

ASH

a short story by Sierra Rennart

Ash settles like snowflakes on a meadow of broken wildflowers, the only funeral rites some will receive. Those who still stand, choking on the acrid air, will be left with no sharp remembrance of the moment the world was saved. The air dampens their senses leaving only an imprint, a watermark, a wine stain, the phantom burn of acid long after it is cleaned away.

The thick air slows the wyrm's fall and the survivors hold their breath in agony until the monster reaches its final resting place. None look away, afraid that if they do, its eyes will wink open to reveal dreadful light, golden and fell, and all their toil and loss would be for naught. Moments stretch into minutes and they begin to accept: the greatest threat this age has seen will terrorise none again.

But you...

You cannot feel, cannot breathe, cannot see from where you lay face down on the battlefield. But the fall of the wyrm reverberates deep within your bones, louder than sound. The finality of it sits heavy between your shoulders, pushing you deeper into the mud and the broken flower heads.

Nothing so powerful had walked the lands in an age. And nothing, they said, could bring it down. But you had grinned, eyes glinting with laughter, as a new dream woke within you. History would sing songs of this deed for centuries. They would sing of your brother, cleverest of naturalists, and your fellows, masters of their crafts. They would sing of your soul's true companion, a warrior whose blade was unmatched even by the heroes of old. Long were the roads, but bright were the dawns you shared. Together, you had seen off deadly foes and treacherous times, but at the prospect of this new threat, your blood warmed with the promise of undying glory. What was one against so many bound in heart and mind and will?

You reach out for your warrior, but your movements are slow as the air weighs you down and the returning feeling in your body is nothing but pain. She had run to you as the wyrm began to fall. You reach further, fighting against the hollowness in your chest that grows with each silent wave of reverberation. Where is she?

You call, barely able to form the shape of her name in your mouth, but the ashen air smothers your voice and clouds your mind. Lucidity starts to slip away, like sand between your fingers. Maybe you have finally given too much. But as you begin to drift, your brother's voice comes to you through the muffled air.

He kisses your forehead. "This is for the best," his voice cracks, as something cold and metallic touches your cheek. The heavy air presses down on you, squeezing the breath from your lungs.

You find her hand. It is slick with blood.

Something pierces your spine, pain exploding white-golden before your vision blackens and you are gone.

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THE ashen sky reddens deeply at the edges, stained by the first flush of sunset. Ankle-deep in mud and the blood of his friends, a man stands above two prone forms whose hands are clasped one final time.

The wyrm, the terror he had summoned for fear of a greater monster, had cost them much but it had not taken its intended price: the monster that walked the world with them unaware. Someone who wore the face of a sibling, a lover, and a friend.

He holds a knife made of deathly magic, but it is not drained of power as it should have been. He had steeled himself, but the attempt was ultimately half-hearted and impotent.

It is thus that their companions – his companions – now find him, their eyes dulled and minds dampened. They look at him, the slow realisation dawning that he is neither the assassin nor the saviour he had promised to be. Once comforting and reassuring, their gaze now burns. What recourse have they to safety now that the wyrm and knife have failed?

His companions collect the bodies – to give the warrior they loved a hero's burial and to safeguard the mage they must now find another way to destroy.

He opens his mouth to call out, to tell them he will find a way. But they have turned their backs and he is left in silence, their footsteps muted by the fell air.

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NOTHING whispers to you in the darkness where your mind is left to wander. Your body knits itself back together as you drift along the knife edge between life and afterlife, your soul struggling to decide whether to disentangle itself from this world or to remain. Time is uncountable and reality fractures slow and sure as you walk the pathless wastes, guideless and alone. At last, something - choice or inertia - changes the dreamscape.

You lay with your eyes closed for a long time, until echoes beneath your fingertips make you uneasy enough to wake. Your vision blurs as you sit up too quickly, dowsing you in waves of half-remembered pain. The mattress beneath you morphs into trodden earth and the air becomes heavy and something just out of reach makes you cower... and then it is gone and you gasp for breath as if you've been drowning until your chest quiets as this feigned assault on your senses fades away. The mattress is just a mattress, the air is soft and lightly scented.

You breathe in the silence until the breeze moves the coverlet and you find reason to rise.

Vision still wanting for sharpness, you fumble stiff-fingered with the clothing laid out. A shirt and jacket, trousers, socks you cannot seem to find. It is lilies that you smell, you realise only you bump against the velvet petals, flecks of yellow pollen dusting your hands. A hollow opens up inside your chest, a slowly widening emptiness of unremembered joy and you do not know why you are sad.

Time passes uncounted and unmarked as you sit cross legged on the floor before the vase. Sounds begin to creep up the corridor and a shadow fills the doorway.

"Oh," says a voice, deep and low and wary. The bearded face melts into its own cast shadow and recognition eludes you. "You're awake."

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SOCKS are found for you by someone you do not recognise, but know somehow you should. You are brought to a table, set for six, but no matter how often you count, you can only find three others in this house with you. You catch yourself glancing over your shoulder when doors creak or shadows skitter across the floor, hoping to find the missing ones.

"You should rest," you are told, benign words from carers who do not ask how you are. "It will be good for you."

The three speak of others when they think you cannot hear. Never with names, but there is a depth in their voices, a rawness. They speak most of one they refer to only as "he". They wonder where he is headed as his trail has gone cold. They speculate on his motivations late into the night and you let their voices muffle as memories muddle just out of reach. You wonder why you miss him. You drift into dream, wondering if it would be better never to leave.

Of the one they refer to as "she", they say barely anything at all. And in that lack grows emptiness like a yawning cavern, though you do not know why.

The days move on. The silence shared between you is not familiar and the closeness is increasingly disquieting.

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YOU walk the grounds whose boundaries you are forbidden to cross, your circles of traversal gradually widening as you heal a little each day. An altar to the old gods lies on the edge of the estate. You lay a haphazard offering of late-season lilac and grasses on the crumbling stones and wait for the wind to change.

A lone bird call rings of half-remembered laughter and you turn, knowing you are the fool.

When you turn back, two children run past the altar, thin and translucent against the afternoon light. Their ghostly shouts intertwine with the rustle of the grass on the windless field. They are barefoot and oblivious to the fell power flowing through them. But you can see it coursing beneath their skin, streaming down their cheeks, and dripping off their chins. The smaller child laughs and golden light pours from their mouth. The older child looks through them to gaze at you directly and screams.

The scream breaks the scene. The meadow before you, browning late summer grass, flashes ash-white and littered with broken flower heads. The ghostly children are gone.

You step back in a flash of terror and turn to the altar to see your offering scattered on the ground. You breathe, hoping the scent will trigger something, but the air smells of nothing

but meaningless leaves. A deep voice behind you is low enough not to startle but still sends unwelcome prickles down your back. "You shouldn't walk so much. It's -"

You turn to him, your interrupter. While instinct forces you to control yourself, panic flashes across his eyes as your hands twitch by your side.

"For my own good," you finish for him, your voice ragged.

You cannot touch it - not yet - but you feel memory straining beneath the surface of your mind. Was it him who stole it from you? You turn in anger and he does not stop you.

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AUTUMN dwindles and fades. As you do "what is good for you," you feel you are going to rot alive from being stationary for so long. Despite their pretence, you see mould start to grow green and white on your watchers' skin too. Winter settles in, muffling the silent rage of the house in thick blankets of coldest wool. They wait for something that never comes. Uneasy in the way of those who find peace in movement, you are all corpses walking, silent as graves and hollow as homes abandoned to plague. In the seclusion of your own thoughts, you waver between hope and fear of what the coming thaw will release from your souls.

Spring arrives all at once and none of you can sit still another moment more. They whisper amongst themselves, but they cannot leave you, no matter how much they would like to. You, for all of your gathered resentment, cannot bear the thought of parting with them. They have something that you need - a key of sorts you have yet to steal back from them.

They pack your things for you, afraid of what you will hide between the folds of your shirts. "It'll be good -" they begin, but their words die in their throats and they shrink from your withering gaze.

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THE artless road tells no lies and hides nothing beneath its surface, unlike every one of you. Skirting town after town with no signs of stopping, you lose track of your progress and what little belief you had in their feigned plan. When supplies run low, they do not let you into town.

You see dangers rising in the distance - monsters and fires and terrors - but your guards steer away. You are desperate to chase them, your vision is truly clear for the first time since you woke all those months ago, but you are weaponless and the dormant power in your soul refuses to rise to your call. So you bide your time.

You do not wait long. As you race away from the latest threat, you crest a ridge that overlooks an emerald green valley flecked with ash-white flowers. It smells of lilies, fragrant and fresh, and you know exactly where you are.

Dismounting, you run down the side of the ridge, ignoring the strangled cries of your companions - your handlers - and wade through the knee-high grass.

It is not just flowers that dot the meadow. Your movement uncovers remnants of battle: cracked helms, shattered shields, corroded swords. As you look up, the mound of flowers is

a snaking ridge of unburied bones, bleached to opalescence by the elements. A glint of gold catches your eye.

Wary for the first time, you reach out for the helm, a single lily falling from where the horsehair plume should be. Your fingers meet the metal and it steals your breath as shock courses through you. You feel everything at once: Pain and love. Joy and anger. Life and desolation.

And you remember - oh, you remember *everything*.

You remember her: your first meeting in the ruined palace gardens. Every time she laughed, every time she sang. Her eyes the night before the battle, radiant and warm, and the life you dreamed of building together.

You see it, the memory sharp and clear enough to cut your flesh. And you can taste it again - the tang in the air, the ash like snowflakes settling on your nose. The acrid clouds the wyrm had called raged as it rose before her in fury. She held her ground, unabashed and undeterred, as you focus your power through her soul and hands and sword, the only way to bring the monster down. Never stopping to wonder if anyone should command this much power.

You cannot remember the moment you release the torrent, but you can remember the pain that ravaged you and brought you to your knees and you start to drift... until the knife presses against your ear, cold and bright and toxic and you remember all your unremembered nightmares.

"It's for your own good," the voice says. Your brother. And he is lying. "You're too powerful. You can't live long enough to see the monster you will become." And you hear him weeping.

And you return. The offensively brilliant sky shines, unmarred, and the unfairness brings tears to your eyes.

The air is clear and crisp and should taste of spring except for the wafting scent of fear, rank with failure, from the ridge behind you. Where your companions - traitors, loveless - wait on the ridge, impotent and afraid as the awful realisation dawns on them. You turn, half-expecting to see your brother with them, penitent and contrite, but what you really want him to be is afraid.

And finally it is enough to break the dam. You feel it deep below the surface of your soul rushing up to greet your eager hands. You dive in, soundless, and you swim against the current of power that should have filled you with dread and are reborn.

Light pours from your eyes, golden and fell.

"Traitors," you whisper to the wind, trusting it will carry your message. "Now tell me what is for my own good."

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