

FIRE IN THE SKY

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SPIRIT & INTENT

FIRE IN THE SKY

A SHORT STORY

A CANNIBAL. An orator. A chief. There is even another assassin like her on this list, if the rumours are true. She reads through their names, one by one, as if choosing an entree.

"These are the same people as last time," she says.

"I know. What do you think?"

She turns to the window, her eyes finding the top of the waterfall.

I think I'm bored. I think I want out of this life. I think it's time I move on from this thing.

She lifts her glass of water from the table and takes a sip. "The cannibal looks interesting." It's not the first time his name's come up.

"A fine choice, madam."

"I'm glad you agree. Pack my things. I'll leave this evening. I should be gone for no more than two days."

"Very good. And you'll be back in time for the festival."

"The festival?" she sets her glass down, frowning. Then her face softens. "Oh that's right. For the comet."

She'd forgotten that was coming up so soon. Arthur had been telling her about it for weeks. A great fire in the sky, barrelling

towards them at incredible speed. He'd been watching its progress from the contraption in his tower. She'd heard it carried another sky woman. That's what everyone was hoping at least. For someone to come and deliver them from their state of perpetual war. There was supposed to be an eclipse too, if she remembered right.

Now that was something she did not want to miss. She glances outside, watches the way the sun filters through the leaves. Through the window she can see water rush away from the falls before dropping into the great cavern below. Was there time to visit Arthur before she left?

Probably not. But it didn't matter. It would be a quick trip.

Two days. There and back.

And then there would be one less name on the council's list.

The woman gets up from her chair. She's younger than he thought she'd be. He looks in his journal, at his notes. He's been studying her for weeks. Collecting reports of her deeds. She's a proper villain. A cold-blooded murderer. A snake disguised in human flesh.

She's left a trail of victims behind her a mile long and she's done it with a finesse he's seldom seen before. Case in point—no bodies have ever been found. He cannot help but respect that.

She's a business woman, too. This restaurant he's sitting in is hers. It's renowned for its food, the grandness of its setting and its architecture. Even the rumours of her *other* occupation aren't enough to keep people from lining up to eat her food. The restaurant is always packed, so much so he had to make his lunch reservation days in advance. It's just his luck—or perhaps it's fate too—that he got a glimpse of her before she left.

He spears a piece of heron and pops it in his mouth, which waters at the tenderness of the bird. Blackened over fire and

served with crab and garlic stuffed mushrooms, it's the most delicious thing he's ever tasted. He hadn't known food could taste this good. He was used to eating on the road. Boiled dinners. Dry bread. No embellishments or spices.

This meal was not like those at all.

This was the kind of food people cherished. The kind of food you wanted when you were at the end of days, as they were. He ripped apart a piece of wild strawberry bread, dipped it in the juices leftover from his mushrooms and ate it. Then he started on the side dish—an assortment of root vegetables glazed with maple syrup and shaved pine nuts.

He closes his eyes, savours every bite.

Heavens alive.

This meal alone was enough to kill a man.

The server comes by and refills his glass of water with a smile.

He thinks, but is not entirely sure, that he just saw her choose her next victim.

A part of him regrets she is going to be his.

The thing to remember about the Finger Lakes is that like everything else they were once submerged beneath the great sea. Then came Skywoman and her giant sons, battling across the world, leaving the mark of their battle upon the earth she spun from her steps—a song of hills, slopes and valleys.

The forest has grown from such a legacy. Sugar maple and hemlock in the upper lands. Oak in the drier regions. Sycamore and cottonwood in the floodplains. There are swamps and wetlands and bogs. It is a world covered in green.

Even still, the sea makes itself known in the lakes and the rivers and the streams.

That is what she loves about water. Why she chose to live and build her restaurant near the falls. Water gives life to everything.

It shapes everything. Without it—there would be nothing but smoke and ash. When she crosses the trails, sets her foot upon the land, she remembers she wants something more for herself than what she's inherited. She too, wants to give life to the world.

But an assassin cannot give life. An assassin only takes.

She lifts her face to the sky, adjusts her course and continues on. It's late summer. She doesn't need much to sustain her for this trip. Her pack is light and she moves quickly and easily across the land, almost as if she's flying. She's travelled these valleys so often there is not an inch of them she has not seen, though there are some places she does not often get to go.

Still. She craves new sights. New destinations. Further north there are rumours of a great waterfall—a place of pure magic. The story goes that a great snake fell there—a monster so formidable only the Thunder beings could defeat it.

She got chills just thinking about it.

That was the other thing she liked about water. It could calm even the most vile creatures. The most fearsome monsters. Including herself, though she had not set out to become any such thing.

If the restaurant was something she built from the ground with her bare hands then her work as an assassin was something that'd been chosen for her. Something she'd been pushed into.

Why had the council chosen her? She would never know. She'd been the youngest of five girls who'd been trained in the deadly arts. Poisonous plants. Archery. Hand to hand combat.

In the beginning, they had fought only monsters. Great serpents. Wild beasts. But then something had changed within the hearts of men. Darkness entered their spirits and she and the other girls had been sent forth to investigate. Next thing she knew; their entire purpose was altered.

Now she was the only one left and there was always someone her masters wanted to die.

Good people. Bad people. Old people. Young people. It was

this more than anything that kept her in the business. So long as the despicable council wanted something from her, she stayed off their radar. So long as she kept crossing names from their list, she could keep her secret.

He can barely keep up with her. She moves like wind and does not stop to eat. She doesn't stop to make camp, either, which he'd been counting on. He almost loses her twice in the night. By the time the sun breaks the sky he has found her again and only, he thinks, because she has finally stopped running.

They've come to a village, a large settlement of five hundred, maybe more. It sits in the valley between two rock faces, split apart long ago by the great giants who fought across Turtle Island.

It doesn't take him long to realize who her target is. The great wizard is notorious. A cannibal.

More than once, he's found Tadadaho's name on his own list and chosen not to pursue it. But she's not like him. She's trying to turn her life around. She's trying to leave her legacy of killing behind and start something new.

And this is exactly why he's been sent to end her.

She has, as her handlers stated, outgrown her usefulness.

She eases her way into the village, masquerading as a lone traveller headed over the mountain to see a distant relative in the next village over. When people will talk to her, she interviews them about the dangers that lie in wait.

The stories she hears about the wizard get crazier and crazier. He eats people. He had his brother killed. He has eyes in the back of his head. The wind is his friend and it blows your

scent toward him, making it easier for him to find and catch you. All of his limbs are twisted and crooked. He has snakes in his hair.

One thing seems to be certain. Every month, someone has to be sent to him. If they are not, he will stop the water, for he lives in a cave next to the source of the river—a mile or so above them in the hanging valley.

Usually someone volunteers, they tell her. And if no one does, they draw stones among them. Never children. And never a woman who is pregnant or has young ones. She can see these rules don't really comfort anyone. That they live their lives trying to pretend they don't exist.

I should have come here sooner, she thinks. I should have come here first.

Children play in the centre of the village, easy games of kick-ball and tag. It is a small, provincial kind of place, but the shadow of the mountain still hangs heavy over them—a constant reminder of the menace that stalks them.

She finds it remarkable these people can know any kind of peace so close to a monster's lair but then that is a child's power. Their resilience and optimism can almost be mistaken for magic, their laughter a barrier between dreams and nightmares.

She doesn't want to kill Tadadaho. But his name was on the list and she chose him and so she has to deal with him. He cannot be allowed to continue in his terrible ways.

The village has a restaurant of sorts. Not in the same league as hers but a place where she can eat a small meal of onion soup and corn bread. She pays handsomely for a pack of dried meat, offering not only gold but seeds she's planted in her own garden.

"These will grow in any conditions," she tells the cook. "Your people may need them one day. Mine did."

In the restroom, she sharpens her knife, and the tip of her spear. She counts her arrows, bundled together with the smallest and most precise bow she has. Her last weapon barely looks like a

weapon at all but it is the most powerful in her arsenal. Shards of crystal mixed with salt. They fill a worn leather pouch that sits neatly in the palm of her hand. She tucks it beneath her shirt and reaches for her knife. This is the weapon she's best with.

She hates how easily her thoughts bend toward violence. She's been trying to put her killing ways behind her. Trying to find another way to heal that which ails the people of this land, asking herself what it would take. What if instead of sitting here, thinking about how to kill this crazy old man—she could heal the darkness that lay inside him?

We used to be able to do this, she thinks. We used to be able to slay monsters with our minds.

Maybe they still can.

He can't follow her into the village. Two strangers appearing on the same day would draw attention and he's learned by now that if he doesn't take her by surprise he might not take her at all.

He circles wide through the forest, creeping along the edges, watching the village from the trees. He's tired but he doesn't stop. Instead he travels to the bottom of the mountain and begins making his way to the hanging valley.

The air grows crisper, colder, as he climbs. The wind rustles thin branches in the trees above. Autumn will be here soon. Some of the leaves have begun to turn. Winter will follow and when it does he can finally put his weapons down and rest for the season. The thought is comforting and he pushes on, reenergized for the task ahead.

It's obvious no one travels this way very often. The trail leading over the hills is overgrown with brush and ferns. The forest is plentiful with game. Rabbits. Fox. Deer. They watch him from the sidelines, as if wondering what kind of being he is. More man? Or more monster?

Probably the latter, he thinks, for he feels right at home here on the mountain. He is not afraid of anyone or anything. He is not afraid of the wizard. When the girl has killed him and he has killed the girl, maybe he will spend the winter months here.

It's the perfect place for monsters to live.

Tadadaho's cave is at the very heart of the hanging valley, like he's chosen to place his lair at the top of the world to better torment the people who live on either side of it.

A red bellied woodpecker flitters through the brush and lands on the branch next to him. Tufts of red feathers cover the top of its head and its speckled wings are tipped with black. It twitters a song and he thinks he knows what it's saying.

She's coming.

The bird is right.

No sooner has it taken flight than he sees the top of her head, black hair bobbing up and down, the rest of her coming into view shortly after. She carries no weapon, only her pack. Her face shows the strain of the incline on her body but she does not slow down her pace and with a final burst of energy she has conquered the climb. She takes a long drink from her water bag, ties it back around her waist and wipes her face with the back of her sleeve.

There is only one thing left for her to do.

Slay the beast.

The sickly-sweet smell hits her like a wall of stone. Acrid doesn't even begin to describe it. This is not one dead body. This is not even a dozen dead bodies. This is the smell of scores upon scores of victims. Of flesh and meat. Of muscle and fat. Of blood and bone.

This is death, she thinks. This is death and I will never leave this cave. Never leave this scent behind.

She staggers on her feet, overwhelmed. She draws her scarf tight around her face, her mouth.

For the first time she realizes she might actually have to kill him. For who can come back from this? Who can regain their mind after *this*?

Who deserves to?

She catches herself. It is not her place to judge. Only her place to carry out the sentence.

Someone has to decide—to say when enough is enough. But it's not her. At least, that was what they were told, she and her sisters. That they should be proud. That they were putting an end to the terrors in the night.

What causes the terrors in the first place? Her sisters once asked. *Wouldn't it be better if we stopped that first?*

She stopped seeing the other girls after that. One by one they disappeared until it was like they never existed.

Her eyes scan the darkness. White and grey bones litter the floor.

They are animal bones, she tells herself. Every last one of them. Animal bones. And the people who are sent here pass safely over the mountain. The wizard does not catch them. But they still do not return, because who would want to pass this place a second time?

The story makes her feel better. Breathe easier.

It might even be true.

Something moves in the corner of her eye. She freezes. Her head twists to the side. Her spear is in her hands and in two steps she has her would-be assailant pressed up against the walls of the cave, her blade pressing past his leather vest and into his gut.

"I was wondering when you were going to show your face," she says.

Her spear jabs into his stomach.

"Ow!" He winces. "Stop it."

She presses him harder. "Why are you following me?"

"Why do you think?"

"Only a fool would come here." Her eyes narrow. "Or a murderer. Which are you?"

A pile of dead leaves rattles the floor of the cave, swirls around their feet and drifts out of the entrance in a tiny whirlwind. It is not a natural wind. He looks past her and his heart skips a beat.

Tadadaho stands there, watching them.

He is hideous. A horror to look at, as terrible as all the stories suggest. He can feel the wizard's magic creep toward them, crawling over his skin like a thousand fire ants, preparing to sink their teeth in.

The wizard raises his hand, long fingers reach out.

"Oh no."

White and blue light fills the cave and a crackling noise echoes off the walls as he hurls a ball of light at them. The girl dives out of the way, dragging him with her and in his head, he makes note of the fact that she has just saved his life.

The ball of light hits the side of the cave where they once stood. The walls tremble and shake. Splintered rock falls from the darkness above. One shard strikes him on the back of the head.

"Ow. Shit." He reaches up and feels the blood through his matted hair. "That escalated quickly."

He raises his bow and takes aim at the wizard.

"No!" She claps her hand down on the arrow's shaft, forcing the tip to the ground.

"What are you you doing? He'll kill us both."

"We can save him," she says.

"Save him? Why would we want to do that?"

"Look at him! He's human. Just like you and me."

He hears her words and knows they're true. But even hearing them can't stop what he sees when he looks at the old man. Twisted. Crazy. Gone made with power. Probably cursed.

"Why did you come here if you weren't going to kill him?"
Her breath is ragged. "Because. I came here to help him."

In truth, it's been a long time since she's killed anyone. That's her secret. Her restaurant is filled with the people she was supposed to have killed. But instead of bringing them death—she brought them freedom and healing. Found them. Sent them away with strict instructions on what to do and when to do it. And later, after they become new people, they make their way back to her with new identities and new faces. Forty-nine in all and her staff is still growing.

She's only ever killed two people and while she can't take it back—their deaths haunt her.

But she does not know if she can do the same with Tadadaho. There is too much evil. Too much darkness.

The old wizard comes at her and she hurls the salt into his face. He screams, his hands clawing at his eyes as he staggers away. His movements are so pitiful, she cannot believe she just inflicted more harm on his damaged spirit. And yet—this cave is evidence of what he's capable of.

I'm helping him. In the long run. I'm helping him.

She has to believe that.

It was foolish to come here without more magic—she can see that now. But she has enough power with her to keep him here, keep him from leaving this mountain, keep him from clogging up the flow of the river with his sorcery. It will have to be enough—at least until a more permanent solution presents itself. She's just lucky she's not here alone.

"Keep him away from me, but don't kill him," she tells the young man.

"Why should I listen to you?" he asks.

"Because. This man is a sorcerer. A powerful one. And if you think you stand a chance against him with your bow and arrow you're an even bigger fool than I thought."

She digs into the pouch gathering a handful of salt. She whispers an incantation under her breath to invoke the full power of the crystals it contains. She moves as fast as she can, tracing an area outside the cave. Her feet carry her over rock, over water, all the while creating a boundary of where Tadadaho can and cannot travel, penning him in like an animal.

It is not a pleasant thing to do to another person, but she can't see another way. She returns to the entrance of the cave and calls into it. Her voice sounds into its depths.

"There is food enough to sustain you out here on the land, but the villagers who take the mountain pass will no longer be at your mercy."

Her voice is softer when she next speaks.

"I will come back for you. Or someone will. Someone who can truly help ease your suffering."

He follows her back down the mountain. Her movements are sluggish and awkward, or about as sluggish and awkward as he can imagine them getting. It would be a good time to kill her, really. She's tired and weary. But he's not sure he can just do the deed. Not after what they just saw. Not after what they just shared.

Evidently, she doesn't feel the same way. The second they reach the valley she wheels around, her bow drawn, ready to shoot an arrow into his face.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" he says, lifting his hands up.

"What are you doing here?"

"Isn't it obvious? I came here to kill you," he says.

"Why?" she demands.

"Because. Your name's on the list."

She processes that with a blink. "I didn't realize there was more than one."

"I reckon there has to be, when you're on it," he shrugs, his hands still in the air.

"So what now? Do we fight?" Her voice carries a slight mocking tone.

"We could. But I was thinking we could have a meal together instead."

She raises her eyebrows. "A meal together. You think I'm going to have dinner with someone I know is trying to kill me?"

"Why not?"

"Because that's insane."

"It's a little insane. But there are crazier things." He gestures toward the mountain behind them as if to prove his point.

She narrows her eyes at him, her head tilting as she considers his offer. Her skin is smooth and golden. Her hair as black as crow's feathers. There is something intimidating about her and it isn't just her skill. It isn't even her beauty. Something burns inside her. A mission. A sense of purpose that has nothing to do with killing.

There is something else between them too, he realizes. They are both young. Both attractive. He is suddenly conscious his playfulness could be construed another way.

It should bother him, but it doesn't. Indeed, he is more drawn to her than he wants to admit. He wants to—needs to—spend more time with her.

Any other assassin would have said no to his offer. Not her.

She lowers her bow. "We can eat at my restaurant. Until then. Keep your distance."

"Upon my honour," he says, laying one hand over his heart.

They walk in silence for a while. As they cross back over the land, the tension between them grows less and less pronounced. Nothing would erase it completely, of course, but after a time he deems it safe to address her once again.

"So those crystals you have. You're sure they'll hold him?"

"They'll hold him."

"How do you know?"

"Because. They're special. They have power. When used for the right purpose."

"To heal people," he says.

"That's not all they do. But it's one thing."

"How did you become an assassin?"

"I didn't choose this life, if that's what you're asking. My parents died when I was still a girl. The people who raised me so —," she cuts herself off. "Gave me to another family. They were the ones who taught me this."

"I see."

There was a long silence. "What about you?"

"My parents died when I was young as well," he says. "I suppose I just had to look out for myself. And one thing led to another. And another."

"Not a very happy story."

"Few stories are."

"That's true," she says.

They continue on, moving alongside the river. Every once in a while, their arms brush up against one another. She is exhausted but trying to pretend she isn't. She stumbles and instead of striking her down he reaches out to catch her, holding her arm as she steadies herself once more.

Finally, they reach the great village and walk along the streets until the lights of her restaurant come back into view.

She stops at the bottom of the stairs leading up to it and turns to him. The moon shines bright on her face making her beauty almost otherworldly. Can he really kill so lovely a woman?

Yes. The answer is yes. But not if he waits.

"Tomorrow then?" she asks.

He pauses. "Yes. Tomorrow."

She stands in her room, in the dark, clutching the bag of crystals to her chest. The light of the moon shines through her window and onto the floor, pooling around her feet like a puddle.

Tomorrow night she will watch the sky from Arthur's telescope but tonight, she gazes upon the stars with her own eyes. She can make out a single, orange speck. Seven dancers, rising and falling. The great bear, howling its way across the world—his pursuers at his back.

All of these things look different when seen up close, through Arthur's telescope. Next to the crystals, the telescope is the closest thing she has ever known to magic. It has shown her the moon and more. Planets with their own families orbiting around them, a silent sentry. Arthur thinks maybe they are also moons but she is not sure. She doesn't need answers the same way he does. It's enough to be able to look out and know that the universe is much bigger than she is. That it will go on much longer than she will.

She has a feeling her time is coming to an end.

It doesn't have to. She could kill the man. But she knows she won't. Knows she can't.

Her only hope is mercy and compassion. It always has been.

Her sleep is deep and dreamless.

The food is especially good tonight. They are served a full course meal, though not from the menu. Instead she picks everything they eat, from the main dishes to the sides.

Venison with prawn and pine. Trout with wild rice and a rasp-

berry glaze. Nuts coated with honey and maple syrup, served on a bed of green, leafy lettuce. Sliced bison with turnip and radish. The stuffed mushrooms he had the first time he ate there.

He eats everything she brings him without fear. In his bag he carries an antidote for any poison she could possibly hit him with and he's starting to think she's telling him the truth about her desire to heal rather than harm.

He's dressed up for the occasion and is pleased to find that she has, too. He wears a black shirt, a black leather vest and black pants. She wears a red dress, embroidered around the hem and cuffs with an elaborate flower pattern. A necklace of turquoise hangs around her neck. Her soft-soled boots lace up to her calves, made from worn black leather, the assassin's calling card. Hers have been polished to a shine. Her raven hair is parted on either side of her face and hangs down in loose waves.

She is as beautiful as the food tastes but he is still going to end her.

They chat idly. About the food, the festival. The comet that is coming. She tells him she has plans to watch it, describing a great looking glass he can hardly believe exists.

A server comes and clears the dinner plates away and as dessert is served, the subject turns to the matter they have both been avoiding.

"I can see you have questions," she says. "Why don't you ask them?"

"All right." He takes a bite of his dessert—chocolate coated strawberries with walnut shavings sprinkled over top and served on a flat corncake—and swallows. "You let him live. Why?"

She frowns and cocks her head. "Not the question I thought you were going to start with."

"But it's the one I have. Tadadaho's a monster. You'd have been doing everyone a favour if you killed him. So why didn't you?"

"Does the reason matter?" She arches one eyebrow. Her voice carries a challenge. "You're going to kill me anyways."

"Humour me."

"I already did tell you why. Was my reason not good enough?"

"Not really."

She makes a face at him. "Why not?"

"Because you had a job to do. You swore an oath. You swore you would carry out the council's orders."

"And I have been."

"Rehabilitation is not a part of the plan," he says in a wry voice.

She shrugs. "My plan is better."

"I doubt the council sees it that way."

"I don't care what they see. I know I'm right."

"Well it doesn't matter if you're right, does it? You've screwed yourself. Why didn't you just kill him and save your own neck?"

"Because that's not who we are." She slams one palm down on the table. Their glasses rattle and hop. Her eyes are blazing and for a moment, her beauty burns so bright it takes everything in his power to look away. And he has to look away. He can't allow himself to see her sincerity, her conviction.

"They will come for you." He forces himself to speak, lifting his gaze to hers.

She lets out a noise of disgust. "Then let them come. You think I didn't know that was a possibility? They can't stand to see a woman grow strong. They can't stand what will happen when we lead. When we succeed."

She sits back in her chair. Her eyes move over the restaurant.

"It took me years to build this place. Stone by stone. I met a glassmaker, Arthur. An engineer who travelled here when the doors between our world and the others were still open. Before the bluff fell."

He nodded. He knew the story of the bluff. The stories say it had been a portal once, between their world and six others. Realms of beauty and magic and science. Then for no reason

whatsoever—it had closed. All the light had vanished with it and darkness had risen up in its place.

"We built the windows. The lights. The mirrors. Everything you see here, we built together. Because this is what happens when you honour the gifts of another person. You can make things, greater than you can alone."

"Buildings fall. People die."

She snorts. "You know nothing."

"I know you let a murderer live."

"You're right. I did." She glares at him from across the table. "It's a mistake easily rectified."

There. At least she's threatening him now. He needs to see her venom.

"So what now?" he asks.

"The way I see it—we have a choice." She sets her elbows on the table. "You can try to kill me, if that's what you want. If you can't be dissuaded from your mission, so be it. But I saved your life in the mountains and so you will not try to trick me into death. We will fight face to face, weapon to weapon."

He nods. It was fair. It was more than fair.

"Sounds reasonable. And the other option?"

"You could join me," she says.

"Join you?"

"Yes. You could put down your weapons and you could join me. You could help me protect these people. You could help me build a different future."

He almost laughs. Was she serious? Does she really think he would ever consider helping her?

"When do we fight?"

Colour drains from her face but her voice is steady. "After the comet. I want to see it. And I want you to see it, too. Maybe it will knock some sense into you."

She pushes her chair away and gets to her feet. "Until then," she says.

"Until then."

The fields behind her restaurant are filled with food. Tonight's festival is not just for the comet. The harvest is coming and standing here looking out at their huge and wild garden, she knows this will be their best year yet. There are pumpkins and squash. Potatoes and carrots. Rows upon rows of corn.

It shoots up into the sky, a foot or more taller than she is. She walks beside it, trailing one hand through its leaves as she goes.

Arthur is waiting for her when she finally returns.

"I thought that was you," he says. "What are you doing here? I thought you would be down at the festival by now."

"You know how I feel about crowds."

"I do know. Which is why I've ordered us a special treat. It'll be ready in the tower. We'll watch this comet in style," he says. His eyes glow with an anticipation she shares. "It's the dawning of a new age, dear friend. You'll see."

She does want to see. She wants to see it all unfold. She wants to hear Arthur's stories again, the story of other worlds and wonders. But when she looks into her future all she can see is darkness. The fight that is coming.

She wishes she felt better about it.

Arthur steps closer to her, his face a mask of concern. "Is everything all right?"

"Yes," she lies. "It's just the wizard. I guess I'm still thinking about him. I wish I could have done more for him."

"The answer will come. It's as I said. The world is changing."

She forces herself to smile. "And not a moment too soon. Go on without me. I'll be there soon."

She waits for him to go and turns around again, to gaze out at the fields. Laughter and music drifts up from the village.

So much happiness and here she is thinking what weapon she'll use and whether she'll really be able to use it.

Footsteps sound behind her and she turns, expecting to find Arthur.

Instead the assassin stands there in his all-black dinner clothes, an arrow drawn and pointed at her face.

"What are you doing?" she asks. Wide eyes move from his face to the weapon in his hands. It's obvious he's caught her off guard—that she expected him to keep his word.

"I can't wait until the comet passes."

"Why not?" Her voice is sharp, alert.

"I think you know why."

She takes a deep breath and lets it go, closing her eyes. When she opens them again he can see years of suppressed guilt and shame swirl inside them.

"They were your parents, weren't they?"

He nods. He can still remember finding their bloated bodies slumped over the dinner table, their plates still full with food. It is not the kind of sight you leave behind. Not the kind of smell you ever forget.

"You poisoned them."

"I didn't know." She shakes her head. Her voice is barely a whisper. "They told me it would put them to sleep, nothing more. That it would make it easier to take what we'd been sent for."

"Their crystals."

"Yes."

Crystals. His parents murdered for a pile of liquid rock. But of course, they are not just any rocks. They carry the old magic.

"I am so incredibly sorry," she says.

He doesn't answer her. He is not sure what to say. The council told him she would try to trick him, that she would try to turn

this around on them. But he's an assassin. He's gotten good at reading people moments away from death and though he wants to believe this is all an act—that she's just pretending—he can't.

A lump formed in his throat, making speech difficult. "I know," he manages and cringes at the way his voice catches against it.

Her eyes well up with tears. She's holding her hands up in front of her and he knows he's won. She's not going to fight back. He's caught her somewhere she would never take a weapon. She is ready to die, but she still wants to understand why and how.

He can see her piecing it together in her mind. Patching his movements together.

"You followed me," she says. "You wanted to make sure it was you and not the wizard who killed me."

"It wouldn't be revenge if it weren't by my hand."

"So you let me stop him. And you let me come back here. To this place."

Her eyes flicker around her, at all the things that are growing, at the one place she would never want to see violence. All her staff knew of the time she spent here. How sacred a space this was to her. It was not so hard to get them to speak of it. They were so proud of their mistress, after all. Happy to speak of her.

"Yes."

She gives her head a little shake, touches her hand to her face to wipe away her tears. "You're good," she says. "I never saw you coming."

Do it now. Do it now before you lose your nerve.

"Turn around."

She turns, strands of her black hair catching in the breeze. The sky is dark now except for a single fire blazing in the sky, moving closer and closer. There is no one around to see, just rows upon rows of corn.

"They're coming for you, too," she says. "Your name is on the list."

"I know."

He was a loose end. It was to be expected. He lowers his bow and takes his knife out from his belt. He reaches around her and places one hand on her forehead.

He hesitates—knows he shouldn't.

"You know why I came," he says. "But do you know why they sent me?"

Her voice is small. "Because I didn't take the crystal back. Because I told them I couldn't find it."

"You lied," he says.

"I lied."

"What did you do with it?"

"I kept it. I found someone to tell me what it did. They did that and more. They taught me to heal people. They thought I was special..." her voice trails off. She shakes her head and her hair brushes against his face, filling his nose with the scent of corn and honey.

"And then I made a decision. I used the money I earned from my jobs to pay the people I hired."

"You paid your staff with the money you were given to kill them?"

"Yes," she says. "What happened to your family should never have happened. And as long as I live, it will never happen again. I swear it."

His hand tightens on the handle of his knife. It is too much. Too, too much.

He leans forward, resting his head against her shoulder. "I want to believe you," he says, not bothering to disguise the anguish he feels.

"Then look around you," she says, her voice choking with emotion. She turns in his arms and lifts her tear-stained face to his. "This is who I am. This is what I built. Every day from that day, this is what I have created with my regret. With my sorrow. Your parents did not die in vain. They launched a revolution."

Her hands cup his face. He lifts his gaze to hers.

"And our work is not done," she says. "Join me. Help us. You don't have to kill for them anymore."

His knife falls to the ground. His hands clasp her shoulders and they drop to their knees, together. His fingers are tangled up in her hair and he is gripping her so tight he is half-afraid he will squeeze her to death. She doesn't notice. Her face is buried in his chest and she is sobbing into it. They go on for some time, finally breaking away from one another. The comet blazes across the sky, illuminating both of their faces.

He stares into its blistering light, searing the sky like a torch. He feels like his old self is melting away, and he can see with piercing clarity the pain he's inflicted. The harm he's caused. The lives he's taken.

No more.

Every desire he once had for vengeance is gone. There is much to repair. Much to atone for. Hope sparks like fire inside his chest.

She's right. What happened to him should never happen to anyone ever again. The time for change has come.

No doubt the council will send people for her. For him. But they will stand together. The new dawn is rising. With any luck, this time it will rise on the side of the people.

THE END

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