

When Red wins, she stands alone.

Blood slicks her hair. She breathes out steam in the last night of this dying world.

That was fun, she thinks, but the thought sours in the framing. It was clean, at least. Climb up time's threads into the past and make sure no one survives this battle to muddle the futures her Agency's arranged—the futures in which her Agency rules, in which Red herself is possible. She's come to knot this strand of history and sear it until it melts.

She holds a corpse that was once a man, her hands gloved in its guts, her fingers clutching its alloy spine. She lets go, and the exoskeleton clatters against rock. Crude technology. Ancient. Bronze to depleted uranium. He never had a chance. That is the point of Red.

After a mission comes a grand and final silence. Her weapons and armor fold into her like roses at dusk. Once

flaps of pseudoskin settle and heal and the programmable matter of her clothing knits back together, Red looks, again, something like a woman.

She paces the battlefield, seeking, making sure.

She has won, yes, she has won. She is certain she has won. Hasn't she?

Both armies lie dead. Two great empires broke themselves here, each a reef to the other's hull. That is what she came to do. From their ashes others will rise, more suited to her Agency's ends. And yet.

There was another on the field—no groundling like the time-moored corpses mounded by her path, but a real player. Someone from the other side.

Few of Red's fellow operatives would have sensed that opposing presence. Red knows only because Red is patient, solitary, careful. She studied for this engagement. She modeled it backward and forward in her mind. When ships were not where they were supposed to be, when escape pods that should have been fired did not, when certain fusillades came thirty seconds past their cue, she noticed.

Twice is coincidence. Three times is enemy action.

But why? Red has done what she came to do, she thinks. But wars are dense with causes and effects, calculations and strange attractors, and all the more so are wars in time. One spared life might be worth more to the other side than all the

blood that stained Red's hands today. A fugitive becomes a queen or a scientist or, worse, a poet. Or her child does, or a smuggler she trades jackets with in some distant spaceport. And all this blood for nothing.

Killing gets easier with practice, in mechanics and technique. Having killed never does, for Red. Her fellow agents do not feel the same, or they hide it better.

It is not like Garden's players to meet Red on the same field at the same time. Shadows and sure things are more their style. But there is one who would. Red knows her, though they have never met. Each player has their signature. She recognizes patterns of audacity and risk.

Red may be mistaken. She rarely is.

Her enemy would relish such a magic trick: twisting to her own ends all Red's grand work of murder. But it's not enough to suspect. Red must find proof.

So she wanders the charnel field of victory and seeks the seeds of her defeat.

A tremor passes through the soil—do not call it earth. The planet dies. Crickets chirp. Crickets survive, for now, among the crashed ships and broken bodies on this crumbling plain. Silver moss devours steel, and violet flowers choke the dead guns. If the planet lasted long enough, the vines that sprout from the corpses' mouths would grow berries.

It won't, and neither will they.

On a span of blasted ground, she finds the letter.

It does not belong. Here there should be bodies mounded between the wrecks of ships that once sailed the stars. Here there should be the death and dirt and blood of a successful op. There should be moons disintegrating overhead, ships aflame in orbit.

There should not be a sheet of cream-colored paper, clean save a single line in a long, trailing hand: *Burn before reading.*

Red likes to feel. It is a fetish. Now she feels fear. And eagerness.

She was right.

She searches shadows for her hunter, her prey. She hears infrasonic, ultrasound. She thirsts for contact, for a new, more worthy battle, but she is alone with the corpses and the splinters and the letter her enemy left.

It is a trap, of course.

Vines curl through eye sockets, twine past shattered port-holes. Rust flakes fall like snow. Metal creaks, stressed, and shatters.

It is a trap. Poison would be crude, but she smells none. Perhaps a noovirus in the message—to subvert her thoughts, to seed a trigger, or merely to taint Red with suspicion in her Commandant's eyes. Perhaps if she reads this letter, she will be recorded, exposed, blackmailed for use as a double agent. The

enemy is insidious. Even if this is but the opening gambit of a longer game, by reading it Red risks Commandant's wrath if she is discovered, risks seeming a traitor be she never so loyal.

The smart and cautious play would be to leave. But the letter is a gauntlet thrown, and Red has to know.

She finds a lighter in a dead soldier's pocket. Flames catch in the depths of her eyes. Sparks rise, ashes fall, and letters form on the paper, in that same long, trailing hand.

Red's mouth twists: a sneer, a mask, a hunter's grin.

The letter burns her fingers as the signature takes shape. She lets its cinders fall.

Red leaves then, mission failed and accomplished at once, and climbs downthread toward home, to the braided future her Agency shapes and guards. No trace of her remains save cinders, ruins, and millions dead.

The planet waits for its end. Vines live, yes, and crickets, though no one's left to see them but the skulls.

Rain clouds threaten. Lightning blooms, and the battle-field goes monochrome. Thunder rolls. There will be rain tonight, to slick the glass that was the ground, if the planet lasts so long.

The letter's cinders die.

The shadow of a broken gunship twists. Empty, it fills.

A seeker emerges from that shadow, bearing other shadows with her.

Wordless, the seeker regards the aftermath. She does not weep, that anyone can see. She paces through the wrecks, over the bodies, professional: She works a winding spiral, ensuring with long-practiced arts that no one has followed her through the silent paths she walked to reach this place.

The ground shakes and shatters.

She reaches what was once a letter. Kneeling, she stirs the ashes. A spark flies up, and she catches it in her hand.

She removes a thin white slab from a pouch at her side and slips it under the ashes, spreads them thin against the white. Removes her glove, and slits her finger. Rainbow blood wells and falls and splatters into gray.

She works her blood into the ash to make a dough, kneads that dough, rolls it flat. All around, decay proceeds. The battleships become mounds of moss. Great guns break.

She applies jeweled lights and odd sounds. She wrinkles time.

The world cracks through the middle.

The ash becomes a piece of paper, with sapphire ink in a viny hand at the top.

This letter was meant to be read once, then destroyed.

In the moments before the world comes apart, she reads it again.