

Episode 21 — House of the Covenant

The valley had held the village for one hundred and fifty-three years without comment. The houses sat in clean rows along a main street that curved with the shape of the land, and the people who lived in them carried rituals like stones in their pockets—things worn smooth by handling but never examined closely.

Old Mrs. Reeves had been the one to notice the pattern first, or perhaps she had simply been the only one old enough to remember the last time it happened. She was ninety-two. Her mind held the village's history the way soil holds seeds—dormant, but viable.

The first disappearance came in February. Thomas Kaller, thirty-one, father of two, great-great-grandson of one of the original eight families. He went to work at the mill on a Tuesday morning. He didn't come home. The search lasted four days. They found nothing. The police filed a report and moved on. His wife filed for death benefits and began the work of being abandoned.

The second came in June. Rebecca Mathew, fifty-three, unmarried, a schoolteacher, daughter of the Mathew line going back to the founding. She closed her classroom on Friday and drove home to the cottage her family had occupied since 1871. She did not arrive. Her car was found on Route 9, driver's side door open, keys still in the ignition. She was gone the way Thomas had been gone.

Ace came to the village on a Tuesday, which was irrelevant to everything. She drove a vehicle that had no business still running—a 1987 Chevy pickup, rust blooming at the edges like some slow disease, the bed filled with supplies bound under canvas. She parked at the edge of town and walked in carrying no visible weapons, though the emerald katanas hung at her sides in sheaths that caught the autumn light.

She was small—stunted in a way that made people unsure of her age. She might have been twenty. She might have been forty. Her eyes were violet, which wasn't possible, but they were. Her hair was black with a violet sheen that seemed to deepen and fade depending on how the sun hit it.

She went to the police station first because that was the efficient route. The officer on desk duty was a man named Hargrove, mid-fifties, married, worried about something beyond the scope of his job.

"I'm looking for information about the disappearances," Ace said. Her voice was soft and seemed to cost her effort. She used it sparingly.

Hargrove's eyes flicked to her swords, then away. "We don't have jurisdiction over missing persons unless there's evidence of foul play. They're registered with the state police."

"Two people from the same town in six months," Ace said. "Same family lineage patterns."

"Lineage patterns," Hargrove repeated. "You a genealogist?"

"No."

She waited. People often filled silence.

He didn't. He was the type who could let silence sit. She respected that. She left the station and walked to the library.

The librarian was younger, maybe sixty, with the careful neutral expression of someone used to protecting privacy. She helped Ace access the village records without asking what Ace was looking

for. Ace found what she needed: the founding families, listed in the 1873 charter. Kaller was there.

Mathew was there.

The names were Brennan, Kaller, Mathew, Yates, Prescott, Wainwright, Hollis, and Grech. Eight families. Eight oaths.

She spent the afternoon walking. The village was small enough that you could walk from one end to the other in twenty minutes. The people she passed watched her briefly and looked away. They had an awareness of her that suggested they knew something was off without being able to articulate what. In a place this old, the instinct ran deep.

At the end of the main street, set back from the others, was a small house painted the color of old cream. A garden grew around it in neat raised beds. An old woman sat on the porch in a rocking chair, moving at a speed that suggested she was mostly performing the act of rocking rather than actually rocking.

Ace stopped at the gate.

The woman's eyes opened—they had been closed, or nearly—and focused on her with a clarity that suggested better than ninety percent of her faculties were intact.

"I know what you are," the woman said. "Not what. Who. And I know why you're here."

Ace climbed the three steps. The porch boards held firm under her slight weight.

"My name is Eleanor Reeves," the woman said. "My family line doesn't go back to the founding. My husband's did. Reeves, though, he married out. The line ended with him. So we've been safe all this time."

"Safe from what?" Ace sat in the second rocking chair without being invited.

"The covenant. The oath. My husband's grandmother—she was there, the first winter. They made a bargain with something in the valley. Something they met when they were starving. It promised them safety and prosperity if they served it. Each family would provide. A worker for the land. It was formalized. Sealed."

Eleanor rocked.

"It worked. Two generations, it worked. Food grew. The winters were hard but bearable. People stayed healthy. Then the third generation came. Modernizers. People who wanted to move to the city, get regular jobs, leave the valley behind. They didn't want to be bound to it anymore. So they stopped. They just stopped showing up."

"The entity came to collect," Ace said.

"Yes. Not immediately. But it started to come. One person per family, per generation, the agreement said. Since the families stopped paying in service, it started taking them in absence. One person vanished, leaving a void the shape of what should have been paid. And the entity was satisfied with the equation."

Ace was quiet.

"I've lived with it for sixty-three years," Eleanor said. "I was here the first time it took from the Reeves

line, before John died—before the line could truly break. I saw what it was. It's not angry. It's not cruel. It just completes what was promised. It's more faithful to the bargain than the families ever were.”

“Does it come in a pattern?”

“One person per family, every generation. Five generations now. Five people taken from five families. The Kaller boy was the first this generation. The Mathew woman was the second. The others—Prescott, Yates, and either Brennan or Wainwright, or both. It's due soon. Should be tonight or tomorrow.” Eleanor looked at Ace directly. “That's what you're here for, isn't it? To stop it.”

“Can you stop something that's keeping a bargain?” Ace said. “It made a promise to protect this place. It's holding its end of it. The families broke theirs.”

Eleanor closed her eyes. “Yes. That's why nothing's been done. How do you stop something that's right and you're wrong?”

But that was a question for philosophers.

Ace left before sunset and positioned herself in the space between the houses on Brennan Street. The family homes were distinct on the property records. She sat in the dark among the gardens that all the founding families maintained, watched and waited.

The entity came with dark.

There was no sound to announce it, which was notable. It moved with the weight of something very large, but the air didn't seem to move around it. It was like watching displacement happen to the concept of space rather than to molecules.

It was tall—ten feet at least, though the shape suggested it could be much larger if it needed to be. It had the appearance of something ancient and formal: robed in what might have been fabric or might have been the way light stopped around it. The face, if you could call it that, was blank and attentive. When it moved, it moved with ceremony—each step deliberate, each gesture like a sentence being completed.

Ace recognized it immediately. Oath Demon. Born from a collective promise that had fractured but never broken entirely. It was made of the weight of that unfinished contract.

It moved toward the Brennan house with the inevitability of a funeral procession.

Ace stepped into its path.

The entity paused. It regarded her with attention that felt like a physical pressure. She was not part of the agreement. She was irrelevant to its purpose.

It moved to go around her.

She drew both katanas in one motion. They were green—the emerald glow seemed to come from inside the steel itself, a light that had nothing to do with the moon. The blades caught the darkness and swallowed it.

The entity recognized the threat. It did not move faster. It did not panic or retreat. It simply turned its full form toward her and began the work of completing its collection.

The fight was unlike any violence Ace had encountered. There was no malice in it. The entity fought

with the patient weight of certainty. It attacked in broad movements that held no cunning, only the logic of its nature. It was a stone rolling downhill. It would not stop until it reached the bottom. Ace moved like urgency. She was speed and precision to its weight and inevitability. She learned the joints in its certainty—the places where its ancient bargain could be cut. She struck and cut and moved. Her blades were effective. Each strike found the entity's structure, peeled back its form, revealed the light underneath.

It died formally. It did not collapse. It simply ceased to be, like a sentence finishing. Its form unwound into nothing, dissolving like smoke, but methodical about it, as though it was concluding something it had always intended to complete.

Ace stood in the darkness afterward, breathing carefully, her blades still extended.

No one came out of the houses. The village had learned not to witness certain things.

She cleaned her katanas on grass that glowed in the dim light. She walked back to Eleanor Reeves's house.

The old woman was still on the porch, still rocking. She looked at Ace, and her face said something like relief.

"It won't come back," Ace said.

Eleanor nodded. "The covenant is broken."

"The people already taken—"

"They're gone. They've been gone for five generations. We can't change that." Eleanor's voice was steady. "What did it look like? The thing that took them?"

Ace considered this. "Like what you promised it would be."

Eleanor closed her eyes. When she opened them again, something very old had left her face. "Then it was as kind to us as it could be."

Ace left the village before dawn. She parked at a rest stop two counties over and slept in the truck bed with her weapons close. The emerald katanas rested against the canvas, their glow fading slowly as she moved toward unconsciousness.

In the village, Eleanor Reeves sat in her rocking chair as the sun came up. She had been waiting for sixty-three years for something to break. She had held the weight of a covenant that was never hers, protected a secret that would kill her if she kept it much longer.

She would be dead within the year. The doctor would call it natural causes. The village would bury her and mark her grave. But the weight was gone now.

The weight was finally gone.

The covenant was broken. The village would modernize now. The young people would leave without fear. The families would scatter. The valley would hold them less and less each year until it held them not at all.

But for one night, one thing that had needed to be completed was finally finished.

That would have to be enough.

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