sword and a duelling sash all evening and you don't have a *backup*?" Her voice rises to a squeak.

"Knowing you've got a backup blunts your edge. Anyway, I was angry with myself." I stop frowning as I look at her.

Kay leans me up against the wall just beside the entrance, kisses me and does something electrifying with three of her hands. She vanishes into the hygiene suite to use the assembler, leaving me panting. When she returns I almost don't recognise her - her hair has turned blue, she's lost two arms, and her skin has turned the colour of milky coffee. But she walks right up to me and kisses me again and I recognise her by the taste of her mouth. I carry her to the bed and we explore each other's bodies until we fall asleep.

You can't stay angry forever.

Charles Stross is a science fiction writer in Edinburgh, Scotland, with qualifications in pharmacy and computer science. This is an extract from his novel, *Glasshouse*.

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