

Episode 19 — Last Ferry Out



CAPTAIN'S LOG — MV STRAIT RUNNER

Date: January 14 *Departure: 14:32 / Arrival: 15:17* *Passenger count: 37* *Weather: Clear, wind 6 knots / Sea state: Calm* *Notes: Passenger at stern. Did not turn. Arrival uneventful.*

Date: January 15 *Departure: 07:58 / Arrival: 08:46* *Passenger count: 42* *Weather: Overcast, wind light / Sea state: Calm* *Notes: Passenger at stern again. Did not turn.*

Date: January 17 *Departure: 14:35 / Arrival: 15:21* *Passenger count: 31* *Weather: Clear, wind 8 knots / Sea state: Slight* *Notes: Passenger at stern. Did not turn. Arrival uneventful.*

Date: January 19 *Departure: 08:15 / Arrival: 09:03* *Passenger count: 28* *Weather: Clear, wind 12 knots / Sea state: Moderate* *Notes: Passenger at stern. Felt it this time. Did not turn.*

Date: January 22 *Departure: 14:40 / Arrival: 15:26* *Passenger count: 44* *Weather: Cloudy, wind 6 knots / Sea state: Calm* *Notes: Passenger at stern. Tobias saw it too. We do not discuss it. It is always alone.*

The entries continued like this, clinical and factual, the way one might record fuel consumption or

engine temperature. Just another entry in the logbook. Just another passenger who didn't belong.

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The ferry dock at mainland was small—weathered wood, a single office building, fuel pumps that had been there since the nineties. A working dock. No tourists. Fishermen, islanders commuting to the mainland for supplies or work, the occasional traveler waiting for the next crossing.

Ace stood at the ticket window at 2:10 PM, buying a one-way passage to Strait Island. The ticket agent—a woman in her fifties with the kind of tan that came from twenty years of working outside—took her cash and printed the ticket without looking up.

“Ferry leaves at 2:30,” she said. “Forty-five minute crossing.”

Ace didn't answer. She was already looking past the window, past the agent, to the water beyond.

The MV Strait Runner was moored at the dock—a medium-sized working vessel, sturdy and practical, with equipment racks and working space that suggested commercial fishing contracts as much as passenger service. About forty meters. The hull was weathered white and blue. There were maybe a dozen people visible on deck.

Ace could see it immediately.

It latched to the hull below the waterline like something that had decided to stay. She could see the shape of it in the water, a distortion in the light filtering down through the clear shallows. Elongated. Pale. Many-limbed, though the limbs weren't quite limbs—they were more like protrusions, tendrils, the way a jellyfish extends itself through water. It had been there so long it had become part of the ship's structure. The ferry didn't sail **despite** the thing beneath. The ferry sailed **with** it.

She walked down the dock toward the boarding ramp.

The deckhand—young, maybe twenty-five—waved people on as they climbed aboard. He had a clipboard but he didn't check it much; the captain had already counted heads. Ace went up the ramp with the rest of the afternoon boarding, and the deckhand barely glanced at her.

She positioned herself at the stern.

The stern of a ferry is a specific kind of lonely. The engine room was below and ahead, and most passengers clustered near the bow where there was shade and sight lines to the water. The stern was just the observation deck—a few benches, low railings, the wake of the engines visible below. Ace sat at the very edge, near the starboard railing, and watched the water.

The boarding finished. Someone cast off the lines. The engines engaged and the ferry began to move, pulling smoothly away from the dock and pointing itself toward open water.

Ace could feel it moving beneath the hull now. The entity, sensing the departure, becoming alert. The thing had been sleeping while they were docked—there was no hunting to do while the ferry sat still. But now the water was opening up, and there were forty-three people aboard, and the entity was waking.

She'd fought things like this before. River shadows. Water-dwellers. Predatory things that had learned to hunt the edges of human commerce. They lived in the spaces between places, in the thresholds. A ferry was perfect for them: a regular route, a pattern, a guaranteed supply of passengers who trusted

the vessel and didn't watch the water.

On each crossing it kept a passenger who never disembarked.

The ferry was twenty minutes into the crossing when she felt the shift beneath her. The water had a different temperature. Something was rising.

Ace leaned forward slightly, her hands on the railing. She didn't look down yet. She was listening instead, reading the water the way some people read air—the change in texture, the direction of current, the specific displacement that meant something large was moving upward through the depths.

It came over the stern rail from beneath.

She didn't see it move. One moment the water was empty, and the next there was *presence*—a form that was barely visible even when she looked directly at it. The color of deep water. The shape of something that lived in pressure and darkness and had learned to move in the thin places between. Many limbs, or tendrils, or appendages that didn't have a single name. They wrapped the railing, they tested the air, they reached toward the nearest passengers—who were now forty meters away, at the bow, looking out toward the island.

It was aware of her.

The entity coiled slightly, the way something might coil if it was trying to understand a new threat. It had been hunting these waters for how long? Years? Decades? Every crossing the same, every passenger the same, every hunt already understood. It didn't know how to handle something that wasn't running.

Ace reached down and grabbed the nearest tendril.

The entity reacted instantly—an animal reaction, pure reflex. It tried to pull away, to dive, to escape back beneath the waterline. But Ace's grip was absolute. She went over the railing with her other hand still holding the rail, her body extending out over the water, her feet leaving the deck.

The entity pulled harder, dragging her forward, trying to drag her down.

She let it.

The water was shockingly cold. The moment her body hit it, the temperature drove the air from her lungs, but she didn't fight the cold. She let herself sink, following the thing down, keeping her grip on the tendril with one hand while her other hand came free.

Her katana cleared the water.

She couldn't fight it with both blades—the water was too close, the space too confined, the angles too wrong. She used just one, and she used it with the kind of efficiency that came from having done this specific thing many times. The tendril she held severed. A new one lunged at her and she cut it away. Another came and she turned it aside. The entity was fast—faster than the water should allow—but it was also used to prey that tried to escape, not prey that came down into its element with a blade.

The entity tried a different strategy: it wrapped something around her legs, pulling, trying to drag her deeper, to get her away from the light where she could see. Ace twisted and slashed, and the thing around her legs released with a convulsion.

She was running out of breath.

Her hand found the rail above—she could feel it, solid and real in the chaos of water and violence. She pulled, using her grip on the rail to anchor herself, using the entity's own attempts to drag her down as momentum to rotate her body toward the surface. The water above her was the lighter color of the shallower layer. She kicked toward it.

The entity made one final attempt—something fast and desperate, a lunge that came from below. Ace brought her katana down with both hands and met the strike with absolute precision. The blade went through the thing that was lunging and came out the other side glowing faintly green.

She broke the surface gasping.

The water was chaos. The entity's remains were sinking, dying in the deep, no longer coherent or threatening. Her hand found the railing and she hauled herself up and over, her body heavy with water, her muscles burning. She landed on the deck, soaking, shaking, blood in the water mixing with the salt spray.

The deckhand was running toward her, shouting something, his face white.

"I dropped something," Ace said, breathing hard.

The deckhand stared at her, soaking wet, bleeding from small cuts where the tendrils had caught her arms. He looked at the water. Nothing was visible now except the wake.

"You dropped something?" he repeated.

"Into the water," Ace said. She sat down heavily at the stern bench. "It's gone now."

He stood there uncertainly, clearly trying to decide if he needed to report this to the captain or if it was somehow acceptable protocol to have a passenger go swimming during a crossing. The ferry was still moving, its engines steady, the island growing larger ahead of them.

"I'll get you a towel," he finally said, and he walked away with the careful steps of someone who had decided to simply not think about what he'd just witnessed.

Ace sat at the stern and watched the water.

The entity was dead. The feeding ground was closed. The ferry would make this crossing and the next one and the one after that, and no one would disappear. The weight that had been living in the deep water, the thing that had learned to hunt this route, the presence that kept one passenger on this vessel who never disembarked—all of it was gone.

The water looked normal now. Just water. Just the wake of a ferry carrying people between two places that both knew to ask no questions.

The crossing took forty-five minutes, as it always did. Ace dried herself as much as she could with the towel the deckhand had brought, and she didn't move from the stern. The other passengers mostly left her alone. In a moment of discomfort, most people prefer to pretend you don't exist, and Ace was very good at being ignored.

When the ferry pulled into the island dock, the captain emerged from the wheelhouse. He was a man in his sixties, broad-shouldered, with the kind of weathered face that came from decades of watching

water. He walked to the stern where Ace was standing.

For a long moment, they didn't speak.

Then: "It gone?"

"Yes," Ace said.

He nodded once, a single sharp motion. "Good. We'll have a clean crossing tomorrow."

He walked away without waiting for a response.

Ace gathered her small pack—everything she owned could fit in one bag—and disembarked with the rest of the afternoon passengers. The island smelled like salt and fishing and something green underneath it. The sun was already beginning its descent toward the western ocean.

She didn't stay on the island. The next ferry back to the mainland left in six hours, and she was planning to be on it. There was nothing for her here. The hunt was finished. The burden that had been weighing on the ferry and its crew was lifted.

She walked along the harbor and found a small café where she could sit and wait and not draw attention. She ordered coffee she didn't drink and sat where she could see the water.

The sun descended. The fishing boats came in. The second ferry of the day departed for the mainland, and the evening stretched long and quiet. When it came time, she walked back to the dock and bought a return ticket from the same agent who had sold her the outbound journey.

"Empty crossing this time," the agent said idly, looking at the sparse passenger list. "Usually quieter in the evening."

Ace didn't respond. She was already moving toward the boarding ramp.

The evening crossing was indeed nearly empty. Just Ace, three or four islanders with shopping bags, a fisherman with equipment. The ferry cast off and the water opened up beneath it, and Ace stood at the stern and watched the island recede.

The water was clean now. Just water. Just the normal depths that held nothing but fish and sediment and time.

The crossing took forty-five minutes. The mainland lights grew closer. The ferry engines reduced their throttle and the vessel began its approach to the dock. By the time they were close enough to tie off, the night had completely fallen.

Ace disembarked last, as she preferred. The deckhand—not the same one, this shift change must have happened—waved her off with the distracted gesture of someone working late into the evening.

She walked back to where her vehicle was parked, got in, and drove.

Behind her, the mainland dock settled into its nighttime quiet. The ferry was being cleaned, its deck hosed down, its engine cooling. Somewhere in the deep water offshore, the remains of something old and hungry were finally fully settling into the darkness, becoming just the memory of a presence.

The captain would sleep well tonight. The crew would sleep well. The next passenger who boarded would have no idea what had been watching them from the deep, no idea how close they came to

staying on this ferry forever, no idea how the ordinary crossing they'd just made had suddenly become survivable again.

Ace drove until the island was behind her, until the night was complete, until she could no longer see the lights of either shore.

The road ahead was empty and dark. The work was done. For now, there was nothing but the drive, the engine, the distance.

She didn't look back.

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The MV Strait Runner made its evening crossing the next day, as scheduled. The captain made his log entry: *Passenger count: 38 / Weather: Clear, wind 4 knots / Sea state: Calm / Notes: Clear water. All passengers accounted for at each dock.*

And he never wrote about the stern again.

The water had given him back something he'd stopped expecting: the possibility of forgetting.

[ace](#), [demon-hunt-years](#)

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Last update: **31/03/2026 13:23**

