

Episode 39 — What Was Sent Back

The hiker found the monastery by accident, and accident was not a thing that happened to this mountain with any frequency. The marked trail bent east toward the lower ridges where the light was gentler. She had meant to follow it. The weather had other plans: cloud descended fast enough that landmarks dissolved, and she'd instinctively corrected toward what felt like higher ground, which meant leaving the trail and trusting her sense of direction, which had been wrong before and was wrong again.

The monastery appeared between visibility windows like something that had been waiting for the cloud to clear just enough.

It was beautiful in the way of buildings that had agreed to decay slowly. Stone the color of ash, peaked roof still sharp against the darkening sky, a small bell tower that had not rung in decades. The structure was nearly complete—walls intact, windows shuttered rather than empty, doors still in their frames. Four centuries had treated it better than any mountain building had a right to expect.

The hiker was cold. The wind up here moved in one direction only, and she was not that direction. She approached.

The main entrance was unlocked in the way that unlocked doors often are in places nobody visits: the mechanism had simply given up, and the door swung on hinges that had forgotten their purpose. Inside, the air was still and old, holding the temperature of stone that had been alone for a long time.

She wandered briefly through what had been a dormitory, then a library where books had turned to shelf-shaped dust decades ago. The darkness was complete beyond arm's length. She had a flashlight. The flashlight made things worse by showing her clearly how empty the space was, how much absence a building could hold.

The monastery's heart was deeper in. She found the corridor that led to it without consciously choosing to search: the architecture drew you toward its center the way a body moves toward its organs.

The door to the contemplative chamber was open. That was the first thing that registered. Monastery doors were meant to be closed. They were meant to hold silence in place. This one was open like an invitation.

She stepped into the doorway.

The chamber was circular, precisely circular, with a domed ceiling that rose in elegant proportions. The geometry was sound. She knew nothing about architecture and knew that immediately, the way you know a color without learning the spectrum. The proportions were **right**.

But the air inside was wrong.

It moved in a direction that had no exit. Windows cut into the dome let in dying daylight, but the light didn't move the way light should. It fell into the space and disappeared rather than illuminating it. And beneath the dome, in the chamber's center, was a thickness.

A compression. A density that refused to hold a shape but held itself through sheer insistence. The hiker's eyes tried to resolve it the way eyes resolve distance and shadow and form. Her eyes failed. Something in the physics of the air was refusing the translation her brain was supposed to perform.

She backed away. She did not run—running seemed unsafe in a place that didn't follow the rules of physics—but she walked backward, breathing shallowly, until she was clear of the doorway. Until she was in the corridor. Until she was at the monastery's edge.

Then she ran.

She did not find the trail on the way down. The cloud cleared, the stars came out, and she descended by starlight and panic, moving downslope in a direction her body insisted was away from the thing in the mountain. She reached the road near midnight. A car was parked there, which was not possible because nobody came to this mountain, and she should have registered it as alarming but the only alarming thing that existed anymore was what she'd seen in the dome.

She walked past the car without looking at it. She walked until she found a ranger station. She reported the weather. She did not describe the monastery.

Some things cannot be translated into words. Some things hurt more in the telling than they hurt in the seeing. The hiker knew, with the kind of certainty that belongs to trauma, that if she spoke the description aloud it would become real in a different way—not the thing itself, but the knowledge of the thing, which would be harder to carry.

She went home. She did not hike again.

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Ace saw the car an hour after the hiker had passed it. It was a rental, dusty, parked in the pull-off where the forest accepted vehicles and nothing further. She parked behind it, noting the angles, the dust pattern—it had been here less than a day. Someone else had come to the mountain. Someone else had gone up.

She did not wonder why. She rarely wondered about the why of things. The why was usually just circumstance finding its level.

The track up was steep. She took it in a long, economical stride that ate distance without haste. The monastery resolved from the afternoon haze like it was returning rather than appearing. She had been here once before, fourteen years ago, on a different kind of hunt. That hunt had taken her through the bell tower and the dormitory and the empty archive. She had not found what she was looking for that time.

This time she knew where to go.

The contemplative chamber was at the monastery's center, and the darkness was complete, and the air moving inside it did not move like air should move. Ace did not stop at the threshold. She walked into the space, her eyes adjusting to the absence of light, and felt the geometry of it push against her like something solid.

The Fragment was here.

It was far more formed than it had been in the forest fourteen years ago. In the forest it had been a nascent thing, a compression, a possibility that the ritual had been trying to birth. The cultists had been feeding it intention and geometric precision and words in the old languages. Ace had interrupted the final phase. She had driven the Fragment backward through the boundary before it could complete its arrival. It had been denied.

But denial is not the same as death. And the monastery's chamber—with its specific proportions, its particular resonance, its dome whose geometry created a focal point in three-dimensional space—the chamber was exactly what the Fragment needed. Slowly, over months of uninterrupted time, it had found this place. It had anchored itself in the stone itself. And it had been patient.

It was nearly formed now.

The compression had learned to hold a shape. Not a stable shape—the density still rippled like smoke, still refused to fully resolve. But it was becoming something more organized than possibility. Something that had learned to want to exist.

It sensed her. The reorientation was not quite a flinch. It was more like a plant turning toward light, except the movement was inward—a centering, a gathering of all its not-quite-existent mass toward the acknowledgment of her presence.

It remembered her.

Ace drew her katanas. The blades came with the faint hum of their own resonance—emerald light bleeding softly into the chamber's darkness. The Fragment registered the blades. It had registered them before. It had been born in the interval since then, formed itself in the monastery's patient stone, and it had incorporated that memory into itself. It knew those blades. It knew what they had cost it.

The Fragment was not going to let them do it again.

It moved toward her, not with motion like a physical thing would move, but with an expansion—a spreading of its compression into the space between them. The chamber's geometry amplified the movement. The dome above them sang a single high note that had no source. The floor beneath Ace's feet seemed to lose its solidity briefly, became something more like standing in deep water.

Ace moved into the expansion.

The fight was nothing like the forest. In the forest, the Fragment had been incomplete and the geometry had been hostile but negotiable. Here, the entity and the space were nearly the same thing. To fight the Fragment was to fight the chamber's own proportions, to move through air that was being shaped by the dome's mathematics, to maintain a sense of forward direction in a space that was actively trying to resolve into something else.

The Fragment was stronger. It had been weeks and months of careful, uninterrupted growth. It had learned to use the chamber's resonance the way a voice uses an instrument. When it moved, the air moved with it. When Ace tried to close the distance, the geometry of the space seemed to stretch—not metaphorically, but physically, actual distances changing under the dome's focal point.

She stopped trying to close linearly. She moved vertically instead, up and sideways, her feet finding purchase on the curved stone of the walls. The Fragment had learned to be heavy; it had not learned to be three-dimensional. She came at it from above, both blades angled toward the center of the chamber, toward the specific point in the floor where the stone met the dome's focal geometry.

That was the anchor. That was the place where all of the chamber's proportions converged. That was where the Fragment had rooted itself most deeply.

The Fragment turned to meet her—all of its not-quite-solid mass orienting toward her descent. The impact of the collision happened in the air before the blades reached stone. The Fragment's

resistance was absolute, a wall of something that wasn't density but had the weight of density. The blades met it and stopped.

Ace did not pull. She drove downward instead, feet braced against the wall, putting everything into the push. The chamber's note rose higher, became something that might have been a scream if it had a mouth. The geometry of the air fractured.

The Fragment gave, all at once.

The blades punched through to stone. Sparks flew from the impact, white-hot and brief, burning against the blue-green light of the katanas. The Fragment did not dissolve like the one in the forest had dissolved. This one unraveled. It had been nearly formed, nearly committed to existence, and the reverse of that was not simple. It came apart in layers, each layer pulling toward where the blades had broken the anchor point.

Ace was on her feet before the last of it had dissipated. Her breath came hard. Her arms ached in the specific way of having pushed against something that refused to move. She waited, watching the space where the Fragment had been, watching the air for any sign of reformation.

The chamber was just a chamber now. The air was just air. The geometry was sound but inert. The dome was beautiful. It did nothing.

She spent twenty minutes methodically destroying the anchor point. The stone was ancient and well-made, resistant to damage. She placed her blades carefully and drove them in, and struck them from different angles, creating fractures in the specific place where the dome's focal mathematics converged with the floor. She wedged stone fragments into the dome's interior geometry, breaking the curves just enough that the proportions would never quite align again.

The chamber would still stand. It would still be beautiful. But it would never sing the way it sang now. It would never draw entities the way water draws toward depth.

When she was finished, Ace sat on the floor where the Fragment's anchor had been. The stone was cool and ordinary. Her legs ached. Her shoulders ached. There was a specific kind of exhaustion that came from fighting something that had never been alive and therefore didn't understand surrender or mercy, only the pure momentum of wanting to exist.

She allowed herself five minutes of it. Then she got up.

The walk down the mountain was slower than the walk up. She did not look back at the monastery. She did not check to see if the rental car was still in the pull-off. She drove down the track road in second gear, watching the forest move past, thinking about the hiker who had seen what the Fragment was becoming and had known well enough to run.

Some people learned. Some people listened to what their bodies were telling them when things were wrong.

That was survival. That was the only kind of sense that mattered.

By the time she reached the base of the mountain, the sun was setting, and the valley below was filling with shadow, and somewhere ahead there was another hunt waiting for her. There was always another hunt. There was always another boundary, another entity, another piece of the world that had come loose and was trying to rewrite itself into something other.

Ace drove toward it the way she drove toward everything: with the whole of her attention, with the weight of her history, with her blades beside her in the dark vehicle, glowing their steady emerald light.

The Fragment that could not be born had been sent back again. This time it would not find its way forward.

This time, she had made sure. —

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