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Glasshouse

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SINGULARITY SKY

IRON SUNRISE

ACCELERANDO

THE ATROCITY ARCHIVES

GLASSHOUSE

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“This apparatus,” said the Officer, grasping a connecting rod and leaning against it, “is our previous Commandant’s invention. . . . Have you heard of our previous Commandant? No? Well, I’m not claiming too much when I say that the organization of the entire penal colony is his work. We, his friends, already knew at the time of his death that the administration of the colony was so self-contained that even if his successor had a thousand new plans in mind he would not be able to alter anything of the old plan, at least not for several years . . . It’s a shame that you didn’t know the old Commandant!”

—“In the Penal Colony,” Frank Kafka

Who still talks nowadays about the Armenians?

—Adolf Hitler, 1939

The polities descended from the Republic of Is do not use days, weeks, or other terrestrial dating systems other than for historical or archaeological purposes; however, the classical second has been retained as the basis of timekeeping.

Here's a quick ready-reckoner:

one second

One second, the time taken for light to travel 299,792,458 meters in vacuum

one kilosecond

Archaic: 16 minutes

one hundred kiloseconds (1 diurn)

Archaic: 27 hours, 1 day and three hours

one megasecond (1 cycle)

Ten diurns. Archaic: eleven days and six hours

thirty megaseconds (1 m-year)

300 diurns. Archaic: 337 Earth days (11 months)

one gigasecond

Archaic: approximately 31 Earth years

one terasecond

Archaic: approximately 31,000 Earth years (half age of human species)

one petasecond

~~Archaic: approximately 31,000,000 Earth years (half elapsed time since end of Cretaceous era)~~

Duel

A dark-skinned human with four arms walks toward 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 is 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 subsized, 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. I—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. “Hmm, I think I will 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, 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 ju

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 postsurgical 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.”

That gets my attention: I don’t think I’ve ever met a real live alien before, even an ex-alien. “Were you”—what’s the word?—“born that way, or did you emigrate for a while?”

“Two questions.” She holds up a finger. “Trade?”

“Trade.” I remember to nod without prompting, and my ring sends me a flicker of warmth. It’s crude conditioning: reward behavior indicative of recovery, punish behavior that reinforces the postsurgical fugue. I don’t like it, but they tell me it’s an essential part of the process.

“I emigrated to Zemlya right after my previous memory dump.” Something about her expression strikes me as evasive. What could she be omitting? A failed business venture, personal enemies? “I wanted to study ghoulish society from the inside.” Her cocktail emerges from the table, and she takes an experimental sip. “They’re so strange.” She looks wistful for a moment. “But after a generation I got . . . sad.” Another sip. “I was living among them to study them, you see. And when you live among people for gigaseconds on end you can’t stop yourself getting involved, not unless you go totally post and upgrade your—well. I made friends and watched them grow old and die until I couldn’t take any more. I had to come back and excise the . . . the impact. The pain.”

Gigaseconds? Thirty planetary years each. That’s a long time to spend among aliens. She’s studying me intently. “That must have been very precise surgery,” I say slowly. “I don’t remember much of my previous life.”

“You were human, though,” she prods.

“Yes.” Emphatically yes. Shards of memory remain: a flash of swords in a twilight alleyway in the remilitarized zone. Blood in the fountains. “I was an academic. A member of the professoriat.” An array of firewalled assembler gates, lined up behind the fearsome armor of a customs checkpoint between polities. Pushing screaming, imploring civilians toward a shadowy entrance—“I taught history.” That much is—was—true. “It all seems boring and distant now.” The brief flash of an energy weapon, then silence. “I was getting stuck in a rut, and I needed to refresh myself. I think.”

Which is almost but not quite a complete lie. I didn’t volunteer, someone made me an offer I couldn’t refuse. I knew too much. Either consent to undergo memory surgery, or my next death would be my last. At least, that’s what it said I’d done in the dead-paper letter that was waiting by my bedside when I awakened in the rehab center, fresh from having the water of Lethe delivered straight to my brain by the molecular-sized robots of the hospitaler surgeon-confessors. I grin, sealing the partial truths with an outright lie. “So I had a radical rebuild, and now I can’t remember why.”

“And you feel like a new human,” she says, smiling faintly.

“Yes.” I glance at her lower pair of hands. I can’t help noticing that she’s fidgeting. “Even though stuck with this conservative body plan.” I’m *very* conservatively turned out—a medium-height male,

dark eyes, wiry, the stubble of dark hair beginning to appear across my scalp—like an unreconstructed Eurasian from the pre-space era, right down to the leather kilt and hemp sandals. “I have a strong self-image, and I didn’t really want to shed it—too many associations tied up in there. Those are nice skulls, by the way.”

Kay smiles. “Thank you. And thank you again for not asking, by the way.”

“Asking?”

“The usual question: Why do you look like, well . . .”

I pick up my glass for the first time and take a sip of the bitingly cold blue liquid. “You’ve just spent an entire prehistoric human lifetime as an ice ghoul and people are needling you for having too many arms?” I shake my head. “I just assumed you have a good reason.”

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 blond 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 blond 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 duelists.”

“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 realize—“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 toward 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 counselor 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 postexcision rages aren’t my only irritant. In addition to memory edits, I opted to have my age reset. Being postadolescent again brings its own dynamic of hormonal torment. It makes me pace my apartment restlessly, drives me to stand in the white cube of the hygiene suite and draw blades down the insides of my arms, curious to see the bright rosy blood welling up. Sex has acquired an

obsessive importance I'd almost forgotten. The urges to sex and violence are curiously hard to fight off when you awaken drained and empty and unable to remember who you used to be, but they're a lot less fun, the second or third 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 type of look some postrehab cases get while they're in the psychopathic dissociative stage, still reknitting the raveled 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 optimized 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 remilitarized 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.

Dueling etiquette calls for the challenger to clear the gate by a good ten paces, but Blondie isn't in a good mood, and it's 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 erasure of their memories—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 remilitarized zone is modeled 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 sapients. Alone to work out our grief and rage as the postsurgical 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 barely 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 on to 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 their 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 busy 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 stare into the mirror for about a minute, feeling 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 canonicalizing it, and the edited muscle works just fine. I resolve to avoid Gwyn, at least until she’s in a less insensately violent mood, which may take a long time if she keeps picking fights with her betters. Then I return to my table.

Kay is still there, which is odd. I’d expected her to be gone by now. (A-gates are fast, but it still takes a minimum of about a thousand seconds to tear down and rebuild a human body: that’s a lot of bits and atoms to juggle.)

I drop into my seat. She *has* bought me another drink. “I’m sorry about that,” I say automatically.

“You get used to it around here.” She sounds philosophical. “Feeling better?”

“You know, I—” I stop. Just for a moment I’m back in that dusty concrete-strewn wasteland, a searing pain in my leg, the sheer hatred I feel fueling my throw at Gwyn’s head. “It’s gone,” I say. I

stare at the glass, then pick it up and knock back half of it in one go.

“What’s gone?” I catch her watching me. “If you don’t mind talking about it,” she adds hastily.

She’s frightened but concerned, I suddenly realize. My parole ring pulses warmth repeatedly. “I don’t mind,” I say, and smile, probably a trifle tiredly. I put the glass down. “I’m still in the dissociative phase, I guess. Before I came out this evening I was sitting in my room all on my own, and I was drawing pretty lines all over my arms with a scalpel. Thinking about opening my wrists and ending it all. I was angry. Angry at myself. But now I’m not.”

“That’s very common.” Her tone is guarded. “What changed it for you?”

I frown. Knowing it’s a common side effect of reintegration doesn’t help. “I’ve been an idiot. I need to take a backup as soon as I go home.”

“A backup?” Her eyes widen. “You’ve been walking around here wearing a sword and a dueling sash all evening, and you don’t have a *backup*?” Her voice rises to a squeak. “What are you trying to *do*?”

“Knowing you’ve got a backup blunts your edge. Anyway, I was angry with myself.” I stop frowning as I look at her. “But you can’t stay angry forever.”

More to the point, I’m suddenly feeling an awful, hollow sense of dread about the idea of rediscovering who I am, or who I used to be. What does it mean, to suddenly begin sensing other people’s emotions again only after you run someone through with a sword? Back in the dark ages it would have been a tragedy. Even here, dying isn’t something most people take lightly. For a horrible moment I feel the urge to rush out and find Gwyn and apologize to her—but that’s absurd, she won’t remember, she’ll be in the same headspace she was in before. She’d probably challenge me to another duel and, being in the same insensate rage, turn me into hamburger on the spot.

“I think I’m reconnecting,” I say slowly. “Do you know somewhere I could go that’s safer? I mean, less likely to attract the attentions of berserkers?”

“Hmm.” She looks at me critically. “If you lose the sword and the sash, you won’t look out of place around the block in one of the phase two recovery piazzas. I know a place that does a really good joesteak—how hungry are you feeling?”

IN the wake of the duel I have become hungry for food just as my appetite for violence has declined. Kay takes me to a charmingly rustic low-gee piazza of spun-diamond foam and bonsai redwoods, where quaint steam-powered robots roast 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 aftereffects of memory surgery. I pump her for details of life among the ice ghouls, and she quizzes me about the dueling academies of the Invisible Republic. She has a quirky sense of humor and, toward the end of the meal, suggests that she knows a party where there’s fun to be had.

The party turns out to be a fairly laid-back floating orgy in one of the outpatient apartments. There are only about six people there when we arrive, mostly lying on the large circular bed, passing around a water pipe and masturbating each other tenderly. Kay leans me up against the wall just beside the entrance, kisses me, and does something electrifying to my perineum and testicles with three of her hands. Then she vanishes into the hygiene suite to use the assembler, leaving me panting. When she returns I almost don’t recognize her—her hair has turned blue, she’s lost two arms, and her skin has turned the color of milky coffee. But she walks right up to me and kisses me again and I recognize her by the taste of her mouth. I carry her to the bed and, after our first urgent fuck, we join the circle with the pipe—which is loaded with opium and an easily vaporized phosphodiesterase inhibitor—then

explore each other's bodies and those of our neighbors until we're close to falling asleep.

I'm lying next to her, almost face-to-face, when she murmurs, "That was fun."

"Fun," I echo. "I needed—" My vision blurs. "Too long."

"I come here regularly," she offers. "You?"

"I haven't—" I pause.

"What?"

"I can't remember when I last had sex."

She places one hand between my thighs. "Really?" She looks puzzled.

"I can't." I frown. "I must have forgotten it."

"Forgotten? Truly?" She looks surprised. "Could you have had a bad relationship or something?"

Could that be why you had surgery?"

"No, I—" I stop before anything more slips out. The letter from my older self would have said if that was the case, I'm certain of that much. "It's just gone. I don't think that usually happens, does it?"

"No." She cuddles up against me and strokes my neck. I feel a momentary sense of wonder as I stiffen against her, then I begin to trace the edges of her nipples, and her breath catches. It must be the drugs, I think; I couldn't possibly stay aroused this long without some external input, could I? "You'd be a good subject for Yourdon's experiment."

"Yourdon's what?"

She pushes at my chest and I roll onto my back obligingly to let her mount me. There are toys scattered round the bed, mewling and begging to be used, but she seems to need to do this the traditional way, bareback skin on skin: she probably sees it as a way of reconnecting with what it means to be human or something. My breath hisses as I grab her buttocks and pull her down onto me.

"The experiment. He's looking for serious amnesia cases, offering a referral fee to finders. I'll tell you later."

And then we stop talking, because speech is simply getting in the way of communication, and in the here and now, she's all I need.

AFTERWARD, I walk home through avenues carpeted with soft, living grass, roofed in green marble slabs carved from the lithosphere of a planet hundreds of teraklicks away. I am alone with my thoughts, netlink silenced save for a route map that promises me a five-kilometer walk avoiding all other persons. Though I carry my sword, I don't feel any desire to be challenged. I need time to think, because when I get home my therapist will be waiting for me, and I need to be clear in my own head about who I think I am becoming before I talk to it.

Here I am, awake and alive—whoever I am. *I'm Robin, aren't I?* I have a slew of fuzzy memories, traces left behind by memory washes that blur my earlier lives into an impressionist haze. I had to look up my own age shortly after I woke. Turns out I'm nearly seven billion seconds old, though I have the emotional stability of a postadolescent a tenth that age. Once upon a time people who lived even two gigaseconds were senescent. How can I be so old yet feel so young and inexperienced?

There are huge, mysterious holes in my life. Obviously I must have had sex before, but I don't remember it. Clearly I have dueled—my reflexes and unconscious skills made short work of Gwyn—but I don't remember training, or killing, except in mysterious flashes that could equally well be leftover memories of entertainments. The letter from my earlier self said I was an academic, a military historian specializing in religious manias, sleeper cults, and emergent dark ages. If so, I don't

remember any of it at all. Maybe it's buried deep, to re-emerge when I need it—and maybe it's gone for good. ~~Whatever grade of memory excision my earlier self requested must have been perilously close to a total wipe.~~

So what's left?

There are fractured shards of memory all over the lobby of my Cartesian theatre, waiting for me to slip and cut myself on them. I'm in male orthohuman form right now, orthodox product of natural selection. This shape feels right to me, but I think there was a time when I was something much stranger—for some reason, I have the idea that I might have been a *tank*. (Either that, or I mainlined one too many wartime adventure virtches, and they stuck with me through memory surgery even when more important parts went missing.) The sense of implacable extensibility, coldly controlled violence . . . yes, maybe I was a tank. If so, at one time I guarded a critical network gate. Traffic between polities, like traffic within a polity, passes over T-gates, point-to-point wormholes linking distant locations. T-gates have two endpoints, and are unfiltered—anything can pass through one, from one end to the other. While this isn't a problem within a polity, it's a *huge* problem when you're defending a network frontier against attack from other polities. Hence the firewall. My job, as part of the frontier guard, was to make sure that inbound travelers went straight into an A-gate—an assembly array that disassembled, uploaded, and analyzed them for threats, before routing them as serial data to another A-gate on the inside of the DMZ for reassembly. Normally people would only be routed through an A-gate for customs scanning or serialization via a high-traffic wormhole aperture dedicated to data traffic; but at that time there were no exceptions to the security check because we were at war.

War? Yes: it was the tail end of the censorship wars. I must have been infected at some point because I can't remember what it was about, but I was definitely guarding cross-border—longjump—T-gates for one of the successor states that splintered from the Republic of Is when its A-gates were infected by the redactionist worms.

And then I seem to faintly recall . . . *yes!* Once upon a time I was one of the Linebarger Cats. Or I worked for them. But I wasn't a tank, then. I was something else.

I step out of a T-gate at one end of a musty-smelling corridor running through the stony heart of a ruined cathedral. Huge pillars rise toward a black sky on either side of me, ivy crawling across the latticework screens that block off the gaps between them. (The pillars are a necessary illusion, markers for the tunnel field that holds in the atmosphere; the planet beneath this gothic park is icy cold and airless, tidally locked to a brown dwarf primary somewhere in transsolar space within a few hundred trillion kilometers of legendary dead Urth.) I walk across decaying tapestries of crimson-and-turquoise wool, armored and gowned orthohumans fighting and loving across a gulf of seconds so vast that my own history dims into insignificance.

Here I am, stranded at the far end of time in a rehabilitation center run by the hospitaler surgeon-confessors of the Invisible Republic, pacing the abandoned halls of a picturesque folly on the surface of a brown dwarf planet as I try to piece together my unraveled identity. I can't even remember how I got here. So how am I meant to talk to my therapists?

I follow the blinking cursor of my netlink map into a central atrium, then hang a left into a nave that leads past stone altars topped with the carved skeletons of giants. The nave leads shortly to a rectangular hole in space delineated by another T-gate. Stepping through the wormhole, I feel light-footed: gravity here declines to hold me, and there is a pronounced Coriolis force tugging toward my left. The light is brighter, and the floor is a blue liquid lake with surface tension so high that I can skate along it, my feet dimpling the surface. There are no doors at water level but niches and irregular

hollows cut into the walls, and the air carries a tang of iodine. If I had to hazard a guess, I'd say this route was leading through a chamber in one of the enigmatic routers that orbit so many brown dwarfs in this part of the galaxy.

At the end of the corridor I pass several moving human-sized clouds—privacy haze fuzzing out the other travelers so that we do not have to notice each other—and then into another chamber, with a ring of T-gate wormholes and A-gate routers circling the wall. I take the indicated door and find myself in a familiar-looking corridor paneled to either side in living wood, an ornamental fountain occupying the courtyard at the far end. It's peaceful and friendly, lit with the warm glow of a yellow star. This is where I, and a handful of other rehabilitation subjects, have been assigned apartments. This is where we can come to socialize safely with people in the same state of recovery, when it is safe for us to do so. And this is where I come to meet my therapist.

TODAY'S therapist isn't remotely humanoid, not even bushujo or elven; Piccolo-47 is a mesomorphic drone, roughly pear-shaped, with a variety of bizarre-looking extensible robot limbs—some of them not physically connected to Piccolo's body—and nothing that resembles a face. Personally, I think that's rude (humans are hardwired at a low level to use facial expressions to communicate emotional states: Not wearing a face in public is a deliberate snub), but I keep the thought to myself. It's probably doing it on purpose to see how stable I am—if I can't cope with someone who doesn't have a face, how am I going to manage in public? Anyway, picking fights with my counselor is not going to help my emotional wobbles. I'm tired, and I'd like to have a long bath and go to sleep, so I resolve to get this over without any unpleasant incidents.

"You fought a duel today," says Piccolo-47. "Please describe the events leading up to the incident in your own words."

I sit down on the stone steps beneath the fountain, lean back until I can feel the cool splashing of water on the back of my neck, and try to tell myself that I'm talking to a household appliance. That helps. "Sure," I say, and summarize the diurn's events—at least, the public ones.

"Do you feel that Gwyn provoked you unduly?" asks the counselor.

"Hmm." I think about it for a moment. "I think I may have provoked her," I say slowly. "Not intentionally, but she caught me watching her, and I could probably have disengaged. If I'd wanted to." The admission makes me feel slightly dirty—but only slightly. Gwyn is walking around right now with no memory of having been stabbed in the guts. She's lost less than an hour of her lifeline. Whereas my leg is still giving me twinges of memory, and I risked—

"You said you have not taken a backup. Isn't that a little foolhardy?"

"Yes, yes it is." I make up my mind. "And I'm going to take one as soon as we finish this conversation."

"Good." I startle slightly and stare at Piccolo-47, disturbed. Therapists don't normally express opinions, positive or negative, during a session; it's just broken the illusion that it's not there, and I feel my skin crawl slightly as I look at its smooth carapace. "Examination of your public state suggests that you are progressing well. I encourage you to continue exploring the rehabilitative sector and to make use of the patient support groups."

"Um." I stare. "I thought you weren't meant to intervene . . . ?"

"Intervention is contraindicated in early stages of recovery of patients with severe dissociative psychopathology consequential to memory excision. However, in later stages, it may be used where appropriate to provide guidance for a patient who is showing significant progress." Then Piccolo-47

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