

Episode 15 — What the Dogs Heard



The three sheep dogs had been gone for two days when Hendrick Wyler first began to understand something was wrong. Not gone like escaped—the fencing was intact, the gate latched, the kennel secure. Gone like they had simply stopped existing on his property and started existing somewhere else.

He'd had them for seven years. They knew the perimeter better than they knew their own names. They didn't leave.

The morning after he noticed them missing, he found them at dusk, running in a wide arc across the Blackberry field that bordered his north fence line. They ran with mechanical precision, moving in a pattern that traced a perfect radius from some point Hendrick couldn't identify. When he called to them, they didn't stop. Didn't look at him. Their eyes were open but the light behind them had dimmed to something animal and empty.

He tried to approach. The nearest dog—Mackie, the oldest—turned and bit him through the palm. Not a warning. Not a defense. A severing bite, teeth driven to the bone. Hendrick pulled his hand back and the dog resumed running the arc with the other two, all three moving in synchronization like points on a spinner.

By the next morning, Hendrick's hand was infected. By the morning after that, the pattern had spread.

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The trucker had pulled into a rest stop outside Millbrook with a story about dogs moving like insects across the valley roads at night. He told it to a waitress at the truck stop diner. The waitress told a customer. The customer called the county office. Three phone calls later, the story reached someone who had handled something like this before, or at least knew someone who had.

That person knew how to reach Ace.

She was forty kilometers south when the message came through—a text from a number she'd memorized but never saved, dispatched through layers of cutouts that made the chain nearly untraceable. A location. A description: *Coordinated animal behavior. Perimeter pattern. Likely apex control form.*

Apex control. Night Shepherd.

Ace had encountered one before, in a region where the coyotes moved like a single organism through the scrubland, their hunting patterns too organized, too precise, too patient to be anything but directed by intelligence that was not their own. The Night Shepherd was an apex predator of a very particular kind—it did not hunt. It *orchestrated*. It existed at the top of a territory it could see, and everything beneath it with teeth and hunger became an extension of its will.

She drove toward Millbrook as the sun fell, watching the road.

By eight in the evening, she saw them: two dogs running parallel to the highway, moving with that mechanical stride, eyes fixed on something beyond the visible road. They were part of the net. The net was already cast.

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The ridge system above Millbrook rose in three ascending tiers. The dogs ran in spiraling patterns across all three, their circuits tightening each night. Ace watched from her vehicle the first time, parked in the darkness off a farm road, engine off, hands still on the wheel. The heat shimmer of the dogs moving in coordinated waves was visible even in the dark—dozens of them, perhaps a hundred, moving in formations that would have made a military unit proud.

Somewhere above them, the apex waited.

She pulled the vehicle off the road completely and locked it, then began to climb.

The night was cold and the slope was steep. There were no trails—these were working lands, and the working lands didn't need paths for humans. She moved through the low brush and old stone walls, climbing toward the highest point of the ridge system. Her eyes adjusted quickly. Her breath came steady. Her hands found holds without her consciously directing them to do so.

The dogs below shifted their pattern. They were being redirected. She was coming.

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She was three hundred meters from the ridge's peak when she heard them approach—a dozen at

least, their paws loud on the rocky ground, their breathing synchronized. They came fast but not in a pure rush. They were herding her, trying to drive her down the slope, away from the apex point.

Ace stopped moving forward and turned to face them.

They emerged from the darkness at varying elevations, a loose net designed to cover all approach angles. Their eyes were the same as Hendrick Wyler's dogs—the light inside them switched off, the machinery of consciousness replaced with something that was only obedience.

She drew one of her katanas.

The first dog lunged from her left, teeth aimed at her shoulder. She was smaller than most of them, but she was faster, and she had spent years learning the precise angle where a blade's flat could meet bone and send that bone elsewhere without breaking it. The katana caught the dog just behind the shoulder, not edge but face, and the dog went sideways hard, yelping. It didn't attack again. It struggled to its feet and moved away, whining, no longer useful to the net.

The second dog came low and she moved with it, letting her body shift with the weight of its jump. She used the pommel of her blade against the back of its skull—careful, controlled, the impact precise. The dog fell and lay still. Breathing. Alive. Angry but disoriented.

They came at her in waves and she moved through them like water through a river, not fighting them so much as removing them from the game. She broke no bones that didn't need breaking. She killed none of them. She simply made them no longer useful to the apex predator that had been driving them.

When the last dog retreated down the slope, whining, Ace was breathing hard but steady. Her arm was bleeding—one had caught her before she could reposition—but the bite was shallow. She could deal with shallow.

She resumed climbing.

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The ridge's peak was not a point but a broad table of stone, perhaps thirty meters across, surrounded by low brush and the scattered remains of old wind-damaged trees. The Shepherd stood at the center of this space, waiting.

It was not built for speed or strength. It was built for vision and control. It was tall—nearly two meters—and utterly thin, as though the concept of flesh was only a suggestion applied to its form. Its limbs were elongated, bent at angles that made something in Ace's primitive brain scream wrongness. And its face—

Its face was mostly mouth. The features were there but compressed into a region of skull barely large enough to contain them, and the mouth stretched horizontally across its visage like a wound that had decided to become a feature.

The Shepherd's eyes opened wider as she approached. It did not run. It did not lunge. It simply tilted its head, regarding her the way a teacher might regard a student who had just asked an interesting question.

Ace did not slow. She moved into the space between them.

The mouth opened. The sound that emerged was not sound—not in the way that air vibration makes noise. It was direction. It was command. It was an instruction written directly into the voluntary nervous system of every living creature within kilometers, and for a moment, the muscles of Ace's legs misunderstood their own function. For a moment, her body tried to sit down.

She ran through the moment. Her hand moved and her body followed.

The first blade caught the Shepherd at the junction of shoulder and neck. The second followed a trajectory that would have been lethal if the Shepherd had been built of tissue that could die from such wounds. Instead, Ace felt the resistance of something that was not quite flesh, not quite bone, something that seemed to be made of compacted shadow and wrongness. The blades passed through. The Shepherd's form disrupted where they cut, the substance of it momentarily separating, and then it was trying to move away.

Ace did not let it retreat. She was fast and she was precise and she was standing on ground where the apex predator had nowhere to go. The Shepherd tried to run and she cut. It tried to climb and she cut. It tried to make that terrible sound again and she cut. Each strike was aimed at something vital—the places where a creature's ability to function ran through its structure. She did not hesitate. She did not speak. She simply hunted, and what she was hunting was already too slow to escape.

When the Shepherd finally went still, it went completely. The body that fell to the rocky ground was thin and hollow, and within moments it was not there at all—not decomposing but simply ceasing to exist in any meaningful way, like a thought released, like a shadow when the sun passes.

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Ace stood on the peak for perhaps two minutes, breathing, her blades still drawn. Below her, in the valley, she could feel the moment the net collapsed. She could feel the dogs stopping mid-run, mid-step, their unified consciousness splintering back into a hundred separate animals waking up confused in the dark on ground they didn't recognize.

She wiped her blades clean on her pants and sheathed them.

The climb down took longer than the climb up, because she was thorough about checking each dog she found, making sure it was breathing, making sure its eyes had returned to the particular madness that was just animal fear and not the empty obedience of control. Some of them growled at her. Some of them backed away. Some of them were too exhausted to care that she was there.

The one that had bitten Hendrick Wyler—a black and white shepherd with an ear missing—sat on a rock outcropping halfway down and simply watched her pass. When she stopped to check it, the dog turned its head to the side and did something that might have been recognition. She let it be.

She reached her vehicle as the sun began to lighten the eastern sky. The dashboard clock read 5:47. The night was over.

By midmorning, Hendrick Wyler's three sheep dogs had found their way home. Two of them were missing significant chunks of fur and one had a limp that would probably never fully resolve, but they were alive and they were themselves. They ate. They drank. They lay on their beds and slept the sleep of creatures who had finally come home after a long and terrible displacement.

Hendrick got his hand properly looked at—the infection was still in early stages—and the doctor told him he was lucky. A centimeter deeper and he would have lost the use of two fingers. He told the doctor he didn't feel lucky, but he accepted the antibiotics and the instructions about bandage care

and kept his mouth shut about the dogs.

Some of the other animals never came back. A farmer three miles north lost four hunting hounds. A woman in town lost a shepherd mix that had belonged to her since it was a pup. Twelve total animals that didn't return—some killed in accidents or predation once they'd escaped the net and were lost in the wilderness, some that simply chose not to come home, their sense of place too disrupted by the control they'd been under.

Ace drove out of Millbrook by noon, heading toward the next location, the next thing that was moving beneath the surface of the world in ways that the people who lived in those places couldn't quite see.

Behind her, the ridge system was quiet. The brush settled. The old wind-damaged trees still stood, still broken, but their shadows held nothing but their own shapes.

The dogs slept. They would sleep for days, dreamless and deep. When they woke, most of them would remember nothing of the net. They would only know that they had been gone and that they had come home. That would be enough.

The valley began, slowly, to return to itself.

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