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EARTH, 2045:

THE AGENT

(1485 words)

The instant her eyes snapped open, she knew she was on a job. It was like being born. Each and every time it caught her off guard, like a kick to the ribs.

Some pleasures you never outgrow.

The agent emerged from the shift, and gasped to life, like a drowning diver clawing for the surface while precious, oxygen-sucking seconds swept by—the distance seeming to become longer before air finally exploded into her lungs.

Even before she solidified, her hand instinctively swept for her weapon, which should have been holstered across her chest, but which was not.

Not at her bedside either.

Bad omen.

Of course, she couldn't remember how she had gotten here, or where she had come from, who she was supposed to meet. But that didn't matter right now. She knew the amnesia was a

temporary effect. There were key things she *did* remember: They were built-ins. BOOM! The program kicked in with the first breath, providing an agent the best possible chance for survival. Details would unfold along the way.

If the tech's aim was tight, ready or not, things would roll quickly. She took a moment to orient herself. She was in an obviously abandoned house. The carpet, drywall and much of the framing lumber had been stripped away. Other than the torn mattress she was laying on, the room was bare.

Scavenged, she decided.

The agent *sensed* the actors before she actually heard or saw them. The little hairs along the nape of her neck lifted, her gut tightened, and adrenaline dumped into her system—all at once, long seconds before the first shots cracked the still air.

Shotgun fire—no more than a few blocks off—drew her to the window. It had snowed and frozen, and now a thin, wind-polished layer of ice encased the world. The whole neighborhood appeared to have been be evacuated long ago. Up and down the street, the house fronts had warped and cracked; a decade's worth of unchecked wear and tear. Sidewalks had buckled. What few trees remained lay in pillaged, petrified heaps, and a weathered car still sat parked at the curb, tires squashed as Earth slowly digested it.

The actors were running in her direction, the metallic clap of small-arms fire ringing, drawing closer:

Clack!

Clack!

Clack!

Seconds later, two men crashed to the ice right in front of her, one atop another, grappling over a black pistol.

Their breath steamed in the brisk air.

The guy on top smacked of militia. He was dressed like a soldier in khakis and a heavy jacket with a hood pulled over his head. His pants flared where they were tucked into weathered combat boots.

The other had fallen onto his back, so close the agent could see veins bulging along his temple. He wore a thick, gnarled beard, and an intense blue tattoo climbed his throat.

Something about the tattoo drew her eye, rang familiar, but she couldn't pull it up. Be just like a good tech to program an early cue. A smart one could pull an agent into the new timeline and get her adjusted before the actors even showed.

But her mind was still drunk with the shift, and she couldn't thread the needle.

The soldier managed to land a right cross to the tattooed man's mouth, which burst with blood. The gun fired into the ice, spitting an empty shell, and the agent felt her body tense with the crack of the shot.

In turn, Tattoo knocked the soldier to the ground, hitting him in the side of the head with three sharp blows of his elbow. It was the move of a well-trained fighter, and it momentarily stunned the soldier, but it wasn't enough. Both men still held fast to the weapon.

The gun fired again, but this time the agent didn't flinch. This time the sound was familiar, and the sight of the pistol had triggered her to sense an intimate familiarity with weaponry. In her mind, she could almost *feel* the heft of oiled steel, the kick of the weapon against her palm, the pungent hit of spent gunpowder, as if she had fired it herself. The sound, too, was so

familiar that for a moment a hidden memory felt as if it were about to surface in her mind—a memory of the sound of gunfire and combat: the crack as the hammer dropped, the round exploded, the bullet zinged; men screamed.

The memory shimmered just beyond her reach for no more than an instant, disappearing altogether when two more men converged on the scene outside, sliding to a halt. They were also dressed like soldiers, but now the agent realized her hunch about them being a militia force had most likely been correct. Only their jackets were uniform, with red and black patch insignias sewn to the shoulders.

“Enough!” one of them shouted, shotgun leveled.

Tattoo took a moment to spit a mouthful of blood into the soldier’s face before releasing the gun they had been fighting over.

The soldier wiped the blood from his face, disgusted. In one stroke he raised the butt of the pistol and smashed it across Tattoo’s jaw.

It was a bone-cracking blow. Blood flew, and his eyes rolled, yet after only a few seconds Tattoo recovered enough to return a steady gaze—a gaze which held even as the soldier raised his pistol once more, ready to bring it crashing down again.

But the soldier froze, mid-swing, eyes suddenly drawn down the street.

The agent followed his stare: In the distance, an albino riding high atop a magnificent, broad horse had rounded a corner; captain’s stripes marked his jacket. When the albino spotted the men, he moved toward them at an aggressive trot.

“Tighten your balls and swing already,” Tattoo told the soldier, wiping his bloodied mouth on his sleeve.

As the albino approached, the agent saw that his face was as pale as bleached paper, and his lashes and brows were so light they appeared as if they might blow away. When he pulled back his hood, his hair looked like a layer of cottony fuzz across his scalp.

He dismounted and took a shotgun from one of the men, lifted the barrel to the soldier's throat. "Touch him again without my orders and I'll take your head off." He gestured with the gun's thick barrel. "Move!"

The soldier nervously licked his wind-split lips, secured his weapon, and stepped clear.

In turn, the albino let the gun drop squarely with Tattoo's face. "When you see Tahoe, give him my love."

"Give it to him yourself," Tattoo replied, and spit on the ice. "You take me out, you sign your own warrant. *Guaranteed*. We're done with you and those mutant priests both."

The two stared each other in the eyes, but the albino's face was empty and unreadable—and his deadpan expression never changed when he pulled the trigger and the barrel kicked to the sky.

The agent closed her eyes a second after Tattoo's head exploded, the image burning in her mind, as if it had been superimposed on the back of her eyelids.

When she looked again, the albino had squatted over the body and removed one of Tattoo's gloves. A second ink marked his inner wrist and forearm, but it was too small for her to see.

"Send a clear message," the albino said, examining it. "Skewer his hand on a post in the city square. Set a guard to see it doesn't get eaten."

"What about the rest?"

The albino crunched across the ice, back to his mount, and kicked up to the saddle. The creature shied, a powerful animal ready to run. "Steady, beautiful," he whispered, rubbing its nose. He fed it a small apple, which he had produced from a jacket pocket and buffed against his sleeve.

"Search him for valuables," he said. "Leave the body. Let the scavengers take the meat as a treat."

After they left, the agent slipped out through the window, and dropped to the ice. She followed the men's tracks east from the old, abandoned city, into a canyon of ice-laced, granite escarpments. Even outside the city, trees were few; blackened stumps dominated the landscape, littered with rocks and boulders, along with an abandoned home every mile or two, crumbling into the soil beneath it.

Atop a ridge, the wind whistled across the ice, and the agent caught a long view ahead: The tracks swept into a barren, pockmarked valley. From a distance, the landscape below her looked like the surface of the moon seen through a telescope—as if meteorites had cut it to Swiss cheese.

As she drew closer, however, she realized with astonishment precisely what the humans had done, how they had survived....

The holes were not craters at all, but iron-gray, steel-covered portals.

They were hiding beneath the planet's crust.