

## Episode 18 — The Weeping Commission



The gallery lights were warm. Too warm. Elena had always loved this space at night—the silence, the way the sculptures seemed to breathe differently when no one was watching. The gallery manager, her childhood friend Sarah, had asked her to stay late to help catalog some of the newer pieces. Sarah was in the back office now, finishing paperwork. Elena was alone.

She stood in front of the large one—the \*Woman in Repose\*, the master's most recent work. Life-sized. Marble. The figure's back was turned, her shoulders caught in some gesture of waiting or resignation. Elena had been coming to this gallery for three years. She'd never seen the woman's face.

The tears began at the left eye.

Elena had read about this online. The weeping statues. At first, she'd assumed it was water damage, condensation, some trick of the lighting. But she was looking at it now—watching the clear fluid form at the outer edge of the marble eye and track down the carved cheek in a perfectly straight line. The line continued down to where the statue's neck met its shoulders, then fell from there in a slow drip to the stone base below.

She reached out. The fluid was still warm.

The statue turned its head.

Elena's breath stopped. She hadn't seen it move—there was no blur, no transition, no moment where her eye could have missed it. The head simply *\*was\**, now, facing her. The woman's face was serene. Her stone eyes were open. She was looking directly at Elena.

Elena's feet moved before her mind did.

The walk became a run somewhere between the *\*Woman in Repose\** and the gallery entrance. Sarah emerged from the back office, calling something, but Elena was already through the glass doors and into the street, where the evening was perfectly normal and the sculpture's gaze was no longer on her back.

She didn't stop running until she'd put three blocks between herself and the gallery. Then she stood in a darkened storefront window, breathing hard, waiting for her hands to stop shaking. When she finally looked at her reflection, her skin was marked with salt burns—thin white lines across her palm where the tears had touched her.

She didn't go back to the gallery. She didn't call Sarah. She drove home and took a shower and told herself it had been exhaustion, poor lighting, her own imagination. By morning, she'd almost believed it.

By morning, it didn't matter. By morning, she had started weeping too.

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Ace came to the gallery on a Tuesday afternoon, moving through the doors like any other visitor. A weekday, midweek—the space held only a few people: a couple examining a bronze torso near the back, an older man making notes in a small book, a woman who looked professionally bored behind the desk.

Ace was small. She moved quietly. People had a tendency to forget she was there within seconds of noticing her.

She spent the first twenty minutes walking the gallery perimeter, her violet eyes taking in everything: the pieces, the light, the way visitors positioned themselves in the space. The way they stood before the sculptures. The quality of their attention.

It was the attention that was wrong.

By the third piece—a carved series of interlocking hands, beautiful and geometrically precise—Ace felt it. Not as danger. As a *\*presence\**. Something was living in the shapes these hands made, feeding on the focus of the people who stood looking at them. She could see it peripherally if she didn't look directly—a faint distortion in the air above the piece, like heat shimmer on a road. The moment she tried to look at it straight on, it vanished.

She moved away without looking twice.

The *\*Woman in Repose\** was harder. Ace stood in front of it for exactly two seconds, taking in the silhouette, the posture, the geometry. She caught it in those two seconds: the sigil embedded in the piece itself, woven through the form so completely that the form *\*was\** the sigil. A symbol that had learned to see, to consume, to multiply through teaching.

She didn't look at it again.

The workshop was across the courtyard, connected to the gallery by a covered walkway. Ace entered at 3:17 PM. The master sculptor was working.

She recognized him from the gallery photographs: a man in his sixties, still broad-shouldered, his hands pitted and scarred by decades of tool work. He was carving—a small piece, no larger than a fist. She watched his hands move.

The sigil was in his hands.

It was in the way his wrist rotated, in the specific angle he held the chisel, in the ratio of force to precision as he worked. His hands moved like they were reading something written in stone, translating something from somewhere else entirely. A letter, a map, a spell. Every movement created a mark that was part of a larger pattern. Every mark carried the symbol forward, generation to generation, hand to hand.

The man looked up. Their eyes met for a moment. He didn't ask what she wanted. Something in her stillness told him she wasn't a customer. He went back to carving.

Ace left and walked the perimeter of the building, noting entrances and exits, the location of the storage areas, the position of windows. She moved like she was taking a casual walk. She wasn't.

The weeping had started in the student section of the gallery—the pieces made by the master's apprentices, the ones learning his technique. Seven statues, all weeping now. All drawn to the attention of visitors like flowers bent toward sunlight. All feeding.

In the back office, Ace found documentation: a journal entry from the master sculptor dated twenty years prior. He'd been apprenticed to a sculptor named Reuben Koss, long dead. Koss had taught him the foundational technique. “\*The way of seeing through stone\*,” the entry read. “\*The path in the fingers\*.” The master had been learning and teaching for two decades. The technique had been encoded in his hands and transmitted through his teaching into the hands of every apprentice who'd ever stood at his side.

By now, there were forty-three of them.

Ace left the office and stood in the courtyard, watching the gallery and the workshop. The sun was descending. Her hand rested on the pommel of one of her katanas—not a conscious gesture. The weapons thrummed slightly, responding to the presence of the entity. The emerald glow flickered faintly under her sleeve.

She could feel it now, fully. It wasn't distributed among the pieces or the students. It was \*here\*, in this place, in the workshop especially. The pieces were evidence. The students were carriers. But the entity itself was in the act of making. As long as anyone remembered the technique and passed it forward, it lived.

She would have to burn everything.

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Midnight came cold.

Ace had parked her vehicle three blocks away and approached the workshop on foot, watching for

lights in windows, checking the street for cars. The area was dead. The neighborhood here was mostly commercial—gallery, workshop, a few antique shops, a closed café. Nothing opened late. Nothing was staffed on Tuesday night.

She moved through the locked gallery door with the kind of ease that suggested either lockpicking skills or something else entirely. No one was watching either way.

The fire starter was in her pack: accelerant, timing mechanism, containment materials. She set the first burn point in the workshop's north wall, inside a storage closet full of tools. The chisels, the mallets, the specific implements the master had designed over his career. The sketches of the foundational movements. The teaching materials, carefully preserved.

The second point was in the gallery's main floor—among the larger pieces, around the \*Woman in Repose\*. The marble wouldn't burn, but the workshop's records would, and the frames would, and the documentation of which pieces carried the sigil deepest.

The third was in the back office.

She set them to trigger in sequence, eighteen minutes apart. The first would start small—a professional burn, controlled, with clear boundaries. The subsequent fires would follow the path she'd laid out. Nothing would jump beyond the connected buildings. Nothing adjacent would catch.

She was out and moving before the first smoke began.

The building didn't scream. That was the thing Ace would remember later: the thing didn't cry out as it died. It fought. The entity, full and swollen with eighteen months of observation and admiration, made its stand as the flames rose.

At seven minutes into the burn, it manifested.

Ace saw it in the smoke—a shape that wasn't smoke, a shadow that carried weight, a form that had been slowly coalescing beneath the attention of a thousand visitors, a thousand moments of admiration and aesthetic pleasure. It rose up through the gallery floor like something breaking the surface of water, and the form it took was geometric, abstract, completely wrong. It was the sigil made flesh. It was vision made violent.

It tried to feed on her directly, the way it had fed on every visitor who'd ever stopped to look. It tried to draw her attention into itself, to consume her recognition the way it had consumed everyone else's.

She fought it peripherally.

One of her katanas came free—emerald light flooding out, the blade catching the geometry of it sideways, at angles that didn't let it solidify. She cut through it without looking at it straight on, using her peripheral vision and instinct, the way you track something fast-moving in your visual field without ever catching it directly.

The entity fractured.

The flames consumed its pieces. Each part of the sigil that had manifested in the statues, in the tools, in the technique—all of it was burning now. The master's life work, curated over two decades, was becoming ash. The students' early pieces were becoming ash. The sketches were becoming ash. The knowledge in the master's hands would remain, but the entity had no home in the dead anymore.

At nine minutes, the building's structure began to fail. Ace was already outside, having come over the east wall. She watched from the street as the gallery's roof sagged. The workshop folded in on itself. The fire was perfect: contained, purposeful, final. By the time it burned through to the street, the adjacent buildings would be safe. The professional burn had held.

She waited until the flames were at their height, until she could be certain the entity was dead, then she walked back to her vehicle. Behind her, the gallery was becoming nothing. The \*Woman in Repose\* was becoming ash. The signature of Reuben Koss, rendered invisible by twenty years of teaching, was being erased in real time.

The master sculptor would wake in the morning to find his life burning. The students would watch the news coverage. The people who'd loved these pieces, who'd photographed them, who'd written about them—they would feel the loss without knowing they'd been fed upon, without knowing that something in the experience of beauty had been parasitic.

Ace didn't think they deserved to know. Some ignorance protected people better than truth.

She drove until the city lights were behind her, until the night was complete and empty. When she finally pulled over at a rest stop to refuel, she checked her hands. There were no burns. The sigil hadn't touched her. The entity had never gotten close enough to really try.

That was the advantage of not looking directly at it.

She stood at the fuel pump and watched the night sky, unmarred by the glow of fire. Somewhere in that darkness, in whatever else she had to do, there were other things like what had died tonight. Other entities waiting in beauty, in technique, in the careful transmission of knowledge from hand to hand. Other teachers, other signatures, other feeds.

The work didn't end.

She finished fueling and drove.

By the time the sun rose, she was three hundred kilometers away, and the burning workshop was already a local news story: "Mysterious Fire Destroys Historic Gallery." The master sculptor was refusing interviews. The students were gathering, shaken, trying to remember exactly what they'd been taught and whether they could recreate the technique from memory alone.

Ace was already thinking about the next hunt.

Behind her, the road was clear and empty. Ahead of her, the sun climbed higher. Nothing followed her. Nothing ever did.

She was alone, and she was moving, and that was the only peace she'd ever learned to trust.

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