

Episode 38 — The Last Testament

The city had been something once.

You could see it in the bones—the civic architecture from the 1950s, the commercial district that had housed department stores and theaters, the industrial corridor along the river where the mills had operated until the early 1990s. You could see what it had been in the gaps where it was no longer. The empty storefronts with their windows boarded or opaque with grime. The civic buildings half-emptied and scheduled for consolidation. The slow, patient withdrawal of purpose that turned living places into places that merely existed.

Ace had come to the city for a lead that went nowhere.

Three days of checking with contacts who didn't have what she needed. Two nights in a motel at the city's edge, the kind of place where the proprietor never looked up and asked no questions. She'd confirmed by morning of the second day that the lead was cold—a demon sighting report that had been a misidentification, a dog in a basement, nothing that required her attention.

But she stayed the second night anyway.

She'd learned to pay attention to the moments when she chose not to leave. There was usually a reason, seated somewhere below the level of conscious thought, some recognition that wouldn't surface as words. So on the evening of her second day in the dying city, with nothing to do and no reason to stay, she got in her vehicle and drove the commercial streets.

The buildings were quiet. Some were empty enough that you could see through to the back walls. Some still housed businesses that had survived by being essential—a pharmacy, a small grocery, a check-cashing service in a storefront that looked like it had been cheap in 1975 and had gotten no better with age. She drove slowly, watching the architecture, watching the rhythm of what remained.

She stopped outside a building that had no reason to hold her attention.

It was a three-story civic structure built in the style of the 1930s, stone facing and tall windows, currently serving as nothing at all. The sign above the door read “Civic Records—Archives” in letters that had faded from black to grey. Behind the windows, visible in the streetlight's edge, she could see filing cabinets. She could see shelves. She could see the organized residue of decades of documentation.

The building had been closed for six months according to a notice on the door. The city was consolidating records. Everything was being moved to a central facility. The actual clearance process, the notice implied, was ongoing.

She tried the door. It opened.

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The interior of the records building was exactly what you'd expect: a museum of bureaucracy, the accumulated paper of a city's functions preserved in filing cabinets and cardboard boxes. The air was cool, undisturbed, carrying the specific smell of old documents—dust and old glue, the deterioration of pulp, the faint chemical signature of decades. Her footsteps echoed on the linoleum.

She didn't have a goal. She moved through the space looking for nothing, letting her feet and her attention find what needed to be found.

The front section was organized by standard administrative categories: property records, licenses, permits, zoning variance applications, the machinery of a city's orderly function. She passed through without stopping. The back section was different.

The files here were organized differently. The boxes were arranged with precision, but the labeling system didn't correspond to any archival structure she'd encountered. The handwriting was consistent, deliberate, and utterly unfamiliar. The labels read like classification categories, but they made no sense from any administrative perspective:

Marked Ground—Intersection Route 4 and Clearridge

Textile Mill Collapse—Structural Failure or Direct Intervention

Contaminated Water Supply—Clarion River Valley—Source Unknown

The Woman in the Violet Eyes—Observation Log 3

She opened that last box.

Inside was a file. Inside the file was a written account. The first paragraph was dated from three months prior. It described, in precise detail, a demon hunt. The location was correct. The demon type was correct. The details were specific—details that no witness could have captured without being present and understanding exactly what to look for.

She read the first paragraph twice. Then she kept reading.

The account was clinical. Detached. It read like a professional observation written by someone embedded in events, watching with full comprehension, recording with absolute accuracy. The author described not just what happened but *how* it happened—the demon's behavioral patterns, its weaknesses, the precise moment it understood it was outmatched. The author had been *there*, or had access to information that only intimate presence could provide.

She opened another box. Another file. Another hunt account. She recognized the location immediately—a warehouse on the city's industrial outskirts, a demon she'd tracked for two weeks, an engagement that had lasted maybe forty seconds. But the account in this file detailed forty seconds with the precision of internal observation, describing her own movements in third person with the certainty of someone who'd been looking directly into her mind.

She moved left because she anticipated the creature's strike pattern. She was correct. The creature struck where she had been, and she was already committed to her counter-movement. The blade entry was precise—it targeted the neural cluster that functioned as the entity's only vulnerable point. She killed it in a single motion.

That's how it was written. Not narrative. Not journalism. Documentation. The documentation of someone who understood not just what was happening but *why*.

She moved through the boxes systematically. Every major engagement she'd had. Every significant hunt from the past four years, detailed with accuracy that made her throat tighten in a way she rarely allowed. The accounts were consistent in style, consistent in the quality of observation, consistent in the certainty of someone who was documenting something they were simultaneously witnessing.

No byline. No attribution. No explanation. Just the records. Just the watching.

She found one box at random and opened it. The file inside was dated from last month. It described a hunt that had taken place in a town ninety kilometers southeast, in the basement of an abandoned hospital. The demon type was obscure—something she'd never encountered before, something the official records wouldn't even have a category for. But the account in this file described its behavior, its psychology, its specific pattern of movement with the intimacy of someone who'd been there, in the darkness, observing.

She'd been alone for that hunt. No one else knew what she'd done. No one else could have documented it.

But someone had.

She knew this feeling. She'd felt it once before, years ago, in a small town at dusk. A quality to the attention in the world around her, like being watched by something that wasn't looking away. At the time, she'd thought it was apprehension—her own instinct about the place, the work ahead. But it hadn't stopped. Even as she'd left the town, even as the miles accumulated between herself and that place, she'd carried the sense of being observed. She'd convinced herself it was memory, the echo of her own attention lingering.

But it wasn't.

It had been this. Whatever this was.

She moved to the very back of the records section. The most recent files were here, and they were ordered chronologically—the last hunt going backward in time. She pulled the final file. The one that would contain her most recent engagement.

It was dated from four days prior, from a hunt she'd completed the morning she arrived in this city. The account was precise. The account was internal. The account was written by something that had been there, or had been everywhere, or had access to an observation that transcended the normal barriers of presence and absence.

She opened to the last page of the file.

There was one additional page. It was blank except for a single line, written in the same precise hand that had filled every page of every account. The line was not a question. It was not a greeting. It was not an explanation. It was a statement of fact.

She knows now that I am here.

That was all. Just that.

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Ace stood in the records room for a long time.

She didn't move. She didn't reread the pages. She didn't close the files. She stood in the center of the space, surrounded by the documentation of her own hunts, surrounded by the evidence of something that had been watching with the precision of an archivist, the patience of an historian, the certainty of someone who already understood everything she was going to do before she did it.

The feeling that came was not fear. Fear was too simple. Fear was a useful response to immediate danger. This was something else: the specific awareness of someone competent recognizing the

shape of a problem they had no current capacity to solve. The kind of clarity that came with understanding that you were not, and had never been, as alone as you'd assumed.

She began to put things back.

She returned the files to their boxes. She returned the boxes to their shelves. She made no effort to be neat about it—that wasn't the point. The point was to restore the appearance of what she had found, to make clear that she had been there and then was gone, and that she had understood what understanding required.

When the records room was as she'd found it, she turned and walked out of the building.

She did not lock the door behind her. The building didn't belong to anyone anymore, and nothing inside it could harm her in the way physical danger harm. She walked across the empty parking lot to her vehicle and sat in the driver's seat for a long time before starting the engine.

She didn't sleep. She drove back to the motel and sat on the bed and waited for morning, and when morning came, she drove out of the city.

She used her mirror as she always did—not more, not less. She didn't check the horizon for signs of pursuit because there was no pursuit. Whatever was watching would be watching regardless of distance. She'd already accepted that it was there. Acceptance didn't require anything else.

The city receded behind her. The commercial buildings, the civic architecture, the empty places where things had been—they all became memory and then became smaller and then became nothing visible.

But she didn't stop feeling observed.

She understood now that she wouldn't stop. She understood now that the observation had been continuous, that every hunt she'd thought she was conducting in isolation had been witnessed by something that understood the entire shape of what she was doing. The revelation wasn't comforting. But it was clarifying.

She didn't know yet what she would do with this knowledge. She didn't know if understanding changed anything about the hunts themselves, about the work that had to be done, about the demons that kept pushing into the world looking for feeding grounds and didn't care whether one small woman was there to stop them or not.

But knowledge was knowledge. And something in her, the part that had always paid attention to the things below the surface of normal perception, was already working on what it meant. What it implied. What the next step was.

The road stretched ahead, empty and long. The world continued its work of breaking and healing. The demons continued their slow expansion into spaces where they could find purchase. And Ace continued her hunt, moving through the geography of her work with the specific knowledge that she was not doing it alone.

She would find out what that meant eventually. But for now, in the morning light, on a road that stretched ahead without answer, she simply drove forward, knowing that she was being watched, and continuing anyway.

Some doors, once opened, didn't close. Some watches, once recognized, never ended.

But she was still here. Still moving. Still the small violent thing between the world and the things that would unmake it.

And that, it seemed, was observation enough.

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