

Episode 25 — Children of the Ashfield



Part One: The Missing

The woman who disappeared from the Ashfield commune was named Kira Tessenden. She was twenty-six years old, born there, raised there, her entire life contained within the community's borders. According to the records Ace had found—incomplete, maintained with the kind of casual documentation that wasn't quite official—Kira had gone to the nearest town six months prior to pick up supplies. She'd returned three weeks later. Something about her had changed. She asked questions. She looked at people differently. She seemed to be considering the possibility that there might be other ways to live.

Twenty-three days after returning, she was gone.

The commune's official explanation was that she'd chosen to leave. Ace didn't believe it, which was the only reason she was driving toward the Ashfield at all. The report had come from a woman in a diner in California—someone's daughter, no longer in contact, presumed dead by the family but not confirmed. The timeline matched. The description matched. The name in the commune's records matched.

Ace drove toward it anyway.

Part Two: Arrival

The Ashfield occupied cleared land in a transitional zone between forest and valley. The buildings were practical: a large communal kitchen, dormitory structures, a barn for storage, and at the center, a larger structure that seemed to be the focal point of the community's organization. The grounds were clean. The gardens were well-maintained. The people moving between buildings went about their work with quiet purpose, not hurried, not idle, just engaged in the steady labor of keeping a self-sufficient system running.

Ace parked at the entrance and walked in.

The man who met her was named Devin, mid-thirties, kind-faced, genuinely welcoming in the way that communities sometimes were with travelers. The Ashfield had a specific protocol for visitors: they offered hospitality. Food, shelter, a place to work if you wanted to stay longer. Ace accepted the offer and parked her vehicle within the compound.

They gave her a room in the visitor's dormitory. The room was small, clean, the sheets well-maintained. There was a pitcher of water and a window that looked out at the northern forest. The building smelled of cedar and practical cleaners. She set her katanas against the wall and sat on the bed for a moment, processing the texture of the place.

The Ashfield was genuinely peaceful. She could feel it—the absence of anxiety, the sense that everyone here was doing work they understood to be meaningful. These were good people. They had constructed something real. And they had never known anything else.

Part Three: Questioning

Over the next day, Ace moved through the community. She helped in the garden in the morning—the work was straightforward, the other workers were pleasant, nobody asked invasive questions. The Ashfield had a gentle etiquette about privacy. You existed where you were, you contributed what you could, you didn't press on the boundaries of other people's stories.

In the evening, she sat with a group at dinner. The meal was substantial—bread, vegetables, something that might have been venison. The conversation moved gently through topics: the state of the north fields, an upcoming trade run to the valley town, weather patterns. Ace ate and listened and offered minimal commentary.

Near the end of the meal, she turned to a woman named Senna who was roughly her age.

"There was someone here," Ace said quietly. "Kira Tessenden. She left recently."

The silence that followed was informative. It was the silence of people who had decided on a unified response and were now executing it.

"She chose to go," Senna said gently. "She had a different vision for her path."

"I heard she came back from the valley town and then disappeared."

"That was her choice," Senna said. The certainty in her voice was absolute. And it was uniform—Ace could see the same certainty reflected in every face at the table. "We don't force anyone to stay. If someone decides the Ashfield isn't right for them, we accept that. We're grateful for the time they gave to community."

The explanation was kind and reasonable. It was also completely, utterly final. These people had made their decision about what had happened to Kira, and they would not be moved from it. They were not lying. They simply had no other frame of reference.

Ace nodded and finished her meal.

Part Four: The Barn

She waited until late at night, when the community was asleep, and went into the meeting barn alone.

The space was enormous—high ceilings, wooden beams, a floor worn smooth by forty years of ritual movement. The doors had been open when she passed through, and nobody had questioned her. The barn existed in a state of constant accessibility. This was where the community came together.

She could feel it immediately: something was present here, even when the space was empty.

It hung in the upper reaches of the barn, suspended like something floating just below the ceiling. It was invisible in the way that things too large to focus on are invisible—she could sense the shape of it, the massive distributed volume of it, but her eyes couldn't quite resolve the edges. It was there, it was patient, it was waiting.

She could see pieces of it if she tried: compound limbs that didn't move, a form that didn't quite match any anatomical logic, an existence that transcended simple physical space. It was asleep in the way that things waiting are asleep—aware without consciousness, present without engagement.

This was what had been fed for forty years.

Ace felt the weight of it pressing down on the barn's upper space. The entity was immense. The fact that it had gone unnoticed this long was less about its subtlety and more about the community's profound lack of reference point for what might live in their ceiling. They came here once a month, stood in the presence of something that fed on their faith, and believed they were experiencing transcendence.

She walked back to the dormitory and lay on her bed, waiting for the next All-Night.

Part Five: The All-Night

The last night of the month arrived. At dusk, the entire community began moving toward the barn. About sixty people—adults born here, children raised here, a few residents Ace hadn't seen before. They came in quietly, respectfully, the way people entered sacred space.

Ace arrived early and climbed into the rafters above the barn's western side. The position was good—she had visibility of the entire space below and the space above, and the beams would support her weight easily. She crouched in shadow and waited.

The community filtered in. They arranged themselves in a loose circle in the barn's open space. The light began to fade. Someone started a song—old, repetitive, the kind of thing that had probably been sung here for four decades. Others joined. The voices harmonized in practiced patterns.

The song lasted perhaps an hour. Then came silence—extended, meditative, the community standing or sitting in stillness while the last light bled out of the sky. Then came the speaking: individual people standing and offering words, personal observations, gratitude, small moments of meaning. The words

were genuine. These people truly felt the weight of community, the connection to the land, the sense that they were part of something larger than themselves.

They were right. They simply didn't understand what the something larger actually was.

The speaking continued until the hour before dawn. Then the atmosphere changed.

The air became heavy. The thickness that Ace had felt in the empty barn multiplied, intensified, became almost visible. The entity above began to wake, to manifest, to draw inward from its distributed rest into something more consolidated, more present, more **real**.

And the community looked up.

Ace could see them looking up at the space she knew contained the thing, could see the wonder in their faces, the profound sense of rightness and arrival that overwhelmed them. This was the fruition of their faith. This was their God acknowledging them. This was transcendence.

They felt profound peace.

The entity filled the upper space of the barn—Ace could see it now, fully manifested, massive and many-limbed and absolutely ravenous. It had been patient for forty years, feeding on ambient belief, on the inherited faith of people who had never questioned their lives. Now it was large enough to consume more directly. This All-Night was supposed to be the beginning. The moment when it stopped feeding on their religion and started feeding on them.

Ace withdrew both katanas.

The blades flared emerald and she dropped from the rafters.

Part Six: The Killing

She landed directly in front of the assembled community and the manifesting entity directly above them. For a moment, nothing moved. The community had been so focused on looking up that they hadn't registered that anything else was happening.

Then Ace moved.

She drove upward, blades leading, and struck the entity's nearest limb. The blade sank through something that felt like thick muscle and something else, something that resisted like consciousness made physical. The entity screamed—not audibly, but in frequencies that made the barn's wooden structure vibrate and crack.

Below her, the community erupted into chaos.

This wasn't supposed to happen. The All-Night was sacred. The manifestation was transcendence. And now something was attacking it, and the meaning they'd built their lives on was revealed to be under assault by something that was supposed to be their salvation.

Ace moved with economical precision. She was fast—the kind of fast that came from years of learning how to be lethal in confined spaces. The entity was larger but she was faster. It lashed out with compound limbs but she was already gone, repositioning, striking again at points where the creature's mass seemed densest.

The community members screamed. Some tried to stop her. They were slow, unpracticed,

unaccustomed to violence. They got in each other's way. One of them managed to grab her arm briefly before she moved and he fell backward into the crowd.

She didn't stop. She couldn't afford to.

The entity was bleeding now—ichor that wasn't quite red and didn't behave like normal fluid, that pooled and moved with its own intention. It was wounded but far from dead. It contracted, pulling its distributed mass toward a central point, attempting to concentrate enough strength to crush her or drive her away. Ace anticipated the movement and struck at the contraction point, hitting the center of the entity's mass as it compressed.

The blow was deep. The entity convulsed.

It fell from the ceiling.

The community scattered as the massive form dropped. It hit the barn floor with an impact that shook the building's entire structure. Dust cascaded from the rafters. Wood creaked under stress. The entity was still moving, still fighting, compound limbs flailing with the desperate strength of something dying.

Ace finished it.

The final strikes took perhaps thirty seconds. The entity's movements slowed, then stopped. What lay on the barn's floor was massive and broken and no longer moving. The thing that the community had believed was divine was revealed: grotesque, parasitic, completely alien to the transcendence they thought they'd been experiencing.

Part Seven: After

Ace stood in the wreckage of the barn, breathing heavily, the blades still glowing. The community was silent. They were still present, most of them. They had watched the entity fall. They had watched her kill it. They had watched the peace that had defined their entire lives get revealed as appetite.

She looked at them—at their faces, at the profound shock and disorientation there. Some of them were weeping. Others were looking at her with expressions she couldn't quite read. Fear, maybe. Or something else. Something like the first moment of understanding that the world contained other possibilities.

She sheathed the blades and walked through the crowd toward the barn's exit. Nobody stopped her. Nobody spoke. They just watched her pass.

She got into her vehicle. The engine started. The headlights cut through the predawn darkness as she turned toward the exit. She drove through the gates and out onto the forest road.

Behind her, the commune was waking up. Sixty people were standing in their barn, looking at what had lived in their ceiling. For forty years they had inherited a practice, never questioned it, built their entire lives on the structure of a ritual that was feeding them to something that lived in the dark above.

All of that was over now.

Most of them had never made a real choice in their lives. They didn't know how. They didn't have the framework for it. Everything they'd been taught was about acceptance, about fitting into patterns,

about the beauty of inherited wisdom.

The sun was starting to rise. The forest began to define itself, trees becoming visible in the increasing light. Ace drove toward the valley, toward the main road, toward the open country beyond. The Ashfield was behind her now. The entity was dead. The community would have to figure out what came next—who they were when the practice that had defined them was revealed to be nothing but predation.

She didn't have anything to offer them. She never did.

The road ahead was clear. She drove into the morning without looking back.

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