

Episode 20 — The Inheritance



Mira was telling a story about the summer she'd learned to ride a horse.

Sophie watched her across the dinner table, the way she always did now—careful and precise, like she was studying someone who might vanish if she blinked. Mira's hands lay still in her lap between gestures, which was the wrong thing. Hands shouldn't be that still. When people sat at a table eating, their hands moved slightly even when they weren't speaking, adjusting a plate, reaching for water, some small fidgeting that was biological. Mira's hands were still. Completely still.

"I was terrified at first," Mira was saying, and her voice was Mira's voice—the slight rasp at the end of certain words, the cadence that rose when she was building to a punchline. "But Dad kept his hand on the rein the whole time, and I just had to trust that he wouldn't let me fall."

Their father was smiling. Their mother was smiling. They were sitting in the dining room of the estate, in the house they'd lived in for Sophie's entire life, and they were listening to their dead daughter tell them a story about learning to ride a horse the summer she turned nine.

Sophie looked down at her food. She hadn't finished a complete meal in the presence of Mira for approximately four hundred and eighty days.

"You were so brave," their mother said, and her voice was warm but it had that quality underneath it—the quality of someone performing warmth, hitting the emotional notes correctly while something deeper remained uncertain. Their mother had gotten better at it over the three years. She could go hours now without anyone noticing.

Mira reached for her water glass. The movement was fluid, correct, perfectly timed. She lifted the glass to her lips and drank, and her eyes moved—correctly rotating attention between each family member, landing on Sophie with the exact duration of eye contact that would indicate interest and awareness without seeming obsessive. It was the eyes that made Sophie want to scream.

The eyes were **exact**.

"I'm so glad you all wanted me to come home," Mira said, and she set the glass down with careful precision, and she looked at each of them in turn, and her face held exactly the expression of warmth that someone who loved her family would hold.

Sophie stood up.

"I'm not feeling well," she said. "I'm going to my room."

No one tried to stop her. Her father looked concerned—which was the correct response. Her mother looked worried—which was the correct response. Mira looked sympathetic and slightly sad—which was the correct response for a sister who cared but understood.

Sophie walked out of the dining room and climbed the stairs and locked herself in her bedroom, and she didn't come down again until she knew Mira had gone to bed.

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The woman arrived at the estate at 3:47 PM on a Wednesday, walking up the drive as though she had every right to be there.

She was small—unusual smallness, the kind that made it hard to estimate her age. She moved carefully, with a walker's precision, like someone who had learned to move with intention. Her hair was dark with violet in the light. Her eyes were violet. She walked past the front porch where Sophie's mother was arranging new plantings and asked: "Is this the Ashford estate?"

Sophie's mother looked up, momentarily confused by the question—who else's house would it be?—and said yes, and asked if she could help with something. The woman said: "I'm a traveler. I sometimes stop to ask directions. I seem to have gotten turned around. Could I trouble you for water?"

It was an old question. An old excuse. Something in the way people talked about travelers using the word "trouble" meant they expected to be asked inside.

Sophie's mother, who was kind and who had learned long ago that small acts of hospitality could sometimes shift the balance of a difficult day, said yes. She showed the woman inside.

Sophie watched from her window. The woman was walking through the house, through the halls, with her violet eyes taking in everything. She was reading the space like a map. When Sophie's mother showed her to the kitchen to get water, the woman's gaze moved to the photographs on the refrigerator—family photos, the normal trajectory of a family's life documented in image form. A newborn. A birthday. The car accident. The recovery.

Sophie saw the woman's stillness deepen.

The woman took the water and drank it and thanked Sophie's mother, and as she turned to leave, she caught sight of someone in the hallway—Mira, come down to see who had arrived. The woman and Mira looked at each other for what was probably less than three seconds.

When the woman left the house, her hand was shaking slightly.

She made it back to the road before she stopped. She stood in the curve of the drive where the house was still visible but distant, and she breathed, and she steadied herself. Then she turned and walked back.

Sophie met her at the edge of the rose garden.

"You see it too," Sophie said. It wasn't a question. It was a statement from someone who had been waiting for four hundred and eighty days for another person to see it.

The woman looked at her. Truly looked at her, not in the correct social way that Mira could reproduce, but in the way someone really **saw** another person. Sophie felt her throat close.

"What is she?" Sophie asked.

The woman was quiet for a long moment. She looked back toward the house, toward the window where Mira might be watching, toward the photographs on the refrigerator that showed a daughter being recovered from death.

"She was your sister," the woman said finally.

Sophie absorbed this. The past tense of it. The weight of it.

"Will it hurt?" she asked.

The woman didn't answer that. She said: "Show me the rose garden."

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Ace asked Mira to give her a tour of the property because it was something a guest might ask, and Mira would accommodate a guest. It was what the thing in Mira's body knew how to do—accommodate, respond, perform the small courtesies that kept the family functioning.

They walked across the lawn. The afternoon light was beginning to slant, turning everything golden. The roses were in their mid-season bloom, the colors deep and complex. Ace could feel the thing that wore Mira's body moving beside her, could feel it noticing the roses, could feel it generating the appropriate response to beauty—a small intake of breath, a slight pause in gait, the physical signs of appreciation.

It was very good. Three years of practice at being Mira had made it nearly seamless.

When they were far enough from the house, Ace stopped.

"I know you're not her," she said quietly.

The thing that was Mira stopped walking. For a moment—not even a moment, a fraction of a moment—something shifted in its expression. Not emotion. The absence of emotion, suddenly visible.

The precise arrangements of facial muscles that were supposed to convey feeling, all of them suddenly still in the way that a mask is still when it's not being worn.

Then it moved.

The attack was sudden and vertical—the body that was Mira's body, perfect and unmarked and three years occupied by something else, launching itself at Ace with speed that no human body should produce. Ace rolled sideways, came up with one of her katanas already clear, the emerald light flooding out.

The thing was fast. It had learned speed from living in a body, from experiencing the physics of flesh and muscle and nerve. But it had also learned something else in three years: it had learned how to hurt. Mira's hands became weapons—nails like knives, movements that bent joints in ways that suggested an absence of the normal limitation that pain imposed.

Ace fought defensively at first. She was aware—acutely, unbearably aware—that the body she was fighting was still the body of a twenty-one-year-old woman. It was still the body of someone's daughter. It was still the body that had been buried, that had been expected not to come back, that had come back entirely wrong.

The thing didn't have those limitations. It threw itself at her with absolute disregard for the body it inhabited. When Ace cut it on the arm, it didn't flinch from the pain because it couldn't feel pain, only damage. When Ace knocked it backward, it came forward again without any of the human impulses that would create hesitation.

It was trying to drag Ace toward the house. Toward Sophie, who was watching from a distance. Toward the parents, who were inside and didn't know what was happening.

Ace stopped defending and started fighting for real.

She moved between the thing's attempts to grab her, she used the roses as obstacles and cover, she fought with the kind of precision that came from knowing exactly what she was doing. The emerald blade caught the light. The thing that was Mira was fast but it wasn't a trained fighter—it had learned human movement from a human perspective, but Ace had spent years learning how demons moved, how they reasoned, what the gaps in their understanding were.

The gap was in her eyes. She could see it—the slight delay in processing things at the corner of her vision, the way it relied on perfect front-facing attention. When Ace moved into the blind spot at the edges of its vision, it couldn't track her.

She finished it quickly.

The blade went in cleanly, between the ribs, positioned for the heart. The thing that had been wearing Mira made a sound that wasn't quite a scream—more like the rupture of something pressurized. It went down.

Ace laid the body in the roses.

The flowers were red and white and pale pink, and the body lay among them with its face turned toward the sky and its hands open. For a moment, before the light left it, it looked like someone who had finally been allowed to rest.

Ace stood there for perhaps thirty seconds. Then she turned and walked back toward her vehicle.

Sophie was standing at the corner of the house, watching. Their eyes met as Ace passed.

Ace kept walking.

Behind her, the body lay in the roses. Behind her, Sophie would have to go into the house and tell her parents. Behind her, the family would have to grieve twice now—once for the death they'd already had, and once for this one, which was real and final and bore no ambiguity.

Ace had learned long ago not to stay for that part. The grief was real. The loss was real. But the certainty that came after—the knowledge that the thing that had been slowly consuming their memories of the real Mira was finally gone—that would come later, if they were lucky.

For now, there was only the loss.

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The drive away from the estate was long and quiet.

Ace's hands were steady on the wheel. Her violet eyes were focused on the road ahead, which curved through farm country and open fields. The sun was descending toward the horizon. She would drive until nightfall and then find a place to sleep, and in the morning she would keep driving, and the memory of Mira's family would fade into the background noise of all the other hunts, all the other resolutions.

Except it wouldn't.

This one would stay with her longer than most, because she had seen Sophie watching with her own awareness intact. Sophie knew what had been living with her family. Sophie understood what needed to happen and what it meant. Sophie would carry that knowledge forward in a way that most people didn't have to.

The body in the roses would be found by their father within the hour. The grief would be real and immediate. The family would fracture further—not because of what Ace had done, but because of what had been done to them three years ago when they'd been allowed to believe that their daughter had survived.

There was no mercy in that knowledge. There was only the cold certainty that the alternative had been worse.

Ace drove on into the darkening evening.

The road behind her was empty. The road ahead of her was clear. There were other hunts, other entities, other families who didn't yet know what was living in their homes or their gardens or their routines. She would find them the way she always did—by following the wrongness, by noticing the places where something didn't fit, by understanding that when people spoke about their loved ones in a voice that sounded just slightly too careful, there was usually a reason.

But that was tomorrow's work.

Tonight, she would drive. Tonight, she would not think about Sophie's face or the weight in the roses or the way the thing that had been Mira had sounded as it died. Tonight, she would keep moving forward, because stopping was something she didn't know how to do, and because the work was never finished, and because somewhere in the dark, there was something else waiting to be found.

The grief that the family would carry—that was theirs to bear now. That was the cost of being alive, of being human, of being the people who had to stay behind and remember correctly.

Ace had no one to remember her correctly. She had only the hunt. Only the next job. Only the empty road that stretched ahead, lit now by her headlights, carrying her toward whatever else needed killing.

The night deepened. The road climbed into higher country. And somewhere behind her, in a rose garden in the declining light, a family discovered that they were finally allowed to grieve in truth.

It was the only mercy she could give them.

It would have to be enough.

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In her bedroom at the estate, Sophie sat on her bed and listened to her mother's scream echoing up from the garden.

She didn't go downstairs. She sat in the dark and waited, and she thought about the woman's eyes—violet, patient, certain. She thought about the absence of ambiguity, the finality of the blade. She thought about the rosebush that would never grow quite the same way again, not because of what had happened in it, but because her family would not be able to tend it with the same careful attention.

The grief was already beginning.

But underneath the grief, in the deep part of her that she didn't have words for yet, there was something else. There was the knowledge that what had been living with her family was finally gone. There was the certainty that the wrongness she'd been feeling for four hundred and eighty days had a name and a reason and a resolution.

Her sister was dead. Again.

But this time, she stayed dead.

And that, Sophie thought, holding herself very still in the darkness, was the only thing that could possibly be called a gift.

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

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