

Episode 13 — The Cartographer's House



The researcher sat in the diner with a cup of coffee she wasn't drinking. Her name was Helena. She had been to the house three weeks ago. She was speaking in the third person.

"She spent four days in the house," Helena said. The librarian across from her—whose name was Jane, who had been trying to find answers about what happened to the other researchers—was taking notes, but her hand was shaking. "She arrived on the Tuesday. The cartographer's collection was extensive. Very well-organized. All indexed and catalogued."

"Helena," Jane said carefully, "what did you—what happened while you were there?"

Helena looked at her coffee. "She doesn't remember exactly. She remembers the work. She remembers every room. She remembers the maps very clearly." Helena picked up her own hands and looked at them. "She isn't sure these are her hands, but they seem to be functioning."

"Are you okay?" Jane heard her own voice crack.

"She isn't sure what okay means," Helena said conversationally. "She thinks she's okay. She went home. She returned to work. But she isn't sure if she was the person who did those things or if she's observing someone who did those things. She seems to be the one. The evidence suggests she's the

one. But the connection isn't clear."

Jane set down her pen. "The other two researchers—"

"They had the same experience," Helena said. "They told her so, briefly, when she called them. They couldn't quite explain what they meant, but they seemed to understand what she was describing. All three of them spent time in the house. All three of them came away from it knowing everything they had done there in perfect detail, as if they were narrating someone else's life."

The coffee was cold now. Helena pushed it away with the same precision she'd used to place her hands on the table. As if she had to think about each movement.

"She thinks she should go back," Helena said. "To the house. To finish the cataloguing. But she also thinks that if she goes back, she won't come back at all. Or she'll come back as even less than this. So she's staying where she is. She's going to work. She's going to eat and sleep and perform the functions of being alive. And she's never going to feel quite present inside those actions again."

Jane had no answer. She had no answer at all.

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The house stood on a wooded hillside, isolated from any other structure by nearly a kilometer in all directions. Three stories of old brick and ivy, windows like watching eyes, a long driveway that had been left unpaved and had accumulated decades of ruts. The cartographer who built it had been prolific—hundreds of maps, maybe thousands, produced in the thirty years he'd lived there before he died. The historical society had claimed the collection. They sent researchers periodically to catalog and preserve.

Those researchers came back wrong.

Ace pulled up just after dawn. The house looked like nothing special in daylight—old, yes, and isolated, yes, but just a house. A historical house. A place where someone had lived and worked and eventually stopped, and their work had been declared important, worth preserving.

She got out of the car and looked at the structure. Her eyes were violet. They saw more than human eyes. She could see the faint tracery of something underneath the brick, some kind of pattern that didn't match the physical architecture. As if the house had a second blueprint, and that blueprint was not one made by the cartographer.

The front door was unlocked.

Inside, maps.

Every wall. Every surface. Framed and unframed, rolled in neat cylinders, stacked on tables, pinned and unpinned, old maps with hand-drawn annotations, newer maps printed on paper and laminated, maps of coastlines and mountain ranges and river systems. Maps of places that were real—she recognized some of them. Maps of places that looked real but weren't—too symmetrical, too perfect, the kind of precision that no actual landscape could maintain. Maps that looked like places she had been.

She stopped in the entrance hallway and did not move. She had learned quickly, on the approach, to be very careful about looking at any single map for too long. Looking triggered something. A sense of being drawn in. A sense of immersion. As if the map itself was a gravity well and she was mass falling

toward it.

She didn't look at the maps. She looked through them. She moved through the house like someone avoiding eyes, keeping her vision peripheral, keeping the maps as context rather than object.

Room after room. The first floor was all galleries—rooms dedicated to different geographic regions. Europe. Asia. Africa. The Americas. Every continent rendered in obsessive detail. Some of the maps were originals, centuries old, with inaccuracies and beautiful errors. Some were recent. Very recent.

She climbed the stairs to the second floor.

More rooms. These ones less organized. These ones filled with maps that looked like they'd been made in the last few decades, maps of specific towns and regions. Ace's eyes flicked across them without settling. There was a map of the diner where she'd eaten last week, thirty kilometers away. The layout was perfect. The locations of the waitresses were marked with small symbols. The times they would be in certain positions were annotated on the margin.

There was a map of the motel where she'd slept. Room by room. The walls marked to show their thickness. The routes of the pipes drawn. The times of quietest occupancy marked with a notation that could have been a timestamp.

She had been in those places. The entity had observed her. The entity was documenting.

The second floor led to the third. A narrower staircase, older, creaking under her weight in a way that felt deliberate, as if the house was announcing her arrival to something that was already waiting.

The third floor was different. Fewer rooms. Most of them empty. At the far end of the hallway, a closed door.

The basement stairs were accessed from the second floor. Ace found them in a side room, behind a locked door that wasn't locked, just closed. Down.

The basement was cool and dry. The concrete floor was marked with storage shelves, and the shelves were marked with boxes. But the real collection was in one specific room—a chamber that had been built inside the basement, a dedicated archive, its walls lined floor to ceiling with document boxes, with map cases, with materials that looked like they pre-dated the house, looked like they pre-dated the town.

In the center of the room stood the entity.

It looked like what the Archive Entity looked like: a figure made of folded documents, impossibly tall and impossibly still. Not human, but humanoid. Its surface was layered, as if it had been created by folding and refolding paper, and every fold was a different document, a different record, a different attempt at capturing something real and reducing it to notation.

It did not move. But she felt it register her presence.

She could feel the quality of its attention—not hostile, but observational. Very precise. Very interested. It would have spent considerable energy getting to know her, if she let it. It would have documented her down to the smallest detail: her walking patterns, her eating times, her breathing rhythms, the way her eyes moved when she thought she was unobserved. It would have created a map of her, and that map would be perfect, would be exhaustive, would be everything that made her herself rendered into records and notations and cross-referenced data.

And in the process of creating that perfect map of her, it would erase her. It would extract her sense of self—the continuity of identity that made her coherent. The researchers who had come here had walked out of this room knowing everything about themselves in perfect detail, like characters in a story they were narrating, but unable to feel present inside that story. They had been documented into absence.

She could feel it starting already. The pulling sensation at the edge of her identity. The sense of being observed, catalogued, rendered into detail. A map of her, taking shape, becoming complete.

She had a lighter in her pocket. The house was ninety percent paper.

She made sure she had a clear exit first. She traced the path back to the stairs, memorized it without dwelling on the details. She looked at the room itself, the one she was standing in, and she identified the oldest material—the boxes that looked like they pre-dated everything, the ones that had been here the longest.

She lit them first.

The entity's response was immediate but not violent. Not aggressive. Something more fundamental. It tried to gather. It swept toward its documents with the kind of motion that suggested it was not moving but folding, not traveling but becoming smaller in order to be closer to the things it needed to preserve.

Ace kept burning.

She lit the shelves. She lit the boxes. She worked systematically, starting at the farthest corner and moving toward the door, making sure she would be able to leave before the archive became uninhabitable. The fire was hungry. Paper burned hot and fast and bright. The light filled the basement chamber, and she could see the entity more clearly now, could see it not as a static thing but as a process—an activity that was constantly trying to preserve, to document, to save, to keep from losing anything.

It was not evil. It was archival. It simply wanted to remember. To record. To maintain and preserve and protect the patterns it had found.

It kept trying as the fire grew. It gathered papers. It stacked them away from the flames. It moved with desperate precision, trying to save what could be saved, trying to preserve the collection that was its entire existence.

Ace did not stop her.

When the core collection—the oldest materials, the foundation documents, the original records that had been there perhaps longer than the house itself—when those caught, the entity began to come apart. Not suddenly. Not all at once. But steadily, methodically, the way things do when their structure collapses.

Map by map. Fold by fold. The paper-figure began to lose its coherence. The tall, still, folded form became less formed. Less present. Less there.

It made no sound. There was nothing to hear in the process of dissolution. Just the fire, and the burning paper, and the entity becoming absence.

Ace moved toward the stairs.

The basement was becoming too hot. The smoke was changing the air. She climbed back to the second floor, back to the first, moved toward the front door. Behind her, the house was filling with light and heat. The maps on the walls began to catch. The collections on the first floor began to burn. All that careful documentation, all that obsessive record-keeping, all that precision devoted to the capturing and rendering of reality—it all burned equally, consumed by the same indifference.

She made it to the car. She pulled around the circular drive and pointed the vehicle back down the hill, away from the house. In her rear-view mirror, she could see the fire beginning to manifest in the windows. Not yet visible from a distance, but it would be soon. Someone would see it. Someone would call the fire brigade. They would respond. They would find nothing alive when they arrived.

She didn't wait to watch it burn completely. She drove down the hill and toward the town, and she didn't look back.

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The next day, the news said that the cartographer's house had burned. Accidental fire, most likely. Electrical, possibly. The historical society was devastated. The collection was considered irreplaceable, though of course they had some duplicate materials in storage elsewhere, and they were beginning the process of documenting what had been lost.

Nobody died in the fire. The old house was empty when it burned.

The three researchers would not recover. The maps of them were destroyed, but what had been extracted remained extracted. They would navigate the world as external observers of their own lives—functional, present, able to describe themselves in perfect detail, but never quite connected to the present moment, never quite present inside their own skins.

There was nothing to be done about that.

Ace left the town by the afternoon. The road away from it was straight and unmarked by any serious history. She drove it the way she drove all roads: carefully, watching, aware that the world was full of things that wore the shapes of ordinary places and ordinary objects, and that some of those shapes contained hungers that needed to be stopped.

The cartographer's house was no longer standing, was no longer collecting, was no longer documenting. The records it had kept were ash. The entity that had tended them was dispersed, scattered, returned to whatever principle or absence had given it temporary form.

The world would continue to be mapped. Maps would continue to be made. But this particular archive would not add to the collection anymore. This particular hunger would not feed on the people who came looking for historical knowledge and came away as strangers to themselves.

It was a small thing. It changed nothing for the people already affected. But it was something. It was what could be done.

Ace drove on, alone on the road, her blades gleaming in their sheaths, her eyes violet in the afternoon sun. The town fell away behind her. The burned house was already becoming memory, becoming the kind of local story people told without quite believing, the kind of thing that happened once and then was folded into the slower rhythm of ordinary life.

She would not be part of that story. She would not be remembered.

That was fine.

There were always more hunts. Always more things wearing shapes that needed to be stopped. The world was large enough for both the things that hunted and the thing that hunted them. And she was patient. She would keep moving, keep watching, keep being ready for the moment when something beautiful and terrible and hungry would need to be put down.

The road stretched ahead of her, empty and pure, going nowhere particular, going everywhere at once. She drove, and the miles fell behind her, and she did not look back at the smoke or the ash or the maps that had been unmade.

She simply drove forward, alone, the way she always did, the way she always would.

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