

Episode 26 — The Mirror Chorus

Part One: The Hotel

The Grandview Hotel had closed in 2006. It had been a nice place once—a destination hotel in a small mountain town, the kind of property where people had driven up for anniversaries and corporate retreats. Four stories, maybe forty rooms, the kind of genteel mid-century structure that had weathered its decline into abandonment with the quiet dignity of things built to last.

The mirrors were everywhere.

Full-length mirrors in every room. Hallway mirrors framed in gilt or chrome. Bathroom mirrors, some of them broken, some of them still perfect. The ballroom on the ground floor had a mirror wall on its eastern side—three meters tall, stretching the full twelve-meter length, a single massive reflective surface that had once reflected dancing couples and had continued to reflect long after the dancing stopped.

In the years since closure, something had begun using those mirrors to breed.

The first person to notice was a woman named Dallas. She'd gone to the Grandview with her two friends on a weekend when they were all between jobs, looking for cheap thrills in an abandoned place. She'd gone in through a window, explored for maybe five minutes, and then come back out screaming about something in the mirrors. She refused to describe what she'd seen. She wouldn't return.

Her friends, Marcus and Elena, went deeper.

They were found in the ballroom forty-eight hours later, catatonic on the floor in front of the eastern wall mirror. They'd been staring at the glass for long enough that their eyes had partially dried out. When they were moved, they tracked the mirror with their gaze—their pupils following the reflection of the room even as they were carried out. They've since recovered partially. Marcus has covered every mirror in his house with sheets and refuses to remove them. Elena flinches at any reflective surface. Their families call them lucky. They both know better.

Three more people had gone to the Grandview in the interim. Only one had come out. The other two simply disappeared into the building, and their families had stopped looking after a week.

Ace had learned about the hotel from a woman in a hospital who still couldn't quite explain what she'd experienced there. The details were fragmented, the traumatized recollection of someone whose mind had been forced to process something outside its frame of reference. But the pattern was clear.

Solo Mirror Stalker: one entity per mirror, ambush predator, attacks when you look directly into the glass.

Colony: mirrors breeding in mirrors, reflecting back and forth, compounding. Dozens of entities. All of them distributed through the building's reflective surfaces, all of them coordinated, all of them waiting.

Ace knew how to kill a solo stalker. She'd learned through direct experience and survival. A colony was different. A colony was a problem that required a different kind of methodical violence.

She drove toward the mountain town on a morning when the light was weak.

Part Two: Preparation

The parking lot of the Grandview was empty. The building stood against the mountain backdrop like something already dead, its windows dark, its structure sagging with the gentle entropy of twenty years of weather and disuse. The front doors were boarded. Ace went around to the eastern side where a window had been broken by previous intruders.

Before entering, she did a systematic check of her equipment. She had both katanas. She wore dark practical clothing. She checked for any reflective surfaces on her person—a watch with a metal band, removed. A hair clip with a reflective finish, removed. She was as invisible to the mirror ecosystem as human flesh and cloth could make her.

The blades, however, couldn't be covered. The emerald glow was essential to their function. She would have to accept that she appeared in the mirrors too, that the colony would see her reflection moving among themselves, and that the confusion between her physical location and her reflected image could be either a liability or an asset depending on how she moved.

She climbed through the broken window into darkness.

Part Three: The Climb

The lobby was decay incarnate. The carpet was soft with moisture, the wallpaper peeled in strips, the air smelled of stagnation and the specific mustiness of enclosed spaces that hadn't been inhabited in a generation. The light came through cracks in the boarding, creating sharp geometric patterns on the floor.

And there were mirrors. The lobby had been designed for grace, and mirrors had been part of that. A large circular mirror hung behind the defunct front desk. Hallway mirrors marked transitions. A mirror frame was visible through a doorway to what had been the restaurant area.

Ace didn't look directly at any of them.

She moved through the lobby to the stairwell and began ascending. The ground floor was the public space—the ballroom, the bar, the restaurant, the kitchen. She would save that for last. The entities in the upper rooms would be individual, concentrated in single mirrors. The strategy there was simple: enter, locate the mirror, destroy it, exit. Room by room. Floor by floor. Systematic.

The second floor was where the rooms started. She moved down the hallway, her violet eyes tracking details. The carpet was rotted. The wallpaper was separating. And the mirrors were everywhere—full-length mirrors on the backs of doors, bathroom mirrors, decorative mirrors in hallway alcoves.

The first room door opened with minimal resistance. The interior was a graveyard of furniture and fabric. Bed frame. Dresser. Curtains gone mostly to dust. And in the corner, facing the bed: a full-length mirror.

She could see something in it that wasn't her reflection.

The shape was wrong—too many joints, too much fluidity, something that was trying very hard to look like a reflection while being nothing of the kind. It was pressed against the inside of the glass, watching her, waiting for the moment when she would look directly and allow it to cross.

Ace drew a blade and drove it through the mirror surface.

The glass cracked. The entity in the glass convulsed—a limb appearing at the surface as if trying to emerge before the reflection collapsed. She hit it again. The mirror shattered. The pieces fell, and with them, the entity that had been breeding in that reflective space dissolved—not dying exactly, just ceasing to be, returning to whatever potential space it had emerged from.

The room was quiet. The wall was just wall now, with the frame and fragments of glass remaining. She left it and moved to the next room.

Part Four: The Scaling

By the time she reached the third floor, the colony had begun to communicate.

She could feel it in the quality of her reflections. When she passed mirrors—moving quickly, not looking directly—she could see herself reflected in surfaces she hadn't approached yet. Not just her image: her image **with something else**, as if the colony was passing her between mirrors, moving her reflected form around the building's mirrored network like intelligence coursing through neural pathways.

They were learning her. They were seeing her fast, her competence, the way she destroyed mirrors without hesitation. And they were beginning to coordinate their response.

In room 312, she paused before approaching the mirror. The surface was showing her reflection, but the reflection wasn't quite synchronized with her position. It was showing her as she'd been three seconds before, as if the mirror was showing the past. Another mirror across the building was doing something similar—showing her current moment reflected three seconds ahead.

The colony was trying to triangle her. Trying to confuse her sense of where she was relative to her images, to use the distributed reflection to attack her from multiple vectors simultaneously.

She destroyed that mirror and the next one before they could coordinate fully.

The fourth floor was the top floor. Only a few guest rooms remained here, most of them boarded from the inside, the Grandview's slow death having claimed these spaces first. The mirrors here were less well-maintained—surface degradation, dust, some of them showing the warping of old glass. But the entities living in them were fierce. In room 407, when she destroyed the mirror, something emerged halfway before the glass came apart—a compound limb that scored a line across her shoulder before retracting back into nothing.

Blood on her shirt. Pain sharp and real. The reminder that this was combat, that the colony could hurt her, that her speed was an advantage only until it wasn't.

She descended toward the ground floor.

Part Five: The Ballroom

The ballroom took up the entire eastern side of the ground floor. The entrance was wide, the interior vast, the ceiling high enough that Ace's footsteps echoed as she walked through the door. The space was empty except for the bones of furniture scattered at intervals.

And the wall.

The eastern wall was entirely mirror. Twelve meters of reflective surface, three meters high, a single continuous plane of glass that had been the focal point of the room for the decades when people had

danced here. It was still the focal point.

Ace could see herself reflected in it at a dozen points simultaneously, and at each reflection point there was something reflected too—something large, something that was the colony's mass consolidated, something that was absolutely aware of her presence.

They all moved at once.

The stalkers emerged from points along the twelve-meter mirror simultaneously—compound limbs appearing at the glass surface, faces pressing through the reflection, the colony acting as a unified organism despite being composed of dozens of individuals. Ace was fast but she couldn't be everywhere. She moved laterally along the ballroom, letting the reflected stalkers reach toward her while she positioned herself at angles where her physical body could attack mirror sections while her reflection drew the entities' attention in another direction.

The violence was precise and methodical.

A stalker reaching out from the glass near the mirror's center—she was at a forty-five-degree angle to that section, allowing her reflection to appear in three different mirror sections simultaneously. The entities didn't understand. They thought she was in multiple places at once. They all lunged toward where they saw her while she struck at the mirror section where they were anchored.

Glass shattered. The entity anchored to that section dissolved.

Another section, another coordinated emergence. The colony was learning her tactics even as she executed them. They were adapting, pulling back from attacking her reflection in favor of emerging faster, trying to get limbs fully through before she could destroy the mirror. One of them succeeded partially—a limb that was mostly through, flesh that was alien and moving with liquid intent.

She slashed at it. It recoiled. She destroyed the mirror section. It vanished.

The ballroom was becoming a storm of activity. Mirrors at points she hadn't reached yet were showing reflections of mirrors she was actively destroying, creating a visual recursion of her own violence reflected back at her from surfaces she couldn't yet see. The colony's coordination was breaking down into chaos, but it was a coordinated chaos—they were all moving toward the same goal, all trying to overwhelm her through sheer numerical advantage.

Ace was bleeding. A slash across her forearm where she hadn't moved fast enough. Blood dripping on the ballroom's rotted carpet. Her breathing was hard and controlled, her movements never slowing, her focus absolute.

She was working toward the center section. The mirror's heart. The largest concentration of the colony's mass was there, visible in the reflection as a shape that was barely holding together, barely cohering into the illusion of individual entities. They were almost one thing, almost unified.

She reached the center section and stood directly in front of it.

Part Six: The Breaking

For a moment, nothing moved.

She could see herself in the mirror. She could see the colony reflected there too, surrounding her image from every direction, a mass of wrong shapes and too many joints and compound limbs that

didn't have names in human anatomy. They were looking at her. Her reflection was looking back at them.

Then she moved.

The first strike was perpendicular to the glass surface, driven with all the force her small frame could generate. The blade entered the mirror at its center point. The glass cracked in a perfect asterisk from that point. The colony convulsed. The entities in the reflection all screamed in frequencies that made the ballroom's remaining structure vibrate.

She struck again.

The second blade went through the crack she'd created. The two blades now bracketing a central point, she twisted, leveraging the handles to create lateral stress. The mirror panel began to break—not shatter, but break in large pieces, starting to fall away from the wall.

The entities poured out.

It was not a metaphorical thing. The colony emerged from the collapsing mirror in a rush of mass and motion, trying to escape before the mirror fully fragmented. Ace moved, striking at the entities as they emerged, destroying them before they could fully solidify in the three-dimensional world.

A limb tried to grab her. She slashed through it. Another entity came at her from an angle—she was faster, her blade finding the core before the entity could reach her. The ballroom became a space of violence and shattering glass and the dissolution of the colony into components that couldn't survive outside their reflective medium.

The mirror was gone. The wall was just wall now, bare plaster beneath where the glass had been. The entities that had been anchored to that surface were simply gone—returning to whatever space they had emerged from, ceasing to exist because the medium that had created them no longer was.

But there were still mirrors in the ballroom.

Smaller mirrors. Decorative mirrors. Mirrors that had been part of the hotel's aesthetic architecture. The colony had bred in all of them. As Ace destroyed the main wall mirror, these others began to activate—entities emerging from surfaces she'd been less focused on.

She had minutes, maybe, before they coordinated a unified assault from multiple angles.

She moved methodically from mirror to mirror, destroying each one with the precision that came from years of practicing lethal violence. A mirror behind the bar. Gone. A decorative mirror in an alcove. Destroyed. A mirror that had been part of a hallway beyond the ballroom. Shattered. She was becoming exhausted—the adrenaline was fading, the wounds beginning to register as actual pain rather than data, her movements beginning to slow slightly as fatigue accumulated.

But the mirrors were also becoming fewer.

The last mirror in the ballroom was small—no more than a meter across, mounted near the room's far exit. When Ace destroyed it, the entity inside was alone, without colony coordination, without the network that had allowed them to distribute their attention. It emerged and lunged and she was simply faster. The blade took it before it could fully traverse the glass-air boundary.

The ballroom was silent.

Part Seven: The Darkness

Ace stood in the broken glass and the darkness, breathing heavily, the blades still glowing their faint emerald in the space where the ballroom's mirrors had been. There was no more reflection. There was no more the colony's distributed consciousness moving through the building's reflective network.

There was just a dead hotel, full of broken glass, bleeding slowly back into entropy.

She wiped blood from her forearm—her own, still dripping slightly from the slash wound. Her breathing steadied gradually. The adrenaline continued to fade, replaced by the specific exhaustion of someone who had been operating at the edge of her physical capability for an extended period.

She walked through the ballroom toward the exit, crunching glass beneath her boots. The hotel was just a hotel now. The fourth floor had three operating mirrors—she'd destroyed them. The third floor similarly. The second. The lobby would have had mirrors but the colony had been concentrated in the rooms and the ballroom, and she'd been systematic enough.

She climbed out through the same broken window she'd entered from.

The mountain light was gray and weak. She sat on the pavement outside for a moment, just breathing, letting the shock begin to subside. The forearm wound would need attention. The smaller lacerations from the glass were inconsequential. She was alive, and the colony was dead, and the Grandview could decay in peace without any consciousness living in its mirrors.

She walked to her vehicle and got in.

The engine started. The headlights cut through the afternoon gloom. She drove away from the hotel without looking back, down the mountain road toward the valley, toward the open country, toward the next place where something had decided to live and feed and wait.

Behind her, the Grandview stood against the mountain backdrop, its mirrors all destroyed now, its interior just empty space and rotting furniture and the patient work of time.

The colony was gone.

In a few years, the building would probably collapse. The elements would finish what Ace had started. The mirrors would break not through violence but through weather and gravity and the slow entropy that claimed all things eventually. The space that had been a hotel, then a haunting, then a battleground, would become just another ruin in the mountains.

Ace drove toward the highway without thinking about what would come next.

The road was clear. The sky was beginning to clear. It would be night soon, and she would drive through the night, and somewhere in the morning she would find another diner and another cup of coffee and another person with a story about something that was living somewhere it shouldn't be.

The work continued. It always did. —

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Last update: **19/03/2026 11:36**

