Kiss the Knife

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Summary

Impulse is a mercenary tasked with killing a mage; but he interrupts a spell, and they're transported from their sci-fi world into a fantasy/medieval world. Impulse wants to get back so he can kill Ren and get his payment; but Ren doesn't remember a thing before he woke up in the forest—least of all the spell to send them home.

Impulse is no fool. He has no real name these days, nothing to trace: just a mind, a body, and a dagger—that, and the flimsy card to a modest holocredit account. He'd like to say he's the best mercenary around, but even he knows that's not really true. He's certainly the most well-known, the most ambiguous, the easiest to acquire. He makes himself easily available to any potential clients. It's why he's so careful not to exist outside his jobs. Other mercenaries, they try to live normally when they're not on a job, but they're harder to find on short notice. Impulse gets hired for other people's... passion projects. Spur of the moment battles and last-minute death wishes are his domain. Much harder to trace to a mercenary. Plus, even if he's ever found out, the laws are somewhat grey. Crimes of passion are much more likely to end in a death sentence for his employer, and he'd maybe end up with a few years in prison. *If* he were to get caught.

He won't. He keeps his tech print minimal: just a nonpermanent attachment that hooks over his ear. Nothing for a hunter to track, unlike most other mercenaries these days with their incessant tech and gear.

He may not be the *best*, but he's *good*.

To kill a king's mage—that's a novel honour, and rare to boot. He'd never pass it up, not for a moment. This could be the kill that makes him infamous. This could be the job that allows him to live in peaceful luxury for the rest of his days.

This mage isn't even a difficult target. He's not the king, just a happy-go-lucky mage who ended up in the king's employ. Hardly even guarded! Even after a mere three days of observation, Impulse has pinned down the precise moment in which he'll strike.

Every day at sunset, the mage ascends a tower to meditate on the uppermost level. It's open, like a pavilion placed atop the turret. Not particularly defensible, but not monitored by the pervasive cameras that blanket the city in a cloud of surveillance like mosquitoes in summer, and it's got an incredible view. Impulse would know—he's got the same view from the rooftop a few feet away.

Today, the mage is wearing a long white robe with rich blue trim and golden thread embroidered along the cuffs; sapphires drip from a sigil on the back, transitioning to aquamarine and turquoise as they trail down the rear with increasing sparsity. Impulse would say he's never seen so many gems in one place, but while observing the mage, he's also seen the king and, more importantly, the crown, mantle, and radiant scepter coated in gems both rare and imported.

The mage is also muttering to himself, something Impulse hadn't noticed from afar during his days of observation. An oversight. It doesn't matter with his target in such proximity, though. He quietly draws his dagger and approaches from behind. As the blinding sun strikes his vision, he raises one hand to shield his eyes.

Robes flowing, the mage is... is hovering. He's never done that before. A coat of glittering light spreads along the floor, up the walls, out over the rest of the castle and beyond. Impulse gasps softly as it ghosts over him, too, with its brilliant glimmer. It's blinding. The sun

reflects over and over and over again like a candle trapped within a box of mirrors. Impulse screws his eyes shut as he thrusts the dagger forward into the mage's back. A spell, sure, but what spell can overcome the power of a damascus dagger?

He pushes on, presses forward, waits for the mage to go limp despite the rush of magic that urges Impulse away from his target. He leans into the dagger. With his weight, he twists it as much as he can.

The light grows, grows, grows—

Impulse is flung back. Instead of hitting the railing he'd climbed over so carefully, his back lands on flat ground. He can't open his eyes, light already unbearable in his skull. The most he can do is focus on his other senses. His surroundings feel... Well, he's definitely not on a shingled roof, nor clay or porcelain. It isn't the fake grass and greenery of the courtyard, though, either. It feels like... some kind of strange, knobbled road.

As the light fades, so does the ringing in his ears. His hand fumbles the tech attachment from his ear, and with the relief, he notices strange sounds. The world, when he opens his eyes, is foreign. Deep, craggled green stretches high above him like skyscrapers, and the rush of silent, electric cars is replaced by a deeper burble with an undercurrent of... liquid on stone—that can't be right.

Impulse sits up, tucking his dagger to his chest, and finds himself somewhere impossible. Where he's from, forests don't exist anymore. They've been replaced with housing: wide, flat buildings far as the eye can see, crescendoing into skyscrapers in the denser areas. But here, his earpiece is shorting out because somehow he's been flung far enough from home that it's lost signal. So... just how far out is he?

A groan issues from nearby. Impulse stares at the mage lying on the lush ground not two feet away, slowly coming to.

Quickly secreting the dagger away, Impulse crawls to his knees and examines the mage, but he seems... completely uninjured. Certainly not stabbed in the back

The mage's eyes flicker open; his gaze widens when it lands on Impulse's face.

He feels far too bare without his face shield, but if his earpiece isn't functioning, it certainly isn't going to project the shield. Besides, protecting his identity isn't the greatest of his concerns at the moment if they really are in the middle of some long-lost forest.

But that means the mage is the first person to really see Impulse's face, unscrambled, in... he can't remember how long. In his line of work, anonymity is paramount. He's careful to hide any personal information.

The mage is looking at him like he's the sun. "God?" he trembles.

A rough, amused bark leaps from Impulse's throat, breaches his lips like water barely reaching a boil. "No, no, not a god. Just... found myself on the ground here, no idea where I am. I don't suppose you could help me? Seems like you're, maybe you're in the same boat."

“Yeah dude, uh... I don’t... I’m not rememberin’ anything right now, yeah, um. Not good, my dude.”

“Okay, yeah.” Internally, Impulse breathes a sigh of relief. So he doesn’t remember the dagger, the attempt on his life. That’s definitely good, bodes well for his chances of getting back alive. “Well... I’m... I’m Impulse, what should I call you?”

“Ren,” the mage says, as if by instinct more than choice, then frowns. “I didn’t realize I remembered that, even, heh.”

Impulse has already taken stock of the situation as much as he can: there’s nothing around, only a path a little way off. Left with no alternative, he rises to his feet and, only hesitating a moment, grants Ren his hand.

The touch is unfamiliar, strange as a tree in the city—but, surrounded by trees as they are, he sets aside his discomfort. He holds out an arm and allows the man to use him for stability, for strength, for leverage as they begin to travel.

Ren, he’d called himself, almost like a songbird, like with one more letter he could take flight and leave everything behind.

Well, i't’s not like there’s much to leave behind, here. They’ve already been raptured far from whatever Ren had as the mage. And Impulse... never had anything worth losing to begin with.

Sure, this man is his target, but they’re so far away he’ll never be able to drag back the evidence of the mage’s demise. Easier to get back alive, *then* kill him. Simple as that, simple as finding his way home from the middle of a forest after a spell he’s never heard of, and simple as dragging the mage back with him.

The path is thin as a trashy alleyway, hardy travelled even by whoever—or whatever—lives in this overwhelming place. The sounds are new, everything unfamiliar. It’s... underwhelming gives the wrong impression, but it’s calmer than Impulse is used to, and—and he really shouldn’t get used to it. This isn’t his life, it’s not where he belongs. He’s just lost. He’ll find his way home, get his payment, and move on with his life. Living from one fight to the next: that’s where Impulse belongs.

Ren, on the other hand, seems enchanted by his surroundings. When Impulse takes his hand to hurry him up, there’s an electric pulse just beneath the skin, like the mage has some technology or another embedded deep into himself. A strange choice; Impulse can’t say he’d do the same, even if that kind of tech were available to him. But it’s not. And he’s in a rush. And... and he needs to get home so he can leave Ren in the past like a bad memory.

After an hour or so, they come upon a town made of stone and mortar, with thatched rooves and wooden doors. How luxurious do these people have it? Living in a forest, with homes made of such rare materials, they must all be rich!

With a stern glance, Impulse situates Ren, safely hidden at the edge of the forest, and enters the town to explore and ask for directions. These people don’t look rich. They don’t look anything except tired, really. Faces downcast, dirt trailing up the edges of their pants and

along the seams of their various shirts and aprons. How could they be so miserable when they live in such luxury as this? Everything around them seems more alive than they are. They hardly respond when Impulse asks where he is—they just point him to the other end of town, where the road continues. Back he ventures, and drags the mage down the road until night turns to day again and Ren's footsteps have long been slurred and stumbling as he sleeps on his feet.

Some people have just had it easy, Impulse thinks to himself as the makings of a large stone city begin to peer over the trees. The castle rises high above the rest of the city, which is also made of rare organic and natural materials.

At the sight of the wooden buildings, Impulse would weep, were he a lesser man and not a hardened mercenary. Ren, on the other hand, expresses his adoration quite openly. At the least, it seems to draw him from his exhausted stupor, and at most Impulse can hardly keep up as Ren presses his palms against the wood and even, in a most embarrassing display, rubs his cheek against one building before Impulse grabs him by the collar and the back of his neck and drags him away. People scurry out of their way, leaving a clear path to the castle, where *surely* someone can tell him what's going on.

"You're *sure* you don't remember *anything*?" Impulse whispers as they wait just outside the doors while guards bustle down to let them in.

"Not a whit, my dude," Ren smiles thinly.

Impulse draws a hand over his face as the doors permit them. "Great."

Their temporary way of life isn't much, but it does keep them alive. While Ren wanders around every day taking on odd jobs such as a shepherd, talespinner, or keeper of the boat race, Impulse tends to his temporary occupation as a tradesman. Even for him, he'll admit, it's quite strange. From what he can tell, the spell somehow brought them both to somewhere not on any map Impulse had ever seen, and no map he's found here can take them back home; certainly they're somewhere that has never heard Ren and Impulse's native tongue. So, for now, he wanders with a variety of wares.

Ren, on the other hand, is more of a homebody. Once Impulse had constructed the framework of the house, Ren had immediately begun to decorate it. He seemed much more excited to be staying here than Impulse—then again, Ren didn't have a giant paycheck waiting for him. Or maybe he did, but even so, Ren wouldn't remember it.

The domesticity must be getting to Impulse, it *must*, because when he returns to the city after a long week or even month of travels to neighbouring towns, he... he looks at the log cabin with smoke puffing from the chimney and the silhouette of the mage—no, the silhouette of Ren, clothed in organic fabric—standing in the doorway with warm light seeping out behind him, Impulse almost feels comforted. Relieved. Happy to be—

He needs to get home, and the mage is coming with him.

On his travels, he begins collecting books of myth and magic. In a leatherbound journal that would have been priceless where he comes from—but only cost him a few rare snail shells and an hour-long story round the fire—he recalls the spell as the mage had muttered it. And, astonishingly, after almost a year of staring at little else, he finds a pattern—a rhythm—a rhyme.

He begins to understand.

Though he and Ren had at first struggled to understand the people here because of the language differences, they began to pick up on it. He's sure their speech is broken and accented, but they can communicate well enough. As a trader, Impulse's accent and broken speech is almost expected—no one is surprised, and no one points it out. They simply do their business, listen to his stories—growing more complex and animated by the day as he picks up on literary nuances and grammatical details of the language, not to mention his growing attachment to the stories he's told over and over again—and wave as he continues down the road. Those linguistic notes live in the back of his notebook, opposite the magic. The two subjects race toward each other like cars on a one-way road driving faster and faster until they collide—only this is much less exhilarating and a lot more effort.

Impulse is no stranger to effort, no, he's always worked hard to get what he wants. It's how he got to where he is—was, that is, back in the city. But here, he's... someone different. It feels like some kind of slow death, a falling away of dead skin cells and a burning up of the soul.

He wonders if Ren would understand that sort of thing. Then again, Ren still doesn't remember his past, and has found his happiness here. It really is too bad Impulse will have to rip him away from it someday just to kill him. That's the deal, though, that's life. That's what Impulse chose for himself.

They're sitting down for dinner after one of his trips: the first solid roof Impulse has rested beneath in over a month, and the first time he's seen Ren in as long. The man fits right in here, like he was made for this place, this life. This fantasy. As he recounts what he's been up to while Impulse was away, his eyes wander, stars creeping in as Ren talks about the life he loves.

Should he feel more guilty that he'll have to rip this away from Ren someday? Not like Ren will even know. Not for long, anyways; he'll be dead. And Impulse will be rich and the world will turn and Ren will drown in the forgetting that skips hand in hand with time.

Suddenly Ren's eyes refocus, and he fixes Impulse with an uncharacteristically serious gaze. "Did we know each other before you found me? 'Cause dude, I... There's something I've been almost rememberin', and I don't know, man, I keep feelin' like you can help me with the missing piece-age. Like, I keep wondering if you could put it all together for me. Ahh, I dunno. Maybe it's silly. That's silly of me, I know it is."

"I... Nah, Ren, I didn't know you before we met in the forest. I'm just not from around here, and I guess you probably aren't, either." Impulse takes another bite of the luscious venison, prepared by Ren and still just the faintest bit bloody. "But I have... There's a spell," he

pronounces, “that I remember hearing before I woke up there with you. And I’ve been trying to, uh, here. Been tryin’ to put it together again.”

Ren watches the journal Impulse hands him with confusion, but no recognition flashes in his eyes. Impulse had thought, if anything, Ren might have remembered that he once loved magic so much he’d dedicated his life to protecting the world’s largest collection of magical artifacts.

Nothing.

Impulse is on his own, then, as always.

With so little space, they don’t have separate bedrooms so much as one bedroom split in half by a curtain. Sometimes Impulse, in the dead of night, wishes the curtain weren’t there; sometimes he wonders what Ren looks like by moonlight. For some stupid reason, he almost suspects the man glows. Maybe the technology imprinted beneath his skin, dormant as it must be after all this time, still shines through. Of course, if it doesn’t shine during the day under direct sunlight, it certainly wouldn’t at night. Still, Impulse wonders.

On his side of the room, he quietly recites words from the spell to himself until they run dry from the page, and then he writes more. It’s part memory, part intuition, and he thinks he’s getting close. As a matter of fact, the night after showing Ren his notebook, he finishes it. He fills in the last blank and sits back, staring at the spell. That can’t be it. It can’t be that easy, can’t be over so quickly, and yet it… *looks* complete.

He’s not ready to go back. He’s not ready to rip Ren away from this life, not just yet.

He shoves the notebook under his pillow and pretends it doesn’t exist.

When Ren wishes him well on his next journey, cart of objects to trade in tow, there’s a glow to Ren’s face that Impulse wants to remember forever. He looks radiant here in the forest citadel with rich stone buildings rising above the log cabins around them.

Part of Impulse, something deep in his gut, surges forward and ushers him toward Ren, but he refrains. He won’t fall for it, won’t let himself get attached to the man he’s going to kill. Ren’s joy, his excitement, his eye for beauty—none of it should sway a real mercenary. Much as Impulse pretends otherwise, he is not a trader. He is not a traveller. He is not a jolly talespinner who is content sitting around fires at night and entertaining children and adults alike. He is not a pleasant man to be around, nor does he care for the company of others. He works alone, and he kills. *That* is all there is to it.

He stays away for nearly two months before exhausting all the paths and returning, heavy-footed, to the citadel. To his paycheck, the perfect, rich life awaiting him when he brings Ren back to their *real* life and kills him.

As always, Ren waits for him as the sun sets, casting an orange glow cut off across the bridge of Ren’s nose by the shadow of the porch roof.

Feet still firmly on the packed dirt of the road while Ren stands on smoothed wooden boards, Impulse sets his cart down and musters up a thin smile. “I think I can bring us home,” Impulse says. “I’ve never really done magic before, but... I didn’t really wanna test this one in case—in case I left you behind,” he coughs sheepishly.

Ren lunges forward and wraps his arms around Impulse’s waist in a warm, soft hug. “Oh Impulse, my dude, that’s sweet! Ohh, I missed you. Welcome back! Let’s, here, tell ya what. Let’s have supper first, then we’ll try it. Don’t wanna go somewhere on an empty stomach, if ya know what I mean.”

Impulse watches Ren over his sandwich at the table, thinking. When they return... Impulse could give Ren a head start, as it were. Maybe a day, or even a few hours. Disappear. Pretend he was never there. What if, when they get back, Ren remembers? What if he remembers, and he calls the guards to arrest Impulse, and they never see each other again?

But they have to go back sometime. This idyllic little life won’t last; it just can’t. That’s not how life goes. That’s not how *Impulse’s* life goes.

Ren may be happy here for now, but it isn’t real. Not in any way that matters. Right? It’s not. This isn’t who Ren is. It’s better to bring him back so—No, no, that’s not right. Impulse isn’t doing this for Ren, he’s not going back because staying here with Ren is deceitful to Ren. That’s not what this is. Impulse is going to go back, and he’s going to bring Ren, and he’s going to kill him. Then he’ll get paid and move far away where he’ll never have to do this again.

If he stays here...

If he stays here, he has to be honest with Ren, has to live with him forever.

Would that be so bad?

But dinner is over, and Ren is watching him expectantly.

The sun has almost dropped below the horizon, leaving only a sliver of light left, just like last time. Impulse reads off the nonsensical words, holding his notebook in one hand and tucking Ren close to him with the other. It wouldn’t do for the spell to take Impulse back, but leave Ren here. That’d be worse than living here forever.

He speaks slowly and clearly, trying not to rush as the sunlight fades into a beautiful clear night. The first few stars begin to peek out from behind thin, wispy clouds, and Ren gazes up at Impulse adoringly. The spell is complete. He’s said all the words, the light has begun to surround them, and nothing else is happening. What’s missing? What’s...

Ah.

The spell had been something else, once. Impulse is simply repeating a botched ritual, and he’s missing the biggest piece. He wonders if it was once a spell of protection. He pictures it: Ren, atop the tower, weaving the most beautiful spell in the world to protect the castle and

everyone in the kingdom. He remembers light cutting through the smog, piercing across even the tallest building as the sunlight grew too strong. It was beautiful.

It was a different spell, never completed.

This spell, the... the spell of transportation, or relocation, or whatever, it must require the mage's blood. Slowly, he pulls the dagger from its hidden sheath for the first time in front of Ren, and he carefully pricks his own finger. Where the drop hits the light beneath their feet, a ripple reverberates outwards, but the spell doesn't end. It keeps moving around them, shifting, asking a question Impulse doesn't understand. He's not a mage, not really, he doesn't *get* magic. He's just got a notebook full of magic words and unanswered questions.

Ren still looks at him like he's the sun, like he can fix anything. Ren believes Impulse is a mage, is the thing. That's the problem, the root of Impulse's sorrow sprouting suddenly from its dormant seed. The spell isn't looking for different blood, it's looking for more. Blood is powerful, probably. That must be it. Takes a lotta juice to transport someone this far, it's only fair the mage give something in return to pay the cost.

In the magic light, white tinged with every colour sparkling in its turn, the dagger's blade looks unreal. The stripes, always striking, seem to shift with the spell's glow.

He looks at Ren: the man he should be killing in just a few moments, the man who trusted him when there was no one else to turn to, the man he... the man he can't bring himself to kill. Then he flips the knife around and hands it to Ren, hilt first. "Stab me," says Impulse.

Ren merely takes the knife loosely, no real intent to his grasp. "What?" he breathes.

Impulse wraps his hand around the pommel and, closing his eyes, holds the blade steady as he leans in quick and easy. "It needs blood."

Without thinking, his lips find Ren's as the knife goes in and the blood pools, drips, thrums through the spell. He doesn't even think about the pain. He's too busy thinking about Ren's lips on his, kissing him back, realizing everything he'll miss out on when they return home. He'll have to disappear, that's it. He'll have to leave everything behind, Ren included, to escape his current employer. But... he can't kill Ren, the man doesn't deserve it. He's sweet and kind, and sees beauty in everything, and he only wanted to protect what was his. Impulse won't kill him; instead he'll leave Ren to save him.

The light envelops them, and the last thing he feels is the knife withdrawn and the chill absence of Ren.

Ren's head pounds as the light recedes. He remembers... the spell went wrong, something about a knife in his back, blood... Then a forest. He'd only seen forests in illustrations, in his imagination, in glimpses into other lives and other worlds granted via magic. A forest and a man.

Around him he feels a pool of blood. Is it his?

Peeling himself off the sticky floor, he sheds his robe, only to find it’s not a robe, it’s a strange cloak. From the forest, he recalls, it must have all been real! But that means—

In the center of the red pool, the edges of which have begun to congeal, is a familiar man with light hair and dark eyes. The mystery man, the one with the knife that has now run them both through. The man who had kissed him, impaled upon the knife, to return them home. Why, Ren can’t say. But he figures they’re even, so he carefully gathers the man into his arms, blood stringing and dripping between his clothing and the floor, and he begins his descent.

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