

Oh, Reality

[*Present*]

As the flames behind her danced in the waning light, two screams haunted the air—one a desperate cry for help, the other a raw howl of frustration. A promise, made long ago, had been broken with reckless abandon.

Oh, the irony.

[*An hour earlier*]

Two figures crept through an almost empty house, touching occasionally, never making contact with the furniture. They seemed to flash in and out of existence with every step they took, each shadow an opportunity to disappear. Through scattered glimpses, the woman is seen to have dark hair in a braid down her back, flat brown eyes, and a lithe figure. The man had short black hair and he was short enough to match the woman in height. The pair was plain, average. Their ability to vanish in the sepia-colored minds of observers is what made them so successful—they were forgettable.

The woman did not have a tiger's fierce eyes, or a sort of inner strength immediately obvious to those around her. The man did not wear glasses or project bookish intelligence. For the woman, only the set of her jaw and the sharpness of her gaze betrayed her, and for the man, only his quiet calm and calculated analysis of all he saw was any indicator of his inner character. This fortitude, too, remains a coveted commodity in their trade.

Perhaps their greatest skill, however, was their uncanny ability to communicate with a flick of the hair or a raised eyebrow. No two people were ever more attuned to the other's thoughts, and this made them one of the most prized mercenaries for hire.

It was supposed to be an easy job—the ones that go wrong almost always were supposed to be easy. It might have been overconfidence. They might have been drugged, even, but by whom, it remains unknown.

The job had sounded simple enough—and in fairer circumstances, it would have been. As it stands, the circumstances were anything but fair.

[*Present*]

She valued fairness, she valued honor, and, above all, she valued loyalty. She had vowed from a young age to stick by those who stuck by her, and when she became involved in the messy business of murder, she made sure to always keep that promise.

Other partnerships were the same. The characters might be shadier, perhaps with fewer scruples—but loyal. Above all, they protected their own. They never left anybody behind. To abandon their partner, in the shadowy world of assassinations, was considered akin to murder in the world the rest of us know. This was, perhaps, because it *was* murder.

The woman ran from the burning house, braid singed, eyes stinging, lungs hacking, and heart aching. Their target, as promised by their client previously, had not been not lying in bed. He had not been asleep. And, most importantly, he had not been sane.

“Burglars!” he had shrieked, mistakenly, backing into a wall. The two converged upon him, the woman with a knife, the man with a pistol. The man tilted his head. Taking this as a cue, the woman moved slightly to the left, cornering the man further.

“Get away!” cried the man. “I’ll flip the switch! I will!”

The woman glanced at her partner, who shrugged. “What switch?” he asked, curious, despite himself.

The man laughed and drove his elbow into the wall. There was a click and then a sudden burst of heat, and then all the woman could see were flames.

The bright trails of fire crackled and spun, weaving between each other in a hypnotizing dance. The air was suffused with smoke and ash. The woman was blinded.

She stood there, frozen, watching the fire. She couldn’t move. She couldn’t breathe. She could only watch, stupefied.

“Get out of here!” a familiar voice cried. She felt strong hands on her shoulders, shoving her away to the open path that remained to the door. The flames crept ever closer—she was running out of time.

Making a choice quickly, she ran towards the opening in the flames. Just inside the threshold of the next room, where the flames hadn’t managed to reach, she turned around. She caught a final glimpse of her partner struggling with the man, his pistol strangely absent, before the two men kicked the door shut.

Frozen with indecision, she stood there for an infinitely long minute. Only when the flames started to lick at her shoes did she turn and run outside, coughing. She stared at the house, her mind blank, hands clenched at her sides. Her clothes were singed and her throat was full of smoke, but the neighborhood was empty. No one was there to ask awkward questions.

“Andrew,” she whispered, finally, as she watched the fire devour the house. Her voice was hoarse, cracked. She hadn’t needed to speak to him or anyone else for a long time.

“Andrew!” she yelled, after a second or two.

A screech echoed in the air. The target man had cried for help, and a part of the woman recoiled. She was the only one around, and she would rather eat slugs for the rest of her life than help him. The ability of selective empathy is a common trait among mercenaries, and she was thinking rather nonsensically at the time.

Well, you could even go so far to say she wasn’t thinking at all. The woman was a wooden doll. Another cry reached the woman’s ear. It was her name, yelled in a voice she knew well. She hadn’t heard her name in a long time.

[The day afterward]

She was sitting on a hill, eating lunch. The sun shone, the birds sang, the wind whistled, and the news played.

“Two bodies recovered...” said CNN.

“Possibly arson...” said BBC.

And the last, most horrible piece of news was the two pictures on ABC, of two men. There was the target—an innocent, kindly—looking man in his late fifties. There was her partner, too, a mugshot from a few years earlier.

The woman choked on her food when she saw it. She set aside her sandwich and put her head in her hands. She wasn't sure if she wanted to eat ever again.

She had already replayed all of the possible scenarios, something...something he had liked to do. She could have stayed, that was one. She probably would have died, and common sense said that he probably would have died too.

She could have tried to get him out of there...but, rather regretfully, she knew that she couldn't have fought the man off. The knife had always been just a show. The woman was a good shot from far away, but at close range, she was rubbish. So she would have died, but there was a chance he would have survived.

But if he had lived, if she had shoved him out of that burning room, he would have been faced with the guilt.

The woman was drowning. The sea boiled around her, the steam choked her, and the waves tossed her about like a ragdoll. Every drop was another regret, something else she could have done.

She could have declined the job.

She could have stabbed the man before he had had a chance to pull the switch.

She could have researched the client better, made sure her information was trustworthy.

She could have shoved the man out of the room.

She could have done any number of things, really. The important piece to note here...well. It's that she didn't.

[Two days later]

"Here's your money," said the young woman in front of her, slapping down a bundle of cash. "My dad deserved it. Nice work." She smiled appreciatively, tapping long fingernails on the wooden table.

The woman glanced at her client, who flipped her choppy bob and continued to drum on the wood.

Wordlessly, the woman pushed the money back at her client and turned around as if to leave the bar.

"Where are you going? Don't you want the money?"

The woman only gave her a cursory wave, not even bothering to turn around. She walked out of the bar, her flat shoes making barely any sound against the cobbled street.

[A year afterward]

"You're the person I'm looking for, right?" asked a very earnest-looking man. "I've got a job—"

The woman stared blankly at him, pretending not to understand. She began getting her money out of her bag to pay the check and leave.

"Where's your partner? I thought he was always with you."

The woman froze, mind racing. Hot tears started pouring down her face as she attempted to swallow past the lump in her throat. She stood up abruptly, took all of the money out of her wallet and, without bothering to count, slammed it on the table.

She left the restaurant quickly, pausing to check over her shoulder to see if the man was following her.

“Not anymore,” she whispered, in response to her potential client’s question.

[The next day]

It was his birthday.

She sat on that same grassy hill that she had eaten her lunch on the year before, staring at her lap. She had barely anything left of him, anything left to remind her of her cowardice that day. She really had left him behind.

She fingered a bottle around her wrist. It was tiny, plain, and fragile—but it contained all she had. In it was a scrap of ash from the burned-out house. The day after the fire, she had picked through the debris. She found the melted remains of his gun, the remains of the floorboards—but nothing else. His body had been taken away by the cleanup crew.

She took a pinch of ash before she left—one last bitter reminder.

Sometimes a memory is reminder enough.

[Two years before]

“My name is—” she began, but the man cut her off. “I know. I looked you up. You’re surprisingly hard to track down, you know.”

She smiled grimly. “Your face was plastered on the front page of every website I’d done my best to avoid.”

He laughed.

“There’s only one rule,” she said. “And that’s a rule of loyalty. Don’t feed me to the wolves, and I won’t throw you under the bus.”

“You seem to be fond of idioms.”

“I’m fond of similes, too.” The woman looked hard at the man. To his credit, her gaze didn’t seem to affect him. He stared right back.

“If you turn me in, or if you leave me behind, I’ll spill everything I know about you faster than an oil rig poisons the ocean.”

He grinned. “I won’t leave you behind. We’re partners now.”

“Looks we are,” she said, holding out her hand. After another pause, they shook.

[Present, the day after his birthday]

“Reports of a suicide off of Derwent Hill...” said CNN.

“Body identified... Sofie Lawrence, 26 years of age...” said BBC.

ABC had a picture, and that picture had a caption. “Here she is, pictured with one of her coworkers in her office at DreamLabs. They specialize in virtual reality...”