

Episode 27 — Blood Contract

The magazine page had been blank for three minutes. Sarah Mercer had read it before, or something like it—the same brands, the same models, the same posed smiles—and she'd moved on. Now she was reading it again because her hands needed something to do, and the waiting room's fluorescent lights made everything taste like metal and fear.

The hospital chair had a foam cushion designed by someone who'd never actually sat in a chair. Through the wall, she could hear the arterial hum of machines keeping her husband breathing through lungs that were forgetting how to work. He'd been fine two weeks ago. Active. Running the farm. Now his white blood cell count was collapsing for no reason any doctor could name, and the hospital was that particular kind of useless that came with helpfulness and competence and absolutely no answers.

Her phone buzzed. Another family. Another of the children of the founding seven.

She set the magazine down without looking at the page number.

The oldest surviving founder was Thomas Brennan, seventy-four, with the particular hardness of a man who'd spent his entire life making things work. He lived in a house at the edge of town that he'd built himself in 1986, and he hadn't changed it much since. The shutters were the same. The garden was now wild. He'd stopped maintaining it sometime in the past five years, around the same time he'd stopped sleeping through the night.

He knew what the contract said. He'd known since the beginning—or rather, he'd known since the third year, when a lawyer he'd hired to interpret it came back with a white face and a suggestion that the founders consider hiring a second lawyer to challenge their interpretation. The second lawyer had had the same white face. Neither of them had wanted to continue taking his money.

The document was in a safe in his office, in an envelope sealed with wax and his fingerprints smudged across the seal from where he'd pressed it as a young man.

When the knock came on his door and he opened it to find a girl barely five feet tall with violet eyes and black hair with a sheen like oil on water, he knew exactly who she was, because he'd been waiting for someone like her for forty years.

"I've been expecting you," he said.

She didn't respond. She looked at him the way you look at a problem you're still solving—observing, processing. The violet eyes didn't blink much.

He stepped back and gestured her inside. "The contract is in my office."

The girl—Ace, he would learn from the people who knew her name, and those people were few—followed him wordlessly through a house that smelled like coffee and the waxy accumulation of forty years of silence. His office was clean. Books on shelves. The safe was obvious, set into the wall, painted over so many times you could barely see the seam.

He opened it and removed the envelope.

The paper inside was cream-colored, thick as cardstock, printed in a style that suggested it had been made forty years ago. The ink had a faint iridescence—not quite metallic, but not quite not. He'd read it enough times to have parts of it memorized, though he tried not to.

We, the undersigned, do enter into this covenant of mutual prosperity...

Prosperity the town had received, without question. The agricultural yields had tripled within five years. The population had swelled. The school had gotten a new building. The road had been paved. Forty years of luck so consistent and so extraordinary that no one questioned where it came from.

...and do hereby cede to the bearer of this contract the right and authority to collect upon its fulfillment such compensation as is specified herein...

The compensation clause was the one that required a lawyer to read it three times.

He handed the envelope to Ace without opening it further.

She took it. She opened it. She read the first page while standing in his office, while the house held its breath.

When she reached the compensation clause—the one that, in the extremely careful language of contract law, specified that compensation would be “the firstborn of each signatory line, as defined by birth occurring after the establishment of covenant”—she looked up.

“The children,” he said. It wasn't a question.

She turned the page.

“All of them,” he continued. “Every child of every founding family born after 1983. They're coming due. The entity interprets the contract literally. It's been patient—forty years is not long, for something like that. But now the eldest of the generation is thirty-eight, and the contract specifies no time frame for collection. The entity has begun to enforce.”

She read in silence. When she finished, she folded the contract and held it.

The silence stretched.

“I should have destroyed it,” he said to her back. “I've had forty years to burn it. I could have burned it at any point. I didn't because I was afraid of what would happen if I did. Whether the entity would come for us anyway, or whether breaking the contract would anger it further. So I kept it safe. I kept it here. I waited for someone to come who could—”

The air changed.

It happened without warning—not an alarm or a sound or anything external, but a simple alteration in the pressure of the room, as if reality had suddenly decided it needed to be more full. The safe bulged and collapsed and bulged again, the metal groaning. Thomas fell backward into his chair.

She was already moving.

The entity manifested in the center of the office as a compressed mass of material, larger than it had any right to be. It resembled nothing so much as a fist made of paper—documents and documents pressed together, bound with material that might have been string or might have been something else, folding in on itself in ways that made the eye slip sideways when it tried to follow the contours.

It had no face, but it had attention. The attention was focused entirely on the contract in Ace's hand.

She moved toward the fireplace. The entity flowed—there was no other word for it—between her and

the open space where the fireplace opening should be. It was disturbingly fast for something so dense. The compressed bulk of it struck her as she tried to circle, and she went down hard against the bookshelf, books cascading down her back.

The contract was still in her hand.

She got up. The entity was already repositioning, cutting off the angle to the fireplace again. It moved without lunging, without aggression—purely functional, purely concerned with the specific task of placing itself between Ace and the destruction of the contract.

“Get out,” she said, not to the entity, but to Thomas.

He was already moving, pushing himself out of the chair. She dropped her left blade and drew her lighter with that hand—a brass Zippo, engraved with something he couldn't read—while keeping her right blade up, the emerald glow steady even in the bright office light.

The entity pressed forward. She backpedaled, one hand extended with the blade and the other bringing the lighter to the corner of the contract. The flame caught on the first attempt.

The entity made a sound. It wasn't rage—it was lower, more structural, like a building recognizing that its foundation had just been severed. The entity lunged, but Ace was already moving to the side, keeping the burning paper high, away from the entity's mass.

The fire caught the edge of the page. The paper curled. The iridescent ink began to darken.

She held the entity off with the blade while the document burned in her lighter-hand, the flames licking upward, consuming the terms, the signatures, the covenant. The entity struck at her again, and this time she took the impact on her shoulder and transferred it, rolling with the blow instead of resisting it. The entity hit the wall and left an impression like wet clay.

The second page caught.

The entity was coming apart—not physically, but something essential was unlinking. The compression was becoming uneven. Folds began to open. The sound it made was shifting from computation to something like confusion.

The third page went up.

She fought it now without the distraction of protecting the contract—full attention, both blades, using the confined space of the office against the entity's bulk. It was slower now, the compression breaking down as its purpose dissolved. She moved inside its radius and drove upward with both blades, driving them deep into the compressed mass.

The last page became ash.

The entity came apart like a fist opening. The compressed documents exploded into chaos—individual papers spiraling, constraints breaking, the material that had bound them falling apart into something almost like flour. It scattered across the office floor, drifting, becoming nothing. There was no sound when the last of it dispersed.

Ace stood in the wreckage of the bookshelf, breathing steadily. Her shoulder was already swelling. Thomas Mercer watched from the office doorway, where he'd stopped when she told him to leave.

“Get out,” she said again, quieter this time.

He turned and left her there without speaking.

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The decline stopped within hours. The doctors called it a spontaneous remission, a mysterious reversal of unknown causes. Some of the people who had deteriorated began to recover immediately—a few hours of recovery marking the moment when their bodies seemed to remember how to work again. Some took longer. Two had progressed too far: Marcus Chen, thirty-nine, who had made it three weeks before his heart finally decided it had forgotten the rhythm. And Helen Vasquez, thirty-seven, who'd had a stroke that no amount of suddenly-restored health could correct.

Three of the original seven signatory families who had lost children to the covenant. The other four survived. Some of them would carry damage—the recovery wasn't always clean, and three weeks or four weeks of rapid decline left marks.

The town didn't ask questions about why the illness had stopped. The town had learned long ago not to ask too many questions about the contract's origins, and learning not to ask questions is the same as learning to be grateful without understanding why.

Thomas Mercer sat in his office chair in a room that smelled like smoke and old paper. The bookshelf was still toppled. The safe door hung open. He had not cleaned up the ash that had been the contract—the millions of tiny particles of compressed documents that no longer had a purpose, scattered across his floor like some kind of absolution.

He sat and looked at it until evening. He didn't turn on the lights. He just sat there in the fading day and watched the dust that had been a covenant, a promise, a debt, settling slowly onto his carpeted floor.

Outside, in the town that had been given forty years of impossible luck, people stopped being sick. They went back to their jobs. They kissed their children. They didn't ask the hard questions.

Thomas Mercer picked up a broom and began to sweep.

By the time he was finished, he was alone in the house. He had been alone in the house for a long time. He simply hadn't realized it until now. —

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