

TIMELESS

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Prologue

The dining hall is full of assassins. For everything in Cambridge has its season – a time to live, a time to die. And tonight, a time to kill. Towering candelabras flicker across the five long tables as the assassins finally take up the places they have spent years fighting for. Nobody speaks. They hardly breathe. The only sound is the occasional clank of a weapon concealed beneath a black university gown. Coming to dinner unarmed would be tantamount to suicide. But so is coming to dinner tonight at all.

The last assassin to arrive doesn't stop to check the gold calligraphy on the seating plan. She doesn't need to. She strides the length of the wood-panelled dining room, and the edge of her gown flicks over the sabre at her hip. Other assassins bow their heads in reverence as she passes, and the chestnut hair coiled on top of her own might as well be a crown. For tonight she is a young god among them – for this moment and this moment only, she wins.

She doesn't bother to conceal the sword again until she reaches the head of the central table – the only

place with a chair. Her eyes survey the figures standing behind the benches. She recalls their strengths, catalogues weaknesses, guesses at the armourers who have gifted the weapons beneath their gowns. She doesn't allow herself to read the place-card that sets out her name and rank: Artemis #1. If she's killed tonight, that little number dies with her.

Nobody sits, not yet. But as some of the assassins watch the Masters filing into the hall, others pluck knives and forks from the tables, vanishing them into the shadows of their gowns. Artemis removes her whole place setting, the cold metal biting at her skin as she slides the cutlery into a garter she can access through the slit up her wine-dark dress. Half of these assassins won't make it through the night; a quarter won't even survive to dessert.

Four chairs scrape on the wooden slats of the raised dais at her back. Four of the Faculty founders have taken their seats – the Master Navigator, Master Armourer, Master Historian and the Master Medic. The tension in the dining hall heightens as they wait for the Master Assassin to take his place. It is so quiet that Artemis senses the Master's fingertips brush the college crest on his chairback, hears the tiny whistle of breath through his teeth before he speaks. Artemis has been trained to notice these things – they all have – and now it is impossible to shut them out.

'*Non morietur*,' the Master Assassin's voice rings out – a whole century battling along his twenty-five-year-old vocal cords. He says nothing else,

and the back of Artemis's neck prickles as the Master's ancient chair groans under his weight. That's it then – ten years of preparation and *Do not die* is the last piece of advice he's going to give them. The use of Latin feels like a washing of their blood from his timeless hands. *Bastard.*

At once, the dining hall is a blur of movement so familiar that Artemis could almost pretend this evening is like any other. Assassins pull out the long wooden benches and finally sit. Waiters flock into the room with plates balancing on their palms, setting down beetroot soup in front of them. But unlike any other dinner, nobody starts to pour the wine. Instead, every single hand is reaching for a place-card, every pair of eyes reading the name hidden beneath their own.

Hector #124. Artemis sighs with relief. She knows her target by sight, recognises the brown-curled back of his head two tables over. He's too far away for her to safely make a move inside the dining hall, but she's confident she can take him down as soon as they're outside. Artemis has beaten him in every combat discipline. She slides the place-card into a small pocket in her gown, where it must remain until death or dawn.

'Don't think I've ever seen you in a dress, Art,' Alexander drawls to her immediate right.

Artemis ignores him. Alex might look like an angel – with his golden curls and full red lips – but he fights as dirty as the devil. There's a reason he's #2.

'The dress suits you,' Alexander persists, spinning his place-card around his thumb.

Art drops a palm to the dagger strapped alongside

her new cutlery collection. ‘Shouldn’t you be concentrating on something other than your dick tonight?’ she says lightly.

‘I don’t think that’s something our Alex is capable of,’ Gunnar jokes from his third-ranked place at the table. But he isn’t looking at Artemis as he speaks; his green eyes are flicking compulsively towards an assassin across the room – giving away his target. Careless.

‘A true statement,’ Alex declares, waving his spoon lazily between Gunnar and Art before plunging it into his bowl of pink soup. He’s the only assassin in the entire hall who is eating.

Something must show across Art’s carefully closed expression, because Alex rolls his eyes. ‘Oh relax, Art. Nobody’s killing us up here. Your target must be ranked in the triple-figures, like mine, so they’ll be all the way—’ he flicks his spoon towards the other end of the hall— ‘down there.’ Droplets of soup splatter across the face of Catherine #6, a few places down. She doesn’t blink, moves only to raise her middle finger at him.

Alex smirks, turning back to Art. ‘You’ll need your strength tonight,’ he says in a mock-friendly tone. ‘Eat your soup. Do you want to borrow my spoon? You seem to have misplaced yours.’

‘I like beetroot even less than I like you,’ Art says pleasantly. She can’t be as relaxed as he’s pretending to be. And he isn’t her friend. Not in the years they’ve been living together, training together, occasionally sleeping together – and especially not tonight.

Tonight, Alex is furious that Art is ranked higher than him, and anger is always dangerous.

‘Nice to see the Faculty have a sense of humour,’ Gunnar says, when the waiters bring out the main course. He cocks his shaved head to the side as though examining the steak tartare in front of him.

Nobody replies; even Alex is surveying the room now. The stench of fear is stronger than the bloodied meat. Every assassin knows that the hall is both the easiest and hardest place to kill a target. In the hall there’s no hunt – and the Faculty will see the death, which means no quibbling over the kill. But making a move exposes you: makes you vulnerable to the assassin with your name on their own place-card. Art’s muscles are taut, waiting for someone to make the first move – she could really do with a glass of wine. But this late into dinner, she can’t risk the possibility of poison.

There is a grunt, a shout, the smash of a plate. Then chaos. Art keeps one eye on her own table, but turns her head a fraction so she can watch the carnage unfolding two tables over. *Two tables over. Shit.*

Art shifts her whole body towards the brawl that has broken out there, searching for Hector’s brown curls.

At first she can’t see him through the swirling movement of gowns, the flashing of daggers at throats, but then she sees the body. Hector #124 is lying along the centre of the table, the toes of his black polished shoes pointing skywards, his right elbow resting in a plate of untouched steak, a dagger protruding from his chest, pinning him in place.

‘Oh, for fuck’s sake, Hector,’ Art hisses under her breath. She is going to have to move.

As soon as Art rises from her chair, the fighting stops. Those who have survived the melee retake their places along the bloodstained benches, settling in to watch the assassins who are coming for the bodies littered around the end of the table. Some are sprinting across the hall, gowns billowing behind them like the wings of startled crows. Others move more carefully, halting every few steps. A few – like Art – have drawn a weapon. She is taking no chances. For there is both glory and stupidity in attempting to take out the #1 ranked assassin. And crossing the hall gives equal opportunity to the trophy-hunters and the idiots.

But nobody moves against Art as she reaches Hector’s body. She feels bile rise in her throat at the gruesome sight of him: the glassy stare of his eyes, the curls that will no longer bounce. Art has seen a fellow assassin die before – freeze to death in basic training, break their neck during sparring, pick the wrong ingredient for an antidote. But she has never seen a murder. A murder *she* should have carried out. Horror snatches at the ends of Art’s breath, and she grips the hilt of her sabre. She recalls the advice of her mentor – Professor Denwood.

Killing a fellow soldier will be the hardest thing you ever do, Artemis. But no assassin may enter time without first taking a life. Kill. Survive. Claim your crew. Make your existence matter.

Survive; don’t die. Her mentor’s advice; the Master’s advice. And somehow the simple commands steady

Art's breathing. She makes herself reach for Hector's place-card, tucked within the bloodied folds of his gown. She flips up the side where 'Hector #124' is inked in swirling gold, and finds the name and rank of his target – *her* new target – beneath it.

'You have got to be kidding me,' Art whispers, as she reads Alexander's name.

A sharp clap.

'Please re-take your seats for the final course,' the butler commands from the Masters' dais.

Art barely notices the bodies of the assassins she steps over to return to her place; hardly hears the moans of the dying, or the frenzied panting of their attackers. Her veins are a cocktail of fear and exhilaration. Hector was never going to be able to take her down, but Alex is different. Alex has beaten her before, and this time there will be no second chances.

'Hector was your target?' Gunnar asks, as soon as Art sits down again. Nobody else at the top of her table appears to have moved – it's as though they have been at a completely different dinner. Catherine has even poured herself a glass of wine.

Art inclines her head to confirm. Gunnar has always collected knowledge like trinkets – especially when he's afraid. And she realises that they are all fearful up here now – because they know that the #1 ranked assassin has a new target. A high-ranking target.

'You had *Hector*?' Alex laughs, pausing in the demolition of his Eton Mess. 'Talk about the Faculty going easy on you.'

‘Well, unfortunately for me, the bastard couldn’t even stay alive until pudding.’ Art shrugs, trying to appear nonchalant, while silently listing every weakness Alex has shown since he turned ten.

Alex snorts and goes back to eating. Art watches the veins bulging on his massive forearms as he grips the spoon. His weight is his biggest advantage. He has at least ten kilograms on her – she remembers that from being pinned underneath him. During combat sessions, and . . . outside them. Bile rises in her throat again, and she swallows hard.

Kill. Survive. Matter.

Art jumps onto the table in a crouch, scattering glassware and upending a candle. Then she draws her sabre with her left hand and snatches Alex’s spoon with her right.

Alex is up onto the bench in a split second, two short swords already swept from their straps across his back.

‘It’s you,’ Artemis says simply, as he steps up onto the table to face her.

‘Of course it is,’ Alex sighs, and there is the tiniest quiver of fear in his voice. It is a comfort to Art that he’s as shit-scared of death as she is. And then he lunges with perfect form – attempting a killing thrust to her chest with one sword while bringing the other down for a head cut – and suddenly Art feels a lot less warm and fuzzy towards him.

She parries his blade at her chest before raising her sabre to block the hit to her head, trapping the sword with her guard. Art steps forward so aggressively that

Alex is forced backwards, almost tripping over somebody's abandoned bowl of dessert.

'You can't win this,' Alex taunts as he regains his footing. Alex always likes to talk to his opponents – Art has never been able to work out whether it's a distraction tactic, or if he's simply incapable of ever keeping his mouth shut.

Art half-steps, feints with the blade towards Alex's shoulder – and then explodes into a lunge, sending a bottle of wine flying as she swipes for his throat instead. But Alex sees it coming, and somehow sweeps his twin swords across his body in a parry so strong that it almost knocks the hilt from Art's hands.

Perhaps she might have recovered, if it hadn't been for her stupid formal shoes and the crushed meringue coating the table, but before she knows it, her sabre is clattering against the nearest bench and her knee is colliding with the oak table. When Art raises her head, both of Alex's swords are at her throat.

'I really do like the dress,' Alex says, his eyes sliding to Art's exposed thigh and the arsenal strapped to it – weapons she is now unable to reach.

Art swallows and holds his blue gaze. She has trained for worse situations than this. 'You'll never make a good assassin, Alexander, for exactly the same reason you'll never make a good lover.'

Surprise flickers in his eyes. The sword points pinch at Art's throat, and she feels the blood running down her neck in tiny rivulets. She's got one shot. *Keep him talking.* That should be easy.

'Oh, Artemis,' Alex groans dramatically. 'I admire

your bravery almost as much as your excellent arse. But telling me I'll never make a good assassin with my swords at your throat is downright reckless, wouldn't you say?'

'Don't you want to know why you'll never make a good lover?' Art's taunt is a croak, her Adam's apple caught between the two sword tips.

'Do you really want to waste your dying breath on my non-existent sexual shortcomings?' Alex's voice is harsher now, his breathing ragged. His blue eyes aren't meeting her brown ones any more. He is preparing for the killing blow, and he's too much of a coward to look her in the face as he takes her life. Her chance to matter. Now. She has to do it now.

'Your problem, Alexander, is that you never notice the details. A subtle shiver, a whispered *yes*, or—'

Art throws her whole weight backwards, creating a momentary sliver of space between her throat and the blades. In another breath, her right hand is in front of her neck and as Alex thrusts forwards for the blow, both sword tips ricochet off the spoon – his spoon – that she's managed to hold on to all the way along the table. Alex stumbles, and Art doesn't hesitate. She ducks under his guards, scoops up an unopened wine bottle and hurtles towards him so fast that he never even has the chance to block as she slams the Burgundy into his temple.

He falls like a tree. China and glasses and toppling candles smash around him like an absurd Renaissance painting. He's not dead, but the colossal blow to the side of his head guarantees a few moments of blackout.

Efficiently, Art takes up one of his short swords and stands over him.

‘Details,’ she says again, sadly, before tossing away his spoon and slitting his throat precisely, the way she has been taught.

Art turns atop the table, still breathing hard, and catches the eye of the Master Assassin seated on the dais. He gives her a nod. An acknowledgment of the kill. Art expects to feel something – triumph, or perhaps relief – but instead all she can think about is the blood pooling at her feet, and the stench of death filling the room. She needs to get out of here.

As though the Masters sense this, they rise from their seats at last, their meal concluded. The silence is absolute until the small door closes behind them.

And then Art runs. She runs the length of the dining hall, slipping and sliding through blood and gore, her hair escaping from its ornate pins. Once she’s past the entrance with its pointlessly elegant seating plan, she pulls a dagger from her leg strap and sprints into the unforgiving cold of the Cambridge evening.

Artemis is first out into Old Court, the lawn sparkling from the glow of the lamps still lit in the soldiers’ rooms above. She is first to drag in breaths of mist, damp as the Fens its travelled from. *Alive*. But only for now. She hurtles towards the Porters’ Lodge – and it feels absurd that she must find a key in her gown pocket, take it in her shaking, bloody fingers until finally she is through the late-night door and tearing down the cobbled streets to hide now, to hide until—

A figure appears from behind a line of bicycles like an apparition. And he's grabbing her arm, pulling her towards him, saying her name and she's fighting him off like a wild thing, drawing back her dagger—

'Art, it's Reeve. It's me. Put that damned thing away before you kill someone.'

Reeve. Reeve making a joke of it all and ignoring her half-feral snarl.

'You're alive,' Reeve breathes, and she wishes he wouldn't look at her like that – like she is a lighthouse, when she feels like a storm that will wreck every ship in the world.

'Did you—' He doesn't finish the sentence. That's why she is the assassin, and he is the navigator.

'Yes,' Art replies.

She will never speak Alexander's name aloud again – to Reeve, to her crew, to anyone else. But Artemis already knows that however far she travels in time, she will feel him in a lover's laugh, catch his eye across a crowded square, hear his name whispered on the wind.

You win, Alexander, Art thinks, then steels herself to survive the night.