

## # Episode 35 — The Faithful Few

Dr. James Morrison had spent forty-two years as a general practitioner in the town of Millbrook, and he had begun to notice something small and consistent that nobody else seemed to see.

His long-term patients—the ones who served on the town council, who volunteered regularly at community events, who taught classes at the high school—were becoming more compliant. Not more pleasant, which would have been normal with age. More deferential. More inclined to agree without actually voicing agreement. More willing to let decisions move forward without pushing back, without insisting on clarity.

It was subtle enough that he'd almost missed it. But when he started tracking it backward, matching it to patient visits, he found the correlation was clear: people who used Meridian Hall regularly over years were showing measurable shifts in their personality profiles. Less decisive. More vague. Increasingly prone to deference.

He'd written his report as a footnote in a regional anomaly database. He hadn't expected anyone to read it. But someone had, someone who understood the language of anomalies, and now there was a person sitting in his living room asking him to elaborate.

"The building has been in use for sixty years," Morrison said. "Originally built by a congregation—I looked it up—called the Faithful Assembly. They disbanded in the 1980s after their pastor died. The building was donated to the town. We've used it ever since."

"When was it built?" Ace asked. Her voice was quiet. She moved without tension.

"1963."

"Who designed it?"

"I don't know. The records at the town office don't go back that far."

Ace nodded. She stood and asked if she could see Meridian Hall. Morrison offered to take her. She declined. She just wanted to know where it was.

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The hall occupied a central block in downtown Millbrook—a substantial building, four stories if you counted the basement, made of pre-cast concrete panels and stone facing that had aged to a grey-brown that might have been intended or might have been accident. The main entrance faced south. The roof was flat. The building had a solidity to it that most modern construction lacked, as if it had been designed to last longer than fashion dictated.

Ace stood across the street for twenty minutes, just observing it. The way light moved across its surfaces. The way people moved in and out of the doors. The frequency of entry and exit.

She could feel the resonance when she stood this close. It was subtle—not a sound, but something like one, a vibration at a frequency just below the range that human ears detected. Her nervous system felt it though. Her bones conducted it. The building was humming, continuously, almost imperceptibly, at a frequency that matched something deep and constant in her own biology.

She went in.

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The interior was well-maintained. The main hall was spacious, with high ceilings and windows positioned to catch light at specific angles. There was a stage at the north end, seats arranged in rows that could be reconfigured. The acoustic properties were immediately apparent—when someone walked across the floor, their footsteps echoed back with perfect clarity, creating a feedback loop that made the sound resonate longer than it should.

Ace walked to the center of the main floor. The vibration was stronger here. It moved up through her feet and into her bones, and she recognized it for what it was: the building was calling out a specific frequency, and that frequency was designed to shape something in the people who spent time in its resonance chamber.

She studied the proportions of the room. The placement of the windows. The curve of the ceiling. The acoustic focus point at the front of the stage. All of it was deliberate. All of it was precise. This was not a building that had been assembled from standard components. This was a tuning instrument.

She moved through the rest of the structure—basement, offices, meeting rooms. Each space was proportioned to reinforce the central frequency in different ways. The building was a machine, and it had been running continuously for sixty years without an operator, feeding on the presence of living people, slowly reshaping the compliance mechanisms of anyone who spent enough time in its resonance.

She spent two hours inside. By the time she left, she understood the building completely.

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There was a town council meeting scheduled for that evening. Ace attended.

She sat in the back of the main hall and watched twelve people arrange themselves around a table on stage. The council members were ordinary—teachers, business owners, a retired librarian. What was extraordinary was how they moved. How they deferred. How every decision seemed to migrate toward consensus without anyone actively pushing it.

The first item was a proposal to repaint the civic parking lot. The council discussed it with the ease of people who had been shaped by years of gentle pressure toward agreement. Nobody objected strongly. Nobody insisted on alternative approaches. The matter moved to a vote with everyone in alignment, and afterward nobody remembered who had actually suggested the decision.

The second item was budget allocation for the coming year. There was more discussion, but it followed the same pattern. Objections were raised gently and then withdrawn. Concerns were voiced and then deferred to the collective wisdom. The decision moved forward like water following a channel, the path carved by sixty years of architectural intention.

Ace watched the council members and saw the subtle signs Morrison had documented: the slight vagueness in their eye contact, the deference in their body language, the way their personalities seemed to soften and round at the edges. These were people who had been slowly rewired by proximity to a living machine designed specifically to unwind the ability to resist.

When the meeting ended, she left before anyone saw her clearly.

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The void space between the inner and outer walls was not on any official plan.

Ace found the discrepancy by comparing the building's exterior dimensions to its interior ones. The difference was consistent on all four sides—approximately sixty centimeters of unaccounted space, a gap that on the original blueprints would have been labeled as void or mechanical chase.

She found the access point in the basement, behind a utility panel that had been sealed but not permanently. The panel came free with steady pressure. The opening led into darkness.

She used a small light and a careful pace, crawling into the void space on her hands and knees. The space was exactly sixty centimeters wide—wide enough for her body when she laid flat, but no wider. The walls on either side were rough concrete, the original structural elements of the building's frame. The ceiling was low. The air was stale and very old.

She crawled through the void space following the building's perimeter, moving past the utility corridors and storage areas that occupied the basement level. Above her, muffled by the concrete, she could hear footsteps. The building was in use even at night—someone was awake up there, living their life within the resonance chamber.

The entity was at the building's center.

The void space widened where four walls met at the corner of the main hall, and in that widened space, in the deepest resonance point of the entire structure, it was waiting.

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It was compact and very still, folded in on itself in a way that suggested enormous patience. Its form was almost humanoid in the way it fit the space—as if it had been living there so long that the space and the entity had achieved perfect conformity. Sixty years of feeding on compliance-energy, of slowly consuming the willpower of people who spent time in the hall above, had left it dense and slow and very, very patient.

When Ace arrived, it looked at her. It had been looking at whoever was in the building above it for sixty years. Its attention shifted without surprise or fear. Just a recognition: here is another visitor in the resonance chamber. Here is another opportunity.

She drew her blades.

The fight in the void space was the most constrained she had ever fought. There was no room to stand, no room to move laterally, no room to use momentum or distance or the tricks that made her lethal in open space. She could only move forward or backward, and the entity could do the same, and the space was too small for anything but direct violence, precision-measured and intimate.

The blades glowed emerald in the darkness, and the light made the concrete walls around them shine like bone.

She drove the first blade forward. The entity moved to intercept and they met in close, too close for the blades to have full extension. She was willing to take damage to close distance further. Her second blade raked across the entity's form, drawing something that was not quite blood, and the creature moved in response.

The fight became rhythm. Forward, backward, forward. The blades cutting. The entity resisting. Her hands were strong enough to manipulate the blades in the confined space, but only barely. She had

to work at angles that made every muscle in her arms and shoulders scream. She had to accept hits that her body had learned to evade. She had to be willing to fight through pain and confinement and the total elimination of any maneuvering space.

The entity was exactly the right size for the void space. It had grown into the space, shaped itself to it, over sixty years of undisturbed residence. In the confined volume, they were nearly matched. Almost equally deadly. She had only the advantages of speed and the fact that she had nothing left to lose.

She fought with everything she had.

The entity's movements began to slow. Its form was damaged, the dense accumulation of sixty years of feeding beginning to rupture and leak. Ace didn't let up. She drove forward, pushing through pain, pushing through muscle exhaustion, pushing through the desire to simply collapse in the dark and be done with it.

When the entity finally stopped moving, she was still driving her blades into its form, still pressing forward, still killing it with every ounce of strength she could generate.

She lay in the void space for a long moment, breathing hard, both blades still driven deep into the entity's remain.

The building's resonance changed above her. She felt it in the concrete walls, in the vibration that had been constant for sixty years suddenly disrupting, suddenly going quiet. The architecture was just architecture now. The machine had stopped.

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She crawled out of the void space slowly.

Her body wanted to quit completely. Her hands had developed tremors. There was blood on her face and on her clothes and on her blades, and her ribs were screaming where she'd taken the entity's last counterattack. She moved through the basement and up the stairs, and by the time she reached the ground level her vision had begun to tunnel.

She walked out of the building's side door into the evening. The sun was setting over Millbrook, painting the storefronts gold. The town was closing down for the night—people heading home, businesses turning off lights, the normal rhythm of a settled place.

She heard voices from inside the hall. The council was finishing up their meeting, and the voices were louder than they had been that afternoon. There was more decisive language. More pushing back on ideas, more insistence on clarity, more of the healthy resistance that came when people weren't slowly being rewired toward compliance.

They would get better slowly, over weeks and months. They would stop deferring. They would remember how to disagree. The building would stand for another hundred years, and it would just be a building, used for community events and town meetings and the normal life of a small place.

Ace got in her car. She knew without looking that there would be blood on the steering wheel and on the seat, and she would wash them out in the next town where she could find a motel. She knew that her ribs would ache for weeks and her hands would shake for days and she would carry the scars from this hunt like she carried the scars from all the others.

She started the engine and drove. Behind her, Meridian Hall stood solid against the darkening sky, just a building now, its resonance finally quieted.

The road ahead was long and dark and exactly where she needed to be.—

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Last update: **19/03/2026 11:43**

