

Death of a Murderer

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Death of Murder is a short story set in a not-too-distant bio-tech, sci-fi future about radicals waging a revolution against the Unifers who control the world we know now and how fighting in a revolution is never simple.

Missy had learned to shoot analogue, “real bullets” she called them. As though the plasma rounds didn’t blast through a Unifier’s skull just the same. “It’s not the same”, she’d insist, and some of us would laugh, others rolling their eyes. “The kickback lets you know it’s real”. The bravado didn’t fool anyone, she was just set in her ways. She’d taken that relic through the uprisings of ‘38, “can’t teach an old bitch new tricks” she’d laugh, and she’d earned her eccentricities alongside her scars. Who hadn’t?

Case in point, Dahlia was cleaning some brown muck off her purple silver combat pumps with rubbing alcohol. She claimed with the instep clamps they were no different from any other shoe —and damn she did move like a dream, a creature born for sidewalks and catwalks. If you were pinned down, watching her float up to your position with her deep purple scarf and matching helmet made you remember what you were fighting for. Leave the camo for the Jesus freaks: this was our city.

The Crow's Nest was in a basement, the main naming convention in our crew wry irony. The word 'militia' had been permanently tainted, of course, especially after the atrocities up in Blackfoot Territory, but August was pretty sure Murder had been a bad joke that just stuck. It liked the black screaming crow against the hot pink cloud that adorned the patches though. "I never thought I'd be risking my life for a bunch of shitty puns" it said, throwing a dart.

"History is made by the posters" suggested Ash, the newest member, we all called her "Rook" though it was an affectionate lie. She had come out of the Siege of Baltimore as unscathed as anyone could be, but her left eye, the orgo one, still carried the weight of that victory, a distance her constant smiles and laughs never crossed: she was no newbie. She was, however a repository of jokes the Crows hadn't heard a million times before. "You hear the one about the Unifier rave? A thousand people missing the beat in perfect rhythm"

"This machine kills gamergaters" was scrawled across the stock of her PR, a history nerd, a nerd nerd and terminally online, a fish swimming through the sea of localized urban nets, she could hack like nobody's business.

She was the kind of girl Alicia would've avoided, before the Unifiers revived the power of the North American Alliance. Their hive tech won some stunning victories, it's true; Alicia had lost a lot of people in Mexico City. But they were sitting ducks if you took out the CO leading the squadron's neural net, or destroyed enough relay drones to lag their response times, and Ash was fucking great at that. Still, Alicia was frustrated, they wanted revenge, and we'd stopped meeting the Unifiers in open combat. The battle lines shifted, focused on covert insertions of hacking teams and carefully coordinated sweep-up squadrons.

We let them swarm territory: now that we knew their tactics they were basically useless in cities. And it's not like they could easily win over the population, everybody knew Miller's big promise to bring back a global internet was just an excuse to extend the hive. "And anyway" Cyn reminded us, her eyes turning to the ceiling, her sing-song vocamp turning wistful, "the Star Queens are still up there bricking satellites faster than they can be put into orbit."

“What kinda person actually wants one of those zombie chips?” Missy would ask. They didn’t work if the host wasn’t willing, although the rumors about instantaneous brain death meant “willing” wasn’t always so relevant. Missy’s younger brother, she heard, had been conscripted, but information coming from West of the Rockies was deeply unreliable, and the Unis loved to lie.

Still, the new warfare models had made the Murder basically moot. We were a social club of grumpy veterans as much as a real fighting force, mostly doing supply runs and low value scouting, while the Unifiers stuck to the suburbs, occasionally sending in spies and infiltrators who couldn’t even fool a fire hydrant.

The suicide bombers were a lot scarier. The tactic reflected Uni desperation, argued Ash, always the optimist. It was an inevitable result of patriarchal mind control, Alicia, our resident philosopher maintained. (And it’s true: Sheriff Miller, on the propaganda broadcasts, says they are fighting for “Family Values” without a hint of irony). Except for those bombings it might almost feel like normal life in the city. Well, that and the shortages.

Had the war made those shortages any worse? It'd been at least a decade since we saw a full supermarket, so that didn't track. It's true that it was hard as hell to get quantum chips now, and a lot of people had to repair systems with old-fashioned binary shit pulled from the dumping grounds up in the mountains. Missy would gloat whenever this came up, as though the supply of metal bullets and gun oil wasn't dwindling ever faster toward absolute zero. But the free pharmacies and Medlabs were running just fine, long used to improvising and DIYing their way through an astounding array of needs, and, just as importantly, wants. Cyn had helped launch two of the local labs, as she loved reminding us.

“Alright, let's get down to business” Dahlia said

“I thought we were waiting for a 55'er report back.”

“We're already twenty minutes behind schedule, how long do they expect me to wait?”

She was kinda magic, we all knew it. The door scanner beeped as soon as she finished talking. A few of us raised weapons and pointed them at the door,

pure reflex, best practices. But the screen just showed Dee's scruffy beard and shit eating grin. "Hey, let me in already" he said, mock impatient.

None of us lowered our rifles. It was a rude way to greet a friend, but reports of zombie-chipped comrade ambushes were getting more common, and paranoia had a way of creeping in the longer you waited for combat. He kept up his shtick as he entered, raising his hands above his head and bulging his eyes out comically. "I know I'm late but this is a little extreme, don't you think girls?" Alicia poked their head out into the stairwell, then shut and locked the 6 inch thick door. It wouldn't stop a committed Patrol, but it'd buy enough time to purge our drives and get out the bolt hole.

We exchanged the traditional pleasantries, then Dee got down to business.

"There was a War Council meeting on Sunday."

"Yeah we heard. But we don't share space with some of those..."

"With fucking TIP bastards" spat Alicia.

"Yeah, what they said."

“Well, look, we don’t care for them much either. But we’re frustrated, we’re not getting anything done, and even a bad idea sometimes gets you thinking critically.” This got some murmurs of agreement.

“It was actually a good meeting?” He laughed at this, and shrugged, like he couldn’t believe it himself. “And uh, well, a lot of us are on similar pages out here. This whole micro-battalion thing was over when those creeps started kamikazing, we just hadn’t accepted it yet.”

He paused, waiting for someone to object, and maybe we should have, since what he just said went against everything we’d built for the last eighteen months. But Crows recognize a corpse when they see one. Still, none of us were making eye contact.

“RIP” said Ash. Cyn and Dahlia giggled. “Shut up, nerd” Alicia said, affectionate, punching her on the shoulder.

“So what? We can’t just hang up our guns while they bomb our city to smithereens.”

“There’s talk about an offensive.”

“Oh great, let’s march out in columns to Fox Chapel, take a flotilla up the Allegheny, what could go wrong?”

“We think we can encircle their headquarters. Melt into the hills, you know, old school Fidel Castro kinda shit.”

“Lemme guess...under a centralized command? One big army, top to bottom?”

“More of a sort of, federated structure.”

At this there were general cries of bullshit. Too many would-be generals said ‘federated’ when they meant ‘poorly organized military power under my command’.

“Hey, listen, I know you are gonna do what y’all want to do. But the 55’ers are gonna give it a try, we decided we’d stick together, better than waiting around for some incel zombie in a crew cut to blow us up.”

August jumped up to its feet. It was normally pretty level headed but when it got angry, well, thoughts and prayers for the poor bastard who did it to them. But Dahlia intercepted, raising her hand in warning, and asked “Who else was even there?”

“The Distroists had a report back from an intel mission on Uni bases. Danika was there, but apparently their polycule has more or less demobilized, and so have most of the Polish Hill crews. A few of the black and gold types were talking about doing some emergency bomb response work, but even the Medlab people seemed pretty enthusiastic about the attack.”

“*Even* the Medlab people?” Cyn, of course.

“Look, you know what I mean. What I’m saying is, things don’t need to change, things *have* changed, and we can’t let this turn into a stalemate. We have to drive them the fuck out of our territory.”

Alicia shifted uncomfortably. They were Seneca, and whenever TIP was involved, people started saying shit like “our territory”. Settler fucks. But they held their tongue. The lashing they were ready to give wasn’t really for Dee.

Dee fielded more questions, and the mood got steadily lighter. We cracked out the Apple Jack and toasted to liberation, and we were all more than happy when he suggested calling Sebastian and Cory. The longer the night lasted, the longer we could imagine this wasn’t what it so clearly was.

Everyone pretended not to notice when Syn and August snuck off to one of the bunk rooms. And when Ash put a bunch of glitchcore on the queue we yelled objections “fucking rook!” “this isn’t even music” but halfway through the track everyone was dancing in that stuttery way that said you were one more hit away from getting fogstruck, even though none of us touched the stuff anymore.

“Perfect music for the end of the world.” said Ash, as we were standing out in the stairwell vaping. Her voice got a bit melancholic then. “What are you thinking—about the whole attack thing?”

“I’m not.” I said, and headed back inside.

The next morning felt like a massacre. Cyn was already up, making coffee and eggs on the little stove, whistling a happy tune. She didn’t turn around when me and Missy came stumbling out into the main room, bleary eyed and miserable. “Shots are on the table.”

“You know I don’t use that shit” said Missy. I gratefully picked up one of the vials, pressing it eagerly into my wrist port. It wasn’t the standard Hang/Over mix you could get from a corp rx, this was a special concoction Cyn made that

had a delightful splash of Progesterone, E, and some weird synthetic Adrenaline so as you came around you felt a tingle of excitement, desire. It wasn't just medicinal, it was sexy. My head went from "pig shat in it" to clear and ready, hungry for Cyn's breakfast and maybe a bit of Cyn, too.

"You're missing out" I said, but Missy scoffed. No matter how many times Cyn went over the chemical composition, Missy distrusted injection cocktails, and only used single-compound hormones for HRT and caffeine for hangovers. Her loss.

The rest of the Murder straggled out, August sheepishly putting its arms around Cyn and nuzzling the back of her neck, and everyone praised her to the heavens for the shots and the food. After breakfast it was bear hugs for Sebastian and Cory and Dee and slaps on the back and jokes. As they were leaving, Dee said "Remember, Friday, at the Hall, 4 o'clock", and the mood instantly flipped, the door closing behind him like a gavel striking, bringing our meeting to order.

In this one instance, maybe Missy was right: at least she could blame the hangover for feeling so miserable. None of us were surprised that August

and Missy wanted to go, but Dahlia was a shock. She hated the Party maybe more than any of us, and hated taking orders with a frankly inspiring passion. When she said these days combat was the only thing that made sense to her, I broke a little bit.

I had always thought I would follow Dahlia to the ends of the earth. But it turns out I just liked to imagine she was leading me; we had been side by side the whole time. I had never really seen Dahlia, she had just been an image of freedom, a dream. Am I an asshole, or is that just what crushes are like?

We agreed we'd keep the Nest through the end of the month, then let it go. There was a bit of debate about distributing ammo, drones, supplies, but in the end it was mostly bickering for the sake of it. We decided which data we wanted to keep and purged the rest of our systems. Cyn was gonna head back to the Medlab, and Ash, Alicia and I were gonna try and connect with the bomb-response folks.

We ended our final meeting raising our coffee mugs to Anna, Rose and Helene, and we hung our heads as Ash sang the beautiful strange Hungarian

dirge the rest of us didn't know the words to. There was a lot of crying, a lot of promises, and we all headed out into the grey morning toward our homes.

The bomb-response squad operated from an old abandoned firehouse. We lived in the building, and beside me, Ash, and Alicia there was a triad of burly bears, ex-firefighters we affectionately called Chad, Chad, and Chad, the best cooks we'd ever met; a splicer, Turbo, who had remade themselves almost entirely out of titanium—a body like that doesn't come cheap, but damn if they didn't throw themselves head first into every piece of wreckage; Dave and Indiana, two EMTs from when Mellon was still open to people who couldn't afford the subscription fees; a quiet kid calling herself Bolo none of us knew anything about; and an ex Party member, Andrew, who loved to talk politics, especially if it involved talking shit about his former orgs.

When the attacks on the Unifiers started, three weeks or so after the Murder broke up, the suicide bombings increased dramatically. They liked to do double or even triple taps, sending in more zombies to detonate the crowds gathered to try and care for people in the aftermath. It was cowardly, and

horrible, and it struck against every instinct we have to help one another. It forced people to embrace their fear, to give in to self-preservation above solidarity: it turned us into exactly the kind of people the Unifiers wanted us to be.

After a while people mostly kept their distance, just ran away from the site, so that when we went in, the street would be near abandoned, save for the moaning and bleeding victims arrayed around the craters. Ash and I would take perimeter, much better at fighting than saving lives, while the rest battled fires and pulled people from the rubble, rushing them to Medlabs which had, so far at least, not been targeted by the Uni scum.

I couldn't sleep. I was always waiting to hear the alarm bell, to jump into action. I got angrier and angrier, found myself threatening anyone who came anywhere close to me on mission, unable to tell the difference between samaritan and enemy. It was dangerous, I was dangerous, and I knew it, Alicia and Ash knew it.

When they started suggesting maybe I should find Missy and August and join the attack camps, part of me wanted to scream and tell them to fuck off, and one time I did, I threw myself against Ash, headbutting her in the chest

and pounding my arms against her. I was strong but she had a foot on me and bionic plate and I only really managed to hurt my forehead and fists, she just wrapped her arms around my shoulders and shushed me and told me it was going to be ok as I wept. I set out for the front the next day.

The site was dreary, olive and grey, the stoic asceticism of militancy the Party so fetishized. They talked about how the only thing that mattered was being “truly alive”, that the most important thing was “intensity”, that politics meant “finding our friends”. It was the inversion of the old feminist slogan, the personal is political, instead it made the political personal, transformed everything into a symbol of your devotion to the cause, pure aesthetics. They were incredibly unfriendly.

“Straight people” was all Dahlia would say about it. She had traded in her purple and silver for forest camo, but my heart still sang with hope at the sight of her. August had been wounded in the last attack—not badly, thank god, an exploding round took a chunk out of its shin, but it could’ve been a lot worse, and Dahlia thought they would be back soon.

“I can’t fucking stand it here” Missy spat into the dirt, but she was always saying that, and her analogue kit made her intensely appealing to the organics fetish of the Party cohort: some sort of saint of the revolution.

“Why are *you* out here?” Dahlia asked me, not unkindly.

I told them about the anger, about the double tap attacks and how empty the city felt all the time, about the sleepless nights and how Bolo got blown up and didn’t even notice I’d started crying. Dahlia put an arm around me and Missy looked loving and concerned, the protective mama the three of us had never had.

“We’ll get those fuckers” she said, consolingly.

But it was hard to ambush an army that could instantly see whatever any one individual soldier saw, unless you got lucky and their monitoring teams weren’t on point. Despite the constant talk of scaled attacks and “wiping them out”, we still had to rely on Hacker Squadrons to strike before we could even approach, still had to fight incredibly carefully, localized. And we stayed constantly on the move, the forest rife with drones and patrols, and there was only so much counter-bots and EMP grenades could accomplish.

Dee had said we had to avoid a stalemate, but that sure as hell was what it felt like. And the second week I was out here a drone found the 55'ers camp and they were almost wiped out. My anger curdled into despair, and I got reckless, always volunteering to take point, always up for the most dangerous scouts.

I had become a crack shot, I was getting a reputation around the woods as a brave and powerful guerrilla, there was even a pamphlet rhapsodizing the “Beautiful New Heroes” of the revolution that talked about the mission where I “singlehandedly” pulled five comrades out of a trap, taking four Unis down and disabling a comms grid in the process. It was all bullshit. I never felt less new. I wasn't brave, I wanted to die before the feeling of emptiness claimed me entirely. Even sex felt like duty.

Missy was worried about me, giving me long quizzical looks and trying to engage me in remember-whens. Dahlia grew distant, abstract, always in her own thoughts. She got quieter and quieter.

When August came back after a few months in the labs, with a new leg and the same sardonic laugh, giving me a big hug, the black and pink Murder

patch proudly on its shoulder, I could almost remember when it felt like we were doing something real, when we were all in love with one another and the city and the possibility of a better world.

“I gotta get outta here” I told the three of them over a campfire one night. “I can’t see it anymore, you know? I can’t taste it. Why we’re doing all this.”

Dahlia just nodded, but Missy said “I don’t think that’s such a good idea. You’re a hero now, you know? They can’t afford to have you leave”

“But we’re just volunteers, right? I’m not in any chain of command. I don’t owe them anything.”

“Well, not technically...”

“Well then I’ll just go, technically.”

“Just, be careful. We camped with a squad a few weeks back, I overheard them talking about ‘deserters’, saying they were gonna capture them, maybe have a trial.”

So there it is. “I remember, whenever we talked about joining our forces, how Alicia used to say ‘Every army becomes a prison: every revolution that becomes an army is lost.’ I thought they were full of shit.”

“No you didn’t” Dahlia said, quietly. She still pushed back whenever I got too cynical, and I still loved her for it.

I didn’t. I knew then and I know now that they had been right.

I began making my plans in secret. I kept going on raids, kept my rifle clean and charged, kept showing up at meal times and fucking anyone who’d have me in their bedroll. But all the while I was squirreling away ammo, chips, and food and what little bit of hope and resolve I had left.

And then one night, I walked out. I just walked out of there, into a scrub full of enemy drones and booby traps and comrades who might kill me for deciding to stop being a hero, not back toward the city but East, toward I didn’t know what, my rifle slung over my shoulder and my pack full of rations, out looking for the revolution I had once known with all my heart, looking for a new flock to replace my Murder. Owls hooted in the starlight above the scraggly canopy, and for the first time in months I felt so light, so free, I could almost cry.

About the Author

Vicky Osterweil is a writer, worker and agitator living in Philadelphia. Her book *In Defense of Looting* came out in 2020 with Bold Type Books.

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