

Episode 14 — Covenant of the Open Palm



The woman's name was Marcus. She owned a packaging business that employed forty-three people. She had been building that business for twelve years. Twelve years ago, she had been hungry and alone and had no idea how to feed her two children. The Open Palm had given her housing assistance. They had given her access to their community clinic. They had connected her with a small-business loan program. That assistance had been the pivot point. Everything afterward—every dollar earned, every success, every moment of stability—had grown from that point.

She was, by any reasonable measure, a success story. The kind of person the Open Palm was designed to help. The kind of person who made the organization's work meaningful.

On a Thursday evening, after her staff had gone home, she received a visitor.

He was in her office when she emerged from a meeting. Not hiding, not lurking. Standing by her desk with the calm patience of someone who had been invited. He was tall and well-dressed in clothes that looked expensive but generic, the kind of clothes designed not to be remembered. His face was the same way—regular, unmarked, perfectly forgettable.

He set a leather case on her desk.

"Marcus," he said. His voice was precise. It had the quality of something that had been used to deliver the same message many times, and would deliver it many times again. "Your prosperity has been noted."

"I'm sorry, who—"

"Open the case," he said.

She did.

Inside was a document. Very old. The paper had yellowed. The ink was fading. Her name was at the bottom, next to a small symbol—a hand, open and upturned, the logo of the Open Palm. The date was twelve years ago, the exact date she'd received the housing assistance.

She looked up. "What is this?"

"A contract," he said. "Made by the founders of your organization. You accepted their help. The terms were completed." He pointed to a clause in small, faded print. His finger did not touch the paper.

She read: "In consideration for material assistance granted with the intent and effect of enabling prosperity, the recipient agrees to repay in kind upon achievement of stable financial status, said repayment to be collected at the organization's discretion."

"I don't understand," she said. But she did. She understood.

"You achieved stable financial status," he said. "This was achieved. The organization calls in the contract now."

"But that's insane. I didn't—I wouldn't have—"

"The founders made the bargain," he said. "Thirty years ago. They were desperate to help. The help was real. The assistance you received was genuine. The contract was the mechanism by which such help could be granted." He closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them. They were entirely without color, just blank space where eyes should be. "You will come with me."

She reached for her phone.

He did not prevent her from reaching it. He did not move, did not threaten, did not do anything violent or explicit. But the room itself seemed to shift weight. The air became heavier. The phone in her hand became unbearably difficult to hold, as if gravity had increased, as if the fundamental pressure of existence was pressing down from all angles.

She put the phone down.

He extended his hand.

She took it.

By morning, her office was undisturbed. Her laptop was closed. Her papers were stacked neatly. There was no sign of struggle or urgency. The leather case was gone. The document was gone. Marcus was gone.

Her family discovered her absence when she didn't come home. The police found no evidence of abduction. The security cameras in her office building showed her leaving with a visitor—normal

conversation, normal body language, no coercion that the camera could detect. The visitor simply ceased to appear at some point after that. Marcus simply failed to arrive at her home, at her office, at any place she was expected to be.

She was gone the way expensive things vanish. No trace. No explanation. Just absence.

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Ace heard about the vanishing three days after it happened. She heard about it because she'd been in the area for a different reason, tracking something else, and the local news was filled with the disappearance. Missing businesswoman. Fourteen-year career. Two children. Beloved by her community.

Then she heard that there had been others.

A man who had received assistance from the Open Palm fifteen years ago and had become a doctor. He disappeared two months ago.

A woman who had been housed by the organization and had become a social worker. She vanished six weeks ago.

A teenager who had received food assistance and had gone on to athletic achievement. Three weeks gone.

All of them had one thing in common: they had been helped by the Open Palm, and they had prospered, and then they had disappeared at the height of that prosperity, in the middle of their most successful lives.

Ace investigated the organization.

The Open Palm occupied three buildings in the market town's downtown. A food bank, a community clinic, a housing support office. Hundreds of people moved through these spaces every day. Volunteers and staff worked with genuine commitment. The organization had processed thousands of cases over its thirty-year existence. It had provided material assistance that had changed lives.

The work was real.

The problem was older.

The oldest board member was named Judith. She was eighty-three. She had served on the board for almost as long as the organization had existed. When Ace asked to speak with her, Judith said yes with the kind of immediate acceptance that suggested she had been waiting for someone to ask.

They sat in Judith's office. It was spare and clean and filled with the accumulated paper of three decades of service.

"The founders," Judith said without preamble, "made a bargain."

She didn't ask permission. She didn't hedge. She simply began to tell the story.

"Thirty years ago, Marcus and Elena were trying to help people during the recession. They had no resources. No funding. No means to do anything substantial. They were desperate to be useful. So they made a bargain with something that could provide resources. I don't know what it was. I don't think Marcus and Elena knew what it was. The bargain was simple: the organization would receive the

funds to help. The help would be real. The assistance would change lives.” Judith paused. “But the assistance would come due. The people who received help and prospered—they would be collected. Years later. At the height of their success.”

“You knew this,” Ace said.

“I suspected it,” Judith said. “I knew something was wrong. I didn't want to know what. It's easier not to know. It's easier to believe the organization was doing good work—and it was, it is—and just accept that sometimes people disappear, and there's no explanation, and you don't look too hard, because looking hard means you have to acknowledge that you're part of something darker than you can bear.”

“Where did they make this bargain?” Ace asked.

Judith stood. “I'll take you.”

The basement of the original building was accessed through the food bank. It was cool and organized, filled with shelving that held supplies. Behind the shelving, toward the back, was a room that looked like it had been part of the original foundation—stone walls, a single narrow window high up that admitted no light, a door marked “Archive.”

Judith unlocked it.

Inside was paperwork. Not random. Organized, catalogued, filed with the precision of someone who wanted records to mean something. Insurance documents. Financial statements. Board minutes from the founding years. And, in a locked cabinet at the far end of the room, something older.

Judith opened the cabinet without being asked.

The document lay on a single shelf, isolated from everything else. One page. Very old paper. Covered in signatures. Some of the signatures were in ink. Some of them were in something that looked like blood, though blood was not red, not anymore.

“The original contract,” Judith said. “The bargain Marcus and Elena made. It binds the organization, and it binds everyone who works with the organization, and it binds everyone who benefits from the organization's work. As long as the organization exists, as long as it does the work it was meant to do, the bargain holds.”

Ace reached out to touch the document.

The air in the room shifted.

It wasn't sudden. It was the kind of shift that suggested something had been patient and present all along, and was simply making its presence more obvious. The temperature dropped. The light—what little there was—seemed to dim, as if it was being drawn away from the space and held elsewhere.

In the doorway stood the Debt Collector.

He was tall and very still. He wore clothes that were appropriate to the era but not marked by time. He had a face but it was the kind of face that you would not remember three seconds after seeing it, a face that had been designed specifically not to be retained in memory.

“The document cannot be removed,” he said. His voice was precise and patient. “This has been

determined. This is binding.”

“Where are they?” Ace asked. “The people you've collected.”

“They have fulfilled the terms,” the Debt Collector said. “Their obligation has been satisfied. Their location is not relevant. The relevance is that the bargain is binding, that the contract is valid, and that collection will continue until the organization ceases to exist or until all living beneficiaries have satisfied the terms.”

“I'm going to burn it,” Ace said.

“No,” the Debt Collector said.

It moved. Not fast in the way speed is normally understood. It moved with the quality of something that had weight and consequence, that hit like the accumulated pressure of bad decisions. It was between her and the document before she had time to process its motion. It simply was there, and it was without mercy, and it was precisely as effective as something designed by a machine intelligence to achieve a specific objective.

Ace's blades came up.

The entity was fast, but Ace was faster. She'd learned speed when she was small enough that speed was the only thing that could protect her. She'd learned it so deeply it was part of her bone structure. Her blades found the Debt Collector and slid past something that was not quite solid, that had weight but not density, that was present but not quite physical.

The entity hit back.

The impact felt like consequence. Like all the accumulated weight of a bargain made and kept, like the obligation to follow through, like the absolute binding authority of a promise made. It drove her backward. It was precise and efficient and utterly without malice.

It was not fighting her. It was simply preventing her from destroying the document. It was a mechanism, and mechanisms did not hate. They simply functioned.

Ace pushed back.

She was bleeding from two wounds—one on her arm, one on her ribs. The entity was not bleeding. The entity did not appear to be injured. But she was faster, and she was committed, and she had learned long ago how to move while the rest of her body was being destroyed.

She cut again. The blade found something that might have been the entity's core, some central place where its will originated.

The entity convulsed.

It did not fall. But it hesitated. Just for an instant, but in that instant, Ace moved toward the document.

“The contract requires witnesses to be valid,” Ace said. She was breathing hard. She was reading the contract as she moved toward it, reading it with the kind of precise attention that only desperation could generate. “A completed bargain signed by both parties. The living signatories. The founders are dead. Both of them. Dead.”

“Elena died,” Judith said, still standing in the doorway, understanding what Ace was attempting.

“Marcus died. Thirteen years ago and eighteen years ago, respectively.”

“The contract requires living authorization to enforce collection,” Ace continued. She was right there. She could see the signature line. Marcus had signed. Elena had signed. Both were dated. Both were long ago. Neither of them had renewed the contract. Neither of them had authorized its continuation from the grave.

The Debt Collector lunged.

Ace moved faster.

She did not destroy the contract. Instead, she invoked it. She read the clause aloud, the one that required a living signatory to authorize collection, and she invoked the absence of living authority. She argued the contract into technical invalidity. She used the entity's own legal logic against it—the very precision that made the bargain binding also made it fragile, because language had weight and authority had limits and death was a thing even contracts could not overcome.

The Debt Collector paused.

It actually paused, as if it was recalculating, as if it had encountered a circumstance that its programming had not prepared it for. The entity stood very still in the basement archive, and something in it was processing the argument, considering whether the terms had been breached not by destruction but by exhaustion, by the simple fact that those who had authorized the collection were no longer alive and had never explicitly renewed the authorization.

In that pause, Ace burned the contract.

She used her lighter. The old paper caught immediately. The signatures—both ink and something older—seemed to accelerate the burning. The document went up in flames that were hotter and brighter than paper should have burned. The Debt Collector did not move to stop her. It stood motionless and watched the document consume itself, and something about that stillness suggested acceptance, or finality, or the simple recognition that a mechanism, when its instructions are revoked, has nothing to do but stop.

The flame burned through everything. The signatures disappeared. The date disappeared. The language disappeared. Until there was nothing left but ash and burnt edges, and the bargain was just memory, and memory did not have authority.

The Debt Collector stood still for a long moment. Then it was simply not there.

Not gone. Just no longer present. The air didn't compress when it left. There was no sense of motion or transition. It simply ceased to be in the room, and there was nothing following its departure, nothing coming after it, just the basement and Judith and Ace and the burnt remains of a contract that had bound a town's fate for thirty years.

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The Open Palm continued to operate.

The board would eventually discover what Judith knew. Some of them would be devastated. Some of them would feel a kind of relief that the secret—the unspoken knowledge that something was fundamentally wrong—was finally exposed. They would grapple with whether the good work justified the mechanism by which it had been funded. They would wrestle with the fact that the organization

had helped thousands of people, and that help had been real, and real help did not become false just because it had been bargained for in darker ways.

The people already collected would not return. They were gone. They had satisfied the terms and they would remain satisfied, and there was nothing to be done about that. Their families would grieve. Their absences would mark the town like scars.

But the collections would stop.

The bargain was fulfilled. The contract was destroyed. Whatever had been promised by those long-dead founders had been given, and the payment had been collected, and now the organization was just an organization, no more or less moral than any human institution, doing good work without the weight of a binding covenant pressing down on everyone it tried to help.

Ace didn't explain any of this to Judith. She didn't lecture about the nature of contracts or the problem of inherited obligation. She simply walked out of the basement and up the stairs and out of the building and back to her car.

Judith stood in the archive room with the ashes of the document at her feet.

The town around her was unchanged. The same. The market square was still busy. The clinic was still open. People were still being helped. The food bank was still functioning. None of it had changed. The only difference was internal—the knowledge, now, that the bargain had been real, and had been paid, and could be paid no longer.

That would have to be enough.

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Ace drove out of the town before noon. The road behind her was healing already, folding the knowledge back into the texture of ordinary life. The people who worked at the Open Palm would go about their days. Some of them would never know what had been stopped in that basement. Some of them might understand, eventually, that the disappearances had ceased, and might connect that cessation to some event they couldn't quite remember, some moment of disruption in the structure of their organizations that they would never fully understand.

The town would continue. The organization would continue. The people helped would continue, the people already collected would remain collected, and the future would open up along new lines, unbound by the weight of contracts made in desperation and despair.

Ace had her blades. She had her car. She had the memory of a precise entity that had simply stopped functioning because its instructions had been revoked, because the authority that had set it in motion had been erased, because death was a thing that even mechanisms could not overcome.

She drove past the clinic. She drove past the food bank. She drove past the housing office. All of it seemed normal, seemed ordinary, seemed like the kind of institution that existed to help people and for no darker reason.

That was fine. That was probably true. The fact that it had been bound by something else for a time didn't erase the fact that the work itself was real, was needed, was valid.

The road straightened ahead of her. The town fell away. She didn't look back.

There were always more things. Always more darkness wearing shapes that looked almost human. Always another bargain made and another hunger fed and another contract that needed to be burned. The work was endless. The hunts were infinite.

But this one was finished.

This one was done.

And in the rearview mirror, the town was already forgetting, already absorbing the strangeness back into the routine of days, already becoming the kind of place where mysterious things had happened once, and then the world had moved on, and that was just how these things went.

Ace drove on, alone on the road, her violet eyes fixed forward, her blades at her sides, ready for whatever came next. Because there was always something next. There always would be.

And she was patient. She was always patient.

The hunts would continue. The darkness would continue to move through the world. And she would continue to move with it, to meet it, to stop it wherever it manifested, wearing whatever shape it preferred.

That was her life. That was all of it. That was enough.

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